The View from In Between:

Mary Kingsley as Cultural Intermediary
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Early in her 1899 monograph *West African Studies*, the Victorian explorer-ethnographer Mary H. Kingsley turns ethnographic convention on its ear. Discussing her voyage to Africa on the British trading vessel *Batanga*, Kingsley observes, "Some one really ought to write a monograph on the natural history of mariners. They are valuable beings, and their habits are exceedingly interesting. I myself, being already engaged in the study of other organisms, cannot undertake the work; however, I place my observations at the disposal of any fellow naturalist who may have more time, and certainly will have more ability." She proceeds to describe the "metamorphic" stages in the life cycle of this creature, as well as the characteristic behavior of each stage and, in a slight mixing of metaphors, the animistic tendencies of the tribe.¹ This passage contains the distinctive elements of Kingsley's writing style: the dry wit, the deadpan absurdism, the offbeat, subversive viewpoint, and the satirical presentation of herself and her profession. But as is usually true with Kingsley's voice, it reflects a deeper meaning than humor alone. In this passage, Kingsley looks on her fellow Englishmen (or at least Europeans) as if from an outsider's point of view, regarding them as she would an exotic culture or an alien species.

Mary Henrietta Kingsley was indeed nearly as much an outsider from Victorian society as from African. A barely legitimate child of a society doctor and a Cockney domestic, she was never truly incorporated into either parent's culture. As a girl in a male-dominated society, she received virtually no formal education. Her father was generally absent, accompanying his extremely healthy patients on their world travels. Her mother, taken out of her own class but

without a husband present to bring her into his, existed in a psychologically erosive limbo, able
to teach Mary little about life or the role of a Victorian woman. Kingsley spent most of her
childhood in a darkened house, nursing her sickly mother, with her father’s library her only real
source of knowledge about the world. Even Victorian society was something she read about
rather than inhabiting, little more immediate to her than the far-flung lands explored by Cook,
Burton, Livingston and her father. Her identity was the sum of her parents and her books.

So when her parents died within two months of each other in 1892, Kingsley was left
adrift. Desperate to escape her confined existence, she determined to leave at her earliest
opportunity for the West African lands charted by her explorer heroes. There she found
something to give her life meaning: understanding African cultures, explaining them to the
British, and advocating their interests against the pressures of imperialism. She fell in love with
Africa (though it was perhaps something of an abusive relationship), and felt closer to its people
and religions than to her own ancestral ones. Yet she retained Victorian dress and propriety, at
least in the persona she presented back home, along with a largely Victorian point of view.

A student of both cultures but an integral member of neither, Mary Kingsley was a
creature of the middle ground.\textsuperscript{2} Though this was a difficult and lonely position for her, it
enabled her to function as an effective educator and advocate on African issues. Since she was
not locked into Victorian ideas, she was able to appreciate African culture as a valid alternative,

\textsuperscript{2}My use of this metaphor is influenced by Richard White: “The middle ground is the place in
between: in between cultures, peoples, and... empires and the nonstate world of villages.” However, while
White’s use of the term includes a literal, geographical element, I use it here in its more abstract meaning,
and include the sense of a middle ground between classes, genders and the like within a culture. \textit{The
Middle Ground: Indians, Empires and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815} (New York,
rather than a degenerate state to be absorbed into conformity; and yet her familiarity with British culture let her explain African ways in metaphors the British could grasp. She retained prejudices which are jarring to the modern reader, but which are minimal next to those of her contemporaries, and which she brought to bear in unexpected ways. Kingsley's attitudes and attributes -- her respect for African culture, her disdain for Christianity and its missionaries, and an adventurous spirit incompatible with expected feminine behavior -- were downright shocking to Victorian norms. Yet through the ways in which she presented herself to the public, wryly subverting her own most subversive attributes, Kingsley managed to win great popularity and acceptance in spite of said attributes. As I will argue, her very detachment from Victorian society was what enabled her to navigate its expectations and present her eccentricity in terms it could accept.

Kingsley was outspoken in her opposition to missionary efforts and assimilationist rule, insisting that British interests could be better served through relating to the Africans as trading partners and leaving their culture as it was, governing indirectly through mutually profitable alliances with local authorities. Her advocacy laid the groundwork for later policies of indirect rule.

Modern historiography has not closely explored Kingsley's intermediary status or its relevance to her achievements in cultural mediation. Generally coming from a feminist perspective, it seeks to position Kingsley within the clash between exponents of conventional Victorian female roles and the burgeoning feminist movement of the era. Her failure to fit
neatly into either group is presented by historians such as Dea Birkett\(^3\) and Lila Marz Harper\(^4\) as a paradox which they seek to resolve by categorizing her as one, the other, or some chimerical blend of both. This emphasis on gender issues tends to neglect the issues of greatest importance to Kingsley herself: the ethnographic study of African culture, the education of the British public in its findings, and the use of it to further improved relations between the two societies. This paper concentrates more on Kingsley's roles as a researcher, educator and cultural mediator, and examines her life, her writings and her public persona to illustrate her existence on a cultural boundary and how that position served these roles. Although the issue of gender relations is not one I seek to examine in depth, I intend to define Kingsley's position between genders as an extension of her in-between status in other areas. Rather than attempting to subvert existing gender categories, she found a middle ground in which she could function as a bridge between them, bringing fresh insights to the scientific field. As a creature of the middle ground, Kingsley possessed unusual flexibility, receptiveness to new ideas, and the ability to move and interpret between cultures.

