


'Primitive': A key concept in Chidester's critique of imperial and Van der Leeuw's phenomenological study of religion

**Author:**Johan M. Strijdom¹ **Affiliation:**¹Department of Religious Studies and Arabic, University of South Africa, South Africa**Corresponding author:**Johan Strijdom,
strijdm@hotmail.com**Dates:**

Received: 27 Aug. 2017

Accepted: 14 Dec. 2017

Published: 05 Apr. 2018

How to cite this article:Strijdom, J.M., 2018, "'Primitive': A key concept in Chidester's critique of imperial and Van der Leeuw's phenomenological study of religion', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74(1), 4797. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i1.4797>**Copyright:**© 2018. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

A critical examination of the history of theories and uses of concepts such as 'primitive' and 'savage' in the academic study of religion in imperial, colonial and postcolonial contexts is particularly urgent in our time with its demands to decolonise Western models of knowledge production. In *Savage Systems* (1996) and *Empire of Religion* (2014), David Chidester has contributed to this project by relating the invention and use of terms such as 'religion', 'primitive' and 'savage' by theorists of religion in European imperial metropolises to South African colonial and indigenous contexts. This article intends to take Chidester's project further by relating Gerardus Van der Leeuw's phenomenological analysis of 'primitive mentality' (particularly in *De primitieve mensch en de religie*, 1937) to Chidester's analysis and postcolonial critique of imperial theories of religion. By taking animism and dreams in Chidester's and Van der Leeuw's works as example, it is argued that in spite of the latter's decontextualised use of ethnological material, a fundamental shift occurred in the judgement of 'primitive' religion from Tylor's evolutionary to Van der Leeuw's phenomenological analysis, which is contrary to claims according to which modern theories are unanimously denigratory of indigenous religions.

Introduction

In a recent survey article on the anthropology of religion, Robert Winzeler (2016) states that '[m]ost of the terms used by anthropologists to identify, describe, analyze, and explain religion are Western in origin'. Among these terms, a number of scholars of religion have rightly insisted, the term 'religion' itself needs to be understood as a Western colonial construct that we need to consciously fill with content, if we want to continue to use it for analytical purposes (e.g. Chidester 1996; Smith 2004; 2015). Winzeler, however, continues by observing that while some of these Western terms 'have differing scholarly and popular uses', there are some of these terms still used in popular discourses that 'have become unacceptable in scholarly discourse, unless used in an appropriate ... context'. Among such unacceptable Western terms, he lists specifically the term 'primitive'. He then proposes that the way to think through the vocabulary used by anthropologists of religion is to understand the terms 'in relation to the *history* of anthropological studies of religion' (my emphasis).

That an *ethical* obligation rests on anthropologists to *assess* the history of anthropology in order to inform dilemmas of the present is a point that Isak Niehaus (2017) has argued in a recent article. By comparing Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski's engagements with South African indigenous cultures in the 1920s and early 1930s, roughly between the two world wars, Niehaus shows that while Radcliffe-Brown, on the one hand, promoted the sympathetic understanding of cultural differences and indigenous cultures in a changing society as 'an integral part of the modern world' where separation was impossible, Malinowski, on the other hand, collaborated with colonial authorities and argued for the territorial separation and indirect rule of indigenous cultures. Niehaus (2017:114) holds that '[*the*] arguments that Radcliffe-Brown, Hoernlé, and their students advanced laid the foundations for an anthropological critique of apartheid', but that Malinowski's:

commitment to the preservation of cultures ... aligned himself with later apologists for apartheid ... and provided a language to legitimate the exclusion of Africans from centers of wealth and power. (p. 114)

Within the present context of demands to decolonise Western models of knowledge production (e.g. Al-Jazeera 2015; Chaudhuri 2016; Hall 2015; Kamanzi 2015; Mamdani 2017; Mbembe 2015), it is ethically imperative that the academic study of religion too be subjected to a critical

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

examination of the history of theories and uses of concepts such as 'primitive' and 'savage'.

David Chidester, in *Savage Systems* (1996) and *Empire of Religion* (2014), has contributed to this project by relating the invention and use of terms such as 'religion', 'primitive' and 'savage' by theorists of religion in European urban centres to South African colonial and indigenous contexts. Chidester's narrative in these crucial publications¹ focuses on the study of religion from the 19th century until the beginning of the 20th century. The task remains to reassess from a postcolonial perspective major theorists of religion in the first part of the 20th century, whose work should be contextualised in this period that preceded the independence of colonised nations.

One major theorist of religion, Gerardus Van der Leeuw (1890–1950), considered a pioneer in constructing a phenomenological approach to the study of religion in the first half of the 20th century,² devoted a monograph to the question of a 'primitive mentality' (*De primitieve mensch en de religie*, 1937), which was published after his major work *Die Phänomenologie der Religion* (1933),³ and was an elaboration of an even earlier publication *La structure de la mentalité primitive* (1928). In addition to these publications between the two world wars, in 1940 he also published an essay on indigenous religions ('*De religie der primitieve volken*') as a chapter in a book that he edited for a more general readership on the religions of the world (*De godsdiensten der wereld*).

