

# PROBLEMS OF REDACTION, PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION OF SOURCES IN AFRICA TODAY

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## Introduction

When Fr. Gianni Rolandi asked me in May of this year to give a paper for your seminar on *Salesian History and Identity: Production, Conservation and Utilisation of the Sources* organised by ACSSA (Associazione dei Cultori di Storia Salesiana) I was reluctant to accept this invitation. I am not an archivist by profession, but a church historian with a keen interest in African mission/church history. As such I have some experience of research in the archives in Europe and Africa in connection with the topics of my books, which are focusing on mission/church history in East Africa. But in spite of being not an expert in archive studies I try to give you some insights on the topic on which you want to concentrate in this seminar.

Africa is considered for a long time in the perception of people in the West as the “Dark Continent”. Because there were no written sources, Hegel thought that Africa had no past<sup>1</sup>. But modern historical research has unearthed quite a lot of written sources that were buried in the archives of former colonial powers that conquered Africa, and religious societies that evangelised in Africa. Also written sources were discovered in Africa itself especially in the Islamised part of it. Moreover modern historiography is using all kinds of auxiliary sciences to reconstruct the past of Africa. The past of Africa gets more and more known and uncovered. The African past is opening up to the gaze of the modern researcher. In this paper I concentrate on the modern time in the history of Africa, that is the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when Africa was colonized and evangelised. In this context the question can be asked whether for writing African mission/church history the same types of sources as those for European church history are used. And whether or not there are different types of sources, which are these sources?

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<sup>1</sup> Georg W. F. HEGEL, *The Philosophy of History*. Translated by J. Sibree. New York, 1966, pp. 91, 93, 99 and 103.

In general it can be said that historical sources are found in archives. But it is an understatement to say that archives in Africa have a high priority for ecclesiastical and religious institutions. Even in Europe until recently the state of archives especially with religious societies was sometimes very poor. They had much more important things to do than to look after archives: to participate actively one way or the other in the apostolate. That was their priority and nobody really cared about the archives. But things have changed there. With the process of ageing of the majority of their members congregations started to take much more interest in their past and with that in their archives. More and more a trend is emerging that religious societies commission researchers from outside to study their past and put in writing the history of their congregations or provinces. When a congregation or a province of a congregation becomes older and the numbers of members diminish significantly, we see as it were an automatic reflex of that religious society to give more attention to the past in order to reclaim its history and identity in a fast changing society.

In this connexion the question can be asked whether there is much difference between the situation in Europe in regard to the archives of religious societies and the one in Africa. Is the state of the archives of religious societies in Africa a reflection of what has happened in Europe with these archives? Are the same factors at work in Africa or have to be considered also other factors that are typical for the African continent and contribute to the specific situation of archive collections in this continent?

My paper is divided in two parts. In the first part I consider the problems of redaction of the sources in Africa. I will treat the different types of sources, which are available and can be made available, that is to say created, in order to write mission/church history in Africa. Moreover their relationship will be treated. Finally I deal with multimedia material. In the second part I will pay attention to the state of the archives in Kenya in particular and Africa in general. Moreover the problems they are facing will be treated. Finally I try to give some solutions for these.

## **1. Documentary and other sources in Africa**

In general we can say that there is not much difference between the types of sources for writing church history in Europe and the ones used on the African continent, although perhaps a difference in emphasis on a certain type of sources can be noted. On the whole in Europe there is an abundance of documentary or written sources, while these are not so overwhelmingly available in Africa. The reason for this is that in Africa the Church was until recently not well established. Missionaries are people who are on the move. They are easily transferred to another mission post every few years. While they are moving from one place to another many of their personal documents get lost. Moreover they are not very much interested in administrative chores. They have no time to write. Very few write in fact. There were complaints of families that they did

not get letters from their brother or sister who was doing missionary work in Africa. The priority of missionaries was somewhere else. Moreover the diocesan curia was small and not very much interested in the history of the missionary church. The main focus of the whole missionary apparatus was to proclaim the good news to the heathen. Everything that was done was done in service of the evangelisation of the local people. Administrative work that did not contribute directly to this purpose was not considered to be very important. Nobody was really interested in it. Therefore paperwork was neglected. Not many archivalia were produced. It is undeniable that most missionaries show a certain indifference to the preservation of historic documents and do not realise their value.

