Dreaming in the Contact Zone: 
Zulu Dreams, Visions, and Religion in Nineteenth-Century South Africa

David Chidester

In *Primitive Culture* (1871), E. B. Tylor supported his theory of religion, animism, by referring to reports about “savage” dreams. Citing Henry Callaway’s *Religious System of the Amazulu* (1868–1870), Tylor invoked the dreams of a Zulu diviner, a “professional seer” who becomes a “house of dreams,” as a classic example of animism because “phantoms are continually coming to talk to him in his sleep.” In the original account, however, these spirits were not coming “to talk” to the diviner. They were coming to kill him. By situating nineteenth-century Zulu dreams and visions in a colonial contact zone of transcultural relations and asymmetrical power relations, we find a hermeneutics of dreams dealing with indeterminacy, an energetics of dreams, linking dreams to ancestral ritual, which is radically disrupted, and a new interreligious space of resources and strategies for negotiating and navigating within a violent world.
During the nineteenth century, Zulu-speaking people in South Africa lived in a “contact zone,” a space of intercultural engagements shaped by unequal power relations (see Ortiz 1947; Pratt 1992; Carrasco 2004). The advance of British colonialism, which was formalized by the establishment of the colony of Natal in 1843, and extended by British military campaigns, the dispossession of land, and the imposition of new forms of taxation, radically disrupted the indigenous patterns, and rhythms of African political, social, and religious life (Guy 1979; Keegan 1996; Lambert 1995). As in other colonized regions, the world was effectively turned upside down. Although colonialism advanced unevenly and was experienced differently throughout southern Africa, Africans generally became alienated in the land of their birth by the incursions of European settlers and the impositions of a colonial administration. In Natal and Zululand, Christian missionaries played an important role in this massive disruption, providing a haven for African refugees or exiles, but also introducing new social divisions between “traditional” and Christian Africans. These divisions were simultaneously spiritual and material. Material signs of Christianity, such as wearing European clothing, living in square houses, or using a plough to till the land, became indicators of spiritual conversion for a new class of Zulu Christian “believers” (Etherington 1978, 1997, 2002). At the same time, Africans who tried to adhere to traditional or ancestral ways of life also underwent a transformation that was simultaneously spiritual and material. We can learn something about this transformation through an analysis of dreams.

In recounting his tour of Africa in 1925, the psychoanalyst C. G. Jung recalled a conversation he had about dreams with an African ritual specialist. “I remember a medicine man in Africa,” Jung related, “who said to me almost with tears in his eyes: ‘We have no dreams anymore since the British are in the country.’” When Jung asked why the British colonial presence had caused Africans to stop dreaming, the diviner answered, “The District Commissioner knows everything.... God now speaks in dreams to the British, and not to the medicine-man ... because it is the British who have the power.” For Africans, as Jung concluded, “Dream activity has emigrated” (Jung 1964: 10:63–64). According to Jung’s biographer, Frank McLynn, the diviner’s point was that Africans were unable to dream under colonial conditions because the European colonial administrator did all their dreaming for them, since “power speaks to power” (1997: 282; see Burleson 2005). Certainly, this inability to dream, this
dream-loss, represented a spiritual crisis within the most intimate interiority and personal subjectivity of people living under oppressive colonial conditions. But it also reflected broader social, economic, and political realities within which indigenous dreams lost clarity and force in the world.

In British South Africa, the Anglican missionary, Henry Callaway, studied Zulu dreams, devoting a large part of his book, The Religious System of the Amazulu (1868–1870), to what he called the “subjective apparitions” or “brain sensation” of African dream life (Callaway 1860–1870: 228; 1872; see Etherington 1987; Chidester 1996: 152–171). Callaway’s remarkable text was produced within a colonial triangle that drew together the force imposed by local colonial officials, the ethnographic research of a Christian missionary, and the information provided by indigenous Africans, most importantly, by the Zulu convert, Mpengula Mbande, who arguably was the real author of the book. As Mbande collected oral traditions and recorded conversations, he produced the basic material for a text that was not about a single Zulu religious system. Instead, it revealed a dynamic Zulu conflict of interpretations. Nevertheless, The Religious System of the Amazulu became famous in Europe for providing what anthropologist E. B. Tylor called “the best knowledge of the lower phases of religious belief” (Tylor 1871: 1:380). As an imperial theorist of religion, Tylor placed Callaway’s text at the beginning of human prehistory, as if it provided data of the “lower” and “earlier” stages of religious evolution.¹

However, if we place this text in its colonial context, we can gain some insight into the spiritual and material dynamics of indigenous dreams in a contact zone. If we return to the Zulu reports, discussions, and debates published in the Religious System of the Amazulu, we find a hermeneutics of dreams, with basic principles of interpretation, but also space for indeterminacy. We find an energetics of dreams, linking dreaming to action in maintaining ongoing ritual relations of ancestral exchange, and ancestral presence within the homestead, but we also

¹ E. B. 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). For discussions of British imperial comparative religion and southern Africa (see Chidester 2000, 2004a, 2004b, 2007). More broadly, what I am calling imperial comparative religion has been analyzed in relation to Hinduism (King 1999; van der Veer 2001), Buddhism (Lopez 1995), Chinese traditions (Girardot 2002), and the European genealogy of “world religions” (Masuzawa 2005).
find colonial conditions of dispossession and displacement that radically disrupted dreaming. And we find a new interreligious subjectivity emerging in this contact zone that changed the terms for interpreting and enacting dreams. Although C. G. Jung imagined that under colonial conditions African dreaming had emigrated, the Zulu evidence suggests that dreaming remained a vital medium for negotiating and navigating within a contact zone.