In this contribution, I intend to complement Chidester's history of the academic study of religion, by relating Van der Leeuw's concept of a 'primitive mentality' to Chidester's critical analysis of the 'primitive' in imperial and colonial theories of religion. Although I will focus on animism and dreams⁴ to focus the debate, my limited discussion will give an indication of how Van der Leeuw might be written into Chidester's postcolonial history of the comparative study of religion.

Against claims that modern theorists unanimously denigrated indigenous religions,⁵ I will argue that Van der Leeuw's

1. Chidester received an American Academy of Religion Book Award for *Savage Systems* and a University of Cape Town Book Award for *Empire of Religion*. He is internationally recognised for his groundbreaking work in the study of religion, as affirmed by the repeated A-rating awarded to him by the National Research Foundation of South Africa.

2. Capps (1995:128), in his historical survey of theories in Religious Studies, considers Van der Leeuw's *Phänomenologie der Religion* 'the best-known comprehensive phenomenological work in the history of religions'. Hofstee (1997:262), in his doctoral thesis on Van der Leeuw's science of religion, claims that Van der Leeuw was in the first half of the 20th century not only 'the foremost scholar of religion in the Netherlands', but also 'one of the most important European scholars in this field of inquiry'. Waardenburg (1978:221) too appreciates Van der Leeuw as best known internationally for his work in the phenomenology of religion.

3. This major work of Van der Leeuw was already translated in 1938 by Turner as *Religion in essence and manifestation*. A revised edition was published in French in 1948, which formed the basis for the posthumous German edition of 1956. The new English edition of 1964 included appendices by Hans Penner that indicated the additions of the 1948 French and 1956 German editions. Van der Leeuw had already published his 'small pheno' in 1924 as *Inleiding tot de godsdienstgeschiedenis* and in 1925 as *Einführung in die Phänomenologie der Religion*. A revised edition of the 'small pheno' was, on the basis of the 1933 and 1948 'big pheno', published in 1948 as *Inleiding tot de phänomenologie van den godsdienst*.

4. The investigation could certainly be extended to other key terms in Van der Leeuw's analysis of a 'primitive mentality', such as dynamism (the belief in an impersonal power in things, animals and humans), fetishism, totemism, magic, myth and ritual.

5. See my discussion of Ciaffa (2008) below.

phenomenological study of religion, in spite of restricting himself largely to debates among European theorists and neglecting colonial contexts from which he drew his ethnological data, brought about a fundamental change in the study of religion and the judgement of 'primitive religion'⁶ in comparison with preceding evolutionary approaches. I will, in conclusion, indicate how this contribution can be taken further to achieve what Chidester has done in an exemplary way for theorists of religion of the preceding period.

Chidester's postcolonial critique of 'primitive' as a key concept in imperial and colonial studies of religion

In the preface to *Empire of Religion*, Chidester (2014) warns us that in:

[f]ocusing on representations of indigenous religion in Africa, we will encounter highly problematic terms – *savage*, *primitive*, and even *indigenous* – that have featured prominently in the formation and development of the study of religion. (pp. xii–xiii)

He explains that generally, although not always, in imperial theories of religion *savage* referred to 'wild people lacking civilization, while *primitive* was a temporal term designating the earliest or simplest stage of human development', with both of these terms carrying 'traces of racist triumphalism'. Although *indigenous* 'seems to be a more neutral or even positive term', he holds that it too must be seen as arising from encounters with imperial powers in different colonial contexts.

In his critical analysis of the history of imperial comparative religion,⁷ Chidester (2014) shows how classic theorists of religion in the second half of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century *decontextualised* and *distorted* data obtained from colonial middlemen in South Africa to develop their theories of religion in imperial metropolises.

Chidester's (2014:91–123) analysis of E.B. Tylor's (1958) theory of *animism* may serve to illustrate his argument. In constructing his evolutionary theory of the animistic origin of religion, E.B. Tylor in Britain made use of the account of Zulu dreams in the work of the Anglican missionary Callaway in Natal, who, in turn, received his information on Zulu religion from his indigenous informant, the Christian convert Mbande, who was himself located in an ambivalent position between indigenous and colonial Christian traditions. The formation of imperial theories of religion can, as Chidester shows for Tylor and others (specifically Max Müller, Andrew Lang and James Frazer), therefore be best described as a complex process of triple mediation.

6. Hofstee (1997:266) argues that Van der Leeuw's 'concept of primitive mentality is the key to understanding Van der Leeuw's science of religion'.

7. Chidester (2014:260–261) distinguishes between three types of imperial comparative religion: critical, interfaith and theosophical. His concern is with the genealogy of the first type as the one pertinent to an academic study of religion.

