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'PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF INTERPRETATION': THE LINK BETWEEN THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF MISSIONARY RECORDS AND THE UNDERUTILISATION OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC MISSIONARY ARCHIVES ON SOUTH-WESTERN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

This article explains the possible reasons behind, and offers possible solutions for, the underutilization of Roman Catholic missionary archives in constructing the history of South-western Zimbabwe. In this article, the underutilization of missionary archives is explained on the basis of the nature of the archives themselves, and the nature of the material found in these archives. The article links the purpose for which the material in missionary archives was gathered, the nature of the knowledge about Africans which was gathered and documented by missionaries to the underutilization of missionary archives. The article uses the author's experience with Roman Catholic missionary archives in South-western as a window through which to project into the general problem of underutilization of missionary archives in Zimbabwe. It recommends the visibility and accessibility of missionary archives in order to enhance access to this rich archival resource.

Key-words: Roman Catholic, Missionary archives, Underutilisation, Interpretation, Boundaries

Boundaries

While this article underscores the research value of Roman Catholic missionary archives in Zimbabwe, it is important to note that not all congregations of priests and nuns were diligent in documenting their activities and storing their records, and that not all congregations have archives. For those congregations that do have archives, some of them are far-flung, some, not well known, while a lot of material remains in private archives, which negatively impacts on accessibility. These archives are therefore erratic in their visibility, availability and richness. The areas where missionaries worked are not evenly covered, resulting in some mission stations appearing more in the records than others. In the context of South-western Zimbabwean, as shall be explained below, the liberation struggle impacted negatively on the survival of documents on the Activities of the Jesuit priests and Notre Dame Nuns who established the first Roman Catholic mission stations in South-western Zimbabwe. Since the priests and nuns left hurriedly, and managed to take only a few documents, records that survive on Empandeni and Embakwe missions, as well as on their outstations, are incomplete, calling for the need to push boundaries of interpretation.

At this juncture, it is necessary to clarify the author's perception of 'pushing the boundaries' of interpretation. Using the imagery of a country, its boundaries establish its geographical limits. Beyond those boundaries, one is on the outside. For a discipline such as history, boundaries may demarcate lines of good practice that must never be crossed. Boundaries separate things that historians may, or we may not, the demarcations between good and bad practices. Boundaries of our knowledge can mark the demarcation between what we know, and what we do not know.

Philips (2005:30) defines history as 'a coherent interpretation of the past based on remains of the past that survive into the present.' After identifying a research problem, a historian has two main responsibilities which are intertwined: collecting facts and interpreting them (Albert, 2005:288). This interpretation of historical facts is an on- going process which involves asking the question why things happened, putting together cause and effect, drawing conclusions and recording them into a meaningful narrative or a historical account of the past. All the while, a historian has to remain mindful of the biases inherent in the various sources. The accuracy of the historian's interpretation depends much on the records that survive, in the case of missionary archives, the manuscripts, the letters, the diaries, and the photographs.

While there are many definitions of interpretation, they all centre on the concepts of meaning and relationships. In history, classical interpretationists Dilthey, Croce, and Collingwood, despite their differences they all agree that interpretation has to do with meanings. It is through interpretation that we come to know meanings. They also agree that interpretation involves an element of re-enacting or re-living in one's imagination, the historical moment to be interpreted (DeVries 1983:253). White (1973:281) contends that the historical record is both too full and too sparse. On one hand, there can be more facts in the record than the historian can possibly include in his/her narrative representation of a given segment of the historical process. In this case, a necessary part of the interpretation is the exclusion of certain facts from his/her account as irrelevant to his/her narrative purpose. On the other hand, where the material is sparse, the historian must "interpret" his materials by filling in the gaps in his information on inferential or speculative grounds. This dovetails with White's (1973:281) contention that::

> a historical narrative is a mixture of 'adequately and inadequately explained events, a congeries of established and inferred facts, at once a representation that is an interpretation and an interpretation that passes for an explanation of the whole process mirrored in the narrative.

