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Sciences of Myth, Myths of Science: Mapping Myths of Origin in Africa

David Chidester

During 1999, while Cape Town was celebrating, “One City, Many Cultures,” the Cape Times published a series of profiles of religious communities, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and Hindu, all living in the same city. On 1 March, this series featured a profile of African traditional religion, the indigenous religious heritage of Africa, in an article, “Going back to our past with praise” (Msimang, 1999). Although the author shared her personal reflections on the loss and recovery of African indigenous religion, the centerpiece of this article was an interview with Gogo, or “gran,” a 102-year-old grandmother living in KwaThema. Keeping alive the memory of ancestral myths and rituals, Gogo had learned the story of the origin of humanity as a child. “My mother told me that the first human beings emerged in the beginning from a hole in the ground in a rock at Lõwe,” Gogo related. “Our ancestors emerged from there and they left their footprints in the rock at the beginning of the world.” As a classic indigenous myth of origin in southern Africa, this emergence myth was also recounted in the survey text, Chidester’s Religions of South Africa, relating the Tswana tradition that “human beings emerged in the beginning from a hole in the ground . . . [Tswana] could point to a particular hole in a rock at Lõwe, near Mochudi, from which the original ancestors emerged, leaving their footprints in the rock at the beginning of the world” (Chidester, 1992: 6).

Against the background of this Tswana emergence myth, which even identified the precise place of emergence at Lõwe, 40 kilometres north of Gabarone, Gogo recalled that as a young woman she had participated in an ancestral healing ritual, overseen by a “sacred specialist,” which involved the invocation of ancestors, the offering of a cow, and the ritual use of the insonyama, the Xhosa term for a special piece of meat drawn from the muscle below the armpit of the animal’s right foreleg. Curiously, based on her own words in the interview, Gogo had an indigenous African religious upbringing that combined a Tswana myth of origin with a Xhosa ritual of healing. This mystery might be resolved, however, by realizing that the description of the ritual, like the account of the
myth, was adapted directly, in some cases word for word, from Religions of South Africa (1992: 9-10).

Although we might wonder whether Gogo had carefully read and assimilated the chapter on African religion in Religions of South Africa, repeating the words of that text in her interview for the Cape Times, I would rather conclude from seeing my own words spoken by Gogo that I am Gogo. I relate all this, therefore, not to accuse anyone of plagiarism, but to establish my credentials to speak about African religion. According to the Cape Times, I am an elderly African grandmother.

But I also cite this case to suggest a more serious point: Our attempts to recover the history of indigenous African religion, myth, and ritual are difficult because of the very nature of that history as an ongoing process of intercultural contacts, relations, and exchanges. In that messy, mixed history, no “pure” positions are self-evident, no “prior” claims are self-authenticating. Indigenous, we might think, refers to the original inhabitants of the land. By definition, indigenous people, even if they form an “imagined community,” are constituted by affirming a special relationship—narrated in myth, performed in ritual—with a specific landscape. Myths of origin underwrite indigenous claims on land. However, such claims would never have to be asserted unless they were experienced as contested, at risk, or under threat by competing claims. Alien and indigenous, therefore, constitute the relational dynamics of indigenous religious history. As a result, indigenous African religious myths represent the most ancient and the most modern religious resources in Africa for making sense out of what it is to be a human being in a human world.

In the modern study of religion, some scholars have attempted to distill the “wisdom traditions” of the religions of the world from any historical sedimentation that might adhere to those traditions, as if “wisdom” represented free-floating recipes for human spirituality (see, for example, Smith, 1994). Conventionally, indigenous religions have been excluded from the major religions of the world, made to stand outside any meeting of the G8 of world religions, relegated to the status of primitive, primal, archaic, or non-literate religions, but rarely recognized as viable, living religious resources and strategies for engaging the meaning and power of being human in relation to land, especially for asserting the kinds of indigenous claims on land affirmed by the
International Covenant on the Rights of Indigenous Nations. Inclusion among the “world religions,” however, also requires sacrificing claims on land as the price for being recognized among the “wisdom traditions” of the world’s spirituality. In principle available to anyone, anywhere, indigenous religion thereby becomes divorced from its historical conditions of possibility. Without denying the legitimacy of such utopian indigenous spirituality, which has proliferated under globalizing conditions, in this essay I want to return to the messy, mixed up history of alien and indigenous myths of origin in southern Africa, tracking the history of mapping Africans and Africans mapping through the medium of powerful mythic narratives of human origins.

Until recently, the question of origins, especially the problem of the origin of religion, has been suspended in the academic study of religion. Rejecting nineteenth-century evolutionary accounts of the origin and development of religion, scholars of religion have attended to aspects, functions, structures, and articulations of religion without worrying about the “impossible” problem of origins. Beginning in the 1990s, however, some scholars of religion have drawn upon developments in cognitive science, evolutionary psychology, and neurobiology, to advance claims about the origin of religion.

I have to admit that I was initially skeptical of these efforts at adducing origins. They seemed to revive all of the odious premises of nineteenth-century evolutionary theories of religion: (1) violating the human integrity of indigenous religions by using accounts about living contemporaries, the “savages” on the peripheries of empire, as if they were only survivals of the “primitive” prehistory of all humanity; (2) psychologizing the human complexity of indigenous religion by abstracting a primitive “mentality” from archaeological, historical, and ethnographic evidence; and (3) reducing the human interests entailed by indigenous religion to questions of authoritative knowledge that could better be resolved by theory, method, and findings of modern science.

At the same time, new evolutionary research on the origins of religion seemed generally antagonistic to cultural theories of religion, rejecting any interest in interpretation, but also opposing a range of critical interventions—feminist, postmodern, poststructural, and postcolonial—that have called attention to the contested political practice of theorizing about religion. Consistently, advocates of a cognitive science of
religion have insisted that theory can be apolitical. By this account, theory is neither
religion nor politics; it is science, driven by scientific engines—neurobiology, cognitive
science, and evolutionary psychology—with the explanatory power to account for human
origins.

While some theorists in cultural studies might argue that such ultimate
explanatory ambitions take science into the realm of religious myth, even if it is the realm
of “myth with footnotes” (Lincoln, 209), there have been modern African mythographers
who have navigated in the sea of science. My friend, teacher, and colleague Gabriel
Setiloane, for example, argued that indigenous African myths of origin anticipated
modern evolutionary science. In his introductory survey of indigenous African religion,
_African Theology_, Setiloane recounted African emergence myths—the Nguni “Bed of
Reeds Myth,” the Sotho-Tswana “Hole in the Ground Myth”—in order to suggest that
these myths inform an indigenous religious understanding of humanity, community, and
nature in African traditions. At the same time, as Setiloane observed, these myths
preserved, in symbolic form, a collective memory of the “cave-man stage” in the
evolution of humanity out of Africa, since the African emergence myth provided a
symbolic account “of how humanity actually developed from the ape to the human.”
According to Setiloane, “The myth corroborates what Western science has arrived at by
another route—the theory of Evolution” (Setiloane, 1986: 4-6, 39). In Gabriel
Setiloane’s rendering, therefore, modern Western science has actually been slow to catch
up with the indigenous understanding of human evolution inscribed in African myth.

Scientists, however, will probably not recognize this claim. Under the auspices of
South Africa’s National Research Foundation, scientists (including researchers in the
human and social sciences) have been asked to focus on “Indigenous Knowledge
Systems” as an area of research that has been prioritized in the national interest.
Although research in this focus area might investigate the ways in which indigenous
African knowledge, embedded in myths of origin, for example, might anticipate,
reinforce, or enhance scientific advances, the authoritative weight of modern Western
science must certainly come down on the question of how to translate, utilize, or mobilize
African traditions in the interests of “normal” science.
As a classic text dealing with this problem, I can only mention here the short story published in 1926 by Julian Huxley, "The Tissue-Culture King," a venture in science fiction that directly engaged African traditional religion as a problem to be converted to the interests of modern Western science. In this story, a British scientist, on a scientific expedition in Africa, is captured by a remote African tribe. Studying their religion, the scientist finds that the indigenous religious life of this community is based on their reverence for the deity of the king, their worship of ancestors, their veneration of totemic animals, and their religious regard for sacred sexuality. With the support of African collaborators, the scientist manipulates these religious convictions. Gradually, he succeeds in converting African religious interests into the service of his modern scientific interests. To make a short story even shorter, the scientist transforms the divinity of the king into the reproduction, and mass marketing, of divine royal tissue cultures. He transforms ancestor worship into experimental embryology, animal totemism into endocrine treatments, and sacred sexuality into artificial parthenogenesis. In the end, Huxley's science-fiction story is a fiction about science transposing the indigenous religious resources of Africa into the idiom of modern science.