### 1.1. *Printed texts*

Although there are perhaps not so many written sources in Africa available for the writing of mission/church history, it is important to know which are these sources. As an example taken from practice, I take my recently published book *Father Michael Witte of Kabaa High School. Missionary and Educationalist. A Study in Mission Strategy*, Nairobi (Paulines Publications Africa) 2011. It is a book about a Holy Ghost Father who founded the first Catholic High School in Kenya against all odds in 1930, that is in the heydays of the colonial time and in a period that the missionary Church was fast expanding and used the school as a missionary method. Which are the documentary sources I use in this book? First of all there are the printed texts. They are the official internal periodicals of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost, issued by the Generalate or by a specific province. In these are found official acts of the administration, letters of appointment, progress reports of a specific mission territory and mission stations, necrologies, news about the growth and internal life of the seminaries, a list of the recent publications of the members etc. Besides, there are the periodicals of a certain province meant for the outside world. These are used to keep in contact with family, friends, benefactors and sympathisers. In other words to create a network of contacts for the purpose of attracting vocations and financial support. In the past many small articles and letters of missionaries were published in these. Father Witte used this tool of communication to the full extent. He wrote in the Spiritan provincial periodicals of Holland, Belgium, Ireland, France and Germany. Moreover there are some letters of his published in local newspapers at home. Further he wrote a small booklet. A very useful publication in this context is: R. Streit and J. Dindinger, *Bibliotheca missionum*, vol. 17: *Afrikanische Missionsliteratur, 1700-1899*; vol. 18: *Afrikanische Missionsliteratur, 1880-1909*; vol. 19-20: *Afrikanische Missionsliteratur, 1910-1940*, Freiburg (Herder) 1952-1954. From every missionary who has worked in Africa in the period covered in this publication one can find a bibliography. It is a very helpful instrument when one wants to write about a specific missionary. For the more recent time an indispensable tool for mission literature in general as well as for articles written by a specific

missionary is: *Bibliografia missionaria*, funded by P. Giovanni Rommerskirchen, continued by P. Willi Henkel, with the help of P. Giuseppe Metzler, Rome 1(1933).

### 1.2. *Archival sources*

In addition to these printed texts I used archival sources for the above-mentioned book. Very important among these were Fr. Witte's diary, his letters to the General Superior, to his Provincial Superior, to his Bishops and his benefactors. It was known that he had many benefactors and after his death they were collected as being useful for the writing of his biography, which a confrere who was his friend wanted to do. Moreover there are the letters of his Bishops and local Religious Superiors to the Superior General. Then there are the journals and visitors books of the mission stations where he had worked. Further there are the reports of the chapters of the local religious circumscription, to which he belonged, reports of the visitations by representatives of the Generalate, and reports of the Council of the Ordinaries of the Catholic Missions in Kenya. Also letters and reports of the colonial officers from the National Archives are used in order to see how mission and colonial government are interacting in the field of education, which was the focal point in my book on Fr. Witte.

### 1.3. *Oral sources*

Next to documentary sources I have used oral sources in the above-mentioned book, although to a very small extent. In general when documentary sources are few, oral sources are very important and have to play a major role in historiography. Many times this is the case in Africa. Therefore oral sources are vital for African mission/church history. Even in European church history oral sources can be the main sources when religious groups of people are investigated that are situated very low on the hierarchical ladder and do not have the privilege of the written word to their disposal.

The term oral history can cause confusion. It could suggest that it is a matter of a distinct field of study, a branch of historiography, similar to other branches such as economic history, social history and church history. But this is not the case. Oral history is about a method, a technique to open up oral sources. The oral history method can be described as "the collecting of any individual's spoken memories of his life, of people he has known and events he has witnessed or participated in"<sup>2</sup>. These spoken memories are recorded on a magnetic tape or in another electronic way in an interview. They are personal memories in contradistinction to oral traditions, which play an important role in unlettered oral societies. There it concerns traditions "which no longer exist. They are handed on

<sup>2</sup> James HOOPES, *Oral History. An Introduction for Students*. Chapel Hill, 1980, p. 7.

from mouth to mouth for a period that extends beyond the lifetime of the informants<sup>3</sup>.

The oral history method provides the researcher with an instrument by which he has a big advantage over a colleague who relies only on documentary sources. As interviewer, the researcher can participate actively in the creation, the production of the oral document and so try to obtain the needed information. The active part taken by the researcher can, of course, have the disadvantage that, unless he is on his guard against his own prejudices, he might consciously or unconsciously construct an oral document according to his own desires.

