Communications from the Field: Missionary Postcards from Africa

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Occasional Publication No. 5
COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE FIELD:
MISSIONARY POSTCARDS FROM AFRICA

Text from an exhibit at the
Yale Divinity School Library
July 1 - October 15, 1994

-with selected illustrations-

Edited by
Martha Lund Smalley

NEW HAVEN, CONNECTICUT

1994
MILLIONS OF THESE HAVE NEVER HEARD OF CHRIST.
What are YOU doing to make HIMknown?
Communications from the Field:
Missionary postcards from Africa

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The postcard phenomenon

The "Postcard Era" was a distinct historical phenomenon occurring in the years between the Spanish-American War and the First World War. Postcard collecting was widespread in Europe by the turn of the century, and the fad had caught on fully in the United States by 1905. At its height, postcard collecting was the subject of considerable satiric commentary, including the following by John Walker Harrington, published in American Magazine in March 1906:

Postal carditis and allied collecting manias are working havoc among the inhabitants of the United States. The germs of these maladies, brought to this country in the baggage of tourists and immigrants, escaped quarantine regulations, and were propagated with amazing rapidity.... There is now no hamlet so remote which has not succumbed to the ravages of the microbe postale universelle.... Unless such manifestations are checked, millions of persons of now normal lives and irreproachable habits will become victims of faddy degeneration of the brain....

The earliest picture postcards produced in Europe were not legal for mailing purposes but this had changed by the mid 1890s. The Post Card Dealer, a trade journal in the U.S., reported that 1,161,000,000 postcards were sent through the mail in Germany in 1906. Figures for the same year in the United States and Britain were 770,500,000 and 734,500,000 respectively. An explanation for these phenomenal statistics is not hard to
devise. Advances in printing technology had made high quality but relatively inexpensive postcards readily available to the public for the first time. Practical aspects of the late 19th and early 20th centuries further set the stage: interest in far off lands surged as improved transportation and communication increasingly facilitated travel to far corners of the earth; the world scene was largely free from wars. As noted in Ian McDonald's work *The Boer War in Postcards*:

The postcards were more than just pictures. They were a leap into the world of wider communication which has been such a feature of our own century. They suddenly made people more aware of the world around them so that the ordinary man in the street could buy a card that reflected his views and, if he wanted, embellish it with some thought of his own...¹

The function of missionary postcards

Most postcards depicting missionary scenes were not utilized for direct communication from missionaries in the field to supporters at home, nor were they acquired at the sites that they depict. Rather, the postcards were produced by mission sending agencies and distributed throughout Europe and America as a means of gaining publicity and garnering support. Messages on the backs of the cards indicate that people used them in their everyday life to exchange ordinary greetings and information. While the majority of the missionary postcards in the library's collection are blank, the handwritten message on Postcard 1 is typical of those that do exist. Addressed to Miss Etta Wolcott of Somers, Connecticut, April 28, 1911, it reads:

I found this card at "The World" exposition in Boston. Do you think we could teach a school like this? My aunt is about over the grip but she is miserable in some ways still, and is likely to be all her life. We have suffered with the cold but it is warm now. I have been in town to the stores only once. A.C.K.
The majority of the missionary postcards in the exhibit date from the 1910s through the 1920s, somewhat past the height of postcard mania, but coinciding with a post World War I surge in mission interest, which was reflected in increasing numbers of missionaries being sent overseas. The suitability of the postcard medium for publicizing mission activity was clear. Visual images of the missionaries, the people they sought to reach, and their physical context could not help but arouse interest among the public and generate the financial support crucial to the missionary movement.

Postcards utilized techniques of "marketing" or persuasion to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the agency producing them. Postcards produced by nondenominational and faith mission agencies, as opposed to mainline church missions agencies, often took a more pointed approach toward gathering support for their work. The device of invoking missionary icon David Livingstone in early 20th century appeals is illustrated by Postcards 2 & 3. As Andrew Ross of the University of Edinburgh has noted recently, Livingstone was an emblem for missionary endeavor in British and American culture; biographies of Livingstone headed the "best-seller list" of "the missionary biography industry that supplied the school and Sunday school prizes of late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain". Livingstone Postcard No. 2 (on publication cover) was produced by an organization called "Missionary Helps" in Liverpool. Small print indicates that this organization had postcards on 20 different subjects available for purchase.