**Formative years**

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Mary Henrietta Kingsley's entire life was defined by the tension between categories, beginning with the very circumstances of her birth. She arrived on October 13, 1862, exactly four days after the wedding of her father, society doctor and professional dilettante George Kingsley, and her mother, Cockney domestic worker Mary Bailey -- placing her on the borderline of legitimacy as well as that of social class.\(^5\)

Securing legitimacy for their child was apparently the primary reason for the Kingsley's marriage, for George spent little time with his wife and children (Mary's brother Charles, named for his noted uncle the novelist, arrived in 1866). Instead he spent most of his time travelling abroad, driven by an intense curiosity and wanderlust -- as Mary put it in her introduction to a posthumous collection of his writings, “loving to be in the wild heart of Nature, far away from the clamour and turmoil of crowded cities, listening to the lore of the forests or the voices of the sea.” Since George mostly followed this yearning, Mary described him as “certainly the happiest of the three [Kingsley] brothers.”\(^6\) As much as she romanticizes his wanderlust, her portrait is not entirely flattering. After quoting extensively from his letters, she diplomatically insinuates, “His devotion to his wife the letters I have quoted faintly show.” Later on the same page she states quite bluntly: “But I am fully convinced his taking this view of life really caused the illness which killed my mother. For months at a time she was kept in an unbroken strain of nervous anxiety about him.”\(^7\)

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\(^6\) Kingsley, George H., *Notes on Sport and Travel*, with a memoir by his daughter, Mary H. Kingsley (London, 1900), pp. 7-9.

Indeed, Mary Bailey Kingsley spent much of her married life in the sickbed, a frail figure dependent on her daughter to nurse her, little able to meet young Mary’s needs for education and training in the conventional roles of a Victorian woman. Even when she was able to move about, she had few places to go; she was unwelcome in the Kingsley family's social circles, but, as Katherine Frank says, “marrying up in the world also to a certain extent alienated Mary Bailey from her own people.” Young Mary was thus cut off from society in both directions. Caught in the middle, never integrated into either half of the social divide, she had to develop a sense of identity as an individual rather than a member of a group.

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Frank, p. 20.
Indeed, as Frank argues, it is unlikely that Mary Bailey was even literate, suggesting that Mary Kingsley acquired her literacy entirely on her own, teaching herself from the eclectic range of books in her father's library.⁹ These books, covering science, history, ancient languages, travel, sport, religion and the like,¹⁰ were highly atypical reading for a Victorian girl, placing her on the boundary of conventional gender roles as well as social classes. On those infrequent occasions when her father was present, he fought with his daughter more than he guided her. In her memoir of her father, Mary devotes eight pages to his fiery tantrums, generally in response to the faults he frequently perceived in his daughter -- her inability to control her pet fighting-cocks, her tendency to decorate the fireplace grate with willow-shavings (potentially disastrous when he threw in his still-lit matches, but he always placed the blame solely on Mary), and, most often of all, her competition for the same books he was in the middle of reading.¹¹ But it cannot be doubted that he was the principal role model in her life, for she inherited most of his tastes and values: an eclectic love of learning, a craving for danger (Mary said George envied no one but “the man who had an extra good chance of being killed by a grizzly bear of superior size”¹²), a repudiation of Christianity in favor of a general sense of divine immanence in nature (Mary uses Goethe's term Erdgeist in reference to George's sentiments¹³), and an abiding faith in the

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⁹Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁰Kingsley lists “Darwin on The Expression of the Emotions, The Kabbala Denudata, Tristram Shandy..., Lotz's Microcosmos, Mr. Sponge's Sporting Tour, Fitzgerald's Omar Khayyam, and Philemon Holland's Pliny” as an assortment of books which might typically be lying on a chair in her childhood home. Notes on Sport, pp. 37-8.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 194-201.

¹²Ibid., p. 8.

¹³Ibid., p. 193.
superiority of the British. In her memoir to him she sings his praises, yet still spells out his faults, often in extensive detail -- suggesting a great ambivalence toward the man. She states there was "one man only in his generation... George Kingsley can be likened to -- I mean Sir Richard Burton." Certainly Burton was one of Mary Kingsley's own role models, but one may wonder if she was aware of Burton's own wife/biographer's efforts to erase her husband's dark side from history, and if the comparison thus held a deliberate double meaning.

Throughout Kingsley's formative years, she was caught between contradictions: upper and lower classes; male and female roles; her father's remote dynamism and her mother's nearby fragility; the exciting, boundless world of her books and the cramped, dreary confines of her everyday life. She was left to find her own balance on these borderlines of identity, and thrived in her own way, becoming one of the great autodidacts of her age; but still she yearned for an escape, for the kind of freedom which made her father, in her eyes, the happiest of the Kingsley clan.

**Travels in West Africa**

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16 Frank, p. 31-32.

Kingsley's liberation came through tragedy -- the death of both her parents within three months of each other. Each died as they had lived: George from complications of a fever he had suffered on his travels,\(^{18}\) Mary Bailey simply by completing the long wasting-away process which had defined her married life.\(^{19}\) No sooner were the funeral arrangements completed than Mary Kingsley began preparing to journey abroad. Africa was her target from the outset, though there have been conflicting theories as to the reason for this -- most of them laid down by Kingsley's own pen. In her first book, *Travels in West Africa*, she characterizes it as a whim:

> It was in 1893 that, for the first time in my life, I found myself in possession of five or six months which were not heavily forestalled, and feeling like a boy with a new half-crown, I lay about in my mind... as to what to do with them. "Go and learn your tropics," said Science. Where on earth am I to go, I wondered... so I got down an atlas and saw that either South America or West Africa must be my destination....\(^{20}\)

\(^{18}\) *Notes on Sport*, p. 205.

