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Abstract:

When the Scottish missionary David Livingstone tried to explain African witchcraft to his mid-nineteenth-century British readers, he famously resorted to writing an imagined dialogue between an African ‘witchdoctor’ and a European ‘medical doctor’. European science—here represented by the figure of the medical doctor—functioned as a reference point for characterising difference. It purportedly highlighted how and why Africans thought and acted differently from modern Europeans.

This symposium provides an opportunity to explore the implicit and explicit role that the concept of science plays in encounter narratives—not only in the past but also, above all, in our histories today. It brings together historians and anthropologists studying intersections between ‘Western’, ‘modern’ or ‘secular’ forms of thought and practice, on the one hand, and new traditions in South American and South Pacific cultures, on the other. It asks participants to reflect on how their conception of science mediates and enables these intersections, both in their own writing and in their fieldwork experiences.

How has science (variously understood) been used in the past to conceptualise difference? What work does the concept of science perform today in narratives about historical encounters, and how does it mediate between the researcher and the researched? What assumptions, in turn, about the nature of science underlie various accounts? And in what ways have efforts to acknowledge forms of local or indigenous knowledges shaped the concept of science? Indeed—what happens to science if we shift from thinking about it in the singular to the plural?

The ways in which we conceptualise science in these encounters matters and remains contested. For some, as with Livingstone, science is a concrete set of practices or assumptions innate to the history of the enlightened West that are lacking elsewhere. Many postcolonial theorists (such as Frantz Fanon and Ashis Nandy) retain aspects of this argument, even if they invert the value of science by highlighting its undemocratic potential and complicity in colonial projects. In more recent times, historians and anthropologists have sought to recognise indigenous forms of knowledge by pluralizing the concept of science—often treating science in the plural, framing encounters as a meeting between ‘Western science’ and ‘traditional ethnoscience’. In such narratives, ‘science’ is elevated to the level of a tertium comparationis, that is, a common quality between two groups, which enables comparisons to be made. Finally, yet other scholars have coined their own terms, framing their accounts as an encounter between: ‘natural histories’ (Sujit Sivasundaram); ‘natural worldviews’ (typically found in German colonial-period texts); ‘semiotic ideologies’ (Webb Keane); ‘cosmologies’ (Katherine Luongo); ‘aetiologies’ (Jack Taylor); ‘religions’ (for those who regard modern science itself
a form of faith and magic); ‘belief systems’; or ‘ways of thinking’. Each of these is entangled with or parallels notions of science in so far as they each draw our attention to competing approaches to causality, evidence, epistemology, and the organization of knowledge. Cutting across these diverse approaches, there are those who target epistemology—writing about points of comparison and contrast between different systems for gaining knowledge of the world. Others, interested in ontology, suggest that beyond confrontations between different ‘ways of thinking’, we should focus instead on the (in)commensurability between radically different realities.

It is these debates this symposium seeks to draw out by inviting scholars to reflect upon the role played by science, both in the South, and in scholarly representations of the South. Following the main theme of the congress, it explores tensions in the historiography between universal conceptions of science and attempts to understand knowledge practices in local contexts.

Keywords: Science in (post)colonial encounters – South Pacific – South America – Anthropology.

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