The "missionary exhibitions" popular in the late 19th and early 20th century were convenient points of distribution for missionary postcards. The "Official Handbook to the Missionary Loan Exhibition and Sale of Work in the Town Hall, Oxford, from October 23rd to 28th, 1899" (Image 4) with its description of its "Courts" containing "specimens of Native Dress, Ornaments, Pictures, Weapons, Idols, and other images of interest,
illustrative of the daily life and customs, Religions, Arts and Industries of the different races in [various countries]..." (Image 5), illustrates the scope and flavor of such exhibitions. Such items, along with the postcards, provide a glimpse of how the missionary movement provided a window on non-Western cultures for the Western public. Postcard 6 portraying "a group of Lokele natives" is an example of a postcard specifically produced for distribution by the East Midland Baptist Association in connection with the Congo Exhibition held in Leicester, November 12-18, 1928.

While most missionary postcards were acquired in Europe or America, at least one in the library's collection was actually written and sent from the location pictured. The message on the back of Postcard 7 reads:

26 Oct 1916

Dear Ina,

I have been travelling about with my hubby for past 6 weeks & most of the time by motor car. Yesterday I visited & spent the day at Lovedale Mission. Mr. Kirkland would have enjoyed it, I am sure. It is a hive of activity....

The Lovedale Mission pictured in Postcard 7 was founded in 1841 by Presbyterians of Scotland. Its educational work gained much renown, as it drew students from a wide geographical area (Image 8). A publicity pamphlet issued by Lovedale in the 1940s (Image 9) states the institution's policy toward indigenous peoples and describes how Lovedale became a "tourist attraction":

[Lovedale believes] that for concord in Africa--as in a piano--both Black and White must play, and play in harmony.

As representing the latter view-point, few spots have come so much into the limelight as has Lovedale. Few are more frequently visited by tourists, insomuch that through Lovedale's gates a continual stream of men and women--a large number of them distinguished in
various walks of life--pass each year. By many, a tour in South Africa is reckoned incomplete without a call at this historic spot.

Portrayals of indigenous peoples

While many of the postcards in the library's collection seem designed primarily to publicize the producing mission agency's work, others serve to provide information about non-Western peoples and customs. Postcards of the Basel Mission work in Cameroon and Ghana (formerly the Gold Coast) are particularly interesting for their illustration of indigenous customs. (Postcards 10-16; see No. 10 below.)

The Evangelische Missionsgesellschaft in Basel was a major missionary force in West Africa and had an early interest in photographic depiction of its work. Established in 1815, the Basel Mission was an outgrowth of a
revival movement that began in Britain, influenced the continent, and led to the formation of pietistic circles. The Mission undertook notable educational and industrial work in Ghana (Gold Coast) and Cameroon, including the establishment of the first cocoa plantation in the Gold Coast.

Paul Jenkins, Archivist of the Basel Mission, has done considerable research on the early use of photography by that Mission. In his article "The Earliest Generation of Missionary Photographers in West Africa and the Portrayal of Indigenous People and Culture", Jenkins indicates that photographs were made by a Basel Mission missionary as early as 1857. As Jenkins notes, it is not surprising that mission agencies took an early interest in photography considering their aims and goals:

[Missionary societies] are in one sense communications systems linking people in the West with situations in the non-western world, and depending on the financial commitment of their supporters at home. A change in communications technology would be likely to interest at least some of them.

Postcards in the library's collection illustrate various points on a spectrum of photographic subjects described by Paul Jenkins, from sensitive portrayal of indigenous ways to glorification of the westernization of indigenous peoples. (See Postcards 17 and 22 below.)

Jenkins has noted how photographer Christian Hornberger of the North German Mission changed the focus of his work between 1863 and 1868:

...[Hornberger's] new images stress the dignity of people going about their daily occasions and their skilled and purposive activity....
His camera pans, away, as it were, from the small huddle of those who were thought to be reproducing in West Africa village life as it was practiced by the pious in Protestant German-speaking Europe. It focuses instead on people living in their traditional way
outside or on the edge of the mission stations. After 1868 the "momentum went out of Hornberger's photography" and sales of photographs by the Mission dropped dramatically. According to Jenkins:

Hornberger came to experience photography's value as an instrument which helped him to explore the cultural world around him. But the Mission's supporters had their own agenda. Frustrated in their wish to see the world in Africa in their own terms...they lost interest in pictorial images....

Postcard 17

Postcards, like the early mission photographs described by Jenkins, were a form of missionary propaganda. He concludes:

...[H]owever much care we invest in locating cases where
photography turns out to have helped to explore, experience and uncover new possibilities of relationship, its propaganda function cannot be left to one side. And so long as Europe and North America remain central in media and economic terms against the African periphery, the danger remains very great that the demands of propaganda, reflecting as they do the preconceptions of a European or North American public, will determine the images of Africa in circulation.