#### 1.4. *Relationship between oral and written sources*

When documentary and oral sources are used in historical research, questions arise concerning the relationship between these sources. In many cases oral sources are a priori assumed to be inferior to the written, as regards both quality and reliability. The oral source is used only for supplementary or complementary information. This happens when incidental interviews are used to obtain complementary or more exact information, whereas the whole research is based chiefly on written sources. Of course there is nothing wrong with that. But it is also possible to proceed from the standpoint that both kinds of sources are indispensable and inseparably linked with one another. Each source, whether written or oral, has its varying uses in different situations. In one context the oral source is seen to be the main source, whereas in another situation it is supplementary or complementary to documentary sources. The same applies to the written source. Each has its indispensable function in clarifying and interpreting a complex historical event. Whether an oral source is used as main source or as complementary depends, therefore, not on its being an oral source in itself, but on the usefulness in a research.

In order to test the reliability of the oral sources, internal and external validation is used. Internal validation has to do with inner logic and consistency. It is not about having mixed or contradictory feelings about a certain event, since that is quite human and can well be sincere and reliable. External validation has to do with a cross check with other sources. Other sources can be the other available oral sources, written sources, and background literature<sup>4</sup>.

Written sources are very important when using oral sources. Without them, oral sources lose much of their value and reliability and cannot be externally validated. They then often remain vague, separated from the historical, social and religious context, and have worth only as an indication of the atmosphere. That is why working with the oral history method in areas where no, or scarcely any, written sources are available, is not without dangers. It is necessary to use oral sources as far as possible in combination with written ones.

<sup>3</sup> Jan VANSINA, *Oral Tradition as History*. London, 1985, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> Paul THOMPSON, *The Voice of the Past. Oral History*. Oxford, 1982, p. 210.

In the Netherlands an oral history project was initiated in 1976, whereby 901 missionaries were interviewed to collect oral sources for the documentation of the work of Dutch missionaries in Africa, America, Scandinavia, Asia and Oceania. So an important source for the study of the contribution of Dutch missionaries to the worldwide evangelisation of the Church is made available. Such a project could be established also by a congregation in order to preserve the missionary work of their members in Africa in general or in a specific country in particular<sup>5</sup>.

### 1.5. *Multimedia material*

Under multimedia material is usually understood photographs<sup>6</sup>, slides, audiotapes, cassettes, films, videocassettes, computer discs, CDs, DVDs etc. All multimedia material can be an important source for African mission/church history. I used audiotapes for some of my studies which were part of the above mentioned oral history project on Dutch missionaries<sup>7</sup>. I myself did not hold the interviews. They were already done by specially trained interviewers and recorded on tapes which were stored at the Catholic Documentation Centre of the Radboud University in Nijmegen. These oral sources were not designed exclusively in view of my investigation. Before they could be used they had to be transcribed. Transcription is in fact a kind of translation, a transfer from one medium to another, from speech to writing, in which as much as possible of the original meaning must be preserved. It is a very tedious work that has to be done. It is impossible to transpose the full riches of the spoken word on to paper. So the spoken word suffers a certain diminishment.

At the moment there are quite a lot of studies that use photographs as a source of history. Photographs are as it were congealed moments of the past. Therefore they can show sometimes much better than a documentary source a certain reality or a historical event. But photographs and other audiovisual material always need some kind of documentation in order to place it in a historical context.

## 2. Archives in Africa

Archives are depositories where documentary and other sources are stored. They perform different tasks. In addition to keeping the various sources they

<sup>5</sup> Arnulf CAMPS – Vefie POELS – Jan WILLEMSSEN, *Dutch Missionary Activities. An oral history project, 1976-1988*. Nijmegen, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Émilie GANGNAT, “*Une histoire de la photographie missionnaire*”, in “*Histoire et Missions Chrétiennes*” 17 (2011) 160-166. Cf D. MORGAN, *The Sacred Gaze. Religious visual culture in theory and practice*. Berkely, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Albert DE JONG, *De missionaire opleiding van Nederlandse missionarissen*. Kampen, 1995; ID., *Mission and Politics in Eastern Africa. Dutch Missionaries and African Nationalism in Kenya, Tanzania and Malawi 1945-1965*. Nairobi, 2000; ID., *The Challenge of Vatican II in East Africa*. Nairobi, 2004.

are concerned with the preservation of the originals themselves against decay by means of deacidification, treatment of ink corrosion, small repairs and acid-free wrappings and climatised storage. Another task of the archives is the conservation of sources, which is also called conversion. Conversion is the transferring of the content of the threatened material to another storage medium. This can be achieved by means of microfilming and/or digitisation. A fourth task is to make an inventory and catalogue of the archival records so that easy access is available for anyone who looks for certain sources. A fifth task is to have a (reading) room set aside for visitors who are consulting the records. A competent archivist should assist them with this. A sixth point is that archives play an important role in the handing down of the history of an institution<sup>8</sup>. A last point especially for archives of the Church and religious institutes is that they have a pastoral function and significance. They should care for conserving the memory of many and different types of pastoral activities through the archival documents so that they can be used in actual pastoral efforts and the work of new evangelisation<sup>9</sup>. Against this background of how archives should ideally function, I like to say a few words about the archives of missionary congregations in Europe, which I visited, before I want to discuss the situation of the archives in Africa.