So: These are the problems before us. Who is mapping? Who is being mapped? How do we map myths? How do myths map us?

Africans Mapping

Myth can be about origins, about beginnings, about time. But myth can also be about space, about the spatial relations that constitute the human geography of a meaningful world. Although we might interpret the timeless wisdom of African myths, applying that wisdom anywhere, thereby divorcing myths from their spatial locations, the historical record, as problematic as it might be, suggests that myths of origin could do a range of religious, cultural, and political work in southern Africa. In addition to providing explanations of human origins, myth is a medium for working out a particular understanding of the social and political conditions of the present world. Myth can be regarded as a type of cultural work, a discourse for making sense out of the present in terms of a primordial past. Briefly, I would like to return to the historical, textual records of our myths of origin, the Sotho-Tswana hole in the ground, the Nguni bed of reeds to
suggest the entanglements of these myths in specific colonial situations in southern Africa.

In his *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa*, published in 1842, the missionary Robert Moffat provided a textual account of the Sotho-Tswana emergence myth. A Tswana-speaking Barolong *ngaka*, a ritual specialist described by Moffat as a “wily rain-maker,” related the indigenous Tswana myth of origin before an audience that included Tswana, Khoisan, and British listeners. According to this “rainmaker,” the Supreme Being who created humans, bringing them out of the primordial hole in the ground, first produced the “Bushmen,” but the Creator did not like them, reportedly because the were so ugly and their speech sounded like the croaking of frogs. So, the Creator made the “Hottentots,” but he did not like them any better than “Bushmen.” Apparently, the Creator also found their speech and physiology unappealing. Using all of his knowledge and skill, the Creator next made the “Bechuanas,” the Tswana-speaking people, who he found to be a great improvement, since their appearance and language were beautiful, but he decided that the Tswana were not his ultimate accomplishment in human creation. As his final creative act, the Supreme Being produced white people and sent them out into the world with ox-drawn wagons and ploughs. According to Moffat’s report, this emergence myth, with its graduated appearance of different classes of human beings—Khoisan, Tswana, and European—was the indigenous religious narrative about the origin of human beings in the world.

Clearly, this myth of origin was not a myth about the formation of any world. It was a myth about a specific, particular, colonial world, in which interreligious, intercultural, and interpolitical relations were being established and contested. Robert Moffat clearly perceived this indigenous African myth of origin as a counter-myth, as a direct challenge to his own biblical account of human origins, because he expressed disgust that the “wily rainmaker’s” story “received the applause of the people, while the poor missionary’s argument, drawn from the source of Divine truth, were thrown into the shade” (Moffat, 1842: 247). Like the “wily serpent” in the Garden of Eden, the Barolong rainmaker, according to Moffat, had transposed “Divine truth” to serve “Satanic” ends.

In the northern Cape, however, such appropriations and transpositions of religious elements defined the local practice of intercultural religious engagements. In
counteracting the missionary's "Divine truth," the Tswana ritual specialist adapted an indigenous emergence myth to the conditions of the colonial frontier situation. In the beginning, according to that myth, all human beings had emerged from a hole in the ground with their distinctive sacred animal emblems. Apparently, sacred animals defined a system of allegiances, cutting across chiefdoms, that bound people together under the sign of a common object of communal reverence, honor, and praise. The term for praise, seboko (pl. liboko), was often used for the sacred animal. Or the animal was called seano (pl. diano) to indicate a sacred object of reverence. To have a sacred animal was to dance (go bina) that animal. At the same time, the object of reverence was also guarded by avoidances, particularly by the prohibitions of people under a particular seboko from killing or eating their sacred animal. European observers tried to document this system of animal praise and avoidance. According to one account, the Bakuena had the crocodile (kuena); the Bataung, the lion (taung); the Batloung, the elephant (tlou); the Batsueneng, the baboon (tsuene); the Batlokoa, the wild cat (quabi); the Bapedi, the porcupine (noka); and so on (Ellenberger and MacGregor 1912: 241-42; see Hoernlé, 1937: 91; Schapera 1952: 35). Bushmen in the region reportedly developed their own sacred animal, the goat, as a focus for ritual attention and communal identity (Mackenzie 1871: 135, n.1; 1883: 65-68). In these terms, therefore, human beings were identified by their sacred animal emblems.

In thinking about intercultural relations of difference in the colonial situation, the system of sacred animals posed a problem for the Tswana. Here was a network of differences, distinguishing people on the basis of animal emblems, that seemed to have no counterpart in the Christian mission. Africans must have asked: If the Bakuena bina the crocodile, and the Bushmen bina the goat, what do the European Christians bina? One solution to this problem in comparative religion on the northern frontier was posed by the Tswana ngaka recorded by Robert Moffat. In his creative improvisation on a traditional origin myth, Moffat's adversary suggested that the white people had emerged from the hole in the ground, like other human beings, with their particular sacred animal. In the beginning, they came out of the hole with the ox-drawn wagon or the ox-drawn plough. According to the "wily rainmaker," therefore, the sacred animals of Europeans were emblems of modern industry, commerce, and transportation. According to the
emergence myth told by this Tswana ngaka, in the beginning Europeans had emerged from the hole in the ground under the sacred sign of a mechanical device, the wagon or the plough. They were, accordingly, the people of the machine.

Turning from the Sotho-Tswana “hole in the ground myth” to the Nguni “bed of reeds myth,” the historical record suggests a similar potential in African indigenous myth for doing complex religious, cultural, and political work within conflictual, contested colonial situations. During the 1850s, for example, the linguist W. H. I. Bleek recorded a Zulu myth of origin in which the creator, Unkulunkulu created human beings, male and female, but also black and white. To the white human beings, Unkulunkulu said, “You shall wear clothing, carry guns, and live in the sea.” To the black human beings, Unkulunkulu said, “You shall go naked and carry spears, but you shall live on the land.” (adapted from Bleek, 1952: 3-4). Obviously, this myth of origin was a creative improvisation on observable oppositions in the nineteenth-century Zulu world. Although certainly drawing upon indigenous narrative resources, the myth clarified the violent colonial oppositions between the people of the sea and the people of the land. In this creation story, therefore, myth was a medium for a particular kind of cultural work that not only explained the present forces at play in the present world but also validated indigenous entitlement to land by placing all of these oppositions under the authority of the Zulu creator.

By contrast, the Zulu emergence myth related by the Christian convert, catechist, and later deacon Mpengula Mbande in the 1860s provided a primordial justification for black subordination to white domination. As recorded in Henry Callaway’s Religious System of the amaZulu, Mbande related the traditional Zulu emergence myth, but he prefaced his account by noting that this myth was the Mbande related the “account which black men give white men of their origin.” According to this creation myth, black men emerged first from the uhlanga, the place of the origin of all nations, coming out, however, with only a few things. They emerged with some cattle, corn, spears, and picks for digging the earth. Arrogantly, with their few possessions, the black men thought that they possessed all things. When the white men emerged, however, they came out with ox-drawn wagons, bearing abundant goods, and able to traverse great distances. By displaying this new, unexpected use for cattle, the whites demonstrated a superior
wisdom that had been drawn from the *uhlanga*. In relation to the power and possessions of white men, black men recognized that they were defenseless. As Mbande explained:

We saw that, in fact, we black men came out without a single thing; we came out naked; we left everything behind, because we came out first. But as for the white men, we saw that they scraped out the last bit of wisdom; for there is every thing, which is too much for us, they know; they know all things which we do not know; we saw that we came out in a hurry; but they waited for all things, that they might not leave any behind. So in truth they came out with them. Therefore, we honour them, saying, “It is they who came out possessed of all things from the great Spirit; it is they who came out possessed of all goodness; we came out possessed with the folly of utter ignorance.” Now it is as if they were becoming our fathers, for they come to us possessed of all things. Now they tell us all things, which we too might have known had we waited; it is because we did not wait that we are now children in comparison with them.