Postcard 22

Postcard 28 (following) is attributed to Friedrich Ramseyer of the Basel Mission. An album of Ramseyer photographs in the library's collection further demonstrates this missionary's exquisite craft.
Postcards documenting Protestant missions in Africa

As noted above, postcards had a particularly important role to play for the so-called faith missions, which depended on unsolicited donations for the continuation of their work. The Africa Inland Mission, for example, had a policy against solicitation of either workers or funds, but the Mission clearly needed to have its work made known to the public who could provide support; their postcards were designed to elicit a response, not just to inform. The Africa Inland Mission had its beginning in 1892 when Peter Cameron Scott felt called to establish a nondenominational mission that would operate on the principle of designated support, allowing donors to choose which workers and areas would receive their support. The Mission
began its work in Kenya Colony shortly after the turn of the century, spreading into the Congo by 1912, then Uganda, the Central African Republic and the Sudan. (See Postcard 31 on verso of title page.)

One of the earliest faith missions, The Regions Beyond Missionary Union, had its origins in the East London Institute for Home and Foreign Mission established by H. Grattan Guinness in 1878. Its first field of work was in the area of the Congo River, in central Africa. This mission was first known as the Livingstone Inland Mission, and after 1888, as the Congo Balolo Mission. When the Mission began it was thought that it could be completely self-supporting, funded by the commercial activities of a series of Christian colonies along the Congo River, but this scheme did not work out and the Mission remained dependent on funds from the home.

Postcards 32-36, issued by the Regions Beyond Missionary Union, are rather distinctive for their condescending captions. One, portraying a "mother's meeting on the Congo", reads: "Naturally, a Congo woman in her primitive condition does not attach much importance to the art of needlework, and the lady missionaries of the Congo Balolo Mission consider they have accomplished something when they can persuade her to learn sewing."

Postcards 37-41, of a homegrown variety, were prepared to publicize the work of Edward Hodgson and the Congo Evangelistic Mission, a Pentecostal mission established in 1915 by an assembly in Preston, England. Revivals in Great Britain in the early part of the century led to a separating out of Pentecostal assemblies from mainline denominations, which looked with disfavor on the Pentecostal bent toward faith healing, prophecy, and speaking in tongues. An avid missionary spirit was often present in Pentecostal churches.

The interest in visual presentation and the creative initiative
evidenced by the Hodgson postcards also reveal themselves in Edward Hodgson's narrative of his work in the Congo, *Fishing for Congo Fisher Folk*. Hodgson's writing is complemented by 80 pen and ink sketches done by his colleague W.F.P. Burton. (Images 42-43) These eye-catching sketches, Hodgson's colorful prose, and the personalized postcards combine to create the type of engaging publicity needed to support faith mission work. It was the Congo Evangelistic Mission's policy never to appeal for money, rather depending on God for support, but their postcards and publications could certainly be characterized as oblique appeals. (See Postcard 39 below.)

The "mainline" Protestant mission agencies in Britain and America also produced postcards documenting their work in Africa. Postcards 44-46 depict work in South Africa and Madagascar (The Malagasy Republic) by
the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. The SPG was the first Anglican missionary society, established in 1701.

Postcards 47-50 document work of the Universities' Mission to Central Africa. This mission traced its origins to David Livingstone's visits to the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge in 1857, when he challenged the students to carry on the work he had begun in Central Africa. Oxford and Cambridge, joined by the Universities of London and Durham, responded to Livingstone's appeal, but it was soon realized that the Mission should be an integral part of the Church of England's mission work, not an independent venture. Early efforts of the Mission to reach tribes in the neighborhood of Lake Nyasa were much hindered by tribal wars and the devastation of the slave trade, but at length it was successful in establishing work in Tanzania, Zambia, and Malawi. In 1965 the Universities' Mission merged with the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts to form the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.

The Church Missionary Society, representing the Evangelical wing of the Anglican Church, was established in 1799 as The Society for Missions in Africa and the East. Its work in Africa was concentrated in Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and the Sudan. Postcards show a caravan of CMS missionaries and depict the Bishops of the first fifty years of the Uganda Diocese.

Like the Church Missionary Society, the London Missionary Society was founded in the aftermath of the Evangelical Revival in Great Britain. Its founders were all Calvinist in their theology, but interdenominational in their church allegiance - Anglicans, Congregationalists, and Scottish Presbyterians. The first London Missionary Society missionaries entered South Africa in 1799. The Central Africa mission depicted by Postcards 53-54 was begun in 1887 when a station was opened at the southern end of Lake Tanganyika. Boats played an important role in mission work in
Central Africa because of the difficult overland terrain.