### *2.1. Archives of missionary congregations in Holland*

When I studied for my Master degree in church history at the Radboud University in Nijmegen in the beginning of the 1970s no archive of the Holy Ghost Fathers in Holland existed. All the archivalia were put at random in an empty room. To find something valuable for my thesis I started at the beginning, the first pile of papers and ended up with the last heap of papers. There was no order. It was a nightmare to find something one was looking for. It was necessary to go through all the papers in the room. It goes without saying that there was no archivist. In the 1980s there was an archivist who worked half time and started to make some order in the chaos. But when I visited in the 1980s also other archives of missionary congregations for doing research for my doctorate, I found some of them well ordered with a full time archivist. Others were not so well ordered. In these cases there was not a full time archivist, but the secretary of the provincial or a vice-provincial was the archivist. So it was not their main task. And the result was that the archives were somehow neglected. The archives in question were in fact completely unprepared for visitors and those in charge of them expressed a certain amount of astonishment at our being interested in mission history. I am talking here about the provincial archives

<sup>8</sup> Eugenius Hubertus BARY, “*Behoud en beheer van kerkelijke archieven: taak voor de kerk?*,” in “*Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Kerkgeschiedenis*” 1 (2006) 23-30.

<sup>9</sup> PONTIFICAL COMMISSION FOR THE CULTURAL PATRIMONY OF THE CHURCH, *The Pastoral Function of Church Archives*. Vatican City 2 February 1997, [www.Vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_commissions/pcchc/documents/rc\\_com\\_pcchc\\_19970202\\_arhivi-ecclesiastici\\_en.html](http://www.Vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_commissions/pcchc/documents/rc_com_pcchc_19970202_arhivi-ecclesiastici_en.html).

of missionary congregations, not about the general archives of these congregations in Rome or Paris, which are well ordered and equipped to receive visiting researchers.

## 2.2. *Archives in Kenya*

I have to admit that I have not visited that many archives in Africa. But the archives, which I have seen were not in a very good shape. They reflect more or less the situation as the one of the Spiritans in Holland in the early 1970s. The archive of Kabaa High School in Kenya, which I visited in the 1970s and 1980s in connection with the writing of my book about Fr. Witte, which I have mentioned above, was in a complete chaos. I found it in the basement of the Fathers' house between the rubbish, which was dumped there. Fortunately I found some useful documents, but very few. No care whatsoever was taken to preserve the most essential documents of this High School. Therefore it is more or less impossible to write the history of the school. A proud past will disappear in oblivion.

I visited also the archive of the diocese of Nairobi. There is no archivist as such. The receptionist was assisting me with my questions and queries. The archive is located in a room without any order. Files are put away in a filing cabinet. One is lucky to find a file, which contains documents one is looking for. Files are exposed to dust because they are not put in proper archive boxes. Moreover there are no other measures taken to protect the archivalia. There is no inventory of the files to know where and what is available in these archives.

The third archive that I visited was the one of the Spiritans in Kenya. Somebody who does not reside in the provincialate is appointed as the archivist. He has put in order the archivalia. They are not stored in proper archive boxes, but in cabinets with glasses, which give some protection against dust. There is no inventory of the files.

The last archive I visited is the one of Tangaza College in Nairobi. Fortunately recently an archivist is appointed, although she had initially no idea about what archives are and what an archivist should do. In the meantime she has followed a course in archive science. Tangaza College celebrated this year its 25 anniversary. That brought the archive to the limelight. A history of the College has to be written, but where are the sources? Until recently there was no proper archive. So the periodical of the College, in which students and lecturers were writing about their vicissitudes, is not preserved in its entirety. With much pain and difficulties I have found some early issues, but it is still not complete. Moreover to find a complete set of the academic handbook was also very difficult. They were not available in the archive and had to be found in the different Institutes of the College and in the office of the registrar. Moreover all the reports of the Principals and those of the Board of Trustees are not available. No systematic effort was done to have these essential documents completely or



stored in the archive. There is no inventory of the files available. Now a commission for the archive is appointed to look in these and other questions and to formulate a policy for the organisation of the archive of the College. It should contain, among others, guidelines as to which documents should be preserved and which not and when they should be brought to the archive. In addition an adequate computerization program is to be initiated.