HERMENEUTICS AND ENERGETICS OF DREAMS

Dreams require interpretation. But they might also demand action. Accordingly, we need to pay attention to basic principles of interpretation, the hermeneutics of dreams, but we also need to attend to their practical, dynamic entailments and obligations, a range of active participation that I will call the energetics of dreams.²

In the Zulu conversations recorded by Mbande, which form the bulk of Callaway’s Religious System, we learn the basic principles of an indigenous hermeneutics of dreams. In the interpretation of dreams, according to Mbande, the Zulu had developed basic principles of correlation and contrast for discerning the meaning of dream symbolism.

First, Zulu dream interpretation observed the correlation of summer with good dreams and winter with bad dreams. “People say, summer dreams are true,” Mbande observed. By contrast, “winter causes bad dreams.” Therefore, in this hermeneutics of dreams, Zulu dream interpretation found a correlation—summer dreams are true, winter dreams are false—which Mbande underscored by reporting that “it is said there is not much that is false in the dreams of summer. But when the winter comes the people begin to be afraid that the winter will bring much rubbish, that is, false dreams.” However, in this Zulu hermeneutics of dreams, with its winter rubbish and summer revelations, Mbande introduced an element of indeterminacy by cautioning about summer dreams that Zulu people “do not say they are always true” (Callaway 1868–1870: 238–239). While the correlation was important in establishing basic principles for interpretation, this indeterminacy was

² I have adapted this formulation, “hermeneutics and energetics,” with a different purpose, from Ricoeur (1970), who used the term, “energetics,” to refer to dynamic energy flowing between the subconscious and consciousness, while I use the term for dynamic energy flowing between dreaming and acting in the world. A useful overview of the cross-cultural study of dreams can be found in Tedlock (2005). The edited collection by Jederej and Shaw (1992) presents different analytical approaches to dreaming in African religion and culture. Lohmann (2003) collects important research on dreaming in aboriginal Australia and Melanesia.
even more important because it opened a space for creative and critical reflection on the potential meaning of dreams.

Second, Zulu dream interpretation observed a principle of contrast, holding that dreaming “goes by contraries” (238, 241). According to a number of Zulu informants recorded in the Religious System, dreaming of a wedding means that someone will die, while dreaming of a funeral means that someone will get married, or get well, or otherwise flourish. As Mbande related his own experience, he recalled, “I have dreamt of a wedding dance, and the man died; again, I have dreamt of the death of a sick man, but he got well” (237).

In Britain, imperial theorists of religion were intrigued by this principle of contrast. Referring to these Zulu reports, E. B. Tylor noted that “this works out, by the same crooked logic that guided our ancestors, the axiom that ‘dreams go by contraries’” (Tylor 1871: 1:110, citing Callaway 1868–1870: 241). Similarly, Andrew Lang took these reports to indicate that “Dr. Callaway illustrates this for the Zulus,” proving that “Savages, indeed, oddly enough, have hit on our theory, ‘dreams go by contraries’” (Lang 1909: 106).3

But the conversations collected in the Religious System about this hermeneutical principle, “dreams go by contraries,” reveal profound struggles with indeterminacy. Like the correlation of good summer dreams and bad winter dreams, the principle, “dreams go by contraries,” was true but not always true. As Mbande acknowledged, “I have not yet come to a certain conclusion that this is true; for some dream of death, and death occurs; and sometimes of health, and the person lives” (238). His friend, Uguaise Mdunga, accepted the principle that dreams go by contraries, but then recounted that he had just dreamed of a wedding and a funeral. According to the principle of contraries, “your dream of a funeral lamentation is good; the dream of a wedding is bad” (242). But what if you dream of both?

As these Zulu deliberations about the hermeneutics of dreams indicate, dreams could be correlated with the seasons, but not always, and dreams could go by contraries, but not always. And sometimes, as Uguaise observed, “sleep has filled my mind with mere senseless images” (246).

This indeterminacy in the interpretation of dreams was related to the uncertainty and instability of daily life under colonial conditions. Dreams were not merely “texts” to be interpreted. They were calls to

---

3 For an ethnographic survey of interpreting dreams according to the principle of contraries, see Dentan (1986).
They demanded a practical response, whether through exchanges with ancestral spirits or through asserting ancestral claims on a territory.

In the first instance, as Uguaise Mdunga observed, dreams often required a sacrificial offering for an ancestor, calling the dreamer to action. “You will see also by night, you will dream; the Itongo [ancestor] will tell you what it wishes,” he observed. “It will also tell you the bullock it would have killed” (6). This exchange between the living and the “living dead,” the ancestors, was a central feature of Zulu religious practice. Dreams were a medium of communication; but they were also a call to action, with detailed attention to the specific ancestral spirit, sacrificial offering, and, of course, the dreaming human being who must be brought into relationship with the deceased ancestor in this exchange.

In the second instance, dreams often required actions to assert or reassert claims on territory, as when dreaming of the dead (or, according to one report, even not dreaming of the dead) required the living to perform certain ritual actions so the dead might be “brought back from the open country to his home” (142). In such ancestral dreams, practical steps had to be taken to reestablish the territorial integrity of domestic space shared by the living and the dead.

These dream-based practices of ritual exchange and territorial orientation suggest that dreams were not only about meaning; they were also about a world of action. Zulu dreams were not merely “subjective apparitions,” or “brain sensation,” as Henry Callaway would have it. Dreams were objective indicators of a changing world.