Postcards 55-56 of the American Baptist Foreign Mission were printed in Japan. Though the primary emphasis of the American Baptists was evangelism, the importance of schools and practical training was soon recognized. The Mission sought to provide impoverished converts with opportunities to become self-supporting members of the community.

Personalized postcards 57-60 publicize the work of Rev. and Mrs. John M. Springer, American Methodist missionaries in Central Africa. The message on Postcard 57, addressed to Pearl Van Wagoner of Valparaiso, Indiana reads:

The Mission Study Class will meet at the church Friday 4 p.m. Be sure to come.

Sincerely, Mrs. Putnam

Postcards documenting Catholic missions in Africa

The majority of the postcards in the library's collection document the extensive and complex web of Catholic missions in Africa. Protestant and Catholic mission agencies in Africa were antagonists, each with their own segment of home supporters. The differences between Protestant and Catholic mission work in Africa are too complex for discussion in this context, but the following passage from T.O. Beidelman's work Colonial Evangelism: A Socio-historical Study of an East African Mission at the Grassroots provides a glimpse of the contrasts, some of which are evident in the selection of postcards available at the library:

A C.M.S. missionary once confronted a Roman Catholic priest from Ilonga (just southeast of Ukaguru) with the fact that while the Catholics did have 440 converts (far more than the handful in the C.M.S. at that time), only 20 were literate. The Protestant claimed this reflected shoddy standards. The priest retorted that one did not
have to read to enter heaven. The C.M.S. could not conceive of conversion without literacy since they set such store on reading Scripture, especially the New Testament. Despite this, as the years passed, Roman Catholics developed impressive educational facilities while the C.M.S. fell behind. In large part, this change in Catholic policy toward literacy related to their quick response to the obvious demands for education set by colonial administrators, even when this might inhibit attention to evangelism. After 1912, the Church required three-year prebaptismal training (the C.M.S. never stipulated a time period) and in general considered conversion to be a gradual affair. The C.M.S., in contrast, demanded a radical alteration in Africans' lifestyle as a sign of grace and was unforgiving over serious moral lapses. Catholics set greater store in teaching the formal ideas and practices of the Church and expected occasional lapses which the institution of priestly confession was ordained to administer.... The Catholics were less involved in the open evangelism so dear to the C.M.S. but instead emphasized formal schooling.5

There have been two major periods of Catholic mission work in Africa. The first began with Portuguese exploration of the west coast of Africa in the late 15th century. Catholic orders, including the Capuchins, Dominicans, Jesuits, and Franciscans, sent hundreds of missionaries to African between 1470 and 1770. They built churches, sought the religious allegiance of tribal chiefs, and introduced the Christian sacraments, but by the end of the 18th century there were no worshipping congregations resulting from early Catholic mission activity, only the ruins of buildings. Geography, climate, and ramifications of the slave trade conspired to make Africa a closed continent for many years. Beginning in the mid 19th century, however, cultural and political forces combined to renew interest in the exploration and conversion of Africa. Map 61 illustrates the extent of Catholic missions in sub-Saharan Africa by 1964. The different agencies
involved were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CICM</td>
<td>Immaculate Heart of Mary Mission Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CM</td>
<td>Vincentians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMF</td>
<td>Claretians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSSp</td>
<td>Holy Ghost Fathers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OCarm</td>
<td>Carmelites</td>
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<tr>
<td>OFM</td>
<td>Franciscans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OFMCap</td>
<td>Capuchins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OMI</td>
<td>Oblates of Mary Immaculate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OP</td>
<td>Dominicans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPrem</td>
<td>Premonstratensians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OSA</td>
<td>Augustinians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OSB</td>
<td>Benedictines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OSFS</td>
<td>Oblates of St. Francis de Sales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAC</td>
<td>Pallottines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SJ</td>
<td>Jesuits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPF</td>
<td>Society for the Propagation of the Faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SVD</td>
<td>Society of the Divine Word</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WF</td>
<td>White Fathers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Postcards 62-66 depict various Catholic schools in Africa. (See Postcards 64 and 66 following.) Educational work was of primary importance to Catholic missions in Africa. As noted in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* article on mission work in Africa:

[missionaries] traveled through the bush country penetrating villages and parleying with native chieftains to win them to Christianity. This direct approach rarely succeeded. Africans scarcely felt a need to change their religion, especially when this involved changes in morals such as the renouncing of polygamy. Confronted with the reticence of adults, missionaries had to address themselves to youth, and organize schools, especially boarding schools...
Postcards 64 (above) & 66
Postcards in the library's collection document Catholic missions in a variety of countries:

**Basutoland:**
Postcard 67 pictures work of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, which in 1862 was the first Catholic group to enter Basutoland.