The material in Roman Catholic missionary archives on South-western Zimbabwe, by their incomplete nature, has a lot of gaps which the historian has to fill by pushing the boundaries of interpretation beyond what is available in the sources and triangulate by using oral sources to fill the gaps.

Boundaries of interpretation can become a constraint, holding the historian back, fencing her/him in and stopping her/him from exploring new horizons. The historian may need to surpass the boundaries in order to perceive what lies beyond. To the author, therefore, the concept of 'pushing boundaries' as far as historical interpretation is concerned implies stretching the accepted limits of historical interpretation, doing things differently, embracing new techniques and setting new limits and new standards in order to accommodate what is new. It means going beyond the norm in order to achieve more.

Pushing the boundaries of interpretation also assumes the need to interpret Roman Catholic missionary sources in a way that would not have been possible under 'normal' circumstances. This process requires specific skills of interpretation, such as of reading against the grain, which will ensure deep analysis, resulting in deep understanding of the message being communicated by the Roman Catholic missionary personnel who generated the material that we find in their archives. Reading against the grain is also a necessary skill when dealing with the nature of missionary archives in general.

The nature of the Roman Catholic missionary archives in Zimbabwe

Through the experience of using the Roman Catholic archives on South-western Zimbabwe, the author reached the conclusion that the archives are underutilised. Having used the archives over

a period of five years, the author would rarely meet historians using the archives. The archivist at the Notre Dame archives in Liverpool confessed that she had not assisted any academics wishing to use the archive.

The underutilization of missionary archives arises first and foremost from the nature of the archives themselves, and also from the nature of the material found in these archives. Generally, missionary records fall under the category of non-public or non-governmental archives. They make a great contribution to the general corpus of archival sources available about the history of Zimbabwe. These archives provide a rare and unique source of history for the last two centuries of African history. The missionary encounters with Africans were not limited to the pursuit of religious objectives. The generation of knowledge was also part of this interaction (Thornton, 2005:268). In order to facilitate the proselytization of the local population, the missionaries also learned local languages. In the case of Roman Catholic missionaries in South-western Zimbabwe, Fr Prestage for instance, spent the long time he waited before Lobengula granted him permission to build a school at Empandeni in 1886, learning the Ndebele language as well as observing and recording their local religious practices and customs. His diary, kept in the Jesuit Archives in Harare, is an invaluable source of the history of the Ndebele kingdom, complementing records left behind by hunters and travellers. However, one can expect that some of the meanings in these records would be 'lost in translation', so to speak. For instance, the researcher had the experience of reading pieces of writing that had been written by the first students at Empandeni mission, the first Roman Catholic mission in Zimbabwe. This is in the form of five letters written by boys and girls who were pupils between 1901 and 1903. The Notre Dame nuns made the pupils write letters to their Mother General in Namur, Belgium as proof of their achievements in education. These were written in Ndebele. One of the Notre Dame nuns translated these letters into English, and sent them to their superior, then in Holland. The author, having knowledge of the Ndebele language, was able to pick out that the translated versions relayed a different meaning from the original letters, which were written in Ndebele. A reader without knowledge of the Ndebele language would not be able to pick out this difference, as well as the subtleness and variety of the messages that the pupils were conveying in their letters.

The Roman Catholic missionary records, with information on Zimbabwe, are housed in a variety of archives. The pioneering Jesuit priests were particularly active in generating information, and among the Roman Catholic congregations of priests, they have the most valuable collection of texts housed in their Archives at Prestage House, Mount Pleasant, in Harare. The Jesuits published some of their writings in the Zambezi Mission Record (ZMR), a quarterly missionary journal, edited by a Jesuit priest, which, though primarily aimed at reaching out to the missionary donors in Europe, illustrates how the Roman Catholic faith engaged with specific people, and how this faith was grounded in the histories of these people. It runs from 1898 to 1934, after which another Jesuit publication, The Shield takes over. Other congregations which were active in Matabeleland, mainly the Mariannhill priests, who took over the running of the Bulawayo Archdiocese from the Jesuits, regarded themselves as more of tradesmen than academics.