**BLOCKING DREAMS**

Under colonial conditions, the meaning of dreams might have become increasingly uncertain. But the energetics of dreams was radically disrupted. As Africans were deprived of the means of exchange and access to territory, dream life was dramatically altered. Increasingly, according to reports collected in the *Religious System*, Africans turned to ritual techniques for blocking dreams because they were unable to fulfill the practical obligations to their ancestors that were conveyed by dreaming. Techniques for blocking dreams included using a black medicinal herb, performing symbolic actions to throw the dream behind (without looking back), and enacting rituals to remove the dream from the home and secure it in a remote place (160–161). Conversion to Christianity could also be a technique for blocking ancestral dreams.
In the ritual energetics of exchange, Africans deprived of cattle could not fulfill the requirements of sacrifice. Recounting a recent dream, Uguaise Mdunga noted, “I have seen my brother.” His deceased elder brother, appearing in a dream, called for a sacrificial offering, which placed a solemn and sacred obligation on Uguaise to respond. But Uguaise had no cattle. Addressing the spirit of his brother, he cried, “I have no bullock; do you see any in the cattle-pen?” Unable to achieve the necessary exchange, Uguaise could only feel the anger of his brother. “I dreamed that he was beating me,” he reported, noting that in further dreams this spirit kept “coming for the purpose of killing me” (146–147, 157). The result of this blocked exchange, he felt, would only be suffering, illness, and death.

A few decades earlier, European Christian missionaries had complained that they could not gain converts among the Zulu because the people were too wealthy in cattle (Polland, Hammond-Tooke, and Voigt [2003]). Now, ironically, when people had less cattle, ancestors were increasingly appearing in dreams to demand sacrifice. As a result, people dreamed, but did not talk about their dreams. As Mbande observed, “although they have dreamed and in the morning awoke in pain, [they] do not like to talk about it themselves; for among black men slaughtering cattle has become much more common than formerly, on the ground that the Idhlozi [ancestor] has demanded them” (172). Under colonial conditions of dispossession, dreams of ancestors calling for cattle apparently increased, but the living, unable to fulfill this exchange, no longer were able to talk about what they had seen in their dreams. Increasingly, Africans sought ritual means to block their dreams, as Callaway observed, “lest the frequent sacrifices demanded should impoverish them” (190, n. 50).

Under colonial conditions, Africans tried to block their dreams, but their dreams were also blocked by colonial conditions. In addition to calling for sacrificial exchange, dreams also called upon people to keep their ancestors in the home or bring them back to the home. However, for people displaced from their homes, this aspect of the energetics of dreams became very difficult. As Mbande recounted, his own family, which had been displaced by colonial warfare, struggled with their ancestral dreams of home. Forced to flee to another country, they employed the traditional ritual means of transporting ancestors under the sign of snakes. As a symbolic trace of the ancestor, the snake communicated through dreams, as Mbande noted, “Perhaps the snake follows; perhaps it refuses, giving reasons why it does not wish to go to that place, speaking to the eldest son in a dream; or it may be to an old man of the village; or the old queen” (212).
In the case of Mbande’s family, however, their ancestral dreams were blocked by the colonial incursions of the Dutch and the British. As they were “flying from the Dutch,” the head of the family, Umyeka, dreamed that their paternal ancestor was demanding that they reclaim their home as “it was said to him in a dream, ‘Why do you forsake your father?’” But they could not return home, “fearing their feud with the Dutch.” Blocked from returning to their ancestral territory, they dreamed of relocating their ancestor. As Mbande recalled, “our father whilst asleep dreamt the chief was talking with him, [saying] it would be well for you to make a bridge for me, that I may cross on it and come home; for I am cold, and the water makes me colder still.” With considerable ritual effort, they built a bridge for their ancestor to relocate to a new home. But this dream of a new home was also shattered, as Mbande recounted, because they were soon driven out at the order of the British colonial administrator, Secretary of Native Affairs Theophilus Shepstone. As a result, Mbande reported, “We were scattered and went to other places” (206–207, 209). The energetics of dreams, therefore, was radically disrupted by such colonial conditions of dispossession and displacement.

4 Theophilus Shepstone was a crucial colonial administrator at the nexus between imperial ambitions and local realities in Natal and Zululand, mediating both structure and history. Structurally, he devised a system of indirect rule through collaborating or appointed “chiefs”—the “Shepstone system”—that became a model for British administration in colonial Africa (Etherington 1989). Analytically, on the front lines of colonial conflict, conquest, and administrative control, he proposed a three-phase history of the Zulu people that was very different than the vision of evolutionary progress from primitive to civilized that was current amongst imperial theorists in Britain. In the first phase of Zulu history, according to Shepstone, “we have simple, primitive, unalloyed barbarism ... peace, prosperity, and plenty.” This idyllic barbarism, a “primitive” situation that seemed more like paradise than like the “primordial stupidity” imagined by the British evolutionists, was destroyed by a second phase in which the original barbarism was mixed with “a dash of civilization” under the kingship of Shaka, who “cut off all that sustains life, turned thousands of square miles into a literally howling wilderness, shed rivers of blood, annihilated whole communities, turned the members of others into cannibals.” Finally, in the third phase of Zulu history, according to Shepstone, “we see civilization,” in its pure form, driven by direct British influence and control, intervening in the devastation of the Zulu people caused by Shaka by “protecting and ameliorating the remnants of this wreck (Sullivan 1928: 9–10). Historians have pointed to two ironies in this version of Zulu history—the tyranny of Shaka was an invention of British propaganda and the terror of Shaka was eventually claimed by the colonial representative of “pure” civilization, Theophilus Shepstone.
INTERRELIGIOUS DREAMS