Therefore, Mpengula Mbande concluded, Europeans had not achieved victory over Africans by their superior force of arms. Rather, their wisdom had conquered. According to Mbande, European colonizers had been “victorious by sitting still.” They had not required military force. The wisdom, wealth, and virtue that whites had drawn from the *uhlanga* were sufficient to overpower the black people, who reflected among themselves, as Mbande reported, that “these men who can do such things, it is not proper that we should think of contending with them, as if because their works conquer us, they would conquer us by weapons” (Callaway, 1868-70: 79-80).

Clearly, none of these narratives could be described as ancient or primordial myths of origin, as oral traditions of creation that had been preserved in African religious traditions from time immemorial. Although they must certainly have improvised on older mythic themes, the tellers of these stories clearly located their myths of origin in the disruptions and conflicts of colonial southern Africa. In different ways, myths of origin
invoked a primordial past in efforts to make sense out of new power relations and social conditions of the colonial world.

**Mapping Africans**

While Africans were mapping these relations through myth, Europeans were mapping Africans. There is a long history of European observers using evidence from African indigenous religion, including evidence from African myths of origin, as data for reconstructing scientific accounts of the origin and diffusion of human populations. For most of this history, European observers relied upon biblical narratives as the template for such reconstructions, in effect comparing African myths, rituals, and traditions to the mythic heritage of ancient Israel. In his early eighteenth-century researches on Khoikhoi religion in the Western Cape, for example, Peter Kolb recorded an indigenous myth of origin that he had no trouble tracing back to the Old Testament. Reportedly, the Khoikhoi preserved an oral tradition about their original ancestors, Nôh and Hingnôh, who had entered the Western Cape through a window or a door, which Kolb took to be an allusion to the biblical account of Noah, the great flood, and the reentry of humans into the world through the window or door of the ark. By preserving an ancient memory of the biblical deluge, this myth revealed the Khoikhoi to be ancient Israelites, descendants of Abraham either through his wife Sarah, who Kolb identified as Jews, or through his concubine Keturah (Gen. 25.1-4), who Kolb identified as the Troglydotes.

Supplementing this genealogy with morphology, Kolb maintained, “In their Customs and Institutions, they cannot be said to resemble any People besides the Jews and the Old Troglydotes” (51). Like Jews, he found, the Khoikhoi offered sacrifices, regulated their festivals by the new and full moon, observed avoidances between husbands and wives, abstained from pork, circumcised males, and excluded women from full participation in the religious life of the community. While sharing these religious practices with Jews, the Khoikhoi displayed other features, such as naming children after their favorite animals, abandoning the aged, running very fast while hunting, and performing distinctive funeral rites, which Kolb found in ancient accounts of the customs of the Troglydotes, causing Kolb to conclude that they were the original ancestors of the Khoikhoi, since the Troglydotes “Not only observ’d all or most of the Customs in which
the Hottentots agree with the Jews, but likewise many others, observ'd by the Hottentots to this Day” (51).

Certainly, Peter Kolb’s theoretical framework, which was determined by biblical history, supplemented by ancient historians such as Josephus, Pliny, and Diodorus Siculus, would no longer count as an appropriate context for the historical reconstruction of human origins and dispersions. Likewise, Kolb’s research methods, which he claimed produced reliable findings based on his own observations and interviews, with the interviews facilitated by “Tobacco, Wine, Brandy, and other Things,” was a kind of fieldwork that could not be regarded as producing reliable data for drawing any conclusions. Nevertheless, Kolb’s analytical strategies—tracing a genealogy, establishing a morphology—have endured even in the most recent attempts to reconstruct African prehistory. In the absence of written records, as Kolb argued, only morphological comparison could provide a basis for reconstructing the origin and diffusion of human populations. According to Kolb, “When Records are wanting, and Tradition is grown a blind Matter, concerning the Origin of a People, all that can be done in it, is to compare that Tradition, together with their Customs and Institutions, with the Histories, Institutions and Customs of other Nations, and to fix it, if Nothing shall hinder, where the Parity most appears” (50).

During the nineteenth-century, European travelers, missionaries, settlers, and colonial agents produced a remarkable body of literature about indigenous African religion in southern Africa. Using the same biblical template for reconstructing African origins, these commentators used evidence from indigenous myths, rituals, and traditions to trace an African genealogy back to the Ancient Near East. Situated on contested frontiers, these accounts transposed a map of the Ancient Near East onto the colonial divisions of the region in such a way that the Xhosa were rendered as ancient Arabs, the Zulu as ancient Jews, and the Sotho-Tswana as ancient Egyptians (see Chidester, 1996: 92-94, 124-27, 201-03).

The theory of degeneration from an earlier, higher religion frequently appeared in reports about Xhosa-speaking people in the eastern Cape. Sometimes, that higher religion was identified as Islam. John Barrow, for example, had found in their practice of circumcision remains of “that grand feature of Islamism” (Barrow, 1806: 1:212). Most
often, however, that origin was specified as a pre-Islamic Arab descent that was shared by Muslims. “Were I to speculate upon their origin,” the missionary Stephen Kay reported in 1833, “I would have little hesitation in giving it as my opinion, that they are descended from some of the tribes of these wandering Arabs, known by the name of Bedouins” (Kay, 1833: 107). In the 1840s, John Appleyard held that the Xhosa were of “Ishmaelitish descent,” having the same origin as the Muslims of Arabia (cited Fleming, 1856: 158). Based on five-years experience on the colonial frontier in the 1840s, Harriet Ward recounted the biblical history of the patriarchs in some detail to situate the Xhosa as descendants of Ishmael. Because not everyone was sufficiently familiar with the Pentateuch, she complained, there had arisen “a confused idea that the Kaffir habits, customs, ceremonies, etc., are of Jewish origin, which they are not--but they are decidedly patriarchal.” Their roots could be traced back to Arabs who had either “refused to admit the doctrines of Mahomet” or had already begun their migrations south by the time of the Prophet (Ward, 1848: 137-39).

By 1853, the Reverend Francis Fleming, who served as chaplain for the colonial army on the frontier, could identify the Xhosa with the “wandering Arabs of the Desert.” In support of this Arabian connection, Fleming cited “the few indistinct traces of religion, which are yet to be discernible among them.” Although they no longer believed in God, according to Fleming, the Xhosa had maintained beliefs and practices, such as animal sacrifice and circumcision, which provided “strong corroboration to this conjecture, which refers the origin of this people to Ishmael, the son of Abraham by Hagar” (Fleming, 1853: 117). They were, as Fleming reinforced this point three years later, “Ishmaelitish sons of Abraham” (Fleming, 1856: 197). Ironically, therefore, the Xhosa, who had been designated by the Arabic term for unbeliever in the religion of Islam, were now, according to this theory, actually descendants from the same original stock as Muslim believers of Arabia (see also Martin, 1843: 187; Pringle, 1835: 413).

After the annexation of Natal in 1843 and the establishment of Shepstone’s location system, the Zulu were credited with a religious system that could be traced back to ancient Israel. In evidence before the Natal Native Affairs Commission during 1852 and 1853, European experts repeatedly reinforced the comparison of the Zulu with Jews. Unlike the Africans on the eastern Cape frontier, who were depicted as wild, nomadic
Arabs, the Zulu were represented as people living a relatively stable life like ancient Israelites. Consistently, the Zulu were depicted as the Jews of Natal. Before the Native Affairs Commission, the magistrate of Pafana location, G. R. Peppercorne, emphasized the moral qualities of the Zulu living in Natal. They displayed the virtues of good subjects, including respect for authority, hospitality, honesty, and manners. Although they had not adopted Christianity, the Zulu nevertheless practiced a type of religion found in ancient Israel. "A general type of the customs and laws of the Ama-zulu," Peppercorne reported, "may be found in the early history of the Hebrews, until they became a nation under a settled monarchy." Europeans who wanted to learn about Zulu religion, Peppercorne suggested, only had to read the Hebrew Bible. For example, Zulu polygamy could be found in the narratives of biblical patriarchs; their marriage customs were outlined in the Book of Ruth; and their attitudes towards labor could be understood by reading the story of Jacob and Laban in Genesis. In Peppercorne's testimony, therefore, the Zulu had a recognizable religious life that made them more suitable subjects for colonial control than the Xhosa who were allegedly wild Arabs on the eastern Cape frontier.

