A Postcolonial Story of Place, Perception, and Proselytizing in Pokot

Julie Morris, PhD candidate
University of Kansas: Department of Atmospheric Sciences and Geography

Abstract

In 1931, after decades of British colonial control, the first Western Christian missionaries came to Pokot, the region inhabited by the pastoralist Pokot people in western Kenya and eastern Uganda. For the past ninety years, missionaries from England, Ireland, the United States, and other Western countries, have come to Pokot with a message of evangelism and initiatives for development. Throughout the decades, mission organizations and missionaries working in Pokot and among the Pokot people have developed their own perceptions of Pokot, place and people, which in turn informed the strategies of missions they undertook: evangelism included translation projects and negotiations with Pokot culture, and development projects focused on education, community development, medical services, agriculture, and water provision. The Pokot people have responded with resistance, ambivalence, and hybridized acceptance to the message and development initiatives of these outsiders. The layers of perceptions, strategies, and responses have informed the history of and sense of place at the contact zone between Western Christian missions and Pokot. The story of this contact zone is told through a postcolonial perspective, highlighting power, agency, and ambivalence through the voices of the actors in place.

Methods

The story of Pokot and Western Christian missions centers on the perspectives of twenty-six missionaries from seven distinct mission organizations or agencies from 1931 to 2019. Missionary texts, including archival letters and newsletters, memoirs and biographies, in addition to interviews were examined through a postcolonial lens, focusing on themes of othering (Said, 1978), binaries (Sharp, 2009), surveillance (Patt, 1992), hybridity (Ashcroft, 2001), resistivity (Scott, 1985), and the dynamic nature of culture (McEwan, 2008).

In addition, texts written by Pokot individuals and interviews with Pokot residents of Arlberg, West Pokot were conducted to reveal these themes in response (not represented in this poster). Feminist methods are also employed in this study to question positivist truth claims and to highlight the importance of perspectives and power dynamics in research (Butler, 2001; Mohammadi, 2001; Sklair, 2001). The intersection of perspective—missionary and Pokot—was examined to reveal the development and dynamic process of place (Cresswell, 2004) at the contact zone (Patt, 1992) between Western missionaries and the Pokot people. Personal narrative plays against the backdrop of colonial and imperial Western power dynamics and history in this sense of place study (Spear, 1999).

Timeline of Western Christian Missions in Pokot (1931-1991)

Bible-Church's Mission Society (Anglican)
Mk Hil, Kitigan, Holy Rosary (Catholic)
Comboni (Catholic)
Africa Mission (non-denominational/AIC)
United (non-denominational)
Reformed Church of America

Centers of Western Christian Missions in Pokot (1931-1991)

The poitical and spiritual landscape of the region has changed over time, and it still continues to evolve. In the past, the region was known as a "backwater" or a "preserve for hedgehogs," a place where visitors were not expected to visit. Over time, however, the region has become more accessible, and more people are coming to visit.

Like Pokot the place, Pokot the people were first described by missionaries in stark, exotic terms (see Figure 7). Further description illustrated the perceived response to the missionaries.

As the stark visual differences that separated the Pokot from Westerners began to subside with time and changing culture and images of pastoralist warriors like the Maasai became more ubiquitous, the descriptions of the Pokot shifted in conjunction with an increasing value of multiculturalism and diversity within Western perception and the missionary discourse.

Figure Captions

Conclusion

Many of the more common themes heard in the mission record have the effect of highlighting the binaries of the normal and the exotic, the Westerner and the Pokot, the central and the peripheral. The topics that repeated themselves throughout the Pokot mission discourse often started with a word and evolved to a theme. Some themes remained consistent, such as wandering and gender inequality. Others evolved in the discourse: primordiality became lack of development; conservatism became resistance to outsiders; the heathens became the unreach. Each theme informed the strategies used by missionaries in evangelism and development. While the landscape may appear to the outsider as showing little change, the place shows the layers of cultural influence through the decades of interaction at the contact zone. Through a process of "improvement," cultural negotiations and revisions occur, smudging, writing, erasing, rewriting, and overlaying the perspectives of place as a palimpsest (Ashcroft, 2001) that would in turn be resisted, negotiated, and/or accepted by the Pokot, creating a new hybrid reality of place.