\(^{19}\) Frank, p. 46.

In a later lecture she claimed, “My reason for taking up this study was a desire to complete a great book my father... had left at his death unfinished.”\textsuperscript{21} Such a book never existed, except as a vague ambition loosely unifying a mass of scattered notes. Her biographer Frank favors an explanation Kingsley offered in an intimate letter to a friend: “...feeling no one had need of me anymore when my Mother and Father died..., I went down to West Africa to die. West Africa amused me and was kind to me and scientifically interesting and did not want to kill me just then -- I am in no hurry. I don’t care one way or the other for a year of so \textit{sic}.\textsuperscript{22} But the explanation of her journey as an overcomplicated suicide plan is no more satisfying than the others, for like them it fails to take into account Kingsley's lifelong study of the exploits of the great explorers, particularly Burton and Paul DuChaillu, who had focussed specifically on the area Kingsley chose to explore, the Congo Français. It also fails to take into account Kingsley's ironic, self-deprecating and often morbid sense of humor. Always modest, she would have rather dismissed her journeys as a form of suicide than acknowledged them as an effort comparable to those of her explorer heroes. Kingsley's specialty was the African people known as the Fan or Fang, a reputed cannibal tribe of the Ogowé River region. Burton had been fascinated by these people and sought to study them himself, but in the end had spent no more than a day among them.\textsuperscript{23} If Kingsley was motivated to fill in the gaps in any other explorer's work, it was more likely Burton than George Kingsley -- although, as suggested above, she apparently identified the two with each other. Certainly the deadliness of West Africa was part

\textsuperscript{21}West African Studies, p. xxii.

\textsuperscript{22}Quoted in Frank, p. 58.

\textsuperscript{23}West, Richard, \textit{Brazza of the Congo: European Exploration and Exploitation in French
of its excitement and mystery to Victorian culture, played up by all the explorers to aggrandize their own feats; it is just like Kingsley to take that trope and subvert it at her own expense.

In any case, whether she sought death or not, going abroad was what brought her truly to life. Her first taste of lands and vistas beyond England moved her profoundly, inspiring prose of great beauty:

On the 30th we sighted the Peak of Teneriffe early in the afternoon. It displayed itself, as usual, as an entirely celestial phenomenon. A great many people miss seeing it. Suffering under the delusion that El Pico is a terrestrial affair, they look in vain somewhere about the level of their own eyes, which are striving to penetrate the dense masses of mist that usually enshroud its slopes by day, and then a friend comes along, and gaily points out to the newcomer the glittering white triangle somewhere near the zenith.

The superb cone this afternoon stood out a deep purple against a serpent-green sky, separated from the brilliant blue ocean by a girdle of pink and gold cumulus, while Grand Canary and Lanzarote looked as if they were formed from fantastic-shaped sunset cloud-banks that by some spell had been solidified.\(^\text{24}\)

The “celestial” imagery here is no accident. The natural world gave Kingsley a sense of the numinous which churchgoing never could. She had inherited her father’s *Erdgeist*.

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\(^{24}\) *Travels*, p. 13.
Although Kingsley was inspired by such explorers as DuChaillu and Burton, and in many ways followed in their footsteps, she nonetheless rejected much of their approach, and in her writings brought a subtle yet scathing satire to bear on the conventions they laid down. The stereotype of the African explorer was a bold, masculine hunter, sallying forth to confront fearsome beasts and natives, fighting them tooth and nail, and coming back home with numerous samples of wondrous new species, all suitably stuffed and mounted for display. Kingsley dryly satirized this convention, referring to both the headhunters and packrats she encountered on her travels as “fellow collectors.”

She herself never “collected” as aggressively as her forebears, preferring to watch live specimens rather than shoot them. This afforded her insights missed by naturalists such as DuChaillu, who saw every new species as a fearsome aggressor needing to be felled in mid-charge (or at least described them that way afterwards to justify shooting them down). DuChaillu, the first European on record as observing a (temporarily) live gorilla, created the stereotype of the primate as a vicious mankiller, even ascribing fangs to the herbivorous species. Modern primatology tells us that his descriptions of gorilla aggression are technically accurate, but that if he was attacked, he must have provoked them first. Kingsley merely observed gorillas from hiding, and reported much less bellicose behavior; indeed, when startled by her African guide's sneezes, the gorilla band retreated swiftly rather than attacking. Kingsley reported wryly, “After this sporting adventure, we returned, as I usually return from a sporting adventure, without measurements or the body.”

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25 Ibid., 278, 309-10.
behavioral data, anticipating Dian Fossey by generations. Kingsley always presented her choice to observe wildlife rather than killing it as a shortcoming, a failure to live up to correct naturalist techniques; but the depth of her observations made the subtle point that perhaps a gentler approach had its own strengths.