Religion defined as animism or the belief in spiritual beings, Tylor maintained, could be explained psychologically in terms of its cognitive origin in dreams. Dreams, he proposed, probably gave rise to the belief in spirits. The best evidence would come from the 'primitive mentality' or psychology of the earliest human beings (the way 'primitives' used to think), which, Tylor assumed, could be inferred by studying the dreams of contemporary indigenous peoples ('savage tribes') such as the Zulu. Drawing on Callaway's account of Zulu dreaming, Tylor held that Zulu speakers provided evidence of the origin of religion, in the sense that when they saw the spirits of deceased ancestors in their dreams, they were unable to distinguish between subjective, inner dreams as illusionary sense impressions and objective outward reality when awake, leading to primitive religion as the belief in the reality of spiritual beings. He observed remnants of this same primitive thinking of confusion between inner subjectivity and objective reality not only among indigenous people like the Zulu, but also in his own Victorian British society among spiritualists, children, peasants and the urban working class – indeed, an *erroneous* way of thinking at the base of *all* religions (from primitive animism and polytheism to civilised monotheism) that modern logical, scientific thinking was in his view supposed to overcome and destroy in the best interest of humanity. Chidester (2014:108), however, emphasises that Tylor's evolutionary theory of religion was clearly 'formulated in the face of perceived intellectual degeneration and moral decay in contemporary British society'.

Characteristic of Tylor's method in using the data that he obtained about indigenous people from middlemen in the colonies was the *decontextualisation* of the data. Mbande, as recorded in Callaway, told the story of James, a convert who, after receiving a calling to become a diviner, left the mission station. According to Mbande, James increasingly had dreams of ancestral spirits *who came to kill him* – a crucial detail in Mbande's report that Tylor ignored, instead emphasising for purposes of constructing his theory of animism the phrase in the report according to which the diviner became a 'house of dreams'. Chidester argues that these dreams, understood within their 19th century context, were indicative of the uncertainty and despair that colonial dispossession and displacement caused among Zulu speakers. Ancestral spirits appeared in dreams instructing their descendants to sacrifice to them and to bring them back to their territorial home (the *ukubuyisa* ritual), but the descendants did not have enough cattle left and were no longer living in their traditional ancestral places. The ancestors were therefore angry with them, appearing to them in their dreams to punish or even kill them. Rituals were accordingly devised by diviners in an attempt to stop the dreaming. Not only Tylor's dream theory of primitive animism as the origin of religion, but also Callaway's explanation of Zulu dreams as a kind of self-mesmerism in which brain sensations of seeing and hearing were confused with real seeing and hearing, according to Chidester, distorted the data and did not do justice to Zulu dreams by abstracting them from their colonial contexts.

Van der Leeuw's phenomenological analysis of 'primitive' as a universal mental structure among humans

Turning to Van der Leeuw, we encounter a phenomenologist⁸ who strongly objects to theories of religion that attempt to explain religion historically on the basis of presumed origins and evolution from primitive to civilised (e.g. Tylor and Frazer), or degeneration from monotheism to ancestor worship (e.g. Lang).⁹ Instead, religious phenomena, with religion conceptualised by him as essentially the revelation of a transcendental Power to humans and their response of awe, reverence and fear, in the presence of this sacred Power,¹⁰ should be sympathetically observed by the scientific researcher of religion by bracketing his or her prejudices and should be described as accurately as possible as the phenomena appear to him or her.¹¹ By studying religious phenomena comparatively, the phenomenologist will make connections and be able to abstract from the evidence recurring structures or patterns. These structures, as he emphasises, are not those of participants¹² and cannot be observed in reality, but are abstracted by the phenomenologist to *understand* rather than explain the data.

He argues that there are two basic thought structures common to all human beings: a 'primitive mentality' and a 'modern mentality'. These psychological patterns are not bound to specific cultures or periods, but are always universally present in the experience of all human beings – although one way of thinking and living may be more pronounced in one case than another.¹³ A 'primitive mentality' is, according to him, evident

8. Van der Leeuw's (1956 [1933]:768–798) conceptualisation of a phenomenological study of religion is set out most clearly in the Epilegomena of his *Phänomenologie der Religion*.

9. See Van der Leeuw (1956 [1933]:172; 1940:465) for his rejection of Andrew Lang's theory. See footnote 23 below for references to Van der Leeuw's explicit engagement with Tylor.

10. Van der Leeuw's concept of religion builds on Rudolf Otto's concept of the Holy as the Wholly Other, whose presence the believer experiences as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

11. It needs to be pointed out that Van der Leeuw did not apply this prerequisite of *epoche* strictly in his study of religion. As Christian believer and minister of the Hervormde Kerk in the Netherlands, he maintained that it was legitimate to study religions from one's own religious persuasion on condition that one is conscious of it. Capps (1995:132) rightly states that Van der Leeuw 'worked under the conscious and deliberate influence of strong theological compulsions', and that 'his work was influenced most significantly by his own devotional – shall we say liturgical? – attitude to the materials he treated', with his phenomenological account finally becoming 'a doxology to the God Christians worship'.

12. See Van der Leeuw (1940:432): '*Deze structuur is natuurlijk ons eigendom, niet dat der primitieven. En wij mogen dat geen ogenblik vergeten*'. Following Söderblom, Van der Leeuw here structures his analysis around the concepts of dynamism (the belief in *mana*, an impersonal power or powers that things/fetishes, animals or humans may have or be charged with), animism (the belief in spirits) and belief in Supreme Beings as the three main religious structures that may help us to classify and understand religious phenomena. He emphasises that dynamism and animism should not be seen as completely separate entities, as they generally overlap; they are simply here distinguished as different mental structures for the sake of analysis (Van der Leeuw 1940:437).