This comparison between the Zulu and Jews was reinforced by the evidence of Henry Francis Fynn, who had certified his expertise on the subject by establishing his own Zulu fiefdom in the 1820s. With only a confused idea of a deity, the Zulu nevertheless displayed a remarkable similarity to the religion of the Jews. "I was surprised to find a considerable resemblance," Fynn recalled, "between many of the [Zulu] customs and those of the Jews." He produced an inventory of the most striking similarities: "War offerings; Sin offerings; Propitiatory offerings; Festival of first fruits; The proportion of the sacrifice given to the Isanusi (or witch doctor, as he is termed by Europeans); Periods of uncleanness, on the decease of relatives and touching the dead; Circumcision; Rules regarding chastity; Rejection of swine's flesh." In this list of common customs, Fynn proposed a morphological comparison between the religious life of the Zulu and that of ancient Israel. But those similar religious forms also contained hints of a forgotten history. Since, as Fynn remarked, the Zulu were unacquainted with their own history, comparison provided a basis for suggesting their historical origin. Because of "the nature of semblance of many of their customs to those of the ancient
Jews, as prescribed under the Levitical priesthood,” Fynn concluded, “I am led to form the opinion that the [Zulu] tribes have been very superior to what they are at the present time.” If they had not originated in ancient Israel, then the Zulu at least displayed traces of a higher origin that was similar to the ancient religion of the Jews.

Among the Sotho-Tswana, missionaries discovered a remarkable system of animal symbolism, myth, and ritual. During the 1840s, their reports provided details of local regard for animal emblems. Samuel Rolland recorded the myth that traced the sacred animals back to the original emergence of humanity. When human beings emerged from Molimo through a marsh covered with reeds, Rolland related, “each tribe received a different animal as an emblem which would be for it a god-protector. These animals are held sacred by the Basuto up to this day” (Rolland, 1843: 474). Sacred animal emblems were used to mark cattle, weapons, shields, skin cloaks, and household implements. Members of a tribe swore oaths by their designated animal. In relation to their sacred animal, each group observed special ritual prohibitions that prevented them from killing or eating it.

European commentators were intrigued by the apparent similarity between these sacred animals and animal gods in the religion of ancient Egypt. As Prosper Lemue observed, the Bakuena, in having the crocodile as their sacred animal, “resemble the ancient Egyptians, who rendered it divine honours” (Lemue, 1844: 54). With respect to the importance of sacred animals among Sotho-Tswana people more generally, Henry Methuen suggested that an investigation of similarities or connections with ancient Egypt was an avenue for fruitful research. As Methuen observed, “How far this custom indicates an Egyptian source, or what resemblance it may have to any practice in North Africa, is an interesting matter of research. . . . The sacred animals and birds of the East are familiar to all who have read accounts of that quarter” (Methuen, 1846: 187, 254). The assumption that the Sotho-Tswana could be traced back to ancient Egypt became common in frontier comparative religion. Citing the authority of the Berlin Missionary Society agent Alexander Merensky, who worked among the Pedi on the northern frontier, J. E. Carlyle observed that all “the traditions point to the North-east—Egypt or the source of the Nile—as the cradle of their race.” Not only their veneration of sacred animals, but also their practice of burying their dead with their faces turned towards the northeast.
indicated the Egyptian origin of the Sotho-Tswana people of southern Africa (Carlyle, 1878: 48-49; see also Arrouset and Daumas, 1846: 104; Mackenzie, 1871: 386-87, 391).

Besides transposing the religious differences of the ancient Near East onto the southern African landscape, thereby reinforcing the ethnic, cultural, and religious differences shaped by colonialism, this fanciful genealogy also implied that indigenous Africans were not really indigenous to southern African because they originally belonged in the ancient Near East.

**Sciences of Myth**

Whatever their differences, nineteenth-century metropolitan theorists, such as Max Müller, Tylor, John Lubbock, Herbert Spencer, Andrew Lang, W. Robertson Smith, and James Frazer, deployed a comparative method that inferred characteristics of the "primitive" ancestors of humanity from reports about contemporary "savages" living on the colonized peripheries of empire. Briefly, I want to recall the roles played by F. Max Müller, E. B. Tylor, and Andrew Lang in this history of imperial comparative religion. For all of their differences, what did they have in common? Among other things, they relied upon local southern African experts, such as Wilhelm Bleek or Henry Callaway, who relied upon Africans, such as Mpengula Mbande, who were struggling to work out the meaning of their own situations through the highly charged idiom of religious myths of origin.

I start with F. Max Müller, the putative founder of the scientific study of religion, who had an ongoing interest in South African language, myth, and religion that culminated in his last publication to appear before his death in 1900, a vigorous defence of British sovereignty over South Africa written in the midst of the South African War (Müller, 1900). Sharing the same patron, the Prussian diplomat and scholar Baron Christian von Bunsen, Max Müller and Wilhelm Bleek had much in common. Both had been encouraged by Bunsen to study language as the key to ancient history, myth, and religion. Max Müller responded, not only by developing principles of classification based on language, but also by proposing a linguistic theory of the origin of religious myth. Under the notorious phrase, the "disease of language," Max Müller argued that myth resulted from a primitive proclivity for transposing words for natural phenomena into
supernatural persons. As he proposed in his first series of lectures on the science of language in 1861,

Mythology, which was the bane of the ancient world, is in truth a disease of language. A mythe means a word, but a word which, from being a name or an attribute, has been allowed to assume a more substantial existence. Most of the Greek, the Roman, the Indian, and other heathen gods are nothing but poetical names, which were gradually allowed to assume a divine personality never contemplated by their original inventors. (1862: 11)

In his second series of lectures on language, Max Müller reiterated this generative theory of myth. "The mischief begins when language forgets itself," he declared, "and makes us mistake the Word for the Thing, the Quality for the Substance, the Nomen for the Numen" (1864: 580).

In between these two series of lectures, however, Max Müller had received corroboration from South Africa that lent new substance and precision to his theoretical speculations about the linguistic origin of myth. "I received lately," Max Müller noted, "a Comparative Grammar of the South-African Languages, printed at the Cape, written by a most learned and ingenious scholar, Dr. Bleek" (1864: 11-12). In that comparative grammar, Wilhelm Bleek had classified the indigenous languages of South Africa into two major families, the "Hottentot" and the "Bantu." The "Hottentot" language was spoken by Khoikhoi people in the Cape, while the "Bantu" language family comprised Africans who would emerge from the nineteenth century under the designations Xhosa, Zulu, and Sotho-Tswana. Although he argued that the study of these languages promised to answer many questions in the science of language, replacing, he hoped, Oriental with African studies as the leading field in comparative philology, Bleek also stressed the importance of South African languages for the study of religion.

As Bleek found, these two families of language could be distinguished on the grounds that the "Hottentot" language organized nouns by grammatical gender while the "Bantu" languages did not. Accordingly, because they spoke a sex-denoting language
that attributed gender to nouns, the "Hottentots" had developed a rich mythology that
personified the moon and sun, the night and dawn, as supernatural beings. Therefore, this
mythological personification of heavenly phenomena, or what Bleek called the sidereal
religion of the "Hottentots," was generated by the grammatical structure of their
language. By contrast, "Bantu" languages, without grammatical gender, had not
supported the personification of nouns upon which the development of myth depended.
Instead of sidereal religion, the grammatical structure of "Bantu" languages supported the
emergence of an alternative type of religion, the worship of the dead. According to
Bleek's theory, therefore, two original forms of religion—sidereal worship and ancestor
worship—were derived from the two different grammatical structures which had been
preserved in their most "primitive" forms among the indigenous people of South Africa.