Instead of riding in a sedan chair on the backs of African bearers or lecturing from a pulpit, Kingsley went among the Africans alone, on foot, as a trader. The West Coast merchants were disdained by British society, but Kingsley bore them great affection and proudly counted herself among their number, believing that presenting herself to Africans as a trading partner was a more effective way to interact with and learn from indigenous peoples than lording it over them as a missionary or conqueror. As she told a lecture audience, “there is something reasonable about trade to all men... when you first appear among people who have never seen anything like you before, they naturally regard you as a devil; but when you want to buy or sell with them, they recognize there is something human and reasonable about you.” Significantly, she illustrated this example by asking her British audience to reverse their expected cultural roles, and imagine an exotic African traveller “suddenly arriving in a village hereabouts. After the first thrill of excitement his appearance gave passed away, and he was found anxious to sell something, anything, say bootlaces, he would be taken much more calmly than if he showed no desire to do business at all.”

28Quoted in Frank, p. 63.
Kingsley's ability here to imagine an African as an agent of cultural interaction rather than a passive recipient exemplifies her exceptional respect and understanding for African peoples and cultures. Certainly her views were not devoid of racial stereotypes and ethnocentrism; she routinely referred to Africans as “savages” and described their capacity for technology as intrinsically inferior to other races. Indeed, she embraced the theory that Africans and Europeans represented separate evolutionary tracks: “I feel certain that a black man is no more an undeveloped white man than a rabbit is an undeveloped hare....” But while this theory is racist by modern standards, Kingsley actually used it to challenge elements of the racism of her time, to reject the perception of Africans as degenerate beings in need of cultural assimilation and instead argue for their culture’s worth and right to exist. She wrote that “In mental and moral affairs the African is by no means so strikingly inferior as he is in handicrafts; he has both a sense of justice and honour, not much worn by daily use, and very easily eliminated by a course of Christian teaching; but it is there, and if you know the way, you can rouse it, and make it work.” She contended that African values and practices, however immoral they might be for Europeans, were practical and necessary in the conditions of Africa and should not be replaced by overzealous missionaries. Conversion, she argued, “eliminates those parts of the native fetish that were a wholesome restraint on the African," while the Christian doctrine meant to replace it could not be wholly embraced by those raised in a fundamentally different tradition.


30 Travels, p. 659.

making it ineffectual as a moral guide.\textsuperscript{32} She considered polygamy an economic necessity for Africans due to the extensive labor needed to maintain the household (although she argued this was due to the Africans' "dilatory" nature and did not apply to Europeans).\textsuperscript{33} She defined African religion or "Fetish" not as mere superstition but as a religion belonging to the same pantheistic track as Hinduism and Shinto, a parallel course to the "revealed" Semitic religions -- a course in which divinity is experienced as a part of all things in nature rather than a separate, elevated plane.\textsuperscript{34} Essentially she defined the Africans' alleged technological inferiority not as a mark of overall inferiority but simply of a different range of virtues, and in so doing she attempted to set aside the question of African material culture and focus attention on those aspects of their culture that deserved appreciation. As Julie English Early puts it, "Kingsley's work was certainly framed by a racist superstructure; once inside the frame, however, her interest focused on discerning the coherence and integrity of a cultural system."\textsuperscript{35}

Kingsley felt the other ways in which imperialists sought to impose their culture on Africa were just as invalid as their missionary work. She criticized the vocational training of the mission schools for focussing their curriculum on "trades which... Africa is not yet in urgent need to be taught," such as tailoring and bookbinding, rather than more useful agricultural skills.\textsuperscript{36} And once back in England, she used the cachet of her popularity to campaign vigorously against

\textsuperscript{32}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{33}Ibid., p. 211-12.

\textsuperscript{34}West African Studies, pp. 101-5.


\textsuperscript{36}Travels, p. 207.
the 1898 “hut tax” imposed by the British governors of Sierra Leone, recognizing that in African law “the thing that you pay anyone a regular fee for is a thing that is not your own... therefore... it is the property of the Government;”\(^{37}\) and that the Africans would therefore interpret it as a confiscation of their property and essentially an act of war. The British officials, lacking her ability to see the African side of things, ignored these arguments and retained the tax.\(^{38}\)

Kingsley persisted in her advocacy, developing a model for a trade-rule system which Frank describes as “one of the earliest expressions of the idea of indirect rule,”\(^{39}\) the principle of governing through existing local authorities and structures. Harper adds, “her influence has been linked to the use of indirect rule in Nigeria and the Congo Reform Movement as well.”\(^{40}\)

\(^{37}\)From the *Spectator*, March 19, 1898; quoted in Frank, p. 253.

\(^{38}\)Frank, pp. 273-4.


\(^{40}\)Harper, p. 220.
In addition to politics, Kingsley made a strong impact in anthropological circles, contributing significantly to the ethnography of West Africa, challenging not only racist assumptions among the general public but scholarly theses as well. Her extensive study of West African “Fetish” led her to question the universality of Sir James Frazer's influential theories of religious development.\textsuperscript{41} Although she was essentially an amateur in an embryonic field, her observational approach was often quite modern. Dorothy Middleton says she “anticipated modern exploration in being more concerned with the intensive study of a small and unfrequented region than with tracing long routes on a known map.”\textsuperscript{42} Frank downplays her ethnological work, seeing it as secondary to being “in quest of herself,”\textsuperscript{43} but she does acknowledge Kingsley's detailed discussion of the Bubi people in Chapter 3 of \textit{Travels in West Africa} as a “model ethnographic study of a little-known ethnic group.”\textsuperscript{44} Some of Kingsley's observations presage modern theories of cultural anthropology. In explaining the custom of African traders to take a wife in each village they trade with, she observes: “This system of judiciously conducted alliances, gives \textit{sic} the black trader a security nothing else can, because... all his wife's relations on the mother's side regard him as one of themselves, and look after him and his interests.”\textsuperscript{45} This reflects the fundamental importance of kin ties in non-agrarian societies: in order to be allowed to interact with a kin-based culture, one must establish a real or

\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Travels}, p. 435.