13. See Van der Leeuw (1940): *De primitiviteit is een gesteldheid van de menselijke geest, die in alle tijden en culturen voorkomt, ook nog in de moderne cultuur en in onze eigen tijd. Zo alleen is het te begrijpen, dat wij de primitieve elementen van het geestesleven overal terugvinden, zij het, dat zij natuurlijk het meest uitgesproken en het minst belemmerd naar voren treden bij de volken die wij als 'natuurvolken' plegen te bestempelen. Daarbij wordt ons ook duidelijk, dat wij het recht hebben wat wij bij deze volken vinden in één vlak te stellen met wat ons verhaald wordt van de primitieve achtergrond van andere religies, ook van onze eigene. Wij moeten meer structureel te werk gaan dan historisch. Het gaat om het bepalen van een geesteshouding, die in de menschengeschiedenis blijft, onder alle historische veranderingen door. Maar deze houding speuren wij na bij de volken, die haar het duidelijkst vertonen en daardoor een min of meer omgrensd groep vormen* (pp. 410–411).

not only among indigenous groups [he uses the term 'primitive peoples' (*primitieve volken*) for the earliest human beings and contemporary indigenous groups], in ancient cultures, and indeed in all religions,¹⁴ but also among children, the mentally ill, poets and so-called 'normal' (meaning Western scientifically educated) people.

He emphasises that the phenomenologist should under no circumstances consider modern thinking and living as superior to primitive thinking and living, or alternatively idealise or romanticise the primitive mentality as better than the modern mentality. Both are to be considered as different but equally valid ways of thinking and living, although – it must be added – that Van der Leeuw himself from time to time expresses his preference for the 'primitive' way of thinking and living.¹⁵

Drawing on Nietzsche's critique of modernity as a nihilistic dead end, a sickness unto death, a forgetting of what it means to live and exist as a human being, Van der Leeuw (1937: 22–23) maintains that if the modern mentality attempts to put the primitive mentality in us aside, it would mean a pitiful loss of authentic human existence.

In comparing the characteristics of these two ways of thinking and living, Van der Leeuw (1937:24–110) considers the unity, participation or concrete and physical immediacy between subject and object,¹⁶ between subject and subject,¹⁷ between object and object¹⁸ and eventually the union of the mystic

with God, gods or spirits,¹⁹ as indicative of a primitive mentality, and the dualism or split between subject and object, between subject and subject, between object and object and between God and humans, as typical of a modern mentality. In the first case, the distinction between inside and outside, and between body and soul, hardly makes sense.²⁰ The primitive subject participates in objects (the borders between subject and object are fluid), and the relationship between subjects is communal rather than individualistic, and the subject experiences union with God, the gods or spirits. In the second case, a distance or dualism between subjects, as well as between subject and object, and object and object, and between human and sacred Power, is created which makes it possible for individuals to study data scientifically by means of abstract concepts. If the primitive way of thinking is synthetic, the modern way of thinking is analytic in dividing the unity into and creating gaps between its constituent parts for purposes of scientific examination.

Animism as evidenced in *dreams* is, Van der Leeuw (1937: 50–58) holds, a feature of primitive mentality – present in all of us, and not to be denigrated, if we want to understand what it means to be a human being. In dreams, as in fairy tales, one typically finds mythical and mystical language and poetic images, in which objects may get transformed into different objects, or subjects may magically metamorphose into objects, or vice versa. The boundaries are fluid, as one image flows into another that cannot be explained in a logical way. Although Van der Leeuw agrees that Freud's analysis of

14. See Van der Leeuw (1937): *Bij deze pogingen werd zeer duidelijk, dat 'primitief' en 'modern' nimmer termen kunnen zijn voor bepaalde stadia in de evolutie der mensheid, nog minder aanduidingen van de gesteldheid van sommige minder of anders beschaafden, doch dat zij alleen dan wetenschappelijk zinvolle en nuttige symbolen zijn, wanneer zij gebezigd worden als namen voor bepaalde structuren van de menschen, die in sommige culturen en perioden weliswaar duidelijker uitkomen dan in andere, die echter essentieel van alle tijden en culturen zijn. Het vraagstuk komt dan heel anders te liggen. Het gaat niet meer om de vraag of een reeks 'primitief' genaamde volkeren anders denkt, gevoelt, leeft dan wij. Het gaat erom of in een dezelfde periode, ja wellicht in een en dezelfde persoon, naast elkander verschillende geestesstructuren mogelijk zijn, die naar wezen van elkaar verschillen (p. 11). See also Van der Leeuw (1937): *De primitieve mentaliteit wordt in alle ontwikkelingsstadia en bij menschen van allerlei anthropologisch type gevonden. De eenige wijze, waarop wij met vrucht ons vraagstuk kunnen behandelen, is het te zien als een structuur van den menschenlijken geest, die naast andere structuren voorkomt. Zulke structuren zijn eeuwig, en hoewel zij in sommige perioden zeer duidelijk, in andere minder klaar omlijnd worden gerealiseerd, kunnen wij ze nimmer beperken tot perioden of groepen (p. 24). And, again, Van der Leeuw (1940): *de scheiding tussen 'primitieve' en 'niet-primitieve' volken staat geenszins vast. Wie de culturen – en daarbij vooral ook de godsdiensten – der z.g. primitieve volken vergelijkt met die van ander volken, komt terstond onder de indruk van het feit, dat er talloze verschijnselen zijn, zelfs in de gewoonlijk tot de 'hoogste' gerekende culturen en religies, die 'primitief' zijn. Dit gehele boek is daarvan een bevestiging. De primitieve religies staan allerminst als een gesloten geheel apart; het is integendeel mogelijk de Egyptische, de Babylonische, de Griekse en Romeinse religie, ja zelfs stukken van de Islam, het Jodendom en het Christendom als primitieve godsdienst te behandelen (p. 407).***