In *The Religious System of the Amazulu*, a convert at Callaway’s mission station, who is identified only as James, features prominently as a dreamer. After living for over ten years at the Christian mission, James left to pursue his own dreams. Showing all of the symptoms of being called by the ancestors to be a diviner, suffering an illness, Mbande notes, “which is not intelligible among Christians,” James went off to live alone, subject to dreams, his body becoming a “house of dreams” (185, 260). When Mbande and his fellow Christian convert Paul went to see him, James related that his initiatory sickness had caused him to leave the mission, noting that “this disease has separated me from you,” but he also observed that his dreams had given him new access to the entire world because “there is not a single place in the whole country which I do not know; I go over it all by night in my sleep; there is not a single place the exact situation of which I do not know” (187–188). In this new freedom, however, his dreams were still blocked. In his dreams, he was told where to find medicinal plants, but he did not find them; he dreamed of antelope telling him where to find an aloe tree, but it was not there. He dreamed of ancestors, calling for meat, could “not kill cattle” (190). The Word of God and the bell of the church, Mbande advised, would drive away all of these dreams. But James seems to have found these ancestral dreams already blocked. Nevertheless, he continued to dream. As he told Mbande and Paul, “on the night before you came I saw you coming to me, but you were white men” (192). Going by contraries, perhaps, this dream nevertheless suggested that James now perceived these African Christian converts as aliens.

Every night, in dreams, James saw wild animals, dangerous snakes, and rushing rivers. “All these things come near to me to kill me,” he said. On the day of his meeting with his Christian friends, James reported that last night he had been attacked by men. As James explained, “I dreamt many men were killing me; I escaped I know not how. And on waking one part of my body felt different from other parts; it was no longer alike all over.” As a result, James found, “My body is muddled today” (260). The Zulu term for “muddled”—*Dungeka, Ukudunga*—was a metaphor derived from stirring up mud in water. Although it could be applied to a state of mind, signifying a confusion of mind, it could also be applied to the disturbance of a household by a house-muddler (*Idungandhlu*) or the disturbance of a village by a village-muddler (*Idungamuzi*) (Doke and Vilakazi 1958: 175). All of these meanings, certainly, were at play in the dreams of a Zulu man
who experienced his body, his home, his family, and his sense of community stirred up and under attack by forces threatening to kill him.

Mbande reminded James of an old dream, which James had related to Mbande when they were both Christians, in which James crossed a river, in a boat of faith, and was saved from being killed by wild dogs. In African indigenous religion, the river was a powerful liminal zone in between the sacred space of home, which was built up through ritual relations with ancestors, and the wild, dangerous zones of the bush or forest that contained alien spirits. Mediating between home space and wild space, the river represented both ancestral protection and spiritual danger, a place of potential for both life and death (Chidester 1992: 3–6). As James learned during his initiatory sickness, the dreams of a diviner were filled with rushing rivers. Mbande, as a Christian, interpreted these dream rivers as a test of faith. The dreamer, according to Mbande, must cross these rivers in the boat of Christian faith. Remembering this old dream, in which he had been saved by the boat of faith, James had now arrived at a new interpretation. Yes, James said, “the boat is my faith, which has now sunk into the water. And the dogs which I saw are now devouring me.” If he could not be saved by Christian faith, Mbande demanded, “Who will save you?” Nothing, James replied: “I am now dead altogether” (188–189).

Under colonial conditions, in a contact zone, all of the Zulu dreams we have considered bear traces of a changing world, a colonial world in which indigenous people were undergoing dispossession, displacement, and despair. As a result, in the hermeneutics and energetics of dreams, the principles of dream interpretation became increasingly indeterminate and the ways of practically engaging with the demands of dreams by entering into ancestral exchange or affirming ancestral territory became increasingly impossible. These were realities of the colonial situation revealed through dreams.

**DISCIPLINING DREAMS**

Within this interreligious contact zone, new Christian techniques were being developed to block ancestral dreams. In dealing with the case of James, Mbande advised a religious discipline of hearing—listening to the Word of God, listening to the bell of the church—as a method for blocking visions. Christian prayer, as well, was a disciplinary technique for counteracting dangerous visions. Mbande’s own experience of prayer had required developing a disciplined subjectivity that blocked what Callaway called “subjective apparitions.” “As regards those wild animals which a man sees when he is going to pray in secret,”
Mbande reported, “I too have seen them again and again.” According to Mbande, these wild forces arrived in a pattern—snake, leopard, and warrior—to distract the Christian from the sensory focus necessary for prayer. With eyes closed, Mbande felt their approach, as if he heard them saying, “Now he has closed his eyes, and will no longer see me; let me draw near and bite him, or lay hold of him, or stab him.” Remaining steadfast in prayer, Mbande heard “a great noise which took away all my courage, and led me to say, ‘This is something real … now there is coming a great thing to kill me” (246)—first the snake, with terrifying large eyes; then the leopard, “crackling” through the brush; then the enemy warrior, brandishing a long spear, thrusting the assegai into the body of the praying Christian.