\textsuperscript{43} Frank, p. 94.

\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 121.

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Travels}, p. 315.
In discussing “Fetish” and missionary work in *West African Studies*, Kingsley makes keen observations about the incompleteness of the conversion process and the reasons for its frequent failure. She recognizes that the adoption of a new religion does not displace the old, as the missionary would desire, but rather is grafted onto the existing belief structure. “Therefore, when... disappointed by unanswered prayers, he turns back to his old belief entirely, or modifies the religion he has been taught until it fits in with Fetish, and is gradually absorbed by it.”\(^{47}\) This is a strikingly clear statement of the processes of religious syncretism identified in the modern scholarship of Richard M. Eaton and others.\(^{48}\)

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\(^{48}\) For an extended discussion of these processes, see Bennett, Christopher L., “Transformation of Belief Systems on Islamic Frontiers in India and Eastern Europe” (1999), in manuscript.
Regrettably, Mary Kingsley's career was extremely short-lived. After a few brief years of fame from her lectures, books and political advocacy -- not to mention her eccentric self-presentation -- Kingsley's longed-for return to her beloved Africa came, not as a scholar, but as a volunteer nurse at a South African hospital during the Boer War. There she succumbed to typhoid on June 3, 1900. 49 Kingsley's significance as an ethnologist is generally considered to arise mainly from the influence of her findings on British colonial policy 50 -- as George W. Stocking, Jr., puts it, "she in fact advocated giving anthropologists a voice in colonial affairs; but any role she might have had in organized anthropology was cut short by her death...." 51 But her insights suggest that if she had lived longer, she might have had a profound impact on the basic science itself.

**Kingsley's public persona**

Mary Kingsley did not fit in to conventional roles, attitudes and expectations, and she was well aware of this fact. Certainly her lack of a place to belong was awkward and lonely for her; as she once wrote to a friend, "I cannot be [both] a bushman and a drawing roomer and so I get worried and bored." 52 Yet at the same time, Kingsley turned her eccentricities to her advantage, even embracing them outright in her public presentation. Her cultivated oddness helped her to catch and hold her audience's attention.

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49 Frank, pp. 296-7.
50 Ibid., p. 94.
52 Frank, p. 207.
A pair of cartoons drawn by an audience member for an 1899 lecture highlight the contrasts in Kingsley’s image. As Harper explains:

Labeled “Anticipation”... the first shows a young woman in military attire and short skirt, a pistol in one hand and a saber in the other, suggesting an unconventional and aggressive “New Woman” explorer, consistent with the view of Kingsley which a reader might form from her activity in Africa. The second figure, “Realisation”... is a sketch of an old bespectacled woman engaged in specimen collecting, hunched with a butterfly net over her shoulder... and wearing an ankle-length skirt.

The latter image was one Kingsley deliberately cultivated to offset her unconventional activities. Her wardrobe at these events was studiously out of fashion, and she was known to introduce herself to audiences by saying, “I expect I remind you of your maiden aunt -- long since deceased.”

Kingsley also cultivated an uncultivated air to her speech and writing. She wrote in mock apology about her “liberties with... the Queen's English.... It is I who have declined to ascend to a higher level of lucidity and correctness of diction than I am fitted for.” Yet she affected the use of old-fashioned, flowery chapter headings, such as “LAGOS BAR: Which the general reader may omit as the voyager gives herein no details of Old Calabar or other things of general interest, but discourses diffusely on the local geography and the story of the man who

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54 *Travels*, pp. xix-xx.
wasted coal." In person, this respected, refined-looking scholar startled audiences when she opened her mouth and addressed them in the Cockney accent she had acquired from her mother. As always, she was self-deprecating about it, once expressing the wish that a newspaper would go easy on her for dropping her terminal g's "when I am trying so hard to hold onto the 'h's."

But this self-deprecation was a way of softening her eccentricity and making it more acceptable to her audiences. Kingsley did not use her contradictions to shock or disturb audiences, but to amuse them. She was an extremely witty, entertaining writer and lecturer, sometimes compared to Mark Twain. Her humor made her unconventional qualities appealing and safe to audiences, giving her a trickster's license to defy convention and shake up sensibilities.

By confounding her audience's expectations, Kingsley challenged them to question their assumptions and consider new possibilities: Can a woman be strong and adventurous yet still feminine? Can African cultures be lawful and civilized without being British, or truly spiritual without being Christian? The mind is never so open to new possibilities as when it is confused, and Mary Kingsley embraced the confusion she could create in the public's minds.

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55 *Ibid.*, p. 73. I should note that after unearthing this and the previous quote in *Travels*, I found that Early had cited the very same passages on pp. 218-19 to make a similar point. Presumably she and I both started at the beginning of the book and used the first good examples -- or perhaps these are just particularly memorable quotes.

56 Frank, p. 24; also Early, p. 218 (yet again).
Kingsley did have some limited success at changing attitudes. As mentioned above, her advocacy and ethnological insights were influential in persuading the British after her death to enact a policy of indirect rule. However, her career was too short for her influence in other areas to be more than fleeting. Although it was something she claimed not to want, her example inspired others to campaign for the inclusion of women in scientific societies; yet after a few years these opportunities were closed off by an increasingly formalized, masculinized scientific establishment.