15. In discussing the difference between fairy tales (expressing 'the typical' and exemplifying primitive mentality) and novels (focusing on the individual and exemplifying modern mentality), Van der Leeuw (1937:28–29) remarks that he himself would prefer the former: 'Ik tenminste lees liever een sprookje dan een novella'.

16. For Van der Leeuw (1937:58–74; 1940:454–455), the kula and potlatch systems of exchange as well as sacrifice provide evidence for his argument of the relationship of the primitive mentality to objects. Again, it is the sacred Power in objects or fetishes that is stressed as essential to understand the exchange.

17. Collectivism, the primitive sense of belonging to a group, is for Van der Leeuw (1937) clear from the practice of vengeance: *niet N. heeft Z. gedood, doch een man, behorende tot den stam N., heeft een man, behorende tot den stam Z., van het leven beroofd. Nog juist: het geheel N. heeft het geheel Z. nadeel toegebracht. Het geheel Z. komt dan ook in beweging. En zoo ontstaat de z.g. bloedwraak (p. 37).*

18. See Van der Leeuw (1937): *Dat wil positief zeggen, dat de primitief niet analytisch denkt, maar synthetisch; of liever, daar synthese altyd een voorafgaande analyse vooronderstelt, dat de rekenschap, die hij zich geeft van zijn ervaring, die ervaring niet in haar deelen ontbindt, maar die als een geheel reproduceert (pp. 31–32).*

Van der Leeuw (1937:34–35) endorses Lévy-Bruhl's view that Australian aborigines and native Americans almost completely lack general concepts: the traditional healer, for example, can name specific plants or illnesses, but does not have a generic term for types of plants or illnesses. This characteristic among primitive peoples is, Van der Leeuw (1937:36) holds, also seen in their languages: Greenlanders, for example, have many words for different kinds of fish, but no generic term for fish. Van der Leeuw (1937:45), however, does observe later in the book that primitive cultures classify in their own ways: the Dobu in Papua, for example, has a word that means 'human', which includes yams, but not white people. To what extent this reflects the capacity of forming abstract categories among indigenous people, is not considered by Van der Leeuw.

19. Van der Leeuw (1937:18–21; 1940:451–455) includes among his examples of the latter, the essential union between an individual or group and their ancestral totem animals, emphasising the reverence and fear of the Power of the latter (tabus connected to the totem animals is evidence of this ambivalent attitude). Although Van der Leeuw (1963 [1933]) would agree with Durkheim that the totems define group identities, he emphasises that the feeling of awe and fear constitutes the essence of religion in this manifestation too: From what has already been asserted about the sacred community there clearly follows the truth, as well as the one-sided exaggeration of the so-called *sociological school*. That religion is no private affair, that in the realm of religion communality and collectivity assume an extraordinarily extensive status, in fact that the search for Power is essentially connected with the flight from solitude: all these are facts. But all the less, therefore, have we any ground for allowing the religious to be merged in the social; for the sacred common element is not sacred because it is common but, on the contrary, common because it is sacred; and in worshipping God humanity does not worship itself, but worships God as it were in assembling itself together (p. 269).

20. Van der Leeuw (1937): *'Innerlijk' en 'uiterlijk' hebben nauwelijks zin. ... Al het psychische is fysisch, al het fysische is psychisch, en beide zijn concreet. Van het hoogste belang is dit alles voor de beschouwing van den mensch. Die is in de primitieve mentaliteit kortweg een mensch ... Een mensch is dus niet een ziel in een liggaam, met een geest, die een liggaam heeft, evenmin een ziel plus een lichaam, of een lichaam, dat bewustzijn kent. Een mensch is een mensch, en wanneer wij zeggen: een mensch psycho-fysisch, dan maken wij, ook al bedoelen wij een ongescheidenheid, een onderscheiding, die niet primitief is. ... Het bewustzijn, waaraan de modern mentaliteit zulk een groote waarde hecht, wordt in de primitieve niet geaccentueerd en kan niet worden aangeduid (pp. 29–30). Van der Leeuw (1937), after quoting from Mary Kingsley's *West African Studies* (1899): What strikes a European when studying (fetish) is the lack of gaps between things. To the African there is perhaps no gap between the conception of spirit and matter, animate and inanimate continues: *De primitief heeft den 'geest' nog niet uitgevonden, met wiens hulp wij ons leven hebben afgedaald in bomwrij kasematten: hier het lichaam, daar de ziel; hier de pijn, daar de smart, hier de religie, daar de praktijk. Hij kent het 'gezichtspunt' niet, dat de voorwaarde is van onze wetenschap en ons inzicht, maar dat ons tevens behulpzaam is om het leven niet te leven (p. 31).**

sexual symbols is undeniable in some dreams, he emphasises that Freud's explanation is reductionistic,²¹ as dreams reveal much more to us about the human psyche: in the dream, the unity between humans and things is unified again, and things have a life of their own, doing what they want to do. He, furthermore, rejects the Freudian evolutionistic view that modern adults must outgrow the way children and primitive people think.²² Children are in Van der Leeuw's view full human beings, as are indigenous people. The primitive mentality in all human beings should be appreciated as essential to being a human.