According to Mbande, Christians at prayer faced real dangers from being discovered and attacked by other people who would say, “O, that man is now a believer; I heard him praying; it is well for us to go to the place where he prays, and arouse him, or beat him, that he many not repeat such things” (250). To avoid being discovered, Mbande went out to pray alone before sunrise while most people were still asleep. In the darkness, therefore, the dangerous snake, leopard, and warrior were like phantoms of a dream. Eventually, Mbande realized that he was being attacked by “fantacy” and “deceived by fantasies.” But this realization required an extraordinary discipline of the senses, not by employing techniques to block out these dream-like apparitions, but by surrendering to them. Mbande recounted how he conquered these apparitions by allowing them to seize him, holding steady to feel them through his body:

And indeed when I was kneeling there came a snake to do as on other days. I said, “No! To-day let me feel by my body that it has already seized me.” Then I conquered. There came a huge leopard. I said also to it, “Let me feel by my body.” I conquered. There came a man, running to stab me at once. Since I had despised the leopard, I said too of the man, “Let me feel by my body.” I conquered him. I went home having ascended a rock of safety, saying, “O, forsooth I have been hindered by fantasies.” (249–250)

In these nineteenth-century Zulu interreligious reflections, we catch a glimpse of new subjectivities being negotiated in the media of dreams and visions. Putting the matter starkly, indigenous dreams and visions were real because they called for action, requiring practical responses through exchange or relocation. By contrast, following Mbande, Christian converts were called to see through their dreams as heuristic
devices, as mere metaphors of the dilemmas of faith. By holding steady, Christians could demystify their visions as mere fantasy. This process of demystification demanded a rigorous discipline of the senses, requiring concentration but also endurance, in mobilizing the body to withstand dangerous attacks in order to break the hold of fantasy.

We must certainly notice the undercurrent of violence running through these dreams and visions. Spirits come to kill James. Snakes, leopards, and warriors come to kill Mpengula Mbande. Zulu dreams and visions, whether interpreted in traditional or Christian idiom, were undergoing violent transformations under colonial conditions. From a Christian perspective, indigenous dreams and visions had lost their purchase on the world. In a section of Callaway’s *Religious System of the Amazulu* entitled “The Diviner Mistaken,” the Zulu Christian convert Usetemba Dhladhla related a story about how a Zulu diviner had failed to find and secure the return of a lost cow, “a heifer belonging to Mr. G., my white master” (300). After getting a shilling from Mr. G. to consult the diviner, Dhladhla participated in the traditional divining ritual of questions and responses to learn that the missing heifer was in the thorn country along the Umsunduze River “in the neighborhood of Mr T.” Following the diviner’s vision, Dhladhla went off to the thorn country only to learn from people in “native villages” that he was entering an area controlled by “the white man who ate up the cattle of the people that were lost.” Dhladhla was afraid to go any further because Mr. T. was a “passionate white man who beats any coloured men whom he does not know if he see them passing through his land. So we went back to Pietermaritzburg without going to T.; and told Mr. G that we had not found the heifer at the place pointed out by the diviner. So he told us to give up the search. We did so, and that was the end of it” (303–304). According to Henry Callaway, this was a case of a “diviner mistaken,” a failure of indigenous African dreams, visions, and divination. But clearly the story provided evidence of colonial violence—appropriation of cattle, control of territory, and practice of torture—that defined the context in which Zulu divination, visions, and dreams were being subjected to a new kind of discipline.

THEORIZING DREAMS

In the academic study of religion, we need to pay close attention to these colonial realities and dreams. A nineteenth-century imperial study of religion, positioned at the center of empire, was committed to erasing these material and spiritual details. E. B. Tylor, for example, used James, the Zulu dreamer, as primary data for building his theory
of the origin of religion, animism, as a primitive misunderstanding of the illusions of dreams for the realities of waking life. Citing Callaway’s *Religious System*, Tylor invoked the dreams of a Zulu “professional seer” who “becomes as the expressive native phrase is, ‘a house of dreams,’” as a classic example of animism because “phantoms are continually coming to talk to him in his sleep” (Tylor 1871: 1:399–400, citing Callaway 1868–1870: 260 and 1872: 170; see Chidester 2005: 78–81). As we have seen, however, this “seer,” the Zulu Christian apostate and struggling diviner, James, was not confused by dreams of spirits coming to talk to him. He was tormented by forces coming to kill him.

In 1871, Henry Callaway presented a paper to the Royal Anthropological Society in London on the results of his research into the dreaming, divination, and religious life of the Zulu of South Africa. Ordinary dreams and extraordinary visions, Callaway proposed, could be explained as “brain-sensation” that took the form of “brain-sight” and “brain-hearing.” Brain-sensation, he clarified, is “a condition of brain which, without external causes in operation, is attended by feeling, hearing, and sight, just as it would if there were external causes in operation, capable of producing such sensations.” Drawing upon the Zulu accounts and interpretations of such “subjective apparitions,” which he had recently published in his *Religious System of the Amazulu* (1868–1870), Callaway illustrated “brain-sensation” through examples of “spectral vision or brain-sight” and “brain-hearing”—that is ... the same condition of brain as there would be if the sounds actually reached it through the ear” (Callaway 1872: 166–167).

In the discussion that followed, one member of the society, Walter Cooper Dendy, dismissed Callaway’s analysis, complaining that it was “the most prolix and monotonous paper read before the Institute during this session; indeed, it was a real infliction ... if we hear nothing from south-eastern Africa more rational, the sooner the district is tabooed the better” (Callaway 1872: 184). But the problem with Callaway’s analysis was that he did not do justice to his “data” because he reduced the dynamic Zulu hermeneutics and energetics of dreams, which were situated in a colonial contact zone, to a cognitive psychology of “brain-sensation.”

Dreaming in the contact zone, as we have seen, cannot be adequately explained as a mentality and certainly not as a “primitive mentality” preserving original cognitive processes of an animism that confused dreaming and waking. In order to distill a primitive religious mentality, E. B. Tylor had to erase all of the social, political, and military conditions under which Henry Callaway was collecting his data. As a matter of method, Tylor insisted on erasing the intercultural
exchanges in which this “religious” data was emerging from a contact zone. According to Tylor, “savage religion” had to be abstracted from its living contexts in order to be used in an evolutionary history of human culture that began with primitive animism. “In defining the religious systems of the lower races, so as to place them correctly in the history of culture,” Tylor observed in 1892, “careful examination is necessary to separate the genuine developments of native theology from the effects of intercourse with civilized foreigners” (Tylor 1892: 283). Any trace of more advanced religious concepts, such as ideas of deity, morality, or retribution in an afterlife, could only have entered “savage” religion, Tylor argued, through such foreign intercourse with “higher” races. Factoring out colonial contacts, relations, and exchanges, he argued, “leaves untouched in the religions of the lower races the lower developments of animism” (Tylor 1892: 298).