### *2.3. Problems facing archives in Africa*

These four at random cases of archives in Kenya give some indication about the state of the archives in Africa in general. It is my supposition that all the ecclesiastical archives and the archives of religious societies in Africa are reflecting somehow or other the same state of affairs. In the light of what I have said about these archives and what I have experienced in them I would like to state in a systematic way the problems, which they face.

- Archives are no priority for dioceses and religious congregations and therefore they are not very well cared for.
- There are no qualified archivists available. A secretary to a Bishop or Provincial or somebody else has to do the job. Most of the time he is not interested in this aspect of his work. Therefore he does not do anything about it.
- Archives are neglected. They do not appear on the items of the agenda discussed in chapters or other important meetings. Very few people are conscious of the fact that a diocese or a province of a congregation has archives.
- Documents are not properly treated. Staples and paperclips are not removed so that they are beginning to rust.
- In general no archive boxes are used for putting away the files and documents to protect them against dust and insects. Moreover not the proper type of paper is used to preserve them. They should be kept in acid-free paper.
- There are no inventories and catalogues of the archival sources. Nobody really knows which documents are stored in the archives. For the one in charge of the archives does not know either, because most of the times he is not interested.
- Preservation of documents in Africa has its own problems because of the humidity. Mildews, ants, and silverfishes are very easily affecting the paper fibre. But also in Europe, even though to a lesser extent, archives have these problems of mildews and silverfishes affecting the paper material.
- Storage of electronic sources is even much more difficult because of the humidity.
- The African concept of time is different from the European one. Africans have a cyclic conception of time, while Europeans have a linear one. It is of course not necessary, but it can be a stumbling block for Africans to value the historical process and its documentary and other sources.

#### 2.4. *Suggestions for solutions of these problems*

There are really no easy solutions to solve the problems facing the archives of dioceses and congregations in Africa. But of course something can and should be done to improve the situation. Here are some suggestions.

- In most cases it is impossible to appoint a full time archivist. That is mostly also not necessary because a full time archivist has not enough work to justify such an appointment.
- When a part time archivist is appointed, who is also the secretary of the provincial or somebody else who has another job, it would be recommendable to have him followed a course in archive studies. When that is not possible, let him get some archival experience during a holiday in the main archives of the congregation where a proper archivist can teach him the essentials of the archival skills
- Archives should be stored in a room separated from the office of the Provincial Superior and should be locked. A register of visitors should be kept. Visitors are not allowed to take archival sources with them.
- In order to make the archives accessible and user-friendly an inventory and catalogue of the historical sources should be made.
- It is necessary to purchase proper archive boxes for storing the files and documents.
- These boxes should be stored by preference in iron filing cabinets for protection against dust, insects and mildews.
- The documents should be wrapped in acid-free paper.
- Proper guidelines should be issued for the consultation and use of the archives by researchers.
- Personal dossiers of living members should not be put away in the archives. Only when somebody dies, the archives are the proper place of putting away his dossier.
- In order to conserve the content of the sources for the future they should be microfilmed and/or digitized.
- Problems that are connected with humidity can only be solved to store material in a climatized room. This is of course an expensive business. If material is really of essential value and no climatized room is available, it is recommendable to send it to the main archives of the congregation for proper storage.
- Problems of acidification and ink corrosion can only be treated by specialists. Documents affected by these deceases should preferably be handed over to the main archives of the congregation for proper treatment.

#### **Concluding remarks**

As I have shown, to do church historical research in Africa is not impossible. Although documentary and other sources are in a lesser extent available than in

Europe, they are there or can be created by the oral history method. However, time is running out to initiate an oral history project in regard to the missionary period in colonial times. In these days church historical research should be done in a way that also gives the African a fair share in the history of his Church and continent. Although many times research will still focus on European missionaries, African actors and collaborators of the missionaries should not be forgotten. They have played their part in the planting and expansion of the Church in Africa. It has been proved many times that they were the first evangelisers in a certain area.

Without sources no history can be written. At a certain moment in the life of an institution there is need for a historical investigation. Questions of origin and identity are emerging. The present and the future have their roots in the past. Archives as depositories where the historical sources are kept are then of essential importance. In general more care should be taken to keep them in order. With a little bit more attention and concern this can be done. Every province of the congregation should do some soul-searching concerning the state of the archive in its circumscription. Without spending too much money great improvements can be made. When it is a question of not being competent to judge what should be done, it is always possible to invite the main archivist for a visit to your province. I am sure he will be delighted to be at your assistance. The future generations of your congregation will be grateful to you for the way you have kept the past records.