A child's response to a question by Piaget illustrates for Van der Leeuw the point. When the psychologist asked the 5-year-old child: 'Is the dream in your head?', the child answered: 'I am in the dream. It is not in my head. ... I am in the dream.' Van der Leeuw (1937:57–58), nevertheless, adds that while European adults dream in a primitive way, they quickly resort to abstract concepts as soon as they awake, whereas indigenous people typically continue to experience their dreams as real after they have woken up.

Conclusion

I conclude with three observations.

Firstly, Van der Leeuw's study of religion in general, and his revaluation of the 'primitive' in particular, constitute a crucial shift in comparison with preceding evolutionary theories. It would be appropriate to characterise this as a paradigm shift in Western productions of knowledge about religion. It should be clear from the discussion above that Van der Leeuw would accept the validity of Tylor's definition of animism as the primitive belief in spirits. He would, furthermore, accept Tylor's claim that deceased relatives not only appeared in dreams to 'primitive' people, but were also experienced by them as real after they woke up. Van der Leeuw would, however, emphatically not accept Tylor's evolutionary explanation of the origin of religion and his degradation of primitive thinking and living.²³

This reading challenges unnuanced claims that Western theories of religion unanimously denigrated indigenous religions and misrepresentations of theories of some individual Western scholars. Ciaffa (2008:124), for example, claims that Lévy-Bruhl's distinction between civilised and primitive mentalities presents 'one of the most notorious

examples' of 'racism ... under the guise of scientific objectivity', which served to reinforce European superiority and rationalise colonialism. This claim, which was already made in Van der Leeuw's time, was emphatically rejected by Van der Leeuw as a misrepresentation of Lévy-Bruhl's position. Hofstee (1997:214), in his discussion of Van der Leeuw's indebtedness to Lévy-Bruhl, states that the latter consistently rejected evolutionary explanations of religion and did not make any value judgements about the difference between 'primitive' and civilised mentalities. My close reading of Van der Leeuw above showed that he shared these views in principle, and developed them further against the views of British evolutionists such as Tylor.

Secondly, as in the case with the British evolutionists, the debate on Van der Leeuw's phenomenology has largely been restricted to a debate among European theorists. It has been correctly characterised as structural-psychological, drawing on romantic reactions to one-sided appraisals of reason in the Enlightenment's tradition. Hofstee (1991, 1997) has convincingly located Van der Leeuw's approach to religion and view of 'primitive' religion within this European intellectual trajectory. In developing his phenomenology of religion, Van der Leeuw drew on European ethnologists, psychologists and philosophers, offering a critique of reductionist modern scientific approaches to religion. Looking closely at Van der Leeuw's analysis of animism and dreams as a key feature of his theory of a 'primitive mentality' in all human beings, it is clear that he develops his theory in debate with *European* theories and theorists, across *European* disciplines, such as the sociology of Lévy-Bruhl (singled out with highest admiration),²⁴ the psychological theories of Freud and Piaget,²⁵ the existentialist philosophy of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger, the study of religion of Kristensen and Otto and the anthropology of Tylor, Frazer, Lang and Malinowski (with appreciation of the latter's fieldwork among the Trobrianders).²⁶

But, thirdly, just as Chidester offered a critical analysis of the triple mediation of imperial theories of religion, we need to scrutinise not only Van der Leeuw's engagement with

21. See Van der Leeuw (1937): *het gevaar [is] groot, dat nu ook alles uit den sexus alléén wordt verklaard. En dit laatste woord duidt tevens de beperktheid van Freud's streven aan: hij wil verklaren, terwijl wij zouden begrijpen. De tweede reactie [van Unger] is veel zelfstandiger dan die van Freud, die, hoe geniaal ook, toch geen ander gezichtspunt kan geven dan het ons reeds bekende phylogenetische evolutionistische* (p. 16).

22. See Van der Leeuw (1937): *in den droom is de eenheid hersteld: mensch, ding en droom zijn onontwarbaar vermengd. De droomer ziet, beleefd, handelt zelfs, maar eigenlijk is het de droom, die zich om hem weeft; de dingen worden gehanteerd, maar zij hebben een eigen leven en gaan hun gang. En niets is vast, alles kan alles zijn of worden* (p. 54).

23. See Van der Leeuw (1948 [1924]:38–46, 1956 [1933]:77–86) for his explicit engagement with Tylor's theory of animism. Van der Leeuw's rejection of evolutionary theories is fundamental to his argument and repeatedly stated already in the introduction of *De primitieve mensch en de religie* (see, e.g. Van der Leeuw 1937:6, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16).

