

“A Book of Good Faith?”

EASA20 Panel 001 – Reading version

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Henri-Alexandre Junod is universally considered one of the founders of Southern African ethnography. Among other things, Junod was the main inspiration behind Radcliff-Brown’s famous *Structure and Function* and Gluckman and Turner’s use of the concept of marginality. It is often forgotten, however, that, in 1911, he also published a novel called *Zidji: A Study of Southern African Custom*. (You will be able to find an English translation of the novel’s first part—that deals with male initiation rituals among the Tsonga of Mozambique—by looking for *Zidji* in my own Research Gate account.)

Junod’s novel helps us understand how he dealt with a major contradiction that faced all ethnographers of his epoch: for the modernists, the fascination with tradition was as intense as the desire to eradicate it. The past could be studied scientifically, for it presented itself as being pristine and knowable. The present, however, was unresolved, muddled, and conflictual – only fiction could convey it. In Junod’s novel, we find there perhaps the most explicit discussion of the contradictoriness of the present that characterises all modernist ethnography and which, to my mind, the social sciences have not yet managed to be rid of to this day.

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The Preface to *Zidji* starts with the following sentence: ‘If it were not for the risk of sounding pretentious, I would start with Montaigne’s words: “This is a book of good faith”.’ (1911: v) More than a charming epigraph, this sentence turns out to be

the very key to a work that is presented both as a novel and as a 'study'. Yet, it is a devilishly ambivalent statement: Junod is telling us that he is not telling us that he is in good faith! It is like an inverted version of Epimenides' famous Cretan Paradox. On top of that, he is playing on the contrast between the meanings of 'Christian faith' and 'good faith' to produce an *insolubilia* of the kind that medieval philosophers so loved. Montaigne, whose philosophical good faith was irreproachable, is being called pretentious for the fact that his Christian faith left much to be desired. Isn't Junod then even more pretentious? But Junod would deny this emphatically since, contrary to Montaigne's, his personal humility is assured by his submission to 'the good faith' – that is, the faith that brandishes the flaming sword of Christ's redemptory purification.

This notion of faith/belief is indeed the key to the whole novel and perhaps to Junod's whole vast oeuvre. However, for us, today, the Christian good faith of Junod's work has become a hindrance, which we need to overcome, if we are to appreciate the ethnographic evidence he left behind. But there is an equivocal here, for behind his pretensions as a transmitter of objective truth, lies the truth of the real acquaintance that Junod had with something that he swore to be a gigantic lie: African Paganism with capital P-, as he used to write it. The purificatory act that institutes the breach between what he called Civilization and Paganism (and that we call today the 'West' and the 'Other') is an absolute condition of possibility for his whole activity as an ethnographer.

Civilization (or modernity, as we would say later) and Paganism were not merely different; they were separated by time. The reason why it was possible to grasp the objective truth of Paganism but difficult to gain the same of Civilization was that the former was already resolved in Civilization; being a fact of the past, it was encompassed by the present.

Ontological primitivism was already in Junod's days an established feature of all social scientific thinking. We can define it as the analytical device that states that the *simplest* instances of a category will necessarily contain the *essential* elements that define that category, and therefore, they will also be *anterior* in terms of historical evolution. In this way, two coeval instances of the same category are not only different, they are also temporally related. As an analytical device, primitivism operates as a time-machine; a mode of reaching the past that is present in the present. Junod's work carries, therefore, another value as evidence beyond its immediate ethnographic one. By looking at his struggles, so apparently transparent to us, today, we can lift the veil of our own background assumptions. In fact, we remain bound today by the leftovers of modernist representationism (his notion of belief) and modernist primitivism (enshrined in his notion of Paganism). A century after him, we are still working under the impact of the shock waves of the grand modernist gesture of purification. Junod's errors are the only vantage point from which we can achieve critical truth—because we no longer know of any place outside of history. As Derrida warned us, it is from within that which we want to deconstruct that we deconstruct it.

This is how Junod warns us of this dilemma in his preface:

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‘Three influences determine the contemporary evolution of the Southern African Bantu: Paganism, Mission, and Civilization. [...] it seems necessary to introduce a certain section of the public to the whole truth concerning these three major powers that mould the indigenous soul. [...] I have attempted in this volume to trace such a picture. [...] Paradoxical as it may seem, in order for the picture to be true, it was necessary to call for the intervention of fiction. It was necessary to avoid any disagreeable identification. Thus, all of the principal persons, being fully real, are presented under borrowed names and the

events, all of them almost integrally authentic, were grouped according to a plan that is not strictly historical.' (1911: v-vi)

This supposed concern not to reveal the characters' true identities, however, cannot be the real deeper reason for rejecting the objectivist style of narrative he used when writing about Paganism. As it happens, Junod is careless about revealing the true identity of his characters—even reproducing in the novel photographs of them. Indeed, as it turns out, he is himself one of the major characters of the novel.

Slide 4 *Bartimée – the good lay-preacher and his family.*

Rather, what prevents him from writing about the present in a regime of truth is its ontological contradictoriness, the ambiguity of the truth of the present by relation to the past to which he keeps warning us. Ethnography deals with what can be known for sure; that which has been already accomplished, as it were. And that is Paganism. So, it is not useful for speaking of the present. Contrary to the novel, his ethnographic monograph was a narrative about something that was stopping to be and that, to that extent, could be revealed as existing all that much more clearly. The present, however, is contradictory, unachieved, and lacking in moral certainty. Its factual description is made difficult both by the fact that Civilization is unwinding Paganism and by the fact that it is challenging the identity of the Africans, who have as a result an uncertainty of being. For Junod, only the purificatory power of the Mission can allow natives to avoid this ontological dissolution, this lack of integrity which opens the way to a collapse into evil. According to him, the Tsonga of his day were caught in a major dilemma: either they relapsed onto Paganism or they collapsed to the vices of Civilization. In order to avoid both forms of ontological dissolution, they had to leave the present altogether and rely on God's future—Christ's second coming.

Thus, the truth of the past – because it is complete – is freely accessible; the truth of the present – because it is a field of struggle – is a lesser truth. For Junod this

meant that, in order to study the customs of contemporary life in Southern Africa (*Les mœurs sud-africaines*), fiction was the only possible mode and that is why, whilst his novel was relevant for his ethnography, the contrary was not the case.

Slide 5 *Junod teaching*

Junod's ethnographic evidence will not be revisited only by our generation but, again and again, by the ones that will inevitably follow. This means, we must ask ourselves: have we taken from it all of the lessons it can give? Can we not use it to assess to what extent we have truly abandoned the modernist utopian mindset that places 'real' history outside human lived history and that places 'true' belief outside of life's encounters? In short, a century on from him, our history is more limited than his was. For us, history will only be for so long as it is experienced by embodied human persons (*personnes charnelles*, as he called them). We have lost the logocentric belief in God's Word, as the foundational truth. In Junod's day, the present included both the essential past and the essential future in a brutal, truth-destroying grip which only God's Revelation – Junod's good faith – could mediate. Yet, it is legitimate to ask with Derrida: have we taken full account of that loss, or does it linger secretly behind our words and deeds as a background assumption? We need Junod to judge of that.

We have given up on essential truth; but we have not given up on truth – ours is a relative, historically-evolving, enactive, never completed truth. Our present will remain ambivalent, for indeterminacy is the condition of possibility of communication between human persons in here. To that extent, we too read Junod's ethnography with good faith, for we now know that there is indeed truth, only it does not go beyond the *conjunctural ethnocentrism* of each one of us as embodied crossroads producing spacetime and matter, as Ernesto de Martino liked to put it.