**Cameroon:**
Catholic missions in Cameroon were begun in 1890 by the German Pallottines. After World War I the German colony of Cameroon was divided between the English and the French. The Pallottine Fathers gave way to the Mill Hill Missionaries in the English sector and the Holy Ghost Fathers in the French sector. Postcard 68 depicts German Catholic mission work in Cameroon. Postcards 69-75 (see Postcard 70 below), issued by the Holy Ghost Fathers, focus somewhat more on indigenous customs than on mission activities.
The Holy Ghost Fathers have sent more missionaries to Africa than any other Catholic order. A more modern set of postcards from Cameroon (76-83) provide a different slant on Catholic missionaries there.

The Congo area:

Map 84 illustrates the complex apportionment of Catholic missions in the Belgian Congo, now Zaire. Postcards in the library's collection depict work of the Jesuits (85-95), Trappists (96), and missionaries of the Sacred Heart (97-98). (See Postcards 91 and 97 below.)

Postcard 91
Ethiopia:

The rejuvenation of Catholic missions in Ethiopia began in the 1840s. Postcards 99-100 depict work in Harar, a mission inaugurated by Bishop Taurin in 1880s. Postcard 99 of the leprosarium in Harar is unusual in the library's collection in that it has a printed appeal for funds on its reverse.

Ivory Coast:

Capuchins and Dominicans were the earliest Catholic missionaries in the Ivory Coast, beginning in 1637. A reestablishment of Catholic missions began in 1844 when the first priests of the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary arrived. The Prefecture Apostolic of the Ivory Coast was created in 1895. (Postcard 102)
Kenya:
Postcards 103-107 depict work of the Consolata Missionary Fathers, who entered Kenya in 1902.

Malagasy Republic (Madagascar):
A large number of Catholic religious orders have served in the Malagasy Republic. Postcard 108 (below) depicts a leper hospital at Marana.

Mozambique:
Catholic work began in Mozambique in the 16th century but by 1855 no missionaries were left. The Jesuits resumed work in 1881 and the Franciscans in 1898. There were 71, mostly Portuguese, missionaries in Mozambique by 1910. (Postcard 109)

Somalia:
The Trinitarians and Consolata Missionary Fathers had charge of work in southern Somalia from 1904 to 1930 when the Franciscans took over the work. Postcard 110 most likely dates from after 1930.
Togo:

As in the case of Cameroon, Catholic missions in Togo changed hands in the aftermath of World War I. Togo was a German protectorate from 1884 to 1919 and then under French supervision until 1960. Beginning in 1892 most Catholic missionaries in Togo were German-born members of the Society of the Divine Word. These missionaries were deported after World War I and replaced by missionaries of the African Missions Society and various other congregations. In this case, the German postcards (111-116) focus on indigenous phenomena while the French cards (117-125) primarily depict mission activities. (See Postcard 114 below and 122 following)
Uganda:

Postcard 126 (following) depicts the Martyrs of Uganda. Catholic missions in Uganda began around 1879, but the missionaries were forced to evacuate from 1882 to 1885 due to Moslem opposition. In the absence of the missionaries Catholicism thrived and the prime minister authorized a persecution that resulted in the martyrdom of 38 Catholics, 22 of whom have been canonized.
Postcard 127 depicts missionaries of The White Fathers (Society of Missionaries of Africa), a group founded in Algiers in 1868. In 1878 the first caravan of ten missionaries headed into the interior of the continent, one group bound for Uganda and the other for the western shore of Lake Tanganyika. Many years of hardship, disease and persecution followed but they at length succeeded in building up an indigenous church.

Conclusion

The exotic and homely images provided by the postcards described above give us an interesting glimpse into the Christian missionary enterprise, and its impact on society. The missionary postcards displayed in this exhibit and described by this booklet represent only a portion of
those held at the Yale Divinity School Library.

For additional information about the Yale Divinity School Library's missionary postcard collection, contact:

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New Haven, Connecticut 06511

Notes:

1. Ian McDonald *The Boer War in Postcards*, (Mbabane, Swaziland: Bok Books International, 1990), p. x.

2. "Historical Sketch of the SVM", introduction to the finding aid for the Archives of Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, compiled by Martha Lund Smalley (Yale Divinity School Library, Special Collections, Manuscript Group No. 42).