Also, some minds are more locked into their assumptions than others. Scholars and critics received Kingsley's eccentricity less well than the “GP” (as Kingsley called the General Public) did. Some dismissed her work as little more than cataloguing; Alfred Lyall characterized her as what Early calls "a scrubwoman to science." Some reviewers missed the point of her writing and used selected examples from it to justify their own racist preconceptions. Even her friends posthumously tried to deproblematize her gender status through “an array of defensive memoirs that sought to construct a 'normative' woman....” In many ways, Kingsley was perhaps too original and challenging for her contemporaries to keep up with. Indeed, as I will now discuss, many historians to this day find her a confounding figure who refuses to stand still for their theories.

Making sense of Mary Kingsley

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59 Early, p. 220.

60 Ibid., p. 224-5.


62 Early, p. 220.
The View From In Between

Christopher L. Bennett

The bulk of modern historiography on Mary Kingsley seems to come from feminist scholars. This seems somewhat paradoxical, since Kingsley was aggressively non-feminist. Although she existed outside conventional Victorian gender roles, she did not seek to alter or overthrow those roles. Feminist historiography tends to define this as a contradiction and attempts to explain it. Lila Marz Harper speaks of how female explorers were required “to present in their narratives the contradictory positions of supporting the separate spheres doctrine [that science was an intrinsically male pursuit], while simultaneously carrying on activities that challenged such beliefs.” She portrays Kingsley as a closet feminist who made a deliberate choice “to distance herself from increasingly vocal feminist movements” in order to preserve her respectability, and thus presumably her ability to function as an activist.63 Instead, Harper argues, Kingsley chose to be subtly subversive in her speeches and writings, lampooning the conventions of the male explorer/hunter/conqueror through her distinctly feminine approach to her subject.64 Other feminist scholars are less flattering. Sara Mills describes her writings as “caught up in the contradictory clashes” between feminist, colonial and other discourses, and says that “[n]o stable position can finally be given to the text.” Eva-Marie Kröller complains that “[f]rom a feminist perspective, Kingsley's befuddled pose may at times be exasperating....”65 Dea Birkett implies that she and other female explorers had a vested interest in keeping women in their place because to do otherwise “would belittle their own reputations as travellers and

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63 Harper, p. 175, 180.
64 Ibid., pp. 206-15.
65 Mills and Kröller both cited in Ibid., p. 178.
professionals, and detract from the uniqueness of their achievements.\textsuperscript{66} She is rather hostile toward Kingsley overall, repeatedly characterizing her satirical wit as “cruel,”\textsuperscript{67} asserting that she “felt no sisterly bonds”\textsuperscript{68} and dismissing her efforts as a naturalist as merely a respectable façade for her self-indulgent wanderings.\textsuperscript{69} It seems that some feminist historians simply do not like Mary Kingsley, perhaps resenting her for her stubborn refusal to fit complacently into their conceptual and ideological schemas.

\textsuperscript{66} Birkett, *Spinsters Abroad*, p.200.

\textsuperscript{67} For instance *Ibid.*, p. 84, 134.


Oddly, the historians interested in Kingsley seem to share little of her overriding interest in West African culture. Indeed, they tend to make the very mistake she chastised her countrymen for the most: defining Africa merely as an absence of European culture rather than as its own culture with its own clearly defined rules. Birkett argues that she and other \"[w]omen travellers celebrated their freedom... when travelling among \'unadulterated\' peoples... here their gender was of the least importance.\"  

This overlooks the clearly defined gender expectations of the West African societies Kingsley studied. In one of her lectures, Kingsley told of her difficulties in explaining her unmarried status to Africans unable to comprehend the concept of a single woman. Ultimately, she developed a strategy for dealing with such questions: \"...to say you are searching for [your husband], and then... locate him away in the direction in which you wish to travel.\"  

Kingsley quite definitely had to cope with gender expectations in Africa; she simply managed to find a way to accommodate such expectations without actually conforming to them. Surely this is relevant to the question of how Kingsley positioned herself within the Victorian gender spectrum, as I will discuss later. By glossing over African culture, Birkett and other historians are missing an angle which could help them answer their questions about Kingsley's place in Victorian culture.

These historians also pay little attention to Kingsley's other interests, such as spirituality. She wrote extensively on African religion, and professed a great personal affinity for its pantheistic aspect, the experience of divinity through nature.  

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70 Birkett, *Spinsters Abroad*, p. 155.
71 Frank, p. 147.
profound spiritual reaction to the African environment, notably in this passage:

In the darkness round me flitted thousands of fire-flies and out beyond this pool of utter night flew by unceasingly the white foam of the rapids; sound there was none save their thunder. The majesty and beauty of the scene fascinated me, and I stood leaning with my back against a rock pinnacle watching it. Do not imagine it gave rise... to those complicated, poetical reflections natural beauty seems to bring out in other people's minds. ...I just lose all sense of human individuality, all memory of human life, with its grief and worry and doubt, and become part of the atmosphere. If I have a heaven, that will be mine.... 73

Harper reads this as nothing more than a metaphorical description of suicidal despair:

“Kingsley... hoped to lose herself by merging with an impersonal nature.... Any hope contained within Christian ideas of an afterlife... is dismissed here by the lifelong atheist who never had any crisis of belief.”74 To her eyes, this passage expresses merely absence -- of hope, of spirituality, of personal connection. But it is in fact intensely spiritual. The description of losing the sense of self and merging with one's surroundings reflects a universal pattern of spiritual experience, according to accounts of meditative, euphoric and trance states from many religious traditions. In fact, this transcendent sense has recently been determined to be an intrinsic potential of human neurology, associated with the shutdown of those perceptual "switches" that define the self as separate from the universe. 75

This blurring of perceptual boundaries is a good metaphor for the basic thing about Mary Kingsley that these historians fail to understand. Rather than existing in one category or

73 Travels, pp. 177-8.
74 Harper, pp. 204-5.
another, Kingsley hovered between them. She was never fully socialized in the worldview of any particular group, whether male or female, lower or upper class, or any particular state or religion. Rather, she observed all these entities as if from the outside, learning about them through her extensive, eclectic self-education but always retaining a certain detachment from them. As a result, she was able to pick and choose between elements of different worldviews at will, combine them, reflect them off each other, and see fundamental similarities between them. She could easily jump from one point of view to another, and was therefore quite capable of holding two contradictory ideas at once -- not necessarily believing them both, but relating sufficiently to both that she could negotiate effectively between them.

Certainly Kingsley's writings and self-presentation are fraught with contradictions. She broke free of the limitations of the Victorian female role yet vehemently denounced feminism. She embraced the legacy of gun-toting "naturalists" yet scathingly parodied their behavior. She baldly asserted the inferiority of Africans while celebrating their culture and expressing personal affinity for their beliefs. She embraced British imperialism but fought for the rights of subject peoples. Historians struggle to reconcile these stances, to figure out what school of thought she truly belonged to, with little success. What they seem to overlook is that any school of thought is not a monolith, but contains many components. Rather than embracing any viewpoint whole, Kingsley studied both sides, took what she liked from each and constructed her own personal perspective in between.

The European worldview has long been dominated by a dualistic way of perceiving the world, a tendency to subdivide reality into separate, clearly defined, often opposite categories: male and female, elite and subaltern, sacred and profane, true and false. Kingsley confronted
this tendency outright and pointed out that there are alternatives. In speaking of “Fetish,” she writes: “What strikes a European when studying it is the lack of gaps between things. To the African there is perhaps no gap between the conception of spirit and matter, animate or inanimate. It is all an affair of grade -- not of essential difference in essence.” Europeans, she asserts, need to be willing to see the world in continuous rather than discrete terms if they hope to understand African thought. Scholars of Kingsley would do well to heed the same lesson. By trying to force her into their predefined dualistic schemas of male and female, racist and inclusionist, oppressor and oppressed, they fail to explain a mind that rose beyond such dualisms and was able to negotiate across the continuum between them. Julie English Early comes closest to understanding this, in her own critique of the historiography of Mary Kingsley: “Splintering her interests, isolating what appear to be clear statements (yet necessarily choosing them from among disarmingly contradictory pieces of text) to bring together a satisfactorily coherent ‘whole,’ has not made Kingsley any less elusive.... Readings of Kingsley's work that ignore that diffusion miss the destabilizing metadiscursive critique [i.e. the challenging of conventional viewpoints through her “outside-the-box” persona] that her career embodies.”

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77 Early, p. 229.
As Early argues, Kingsley was well aware of her own identity as an outsider positioned problematically between contradictory value systems, and used that role to her advantage in critiquing those values systems and “disturbing existing hierarchies.” Recognizing the paradoxical figure she presented -- an old-fashioned spinster telling tales of intrepid adventure, a demure, proper lady intruding on masculine spheres of learning -- she embraced that paradox and used herself as the stage on which the tension was played out. She made herself both parodist and parodied, engaging in a recursive deconstruction which encouraged the audience to take a similarly critical look at themselves, their own institutions and assumptions, “reorient[ing] her audience to different angles of vision.”

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78 Ibid., pp. 218-19.

79 Ibid., p. 223.
There is no paradox in the fact that Kingsley transcended conventional Victorian female roles while still rejecting feminism. In Kingsley's day, feminists were seen as “manly” and “unfeminine,” achieving equality by adopting the gendered behavior which was defined as superior. Kingsley herself described feminists as “androgyns.” She had no desire to assume a masculine role, as symbolized by her adamant refusal to wear trousers (“I would rather perish on a public scaffold,” she insisted). Instead of embracing Victorian society's conventional dichotomy of male = strong, female = weak, Kingsley stepped outside the equation and rearranged the terms, arguing that femininity had its own characteristic strength, a strength proven by “the heavy strain of [a woman’s] home duties.... It is a curious inconsistency that little account is taken of a woman if she sacrifices herself on the domestic hearth, while should she follow in the track of men -- frequently a much easier course -- and undertake public or scientific work, everybody cries 'How marvellous!'” Thus she argued that men and women had comparable and complementary strengths, and proved it by competing in the male sphere while retaining an emphatically feminine persona. Rather than attempting to subvert existing gender categories, she found a middle ground in which she could function as a bridge between them, and, in Susan Morgan's words, “brought the wisdom [of]... the private sphere to bear on... issues in the public domain.” Her feminine outlook gave her insights a Victorian man would lack.

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80 Frank, p. 209.
81 Ibid., p. 256.
82 Travels, p. 502.
83 Young Woman, June 1896, pp. 290-91; quoted in Frank, p. 219.
but she could only bring them to bear by entering spheres of activity normally reserved for men. Kingsley's distinct perspective also gave her sterling qualifications as an ethnographer.