Although both the ZMR and The Shield are published journals, the material in them is primary because the nuns and priests on the ground would contribute the articles based on their direct observations and interaction with the African people. The information covered shows a variety in the missionaries' interests, including the landscape, flora and fauna of the surroundings of the mission stations, the African people's ways of life, their languages, social, religious and political practices. The missionaries were expected to provide an account of their activities, and the ZMR was an avenue through which these activities could reach a wide European readership. The writing and publishing of information on a wide range of topics is what Walls (1966:9) refers to

as the 'missionary as scholar' tradition', whereby missionaries were faced with situations that jump-started scholarly instincts in them, turning them into linguists, anthropologists (albeit armature) and more. The excerpts from the nuns' diaries and letters were published in the ZMR give a hint of the feminine perspective in a largely men's publication.

The Notre Dame nuns accompanied the Jesuits when they came back to Empandeni in1898, after having been forced to leave during the turbulent years of concession seeking and occupation. They worked at Empandeni from 1898 to 1923, and then moved to nearby Embakwe mission, and the Precious Blood nuns took over at Empandeni. The Notre Dame nuns have an archive in Liverpool, England, from where the majority of the pioneering nuns came. These archives are looked after by a professional archivist who is in charge of collecting and preserving the documents. As a show of concern over the physical state of some of the collections, the archivist ensures that readers use gloves when handling the material, which can be described as both vulnerable and endangered, all in an effort to ensure their posterity. Engaging a professional archivist has enabled the Notre Dame nuns to overcome a challenge which many Roman Catholic congregations face, that of not taking the collection and preservation of documents pertaining to their past activities seriously. When the author used the archives, they were in the process of being professionally classified, making it easier for users to determine what the documents actually contain.

While the Notre Dame archives are erratic in their coverage, they provide rich insights on the areas that they do cover. One problem with these archives is that areas in south-western Zimbabwe where the Notre Dame nuns worked are not evenly covered. For example, there is much more written about Empandeni and Embakwe missions than the out stations of Umkhaya, Emhlotshana, Silima and Kwite that surrounded the two missions. Also, less is written about other smaller missions that were established in south-western Zimbabwe. Even about Empandeni and Embakwe, the missionaries wrote what they thought would be interesting, or relevant to the European readership and their friends, relatives and donors. The archives are particularly rich on the early years of the establishment of Empandeni and Embakwe. This is probably because of poor staffing in the early years, which made documentation a necessity. The missionaries tended to document less with the passage of time. In the early years, the nuns recorded as much as they could, from the school, to the visits into the community, the picnics and excursions they had with the pupils, what they taught the pupils and what they learnt from them. The record therefore gets scanty from the early 1920s. Patches of information are missing, with some time periods being thinly covered. For the Notre Dame archives, this also has much to do with the hurried manner in which the nuns left Embakwe mission in 1977, at the peak of Zimbabwe's liberation struggle. In their haste, they managed to carry only a few of their documents.

The Notre Dame archives have some fairly rich private collections, including letters belonging to one of the longest-serving Notre Dame nuns at Embakwe, Sr. Ambrose. These letters were written to members of her family, who kept them. Upon her death Sr. Ambrose's close relatives, having no direct connection to the letters, brought the letters to the Notre Dame Convent, even before it had the archive. From these letters, one can glean the personal experiences of Sr. Ambrose and her interaction with the African people and the pupils she taught. There are also the Embakwe and Empandeni annals, which narrate the progress of evangelisation at the two mission stations.