According to this method, therefore, animism appeared as the original religion—the earliest, the lowest—only by erasing the actual colonial situations in which indigenous people lived. As a result, the theory of animism provided an ideological supplement to the imperial project.

Nineteenth-century Zulu dreams were not symptoms of some original “primitive mentality.” Instead, they were situated within the violent disruptions of a colonial contact zone. An undercurrent of violence runs through these dreams, as dreamers are threatened by neglected ancestors, enemy warriors, wild animals, or dangerous rivers. As I have proposed, this violent dream imagery can be related to the breakdown in the religious practices of ancestral exchange and spatial orientation that were important features of African indigenous religion. But some of these dreams, especially the dreams of James, also suggest the interreligious nature of the contact zone, a space in which Africans were negotiating new Christian and indigenous religious understandings of a changing world.

Both of these modes of understanding—indigenous African and African Christian—were erased by E. B. Tylor in abstracting Zulu dreams from the intercultural and interreligious relations of the contact zone. But they were also destined for destruction within his imperial understanding of the mission of a scientific study of religion. Tylor imagined that his anthropological investigations were providing “new evidence and method in theology” (1871: 2:449). But his ethnographic theology, comparing “evidence of religion in all stages of culture” (1871: 2:451), advanced a discipline of demystification that was not unlike Mpengula Mbande’s demystification of dreams and visions as merely fantasy. “It is a harsher, and at times even painful office of ethnography,”
Tylor asserted, “to expose the remains of crude old culture which have passed into harmful superstition, and to mark these out for destruction” (1871: 2:453). As we have seen, colonial interventions in Zulu dream life, which eroded the material means of ancestral exchange and territorial orientation, had already been far more destructive than E. B. Tylor, from his study at Oxford, could ever have hoped to have been.

However, the colonial situation in South Africa was not only destructive, it was also productive, producing new dreams, and new subjectivities, which have persisted, despite Tylor’s attempt to erase their conditions of production and mark them out for destruction. By returning to the colonial hermeneutics of dreams, in all of its indeterminacy, and by returning to the colonial energetics of dreams, with all of its obstacles, we can recover what E. B. Tylor tried to erase and destroy—the reality of dreaming in a contact zone.5

**ZULU RELIGION**

By grounding nineteenth-century Zulu dreaming in colonial situations, I believe we gain a new perspective on an indigenous African religion as a dynamic, fluid, and contested set of resources—interpretive, pragmatic, and energetic resources—that were deployed in a transcultural contact zone. Clearly, this rendering of religion as resources and strategies could be extended more broadly to the analysis of any religious form of life. In the case of Zulu religion, however, such a situated and dynamic rendering is necessary to counteract the characteristic representations of this indigenous African religion as either a “religious system” to be inventoried or a “religious mentality” to be criticized or celebrated.

In the first instance, the notion of a Zulu religious system (see Kringe 1936; Berglund 1976; Preston-Whyte 1987; Chidester et al. 1997: 212–275), echoing the boundaries imposed by the colonial location system or reserve system (Chidester 1996: 116–172), has been constructed as an inventory of key features—God (Weir 2005; Worger 2001), ancestors (Hexham 1987), sacrifice (De Heusch 1985: 38–64; Lambert 1993), divination (Du Toit 1971; Ngubane, 1977, 1981), and political authority,

5 The potential for analyzing dreaming under different colonial conditions is enormous. I cannot begin to chart all the possibilities here. Frantz Fanon, as might be expected, provides a good place to start, incorporating a psychoanalytic tradition from Freud to Lacan, but critiquing the psychoanalytically informed analysis of Octave Mannoni (1990; orig. ed. 1950) in Madagascar by insisting that “the discoveries of Freud are of no use to us here. What must be done is to restore the dream to its proper time, and this time is the period during which eighty thousand natives were killed” (Fanon 1967: 104). Accordingly, in this essay I have tried to begin restoring nineteenth-century Zulu dreams to their proper time.
asserted in collective rituals of fertility (Gluckman 1938) and warfare (Guy 2005), but also bearing claims to sacred kingship in the lineage of the thoroughly mythologized King Shaka that were most frequently and consistently asserted by British colonizers and imperialists (Hamilton 1998; Wylie 2000). In the colonial context, however, all of these features of indigenous Zulu religion could not possibly be regarded as elements of a stable system. As religious resources, simultaneously symbolic and material, all of these elements were being deployed during the nineteenth century in complex and contested negotiations under colonial conditions.

God, for example, was at stake and at risk in these negotiations. Almost immediately after they arrived in Natal, the Anglican Bishop J. W. Colenso and the Anglican missionary Henry Callaway became embroiled in an argument over whether the Zulu had any indigenous understanding of a supreme being that was similar to the Christian God. Colenso found that they did, identifying two Zulu terms, uNkulunkulu (the “Great-Great-One”) and umvelinqangi (the “First Out-Comer”), which he found equivalent to Yahweh and Elohim of the Hebrew Bible. Disagreeing, Callaway found that the Zulu had no indigenous understanding of God, arguing that uNkulunkulu was actually understood as the original ancestor of the Zulu people. In accounts of the Zulu religious system, this controversy persisted, with some commentators arguing for an indigenous Zulu conception of God (Wanger 1923–1926) and others arguing that Zulu ancestral religion adopted such a concept from the Christian missions (Hexham 1981). By situating this question in the colonial context, however, we discover a range of Zulu interpretive strategies being deployed along a contested but expanding frontier of British influence and control. Under these conditions, people least affected by these changes tended to regard uNkulunkulu as the original ancestor of their political grouping, while people whose political autonomy had been destroyed interpreted uNkulunkulu as either the original ancestor of all humanity or the supreme being of the world (Etherington 1987; Chidester 1996: 160–165).