24. Van der Leeuw (1937) not only dedicates *De primitieve mensch en de religie* to Lévy-Bruhl, but also acknowledges in its foreword his indebtedness to Lévy-Bruhl. Hofstee (1997:222–237) notes that Lévy-Bruhl endorsed Van der Leeuw's insight in his work, and offers a substantial analysis of ways in which Van der Leeuw followed Lévy-Bruhl in describing primitive thinking, but also took Lévy-Bruhl further in arguing that a primitive mentality remains essential in modern humans and enlarging Lévy-Bruhl's limited ethnological focus to include disciplines such as psychoanalysis, child psychology and philosophy.

25. Van der Leeuw (1937:11–13) notes that although Lévy-Bruhl might have influenced Piaget, Lévy-Bruhl and Piaget did not attempt to explicitly relate their theories to each other. If Lévy-Bruhl deliberately focused on ethnology and Piaget on child psychology, Van der Leeuw attempted to broaden the examination of a primitive mentality by relating these and other disciplines that dealt with the problem to each other.

26. Malinowski has, in Van der Leeuw's view, convincingly argued against Freud's theory that dreams are expressions of desires, by showing from his fieldwork that for the Trobriand islanders, 'the dream is the cause of the wish' rather than the other way round as Freud would have it. When Van der Leeuw (1940:461–462; my translation) notes that 'spirits of the deceased rule the life of the primitive in a very real sense', for example, by bringing a curse over a home which would require sacrifice, he anticipates Chidester's analysis of 19th century Zulu dreams as having a real effect on the lives and acts of descendants, except that Van der Leeuw does not show any critical awareness of the function of dreams in colonial contexts, which is indeed the crucial difference between Van der Leeuw and Chidester's approach to indigenous religions. Not only does Chidester insist on a *contextual* interpretation of Zulu dreams, but also on a *critical* assessment of them under colonial conditions.

European theorists across disciplinary boundaries, but also with ethnographers in non-European countries that he quoted. When Van der Leeuw (1937:8) quoted ethnological examples from Dutch anthropologists such as Kruyt and Van Ossenbruggen in the Dutch colony of Indonesia to illustrate his arguments, he considered their work as providing 'rich material' for a phenomenology of religion, without giving a thought of it being produced under colonial conditions. When he drew on material from South Africa, he unproblematically quoted from the thesis of the Afrikaner patriotic minister of the Hervormde Kerk in South Africa, H.C.M. Fourie, who had done his doctorate on the amaNdebele, in *Theology*, at the University of Utrecht. Van Baaren (1957), Van der Leeuw's successor at the University of Groningen, started the reassessment of Van der Leeuw along these lines by pointing out cases where Van der Leeuw quoted his ethnographic sources out of context to support his statements and disregarded ethnographic studies of his time that would not support his views.

More important than van Baaren's attempt, however, is the fact that Van der Leeuw abstracted the ethnographic material that he quoted from its colonial context, without any critical awareness of the colonial context that the data were drawn from – at a time when thousands of indigenous people were killed by Dutch forces in the Dutch colony of Indonesia and racist categories were being refined in South Africa. In order to contextualise his material within colonial relations of power, we will need to delve into the archives in an attempt to find traces of Van der Leeuw's communication with these colonial middlemen and theorists, and to establish his views on Dutch, British and French imperialism, and on Afrikaner,²⁷ Dutch and German nationalisms.

The important task of reassessing classic figures in the academic study of religion, of which Van der Leeuw is undoubtedly one, has clearly just begun – a task that has become ever more urgent as a moral imperative within our current context of debates on the decolonisation of Western productions of knowledge in the academy.

27. For an attempt to do this, see Strijdom (in press), in which a critique is offered for Van der Leeuw's phenomenological concept of 'sacred place' by taking his speech at the Voortrekker Monument as case study. The argument is developed in dialogue with Chidester's (1994) claim that Van der Leeuw's phenomenological approach was not only poetical, but also hinted at an awareness of political power relations. Although Chidester appreciates Van der Leeuw's poetics, he holds that 'in keeping with recent advances', it is 'the struggles over conquest, exclusion, and appropriation [possession]' that now need to be foregrounded (Chidester 1994:228–229). I challenged Chidester's reading of Van der Leeuw's consciousness of power relations, by analysing the speech that Van der Leeuw gave as Dutch representative at the inauguration of the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria on 16 December 1949. In that speech, at the beginning of apartheid and sharing the podium with the recently elected Prime Minister D.F. Malan, Van der Leeuw expressed the joy of the Dutch people in sharing with the Afrikaner volk their victory over the Zulu king Dingaan a century earlier, identifying uncritically with the foundation myth of Afrikaner nationalism. I agreed, however, with Chidester (1994:215) that Van der Leeuw's poetics of sacred place too often '[mystified] political relations of power' and 're-mythologized power from the vantage point of the conqueror' by appealing to 'the mythology of place and person', which 'might deny the legitimacy of any resistance to the conquest that had established a sacred place'. Van der Leeuw indeed paid no attention to resistance movements such as the African National Congress (ANC) that emerged in the first half of the 20th century in South Africa, or to the thinking of black intellectuals on indigenous religion, for example, the African American W.E.B. du Bois, or the South African historian S.M. Molema and dramatist H.I.E. Dhlomo (for a discussion of these black intellectuals, see Chidester 2014:193–255).