One of the first Notre Dame nuns to go to Empandeni, Sr. Josephine Bullen, kept a detailed diary that has gone down in history as The Journal. In it, Sr. Josephine reconstructs the interaction between the nuns and the African communities. The Journal, which has since been

published, presents a cultural dialogue between the nuns and the African population in general, and more precisely with the girls and women within the mission setting as well as the African communities surrounding the mission. Images of African girls and women, and the nuns' assumptions about African women are some of the issues encoded in the journal. Sr. Josephine also records her interest in the environment, and uses her artistic skills to illustrate the flora and fauna of the mission's environs. Some individuals, feature repeatedly in the documents. For example Sikhawulaphi Khumalo, a niece of the great king Lobengula, who lived with the nuns at Empandeni Mission, attracted detailed comments from both the nuns and the priests in their writings. They recorded some of Sikhawulaphi's own verbatim statements, allowing the reader to glean at her personal responses to western style education and Christianity. These few glimpses are precious, given the fact that missionary sources generally muffle the African voices.

The Dominican nuns, who accompanied the Jesuits into Mashonaland in 1890 and then into Matabeleland in 1893, were not adept at keeping records as the Notre Dames and the Jesuits were. Even their Mother House in Sussex, England, does not have any documents pertaining to their history. A Coloured nun, Sr. Admirabilis Piendl, who was a student teacher at Hillside Teachers' College in 1969, wrote a dissertation on the history of the Dominicans in Bulawayo, used school records and magazines which the school no longer has. These records were simply left to disappear without any systematic archiving. The Dominican nuns do not have an archive as such, but whatever material they have is still in the process of being compiled and is in the hands of one of the nuns who is not a professional archivist in some village in Germany, making it inaccessible to most Zimbabwean historians based in Zimbabwe. The Bulawayo Dominican School magazine can be found at the Zimbabwe National Archives in Harare. The Dominicans are an example of a congregation that has considered the aspect of collecting and archiving documents about their activities as peripheral to their core business.

The African congregations of nuns that came into existence as from the 1950's also have not made efforts to keep any material pertaining to their history in any systematic way. However, one congregation, the Anchillae Mariae Reginae (AMR) which is based in Parklands Bulawayo, has a nun who realised the need to capture the history of the congregation. She interviewed the founder members of this congregation and wrote the information on pieces of paper. She also made it a point to keep anything written about the congregation, but not in any systematic way.

What are the boundaries or limitations to accessing these archives and how can they be overcome?

For the historian intending to utilise missionary archives, pushing boundaries begins at the stage of gathering information. The users of missionary archives may be divided into primary and secondary. The primary users are those who generated them, while the secondary users are individuals, mostly secular, outside the organisation that generated them. Most missionary sources have not been used as extensively as they might be. In part, this is due to the limited scope of much of the missionary correspondence, and the arduous task of extracting what the secular historian would consider relevant from the writings of individuals whose dominant concerns were theological. The most frequent users of the mission archives are missionaries themselves. The vast archives which the missionaries left have been neglected by all but a handful of secondary users, academics, mainly those scholars specializing in Church and mission histories. The secular scholars seem to shun missionary archives. The most frequent users are people, mostly from Liverpool, who come to the archive in search of information about their relatives who were nuns. Of late, people in the United Kingdom have been fascinated with their family history and making family trees, and after hearing that they had a female relation who was a pioneer nun in some African country, they visit the archives to find out more. Most of the

Notre Dame nuns who came to Zimbabwe were from Liverpool. The Notre Dame archives are an under-utilised treasure trove for those intending to study institutional, social, political and women's histories of south-western Zimbabwe particularly for the pre-colonial and colonial periods.

One boundary which results in the underutilisation of missionary sources is accessibility. Access is the archival term for authority to obtain information from or perform research in archival materials. On physical accessibility, one major problem with the missionary archives is that they are far-flung. The Notre Dame archives in Liverpool epitomised this category. The fact that they house information on Zimbabwe means that most of the secular scholars who may want to use them are Zimbabweans, or those with a specific interest in Zimbabwe. The location of the Notre Dame archives in Liverpool explains why they are underutilised by most Zimbabwean scholars based in Zimbabwe because using the archives has implications on funding which they may not have access to. There is also general invisibility and lack of information concerning these holdings and their availability to scholars. The Notre Dame congregation in Zimbabwe are not even aware of the existence of such an archive. This makes locating the archives a major challenge to scholars. While it is true that researchers should leave no stone unturned in their quest for sources, the archives could be made more visible in order to improve access to the valuable information they hold.