The role of the ethnographer or cultural anthropologist is to relate to another culture, not as a detached observer peering from behind a duck blind, but as a participant-observer, an adopted member of the culture under study. As a rule, human beings behave differently in front of guests than they do among family. To gain true insights, the ethnographer must become part of the family. At the same time, though, she must not "go native" -- she must retain an outsider's curiosity in order to ask questions and recognize patterns the insider may take for granted, and she must retain her own culture's perspective sufficiently to interpret the studied culture in ways that her own people can understand. The ability to straddle two worldviews is essential. In the words of James Clifford, "Ethnography is actively situated between powerful systems of meaning. It poses its questions at the boundaries of civilizations, cultures, classes, races and genders."  

As suggested by the opening quote of this paper, Kingsley was sufficiently detached from her native society that she could consider it from an outsider's perspective, analyzing it from the same kind of participant-observer viewpoint she brought to bear on African societies. Kingsley used these insights cannily to shape her self-presentation, making herself acceptable to the

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85 For instance, in Travels p. 209 she corrects a male scholar's inability to distinguish a skillet from a kettle, saying "any woman knows a kettle must have a spout."

86 For discussion of the principles of ethnographic fieldwork, see for example Murphy, Yolanda and Robert F. Murphy, Women of the Forest, Second Edition (New York, 1985), pp. 51-76.

Victorian audience despite her flaunting of Victorian norms and beliefs. Recall how she learned to cope with Africans’ questions about her husband: rather than admitting her nonconformity on the subject of marital status and openly resisting the norms of the culture with which she was interacting, she constructed herself in a manner superficially consistent with those norms, yet one which still allowed her to behave at variance with them. As an outsider, not raised with the assumptions of the culture, she was able to see the potentials for variance within the culture’s rules that a fully socialized member of that culture might not recognize. Since Kingsley approached Victorian culture from a similarly external perspective, she could do the same there, accommodating cultural expectations while still remaining outside them: exemplifying the appearance of the prim Victorian spinster while relating her wild exploits; rejecting the blatant subversiveness of feminism while letting her accomplishments speak for themselves about women’s potential; insisting on her own inadequacies as an explorer/collector while quietly demonstrating a more contemplative, less bloodthirsty approach; firmly endorsing the racist belief in Africans’ inferior capacity for civilization while suggesting that it did not imply moral inferiority.

I must qualify my thesis of Mary Kingsley as a creature of the zone between cultures. I do not intend to imply that she was totally devoid of societal affiliation, or that she was detached from both English and African cultures to identical degrees. Certainly she was a product of Victorian England, and identified herself as such. Even in Africa, if her accounts are to be taken at face value, she retained the dress of a proper Victorian lady. However, she was far from the center of Victorian society. Although, compared to an African, she was very much within Victorian society, she no doubt considered herself an outsider. I do not so much assert that she
was an alien to her native culture as that she felt like one, and that this mindset enabled her to
detach herself from many (though not all) Victorian assumptions, to look at them as though from
an ethnological remove, and to consider them as not automatically more natural or right than the
ways of other societies. Additionally, although she was a part of Victorian society, she was an
ill-fitting part, not well-assimilated into any of its subdivisions. Here is where she was most
genuinely in the middle -- between classes, between gender roles, between the scholarly and the
unschooled -- and it was her experience in this middle ground that prepared her to assume an
intermediary role between cultures, as well as enabling her to straddle the perceptual,
philosophical and political divides within Victorian culture as effectively as she did. I am not
addressing the theoretical question of whether an individual can exist detached from cultural
context, but rather exploring how an individual's sense of alienation, her self- and
culturally-constructed identity as a misfit, can be turned to positive advantage in cross-cultural
interactions.

Conclusion

Though a product of Victorian society, Mary Kingsley was never truly a member of it.
As an outsider to both British and African cultures, a keen observer of both but a true member of
neither, Kingsley was able to provide a bridge between them, granting her insights into African
culture of which few other British observers were capable, and enabling her to shape them in
ways appealing to the British mind. As a person who did not fit smoothly into any Victorian
social category, she was able to maneuver between them without rejecting their validity. She
was a creature of the middle ground, and an exemplar of the dynamism and capacity for growth
that exists in that middle ground, in the zones of interaction between different societal potentials.

It cannot be argued that she was happy there; indeed she led a very difficult and lonely life. She bridged cultural divides, but like many bridges was under constant tension, surrounded by emptiness. Her public persona was suffused with a Twain-like humor, but like Twain, she could argue that her laughter came not from joy, but from pain -- the pain of someone who never belonged anywhere, who was never intimate with another human being. But though she never belonged to any of the cultures or gender roles she straddled, she yearned to belong to them, valued them all for their distinct strengths, and thus sympathized with them all. This let her reach out to opposing groups, find common ground between them, and work to bring them together.

Mary Kingsley demonstrates the importance of the eccentric, the misfit, to the process of cultural interaction, and perhaps to history in general. The dynamism in historical processes most often happens at the interfaces between groups -- nations, ethnic groups, genders, religions, classes. As in physics, when different potentials meet, energy flows between them. And who better to mediate that energy than those who reside in the interfaces? In its study of nations, races, genders and mass movements, history has perhaps overlooked the category of those who are uncategorizable, but who catalyze the interactions between those larger groups. In remedying that oversight, Mary Kingsley, triumphant misfit, is a good place to start.