When he gave his lectures on the science of religion in 1870, Max Müller invoked
Bleek's findings as crucial evidence in support of a theory of religion that was based
upon language. Indeed, as Max Müller quoted Bleek quoting Max Müller, he indicated
the symbiotic relationship between their theoretical projects. As Max Müller explained,

In order to guess with some hope of success at the original meaning of
ancient traditions, it is absolutely necessary that we should be familiar
with the genius of the language in which such traditions took their origin.
Languages, for instance, which do not denote grammatical gender, will be
free from many mythological stories which in Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin
are inevitable. Dr. Bleek, the indefatigable student of African languages,
has frequently dwelt on this fact. In the Preface to his Comparative
Grammar of the South-African Languages, published in 1862, he says:
"The forms of a language may be said to constitute in some degree the
skeleton frame of the human mind whose thoughts they express. . . . How
dependent, for example, the highest products of the human mind, the
religious ideas and conceptions of even highly civilized nations, may be
upon this manner of speaking has been shown by Max Müller, in his essay
on Comparative Mythology (Oxford Essays, 1856). This will become
more evident from our African researches." (1873: 54-55)
Not only confirming the premise that language held the key to religion, Bleek actually advanced the theoretical work of Max Müller by broadening the base of relevant evidence. In South Africa, Bleek’s “African researches” suggested a global classification of both language and religion into two general families, the sex-denoting languages, which included the “Hottentots,” but also the Semitic and the Aryan, and the prefix-pronominal languages that included the “Bantu,” Negro, and Polynesian. Max Müller invoked Bleek’s findings as confirmation of his own theory. He even deployed Bleek’s researches in a polemical aside against Edward B. Tylor, who might have had interesting things to say about “savage” religion, “but, not admitting the identity of language and thought, he thinks that the simple anthropomorphic view is the fundamental principle of mythology, and that ‘the disease of language’ comes in at a later period only” (1873: 56, n.1; see Tylor, 1866: 80). According to Max Müller, therefore, Bleek had convincingly demonstrated the linguistic origin of religion. Following Bleek, Max Müller concluded that “the religions of savages, too, will have to submit hereafter to the same treatment which we apply to the sacred traditions of the Semitic and Aryan nations.” And, as Bleek had shown, “there is no solid foundation for the study of the religion of savages except the study of their languages” (1873: 56).

However, in certain respects, Bleek’s researches actually undermined Max Müller’s theoretical project. On the colonial periphery, Bleek found that Max Müller’s global classification, his method of dividing and conquering the empire of religion, was inadequate. Instead of identifying three families, the Aryan, Semitic, and Turanian, Bleek found two that had emerged on the colonial frontier in South Africa, the “Hottentot” and the “Bantu.” Reinscribing this colonial distinction in his theory of the origin of religion, Bleek found two originals represented by “Hottentot” sidereal worship and “Bantu” ancestor worship. In pushing this distinction further, however, Bleek argued that ancestor worship, practiced by the Xhosa, Zulu, and Sotho-Tswana people of South Africa, had preserved the original form of religion performed by “primitive” human beings before sex-denoting languages had “filled the sky with gods” (Bleek, 1869: xv-xvi). Therefore, although language was certainly foundational, the “disease of language” that had
generated mythic personifications occurred, according to Bleek, at a later stage in human evolution.

Turning to E. B. Tylor, we find an evolutionary, cognitive science of myth. Cognitive science begins with the human organism—physical, psychological—and analyzes its cognitive constraints and capacities.¹ What are the cognitive constraints and capacities that produce religion? In his popular survey of human evolution, *The Origin of Civilization and the Primitive Condition of Man*, John Lubbock explained that religion originated as the result of the primitive tendency to attribute animation to inanimate objects. To illustrate this primitive “frame of mind” and “tendency to deification,” Lubbock cited evidence from southern Africa, relying on the early nineteenth-century report from the traveler Henry Lichtenstein that the Xhosa in the eastern Cape assumed that an anchor cast ashore from a shipwreck was actually alive. In a footnote, Lubbock observed, “Dogs appear to do the same” (Lubbock, 1889: 287). This analytical link between the behavior of dogs and the primitive origin of religion was not uncommon in imperial comparative religion. In the *Descent of Man*, Lubbock’s friend and mentor, Charles Darwin, made this link explicit. Religion could be explained in terms of two features of dog behavior. First, like Lubbock, Darwin observed that dogs characteristically attributed life to inanimate objects. A dog’s attention to a parasol blowing in the wind, for example, suggested to Darwin that the animal assumed that objects were alive. Second, Darwin argued that religious devotion, the sense of submission or fear before a higher power, was analogous to a dog’s devotion to its master (1952: 49:302-03; see Verkamp, 1991; Hallpike, 1986). In both these senses, therefore, by attributing animation to inanimate objects and by submitting to a higher power, the dog could provide the basic theoretical model for explaining the origin and evolution of religion.

Max Müller complained about this equation of canine and religious behavior. He blamed it on a misreading of Hegel. Against Schleiermacher’s definition of religion as absolute dependence, Hegel had argued that religion should rather be understood as perfect freedom. If the sense of dependence constituted religion, then the dog might be called the most religious animal. “What was considered a rather course joke of Hegel’s,” Max Müller complained, “has now become a serious doctrine” (1889: 69). Not only
Darwin, but other theorists developed this doctrine. In a discussion of "Animal Concepts of the Supernatural," for example, John H. King asserted that "the dog engages occasionally in rites similar to those of negro fetishism" (1892: 1:87). At stake in this controversy was a crisis over what it meant to be human. For Max Müller, the human was constituted by language, with speech standing as the Rubicon that no animal could ever cross. As an extension of language, religion also marked an impenetrable boundary between the animal and the human. Indicating the seriousness of this question, when Max Müller confronted him with this premise, Darwin reportedly declared, "You are a dangerous man" (1902: 468). In blurring the boundary represented by speech and religion, Darwin, Lubbock, and, as we will see, the anthropologist Edward B. Tylor, established a developmental and evolutionary continuity between the animal and the human. However, because they really did not regard dogs as human beings, these theorists actually established a fundamental discontinuity between the civilized, cultured man of Britain and animals, children, women, rural peasants, the urban working class, criminals, the insane, the deaf and dumb, and "savages" on a colonized periphery of empire such as southern Africa, all of which, as Joan Leopold has noted, "represented a stage of civilization or shared cultural traits of remote ancestors" of humanity (Leopold, 1980: 66).

By using southern African evidence, Edward B. Tylor built a theory of religion—animism, the belief in spiritual, supernatural, or superhuman beings—that explicitly linked the animal and the human by focusing on the cognitive constraints and capacities of human physiology. That theory was based, not on his analysis of the role of dreams, as historians of the discipline have often supposed, but more directly upon reports from southern Africa about the originating religious significance inherent in a certain kind of involuntary physical activity that I will identify in a moment. Like Max Müller, Tylor was impressed by the apparently unmediated access to "savage" religion afforded by Callaway's *Religious System of the AmaZulu*. In September 1871, Tylor tried to raise funds, by making an appeal through the *Colonial Church Chronicle*, to subsidize the completion and publication of Callaway's work, declaring that "no savage race has ever had its mental, moral, and religious condition displayed to the scientific student with anything approaching to the minute accuracy which characterizes" the *Religious System*
(Benham, 1896: 247). In his major work, *Primitive Culture*, Tylor observed that Callaway’s account represented “the best knowledge of the lower phases of religious belief” (1871, I:380). Unlike Max Müller, however, who used Callaway’s book as a resource for studying language, analyzing the play of metaphors in Zulu religion, Tylor harvested evidence of the embodied origin of religion.