As we have seen, ancestors were also at risk, calling for meat from their relatives who had been dispossessed and calling to be brought home by their children who had been displaced. Under these conditions, sacrificial exchange, domestic order, and the divination practiced by ritual specialists were all profoundly affected by British military incursions and colonial interventions. While the British colonial administrator Theophilus Shepstone claimed the sacred mantle of King Shaka, putting himself forward as the Supreme Chief of all Zulu people (McClendon 2004), indigenous Zulu religious resources were being deployed and
redeployed, mobilized and contested, in a contact zone of intercultural relations and exchanges but also of asymmetrical power relations.

If Zulu religion cannot be reconstructed as a stable system, it also cannot be reduced to a mentality, whether that mentality is critiqued as an unwarranted survival from human prehistory or celebrated as a persistence of an African identity that is “incurably religious” (Platvoet and van Rinsum 2003). As we have seen, E. B. Tylor based his entire theory of the origin of religion, animism, on the primitive inability to distinguish between dreams and waking consciousness. Citing Zulu data as his best evidence for this original “house of dreams,” Tylor also invoked the Zulu as survivals of the “inveterate ignorance” that characterized the primitive mentality of human beings in the earliest phase of evolution. In Tylor’s “intellectualist” theory of religion, primitives might have suffered from primordial stupidity, but they exercised their limited intellectual powers to develop explanations of the world in which they lived. As evidence of this primitive mentality, Tylor invoked, once again, Zulu data provided by Henry Callaway’s Religious System of the Amazulu, quoting Mpengula Mbande, who observed that “we are told all things, and assent without seeing clearly whether they are true or not” (Tylor 1871: 2:387). However, Mbande’s point in this statement was that most Zulu-speaking people had not accepted the truth of the Christian gospel proclaimed by Callaway’s mission. Instead of offering “savage” evidence of primordial stupidity, therefore, Mpengula Mbande was announcing his recently acquired Christian commitment. Although Tylor preferred to erase such an entanglement from any reconstruction of “savage” religion, his citation of Mbande as evidence suggests the futility of his enterprise. Everything, even thinking, was thoroughly entangled in colonial relations.

As a strategic counterattack against European denigration of African religion as primitive mentality, John Mbiti’s celebration of African religiosity as an all-pervasive spiritual mentality is an understandable but untenable rendering of African religion. According to Mbiti, an indigenous religious mentality pervades every aspect of African life.

Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician he takes it to the house of parliament.

In every public sphere of economic, social, and political activity, Africans, according to Mbiti, are essentially religious. “Although many African languages do not have a word for religion as such,” Mbiti
admitted, “it nevertheless accompanies the individual from long before his birth to long after his physical death” (Mbiti 1969: 1–2; see Mbiti 1975: 30). This religious portability, however, is a consequence of precisely the kinds of colonial disruptions that we have considered with respect to Zulu dreaming. Detached from “locative” relations of ancestral exchange and orientation, this “utopian” religiosity can be taken anywhere (or nowhere) as a mobile mentality.6

Although cognitive studies in religion have made significant advances in recent years, we are still faced with the challenge of situating mentality in social space (see Lewis-Williams 2002). Zulu religion, however rendered, must be more than a generalized mentality. In a discussion of intellectualist theories of religion in which religion is explained as way of explaining and seeking control over the environment, Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley invoke the Zulu in passing, observing that an intellectualist rendering of religion finds that “the reason the Zulu have a belief in and rites involving the ancestors is that such a belief and the attendant rites enable the Zulu to develop an explanatory theory which not only accounts for any contingency but also permits them to devise means to attempt to control their environment” (1990: 35; see Horton 1997). Based on our brief review of nineteenth-century Zulu dreaming, we must wonder about such an “intellectualist” explanation of Zulu religious mentality as a proto-scientific means of explanation and control. Everything in the nineteenth-century Zulu hermeneutics and energetics of dreams that we have considered suggests that all interpretations were contingent and that the cultural, social, and political environment was out of control. Dreaming, which has been oddly neglected in cognitive studies of religion, might be an important arena for exploring such indeterminacy and chaos in the history of religions.

ZULU DREAMS

Dreams, the most insubstantial medium, which Henry Callaway dismissed as “subjective apparitions,” nevertheless mediated substantial and material relations in nineteenth-century Zulu religious life.7 In

---

6 On the distinction between “locative” orientations, fixed in place, and “utopian” orientations toward anyplace (or no place), see Smith (1978: 100, 101, 293, 309). The utopian portability of Zulu religion, with specific attention to Zulu dreaming, divination, and visions, has recently proliferated in the contemporary global network of neo-shamanism (Chidester 2002, 2008).

7 In more recent research on Zulu dreaming, analysts have emphasized persistence and change. Lee (1958) introduced the notion of “time-lag” in accounting for the persistence of traditional elements in Zulu dreams, while Thwala et al. (2000) tracked a range of structural differentials—urbanisation, gender, age, and education—to account for the discontinuity of contemporary Zulu
conclusion, we can reflect briefly on the colonial mediations of the hermeneutics, pragmatics, and energetics of nineteenth-century Zulu dreaming.