The Jesuit archives, though located in Mount Pleasant, Harare, are also generally underutilised by scholars because of their invisibility. Understandably, the archives are private, but one may live in Mount Pleasant and not be aware that the archives exist. Access to these archives is by appointment. At the Jesuit archives, for postgraduate researchers, a verbal conversation with the priest in charge on the topic under study is usually sufficient. Undergraduate students need to be recommended by their supervisor or a senior researcher known to the priest in charge to support their requests. Authorisation to use the archives depends on the availability of the priest in charge of the archives, and the process of obtaining this authorisation can be long. However, once authorisation has been granted, the priest inn charge is able to direct the researcher to the material relevant to their topic. At the Liverpool archives, the archivist needs a letter from the researcher and, in the case of students, a letter of recommendation from the supervisor as well. Once the archivist or priest in charge is satisfied that all is in order, arrangements can be made for the searcher to visit the archives. In both archives, copies of the documents can be made upon request and for a fee, subject to the preservation and copyright regulations. Researchers can also seek permission to scan the documents using their smart phones, tablets or ipads. At the Jesuit archives in Harare, priests in charge of the archives tend to be those who are no longer very active due to age or ill heath, which means that the archives are often not accessible due to illness on the part of the archivist.

The Mirrianhill Fathers, based in Bulawayo's Queens Park suburb clearly stated that while they had some material, they were not scholars like the Jesuits, and did not have a systematic way of storing the little information they had. They claimed that they were workmen whose main task was to build mission stations and schools, while the Jesuits were the scholars. This underscores another possible reason for the under use of Roman Catholic missionary archives, that they do not share the same level of usefulness to the historian.

Another boundary that needs to be pushed when using Roman Catholic missionary archives is in line with what is referred to as instant understanding. In both the Jesuit and the Notre Dame archives, the early documents, which tend to be the richest of the sources, are available in hand written form. This puts a tremendous strain on the researcher because some handwriting is illegible. In some of the old documents, there is often the problem of cross writing, where

another layer of writing, mostly from the next page, appears on a document. The Notre Dame archives provide magnifying glasses, but these do not always make the task of reading the documents easier. This problem may be solved by having the original sources microfilmed and digitised. This will make the archives more user-friendly.

Roman Catholic missionary records also imposed boundaries by being too critical of African culture and religions. The underutilisation of missionary archives may partly be due negative attitudes towards what is written about Africans in the documents contained in missionary archives. The primary reason why missionaries recorded information on African culture and history is that they needed it for purposes of proselytising Africans. Though missionaries used the information they wrote for purposes of expanding Christianity, they looked at Africans in a more investigative way than the travellers and traders (Falola, 2005:278). They needed to understand the religion, cultures and way of life of the non-Western world that they hoped to proselytise, so they generated a vast body of knowledge for both explicitly strategic reasons and as part of a belief in a wider moral duty to "know" the world.

When it comes to portrayals of Africa in negative and patronizing manner, missionary writings are no better than those of traders, travellers and hunters, whose accounts mesmerised the European readership and ensured a steady supply of funding. In their records, missionaries portrayed African social and political organizations as primitive, and they repeatedly measured African traditions against Western cultural standards, often finding them wanting. Missionaries came with presumptions of superiority, and sought evidence to prove this by presenting African culture in the 'unkindest manner, seeing barbarism instead of creativity, decadence instead of coherence' (Falola, 2005:266). In these records, Africans are often portrayed as the 'abnormal other' (Falola 2005:279).