In standard accounts of Tylor’s theory of religion, animism is thought to be derived from the “primitive” inability to distinguish between dreams and waking consciousness. When the “primitive” ancestors of humanity dreamed about deceased friends or relatives, they assumed that the dead were still alive in some spiritual form. Out of dreams, therefore, evolved “the doctrine of souls and other spiritual beings in general,” a doctrine that was “rational,” even if it was enveloped in “intense and inveterate ignorance” (I:22-23). Certainly, Tylor found evidence of an active dream life among Callaway’s Zulus. As many European reporters had observed, Zulus often saw the shade or shadow of deceased ancestors in dreams (I:430; Callaway, 1868-70: 91, 126; Casalis, 1861: 245; Arbousset and Daumas, 1846: 12). However, Callaway’s volume included a detailed account about one Zulu man, an apprenticed diviner, who had become so overwhelmed with visions of spirits that he had described his own body as “a house of dreams” (Callaway, 1868-70: 228, 260, 316). According to Tylor, all Zulus, as “savage” survivals of the “primitive,” were subject to dream visions, but “as for the man who is passing into the morbid condition of the professional seer, phantoms are continually coming to talk to him in his sleep, till he becomes as the expressive native phrase is, ‘a house of dreams’” (I:443). Although Tylor appropriated him as an archetype of the “primitive,” this particular Zulu man, who served Tylor as a “savage” survival of the original “house of dreams” from which religion originated, can be identified as James, the brother of Mpengula Mbande. Like his brother, James was torn between the Christian mission and indigenous tradition. While Mpengula Mbande went one way, becoming a catechist for the mission, James struggled in the other direction, striving to keep an ancestral dream alive under increasingly difficult colonial conditions. In this case, therefore, the “house of dreams” was not a “primitive,” but a colonial situation, the product of contemporary conflicts in southern Africa.
In any case, the analysis of dreams did not provide the primary or most important evidence for Tylor’s theory of animism. Rather, the involuntary physical phenomenon of sneezing was central to Tylor’s argument. Here again Callaway’s Zulu evidence was definitive. As Tylor observed, sneezing was “not originally an arbitrary and meaningless custom, but the working out of a principle. The plain statement by the modern Zulus fits with the hints to be gained from the superstition and folklore of other races, to connect the notions and practices as to sneezing with the ancient and savage doctrine of pervading and invading spirits, considered as good or evil, and treated accordingly” (I: 104). From Callaway’s account, Tylor derived the ethnographic facts that Zulus thought their deceased ancestors caused sneezing, that sneezing reminded Zulus to name and praise their ancestors; that the ancestors entered the bodies of their descendants when they sneezed; and that ritual specialists, such as Zulu diviners, regularly sneezed as a ritual technique for invoking the spiritual power of the ancestors (I:98; II:367; see Callaway, 1868-70: 64, 222-25, 263). These Zulu concepts and practices, Tylor concluded, were remnants of a prehistoric era in which sneezing was not merely a “physiological” phenomenon, “but was still in the ‘theological stage’” (I:104).

Much has been made of Tylor’s “intellectualist” theory of religion. Although primitives suffered from primordial stupidity, Tylor argued that they nevertheless exercised their limited intellectual powers to develop explanations of the world in which they lived. Unfortunately, Tylor cited a Zulu source in support of this proposition, Callaway’s catechist, Mpengula Mbande, who observed that “we are told all things, and assent without seeing clearly whether they are true or not.” However, Mbande’s point in this statement was that most Zulus had not been exposed to Callaway’s new Christian gospel (II:387). Rather than offering evidence of primordial stupidity, therefore, Mbande was announcing his recently acquired Christian commitment. In any event, Tylor’s theoretical work, and his use of Zulu evidence, demonstrated that his theory of the origin of religion was based on an analysis of the body rather than the mind. More animal than human, in this respect, “primitive” religion, as revealed according to Tylor by its survival among contemporary Zulu “savages,” had evolved out of a bodily process that was as simple, basic, and involuntary as sneezing. However much it might have been theologized, sneezing marked the physiological origin of religion.
Finally, considering the work of the mythographer Andrew Lang, we find cultural studies in language, myth, and religion that were also in conversation with southern Africa. Cultural studies begins with the human artifact—artificial, factual—and analyzes its modes production and consumption. If E. B. Tylor can be invoked as a progenitor of cognitive science in the study of religion, then the mythographer Andrew Lang can stand as an appropriate ancestor for cultural analysis in the study of religion. Andrew Lang is included in standard histories of comparative religion for his expansive anthropological approach to myth and folklore, for his commitment to the premise that high gods stood at the origin of religion, and for his vigorous polemics against Herbert Spencer’s theory of ancestor worship, Max Müller’s philological analysis of Aryan myth, and James Frazer’s scheme of religious evolution. He described himself, however, as a “hodman of letters,” indicating, with characteristic humor, the humble building trade of popular literature in which he worked. Although he engaged in often heated intellectual controversy with other imperial theorists of comparative religion, Lang seemed to hold greater affinity with popular novelists such as H. Rider Haggard and John Buchan who were working in South Africa. Certainly, the novelists acknowledged Lang as a model and mentor. Meeting Lang in 1885, Rider Haggard praised him as “par excellence a litterateur of the highest sort, perhaps the most literary man in England or America.” Rising to hyperbole, Haggard identified Lang as “the tenderest, the purest and the highest-minded of human creatures, one from whom true goodness and nobility of soul radiate in every common word or act, though often half-hidden in jest, the most perfect of gentlemen” (1926, I:229-31). Where Haggard found human perfection, John Buchan discovered a high god in Andrew Lang, noting that after reading his work in 1892, a decade before embarking upon his own career in southern Africa, Lang became “the chief deity of my pantheon” (Buchan, 1933: 1).

What did these adventure novelists find in the comparative religion of Andrew Lang? First, Lang insisted upon a global unity, a vast narrative uniformity, in the entire history of religions. Whether in southern Africa or Britain, “All peoples notoriously tell the same myths, fairy tales, fables and improper stories, repeat the same proverbs, are amused by the same riddles or devinettes, and practise the same, or closely analogous, religious rites and mysteries” (*Longman’s Magazine* 28 (October 1896): 632). What
provided evidence for this global uniformity of religious narratives and practices? Like other imperial theorists, Lang relied upon reports from local experts on the colonized peripheries of empire. "Our best evidence," he held, "is from linguists who have been initiated into the secret Mysteries. Still more will missionaries and scholars like Bleek, Hahn, Codrington, Castren, Gill, Callaway, Theal, and the rest, sift and compare the evidence of the most trustworthy native informants" (Lang, 1906: II:358). Of these seven scholars cited by Lang, four worked in southern Africa, suggesting, once again, the importance of evidence from that region for theory building in imperial comparative religion. According to Lang, however, the narrative unity of religion was only revealed when such evidence was tested by cross-checking accounts from other regions of the world. Lang asked, "Does Bleek's report from the Bushmen and Hottentots confirm Castren's from the Finns? Does Codrington in Melanesia tell the same tale as Gill in Mangia or Theal among the [Africans]." In Lang's comparative method, evidence was validated if it was confirmed, not by additional reports from the same region, but by reports from widely divergent areas of the globe. If local scholars in different regions told the same stories, Lang concluded, "then we may presume that the inquirers have managed to extract true accounts from some of their native informants" (Lang, 1906: II:359). In adopting Lang's notion of the global uniformity of all religious narratives, the adventure novelists could also relate the same stories. As Haggard's hero put it in the novel, She, "All great Faiths are the same, changed a little to suit the needs of passing times and people" (Haggard, 1887a: 125).

Second, given this global unity of religion, myth, and ritual, Lang argued that it resulted, not from intercultural borrowings or historical diffusion, but from the creative power of the human imagination. In his 1873 essay on "Mythology and Fairy Tales," Lang argued, against Max Müller's philological exegesis of Aryan myth, that "there are necessary forms of the imagination, which in widely separated peoples must produce identical results." Similar mental and social conditions, he proposed, generated forms of imagination that produced the same narratives and practices. Clearly, Lang drew upon a long history of nineteenth-century Romantic theorizing about the creative power of imagination and fancy to conclude that "the Aryan and the lower races have had to pass through similar conditions of imagination and of society, and therefore of religion"
(Dorson, 1968: 197). However, his model for the creative imagination was derived primarily from reports about the myths and rituals of the Zulus of southern Africa. The Zulus demonstrated the “necessary forms of imagination” that had originally produced myth and ritual. Furthermore, according to Lang, Callaway’s Zulus had successfully refuted the alternative hypotheses advanced by Max Müller and Herbert Spencer. With respect to Vedic and Greek myth, Max Müller’s special province, Lang concluded that it was “plain that these tales go back to the time when our Aryan forefathers were in the mental condition of Dr. Callaway’s [African] instructor in the Zulu language” (Dorson, 1968: 200). As for Herbert Spencer’s theory of ancestor worship, Lang found that “that inquiring race, the Zulus, are as subversive of the fancy of Mr. Spencer as of the early orthodoxy of Bishop Colenso” (Dorson, 1968: 206). By exemplifying the “necessary forms of imagination,” therefore, the Zulus stood as the foundation of Lang’s imperial comparative religion. In writing extensively about the Zulus, with special attention to their “forms of imagination,” adventure novelists such as Haggard and Buchan extended the scope of Lang’s imperial comparative religion.