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

References

- Al-Jazeera, 2015, "'Decolonising' South African universities', *The Stream*, 08 April 2015, viewed 22 August 2017, from <http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201504081517-0024671>
- Capps, W., 1995, *Religious studies: The making of a discipline*, Fortress, Minneapolis, MN.
- Chaudhuri, A., 2016, 'The real meaning of Rhodes Must Fall', *The Guardian*, Wednesday, 16 March, viewed 22 August 2017, from https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/mar/16/the-real-meaning-of-rhodes-must-fall?CMP=share_btn_fb
- Chidester, D., 1994, 'The poetics and politics of sacred space: Towards a critical phenomenology of religion', in A.T. Tymieniecka (ed.), *From the Sacred to the Divine, Analecta Husserliana, The Yearbook of Phenomenological Research*, vol. 43, pp. 211–231, Springer, Dordrecht.
- Chidester, D., 1996, *Savage systems: Colonialism and comparative religion in Southern Africa*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA.
- Chidester, D., 2014, *Empire of religion: Imperialism and comparative religion*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Ciaffa, J., 2008, 'Tradition and modernity in postcolonial African philosophy', *Humanitas* 21(1&2), 121–145, viewed 24 August 2017, from <http://www.nhinet.org/ciaffa21-1.pdf>
- Hall, M., 2015, 'The symbolic statue dividing a South African university', *BBC News*, 25 March, viewed 22 August 2017, from <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-31945680>
- Hofstee, W., 1991, 'The French connection: Gerardus Van der Leeuw and the concept of primitive mentality', in H. Kippenberg & B. Luchesi (eds.), *Religionswissenschaft und Kulturkritik: Beiträge zur Konferenz The history of religions and critique of culture in the days of Gerardus Van der Leeuw (1890–1950)*, pp. 127–137, Diagonal Verlag, Marburg.
- Hofstee, W., 1997, *Goden en mensen: De godsdienstwetenschap van Gerardus Van der Leeuw 1890–1950*, Kok Agora, Kampen.
- Kamanzi, B., 2015, "'Rhodes Must Fall' – Decolonisation symbolism – What is happening at UCT, South Africa?", *The Postcolonialist*, 29 March, viewed 22 August 2017, from <http://postcolonialist.com/civil-discourse/rhodes-must-fall-decolonisation-symbolism-happening-uct-south-africa>
- Mamdani, M., 2017, *Mamdani delivers rousing TB Davie memorial lecture*, viewed 24 August 2017, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vKFAYXf05NO>
- Mbembe, A., 2015, *Decolonizing knowledge and the question of the archive*, viewed 22 August 2017, from <https://africaisacountry.atavist.com/decolonizing-knowledge-and-the-question-of-the-archive>
- Niehaus, I., 2017, 'Anthropology at the dawn of apartheid: Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski's South African engagements, 1919–1934', *Focaal – Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 77, 103–117. <https://doi.org/10.3167/fcl.2017.770109>
- Smith, J.Z., 2004, 'Religion, religions, religious', in J.Z. Smith (ed.), *Relating religion: Essays in the study of religion*, pp. 179–196, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Smith, J.Z., 2015, *Craft of teaching in the academic study of religion seminar*, University of Chicago, viewed 22 August 2017, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRDLBCTRJug&feature=share>
- Strijdom, J.M., in press, *Gerardus Van der Leeuw at the Voortrekker Monument: A postcolonial critique of his concept of sacred space*.
- Tylor, E.B., 1958, *Religion in primitive culture: Part II of 'Primitive culture'*, Harper Torchbooks, New York.
- Van Baaren, T.P., 1957, 'De ethnologische basis van de faenomenologie van G. Van der Leeuw', *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 11, 321–353.
- Van der Leeuw, G., 1928, 'La structure de la mentalité primitive', *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 8, 1–31.
- Van der Leeuw, G., 1937, *De primitieve mensch en de religie*, J.B. Wolters, Groningen-Jakarta.
- Van der Leeuw, G., 1940, 'De religie der primitieve volken', in G. Van der Leeuw & C.J. Bleeker (eds.), *De godsdiensten der wereld*, pp. 402–474, Meulenhof, Amsterdam.
- Van der Leeuw, G., 1948 [1924], German 1925, *Inleiding tot de phaenomenologie van den godsdienst*, De Erven F. Bohn N.V., Haarlem.
- Van der Leeuw, G., 1956 [1933], *Phänomenologie der Religion*, Mohr, Tübingen.
- Van der Leeuw, G., 1963 [1938], *Religion in essence and manifestation*, transl. J.E. Turner, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London.
- Waardenburg, J., 1978, *Reflections on the study of religion: Including an essay on the work of Gerardus Van der Leeuw*, Mouton Publishers, The Hague.
- Winzeler, R., 2016, 'Anthropology of religion', in R. Segal & K. Von Stuckrad (eds.), *Vocabulary for the study of religion*, Brill, Leiden, viewed 16 December 2016, from http://0-dx.doi.org.oasis.unisa.ac.za/10.1163/9789004249707_vsr_COM_00000041