The hostility of missionaries to African religions in south-western Zimbabwe is illustrated by an incident recorded in the Zambezi mission record, where there was a confrontation between the Jesuit priests and women practicing the shumba, cult at Empandeni. The shumba cult was dominated by women and practised among the Kalanga people who lived around Empandeni mission. Following a tip-off by a male African catechist that the shumba intended to have a dance which the priests described as 'an activity in honour of the devil' (Zambezi Mission Record 3/45, July, 1909: 588), Fr. Beihler and Fr. Hartman set out to 'drive the devil out of the old women' (Zambezi Mission Record 4/52, 1911:229). They entered the hut where the chief shumba was, and using the sjamboks the priests 'hammered all the legs they could get' (Zambezi Mission Record 4/52, 1911). However, this hostility, which, as illustrated above, included physical violence, did not stop the missionaries from making detailed descriptions (Philips 2005: 11).

In missionary records, as was the case in other European writings, Africans are characterised as lacking in morality and intelligence, being perpetually childlike, demonic, and practicing outlandish, barbaric customs. This is evident in the writings of priests and nuns alike. While the nuns' accounts tend to give us more on the social history of the African people they encountered, both male and female missionary writers were deeply racist, and equally contributed to the shaping of imperialist attitudes which made colonisation possible. Female missionary writers' imperialist attitudes are just as entrenched as those of their male counterparts. The nuns, working with children as teachers, did not hesitate to call even the children whom they were teaching, 'little savages', while portraying themselves as the long suffering saint-like human beings. As a result of this racism, missionary archives, at face value, may not present a true reflection of Africa.

The missionary letters to their relatives back in Europe also carried negative reports and portrayals of Africa and Africans, feeding into the Western thinking of the day that colonisation of the African was the moral duty of Europeans, that it was the "White man's burden," in Rudyard Kipling's phrase, to dominate Africans until they could be sufficiently civilized to take their place in the world. They contributed greatly into the myth of Africa as the "Dark Continent" and the image of the deprived, depraved African native that had taken hold of the Western consciousness. The European missionaries and colonial officials often imposed their own cultural framework on African societies and reached conclusions that fascinated them and suited their concerns (Falola 2005:266-279).

Sometimes the missionary sources, with all their faults, are all the written sources the historians have, therefore calling for the need to 'push the boundaries of interpretation'. While navigating through these sources, one has to be mindful of the biases of the source and aim to minimise them by supplementing them with sources with opposite motivations. The historian also has to 'read against the grain'. Reading against the grain should enable the historian to resist the power of the Eurocentric interpretations. Critically analysing the underlying assumptions in missionary sources should bring out meanings different from those intended by the writers, different from the Eurocentric interpretations. Missionary sources also need to be triangulated with other sources such as written sources from other archives and interviews where applicable.

Another problem with missionary sources which is linked to their underutilisation is that the history of Africans is presented from the view of missionaries, making access to the African voices a big challenge. There is a link between the misrepresentations of Africans in general, to the under-representation of African voices in missionary sources. Missionary archives, especially for the early period, do not give Africans a voice. Missionaries speak on behalf of the Africans. The historian can only solve the problem of the lop-sided nature of missionary sources by pushing the boundaries of interpretation of these texts beyond the obvious construction of the intentions and cultural assumptions of the authors. This has also been referred to as reading 'between the lines and against its totalising classifications' (Pratten 2002:21). This means reading material from these archives for its 'logic, for its densities and distributions' (Pratten 2002:21), for its 'constituencies of information, omission, and mistakes along the archival grain' (Stoler 2002:100).

In conclusion, when using missionary records, one need not be fenced in the attitudes of missionaries towards Africans that are apparent in those records. One needs to push those boundaries. Understandably, missionary archives are private, and are regulated by guidelines which are aimed at regulating and controlling their usage. However, even within these parameters, missionary archives could be made more access friendly, so as to enable wider usage by secondary users. The authorities who manage missionary archives need to make their archives more visible, and to relax the conditions that currently make it difficult for students and experienced historians to access their archives so as to improve access to the information they hold. Sibhidhla-Saphetha (2013:74) refers to archival material as being, in essence, 'conversation with posterity'. While it is prudent for the missionaries to ensure the posterity of their documents, it is equally important that they allow researchers from all walks of life are able to engage with that posterity at an academic level by loosening the boundaries that govern their usage.

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