Third, since Lang was concerned with not only the mental, but also the social conditions of myth and ritual, he developed an analysis of primitive politics in which he found that religion was politicized and politics was inevitably enveloped in a religious aura. Here again, reports about the Zulu religious polity served as Lang’s model. “Among the Zulus,” he noted, “we have seen that sorcery gives the sanction to the power of the chief” (1906: I:111). In this respect, the religious resources of ritual specialists, of priests, diviners, or sorcerers, supported political authority. At the same time, however, political power carried a sacred aura. As Lang recounted, “when the chief, as among the Zulus, absorbs supernatural power, then the same man becomes diviner and chief, and is a person of great and sacred influence” (1906: I:113). In the novels of Haggard and Buchan, this intersection between “savage” religion and politics was arguably their central narrative theme; it definitely set a recurring and pervasive framework for dramatic action and interaction between Europeans and Africans in their adventure novels. For example, in All Quatermain, Haggard invented a Zu-Vendi society in southern Africa in which priests held such political power that “it is scarcely too much to say that they really rule the land” (1887b: 154). Buchan’s Prester John centered on a religious
movement that was also a political uprising against colonial domination. Although more explicit in adventure novels, this implicit link between religion and politics formed a subtext in imperial comparative religion.

Finally, Andrew Lang’s academic researches and southern African adventure novels merged in the common project of juxtaposing, often through ironic inversions, the fundamental binary opposition between savagery and civility upon which imperial comparative religion was based. In his collection of satirical stories, The Wrong Paradise (1886), Lang’s dedication to Haggard read: “We are all savages under our white skins; but you alone recall to us the delights and terrors of the world’s nonage.” As Haggard had his hero declare in Allan Quatermain, “Civilization is only savagery silver-gilt” (1987b: 13). These rhetorical turns—stating, undermining, but also reinscribing the opposition between savagery and civility—were crucial to the comparative religion of Andrew Lang. The truth of religion, according to Andrew Lang, was its global uniformity, imaginative origin, political character, and, playing upon the thematic inversion of savagery and civility, the haunting irony revealed by the history of religions that “as man advanced in social progress, he became more deeply stained with religious cruelty” (Lang, 1901: 239-40). In similar terms, and engaging similar tensions in comparative religion, Lang’s more intimate colleagues, the adventure novelists of southern Africa, were already imagining new myths and fictions, new folklore and history, for the global British imperial project.

**Myths of Science**

As recorded in the archives of James Stuart, in 1901 Lazarus Mxaba, a Zulu philosopher with a keen interest in comparative religion, argued for the origin of the Zulu people in ancient Israel. By comparing Zulu and ancient Israelite traditions—both slit their earlobes, burned incense in ritual, spread chyme on graves, and burned the bones and divided the meat of sacrificial animals in similar ways—Mxaba insisted that the Zulu and the Jews shared a common ancestry in ancient Israel (Chidester, 1996: 116-118). Employing the same comparative method used by Peter Kolb, which had also been developed with respect to the Zulu by Peppercorne, Fynn, and other European observers, Lazarus Mxaba deduced a genealogy from a morphology. Mxaba differed from these
earlier commentators, of course, by claiming that genealogy for himself, internalizing a “scientific” account of Zulu origin in ancient Israel and diffusion into southern Africa as the authoritative myth of origin of the Zulu people.

During the broadcast of the weekly television magazine, Carte Blanche, in 1999, a segment focused on the Lemba, “The Black Jews” of Southern Africa. According to a Lemba spokesperson, Machaia Mathivha, “Our forefathers have always claimed that they are the descendants of Abraham and that they are the Jews who came to Africa” (Carte Blanche, 1999).

As early as the 1850s, European observers were fascinated with the Semitic, Jewish, or Muslim features of Lemba religion. According to Thomas Baines, Boers in the Soutpansberg region referred to the Lemba as “the Slaamzyn (Islaams or Mahomedans) Kafirs” (Baines, 1877: 71). Of course, the Boers themselves were branded in British propaganda as ancient Israelites for allegedly claiming the status of the “chosen people” of Israel against African Canaanites in Southern Africa. In the calculus of difference represented by the map of the ancient Near East, with its topography of ancient Jews, Arabs, and Egyptians, the Boers of the Transvaal were placed by the British in the Jewish slot. With respect to the Lemba, however, scientific observers, whether British, German, Swiss, Dutch, or Afrikaner, generally discerned Muslim origins or influences in their religious life. The German missionary ethnographer Schloemann, for example, in 1894 found that the “Semitic” myths and rituals of the Lemba suggested a history mediated by Muslim influence (Schloemann, 1894). The Swiss missionary ethnographer H. A. Junod in 1908 reviewed the basic morphology of their religious myths, rituals, and traditions to conclude that the Lemba had once been in contact with Jews or Muslims of North Africa, although he seemed to prefer the Muslim connection (Junod, 1908).

During the 1930s, scientific interest in the Semitic origins of the Lemba found expression in ethnographic research. Based on his review of the Semitic features of Lemba religion, H. A. Stayt concluded that there was “little doubt that the BaLemba are descendants of some of the early Muhammedan traders who settled between the twelfth and the sixteenth century” (Stayt, 1931). While accepting the Semitic linguistic influences, A. A. Jacques questioned whether the Lemba had once been Muslims, since
their veneration of ancestors, which Jacques termed "ancestrology," was inconsistent with the monotheism of Islam (Jacques, 1931). On the evidence of language, culture, and religion, N. J. van Warmelo concluded that Lembas had been shaped by exchanges with Muslims (Van Warmelo, 1932: 81-82). In the midst of these scientific arguments for Muslim origins, a dissenting voice, the Lembas Manassah Mphelo, a lecturer at Adams College, published an essay in the Native Teachers Journal insisting that the Lembas were "wandering Jews," preserving religious traditions with "typically Jewish features," who only needed to be allocated land on which they could maintain their distinctively Jewish way of life (Mphelo, 1936). Rejecting Muslim origins or influences, Manassah Mphelo insisted that his people, the Lembas, were descendants of Abraham with a distinctive Jewish pedigree in Africa.

During the 1850s, as we recall, European observers distinguished Xhosa "Arabs," who were allegedly wild, nomadic, and dangerous descendants of Muslims or proto-Muslims within the contested frontier of the eastern Cape, from Zulu "Jews," who were supposedly more settled, stable, and congenial to containment in the British colony of Natal. As ethnographic science developed in South Africa during the 1930s, these same terms—Muslim and Jew—served as markers of difference in academic attempts to reconstruct the historical genealogy of the Lembas. While most social scientists preferred a Muslim derivation, the Lembas lecturer, Manassah Mphelo, insisted on tracing his own lineage through Jewish tradition to ancient Israel. Like the Zulu philosopher Lazarus Mxaba, the Lembas lecturer used the morphology of indigenous African myth, ritual, and tradition to deduce a genealogy back to ancient Israel.

As a problem of interpretation, all of these genealogical claims are suspect. Clearly, they have been interested claims, with interests asserted from multiple vantage points. Europeans, from Peter Kolb, traced Africans back to the ancient Near East to show that they didn’t belong in Africa. Africans, from Mxabe to Mphelo, traced their origin back to the ancient Near East, specifically claiming a Jewish lineage, to certify their place in a global history that was grounded in the Bible.