First, dreams were texts to be interpreted. These were multi-sensory texts, evoking a synesthetic engagement (see Chidester 1992; Sullivan 1986) and self-involving interpellantion (Althusser 1989) of the dreamer into a challenge of sense-making and self-making in a social world. Hermeneutical principles could be drawn upon, principles of correlation and contradiction, with the understanding that these principles were true but not always true. Dreams, therefore, asked questions. Considering a different African context, Ladislav Holy has usefully identified the range of questions raised in the interpretation of dreams:

(1) Should the meaning of the dream be understood as the reversal of its manifest content or not?
(2) Does the dream predict some specific event or is its message merely of general significance?
(3) Should the dream be interpreted intratextually or should contextual factors be taken into consideration in the proper understanding of its message? (Holy 1992: 89)

All of these questions, as we have seen, arose in nineteenth-century Zulu dreaming, calling into question whether dreams “go by contraries,” bear a specific message, or relate to a practical context. All of these hermeneutical questions, however, were thoroughly embedded in the changing relations and shifting terrains of colonial interventions. Colonialism, therefore, was an integral part of the stuff that indigenous dreams were made of.

Second, dreams were texts to be told. The pragmatics of dreams, which turns private dreams into shared stories, was integral to Zulu religious practices and performances. Dreams provided resources for an oral textuality and performances of that oral textuality provided resources for dreaming. This reciprocal relationship between dreaming and telling can be identified as the crucial motor of the pragmatics of dreaming. In The Religious System of the Amazulu, the most extensive account of dream-telling refers to the controversy between the Christian catechist Mbande and the Christian apostate James, who left the mission to become a “house of dreams.” Here the Zulu catechist tried

dreaming with traditional or ancestral themes. Amongst Zulu Zionist Christians, Kiernan (1985) found a balance between attributing spiritual visions to the Holy Spirit and significant dreams to ancestral intervention.
to recall the “old dream” of the boat of faith in order to recall the Zulu apostate back to the “old” Christian faith that had only recently arrived and had only recently been abandoned by James. In this pragmatics of dreams, turning “subjective apparitions” into shared narratives, Mbande and James negotiated over the terms and conditions of being a person in a place under colonial relations of power. This particular religious argument, which was conducted by referring to Zulu tradition, but was simultaneously interreligious and transcultural, was pursued in the idiom of recollecting a memorable and definitive dream of the river, the liminal space of pure possibility of transformation and life-threatening danger of dissolution. While Mbande urged James to return to the Christian life of the mission, James insisted, “I am now dead altogether.” As this exchange can only suggest, the pragmatics of dreams, by transposing private dreams into public argument, raised issues of life and death for Zulu-speaking people under nineteenth-century colonial conditions.

Finally, dreams were texts that demanded response. As we have seen, the energetics of Zulu dreaming called for responses of ancestral exchange and orientation that were integral to Zulu religious strategies for sustaining ongoing relations between the living and the dead. In the energetics of dreams, Zulu asked not only, “What do dreams mean?” They also had to ask, “What do dreams want?” In this respect, Zulu dreamers anticipated recent theoretical reflection in cultural studies on the demands of visual images in aesthetic, cultural, and religious life. “What do pictures want?”, W. J. T. Mitchell (2005) has recently asked, a question that has been pursued in research on the demands of visual religious imagery in America (Morgan 1998), India (Pinney 2004), and Africa (Myer 2006). Under colonial conditions, meeting the demands of dreams—doing what they want by sustaining ancestral exchange and orientation—became increasingly urgent as dispossession and displacement increasingly defined Zulu life. The various responses we have considered, from indigenous techniques for blocking dreams to Christian conversion, were situated within the colonial crisis of responding to demanding dreams under difficult conditions.

REFERENCES


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>


Guy, Jeff 1979  The Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom. London: Longmans.


1981  “Lord of the Sky—King of the Earth: Zulu Traditional Religion and Belief in the Sky God.”
Holy, Ladislav
1992

Horton, Robin
1997

Jederej, M. C. and Rosalind Shaw, eds.
1992

Jung, C. G.
1964

Keegan, Timothy
1996

Kiernan, James P.
1985

King, Richard
1999

Krige, Eileen Jensen
1936

Lambert, John
1995

Lambert, Michael
1993

Lang, Andrew
1909

Lawson, E. Thomas and Robert N. McCauley
1990

Lee, S. G.
1958
Lewis-Williams, David  
2002  
The Mind in the Cave. London: Thames & Hudson.

Lohmann, Roger, ed.  
2003  

Lopez, Donald Jr, ed.  
1995  

Mannoni, Octave  
1990  

Masuzawa, Tomoko  
2005  

Mbiti, John S.  
1969  

1975  

McClendon, Thomas  
2004  

McLynn, Frank  
1997  

Mitchell, W. J. T.  
2005  

Morgan, David  
1998  

Myer, Birgit  
2006  

Ngubane, Harriet  
1977  
Body and Mind in Zulu Medicine: An Ethnography of Health and Disease in

1981


Ortiz, Fernando

1947


Pinney, Christopher

2004


Platvoet, Jan and Henk J. van Rinsum

2003


Poland, Marguerite, David Hammond-Tooke and Leigh Voigt

2003


Pratt, Mary Louise

1992


Preston-Whyte, E. M.

1987


Ricoeur, Paul

1970


Smith, Jonathan Z.

1978


Sullivan, J. R.

1928


Sullivan, Lawrence

1986

“Sound and Sense: Towards a Hermeneutics of Performance.” History of Religions 11: 1–33.

Tedlock, Barbara

2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publication Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>and C. Sargent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1871</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1923–1926</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>