The question of the origin of the Lembas might have remained suspended in this interpretative quandary if not for the recent introduction of genetic research into these deliberations about origins. Beginning with the groundbreaking work of Trevor Jenkins
in South Africa, the Lemba emerged as a test case, a privileged scientific exemplum, for the usefulness of genetic research in reconstructing the origins and diffusion of human populations. As reported on television by Carte Blanche, "What Trevor Jenkins in South Africa first determined was that the Lemba's ancestors were Semitic people. That is, they could have come from any group in the Middle East—Jews, Arabs or Egyptians" (Carte Blanche, 1999). As we have seen, this calculus of difference, distinguishing among settled Jews, wild Arabs, and distant, archaic Egyptians, has not been a neutral taxonomy in South Africa. Under colonial conditions, this taxonomy resulted in the construction of fanciful genealogies for Zulu Jews, Xhosa Arabs, and Sotho-Tswana Egyptians that replicated the classification of broad ethnic groups under colonial and later apartheid systems. Jenkin's pioneering genetic research on the Lemba, however, was soon supplemented by researchers from the University of London, who analyzed the distinctive Y-chromosome distribution, the classic Cohen Modal Haplotype (CMH), shared to a significant degree by the Jewish hereditary priestly class and the Buba clan of the Lemba. On this genetic basis, therefore, the origin and diffusion of the Lemba can be scientifically traced back to ancient Israel.

Although this genetic research on the Lemba has become a classic, textbook case for the relevance of science for rewriting history, not everyone has been impressed by these scientific findings. The Lemba spokesperson Mashaia Mathivha, for example, was not impressed. "Scientists come around and tell us what we already know," says Mathivha. "Well, I suppose it's important to those who did not know—to those people it's been confirmed. But for us it's not new—it's what we have always known" (Carte Blanche, 1999). So, if we have already known all this, especially if "we" are Lemba who have inherited a self-understanding that assumes as a matter of fact, as something that is simply taken for granted, that we are Jews who originated in ancient Israel, how does genetic science contribute anything to our understanding of our origins, diffusion, and place in Africa?

Put differently, in conclusion, I want to raise three questions about the relationship between recent genetic research and religious myths of the origin and diffusion of human beings.
First: How is genetic research on human origins and diffusions related to nineteenth-century romantic theories of religious myth? Starting with the German philosopher J. G. Herder, a romantic understanding of the collective spirit of a people linked origins, homeland, language, culture, religion, and physiology as if they constituted a complex, collective living organism with a life-history of its own. As Bruce Lincoln has observed in his recent review of nineteenth-century theories of myth, the romantic understanding of a people, a *Volk*, presupposed a number of requirements—an *Urvolk*, an *Urheimat*, a distinctive *Urphysiologie*, and a set of foundational *Urmythen*—that combined historical origin, geographical location, physiological attributes, and cultural formations into a unified whole, which, despite contingent factors, was assumed to be essentially continuous with the past and uniform in the present (Lincoln, 1999: 74). In reconstructing the history of the Lemba, does genetic research reinforce this romantic understanding of an *Urvolk*?

Second: If genetic research is based on evolutionary science, how does its inquiry into human origins and diffusions relate to rationalist, evolutionary theories of religious myth? For a modern evolutionary rationalist such as E. B. Tylor, myth was certainly pre-scientific but nevertheless was also quasi-scientific because it was the “primitive” medium for undertaking the scientific challenges of the observation and explanation of the natural world. Still, as Robert Segal has put it, myth and science were incompatible modes of explanation because “myth invokes the wills of gods to account for events in the world; science appeals to impersonal processes like those of atoms” (Segal, 2002: 611-12). In the case of genetic research on the Lemba, we might replace “atoms” in this opposition between myth and science with impersonal processes like the transmission of Y-chromosomes. Presumably, genetic research on human origins, even when using particular religious myths, like the Lemba mythic account of Jewish origins, as “evidence” in reconstructing the diffusion of human populations, would subscribe to this evolutionary replacement of religious myth by modern science. However, referring back to the history of African emergence myths, we must acknowledge that the power of myth does not reside merely or even primarily in any “prescientific” interest in observing and explaining the natural world. Other concerns are at stake, especially the concern with working out what it means to be a human being in a natural, social, and political world.
that is also a human world. If that is the case, then genetic research, despite the assurance by rationalist theories of myth, cannot be confident that myth will be replaced by science in that distinctively human activity.

Third: How is genetic research on human origins and diffusion related to nationalist political projects in Africa? Recently, Achille Mbembe has argued that African narratives, whether radical African nationalist or primordial African nativist narratives, have lost their salience (Mbembe, 2002). If these African myths have died, can science take their place in Africa?

In the revitalization of the African National Congress as a political force in South Africa during the 1940s, the lawyer Anton Lembede, who was also a scholar of religion, having written a Master’s thesis on the concept of God from Descartes to the present, was instrumental in formulating a constitution, a manifesto, and even a “creed” for the launch of the ANC Youth League in 1944. That Youth League’s creed adopted striking religious language about the “divine destiny of nations,” the “new gospel of Africanism,” and an African nationalism that had to be “pursued with the fanaticism and bigotry of religion” (Karis and Carter, 1973: 2:308; Gerhart, 1978: 61). In specifying the underlying principles of that religious nationalism, however, Lembede explicitly highlighted its scientific foundation, arguing that the scientific basis of Africanism was found in the Darwinian natural law of variation, with, with respect to nations, allowed each nation to emerge and enabled each nation to make its own particular contribution to the progress and welfare of humanity” (Karis and Carter, 1973: 2:316).

As Lembede argued, ironically quoting the Afrikaner nationalist Paul Kruger, “One who wants to create the future must not forget the past” (Chidester, 1992: 237). If genetic research is going to rewrite African history, what kind of a past will be gained from this scientific inquiry for creating a future? According to Lembede, we need a pan-African past. He called for the erection of monuments to the great heroes of African history to anchor memory of that past. Significantly, Lembede rejected the recovery of narrowly defined “ethnic” or “tribal” histories by insisting that the heroes of all “tribal” histories had to be recognized, regarded, and commemorated as the common possession of Africa.
This brings us to the heart of the problem: While declaring that race has no place, lacking scientific legitimacy, contemporary scientific research tracks the genetic history of bloodlines, groups, populations, cohorts, or “isolates” in ways that seem to replicate the racial, ethnic, or tribal classifications of the past. If we remember that past, with its violating and often violent classifications of human beings, which claimed the status of scientific knowledge, but clearly reinforced colonial, imperial, and now globalizing power, how do we pursue genetic research into human origins, diffusions, and diversity in ways that will create a future free from such a dehumanizing nexus of knowledge and power?

This crucial question, I suspect, takes us beyond ethics as “bioethics” is conventionally configured, with its ethics committees overseeing genetic research, its funding appended to the Human Genome Project, and its guidelines formulated for the Human Genome Diversity Project. Although the ethical, legal, and social implications of this scientific research certainly need to be monitored, we also need to engage the human dynamics of myth in all of its manifold forms, the religious and the political, the aesthetic and the ethical, the transformative and the transgressive, in order to link scientific explanation with humanistic interpretation. Creative, critical inquiry into religious myth as a way of thinking, feeling, and forming a human collectivity, I would like to suggest, can be integrated into our thinking about the ethical, legal, and social challenges of genetic research. Even if we think that religion and science are opposites, they both have to operate in a human terrain that is mapped by the aesthetics and ethics of authoritative narratives we call myth.
References


Moffat, Robert. 1842.


\[\text{\textsuperscript{i}}\] A good entry into recent developments in the cognitive science of religion is found in the work of Pascal Boyer (2000; 2001). See also Lawson and McCauley (1990) and Guthrie (1993). Although cognitive scientists of religion distinguish their explanatory work from religious activity, one version of evolutionary cognitive science, memetics, has emerged as a religion, the Church of the Virus, on the Internet (http://www.virus.lucifer.com/).

\[\text{\textsuperscript{ii}}\] For a programmatic statement about the study of religion and cultural studies, see Nye (2000). Although a flurry of activity has been evident in the study of religion and American popular culture (Forbes and Mahan, 2000; Mazur and McCarthy, 2001; Mizruchi, 2001), this research has not always been theorized in terms of the “holy trinity”—production, artifact, and consumption—that animates research in the field of cultural studies or the study of popular culture.