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THE WHITE FATHERS' ARCHIVE IN ZAMBIA¹

Marja Hinfelaar and Giacomo Macola

I

The archive of the Generalate of the White Fathers (WF) in Rome is a well-known “treasure trove for Africanists of all disciplines.”² Owing partly to the availability of a series of published catalogues and guides,³ it attracts a steady flow of external researchers and figures prominently in the bibliographies of numerous recent works on sub-Saharan African history. What many Africanists might not be aware of, however, is the existence of regional WF's archives, the holdings of which do not necessarily replicate – and in fact often complement – those of the central Roman deposit. It is to this latter, by and large neglected, category that the archive of the WF's headquarters in Lusaka, Zambia (WFA-Z), belongs. In the summer of 2001, Fr. Hugo Hinfelaar – long-standing missionary in

¹ Marja Hinfelaar is indebted to CMC/AMA, in The Netherlands, for supporting her research on the history of the Catholic church in Zambia. Giacomo Macola wishes to thank the Leverhulme Trust for awarding him a Study Abroad Studentship which enabled him to carry out fieldwork in Zambia in 2001-2002.

² C.W. Dickerman, “On Using the White Fathers' Archives”, *History in Africa*, 8 (1981), 319.

³ R. Lamey, *Catalogue 1. Documents in the Annexe of the Archives of the Generalate of the White Fathers* (Rome, 1970); idem, “Les Archives de la Société des Pères Blancs (Missionnaires d’Afrique)”, *History in Africa*, 1 (1974), 161-65; idem, “Archives de la Société des Missionnaires d’Afrique (Pères Blancs)”, in L. Pásztor, ed., *Guida delle Fonti per la Storia dell’Africa a Sud del Sahara negli Archivi della Santa Sede e negli Archivi Ecclesiastici d’Italia. Collectanea Archivi Vaticani 3* (Zug, 1983), 388-413; Dickerman, “White Fathers' Archives”; D.L. Schoenbrun, “Using the White Fathers Archive: an Update”, *History in Africa*, 20 (1993), 421-22.

Zambia, renown scholar and part-time keeper of the WFA-Z⁴ – entrusted the authors with the task of updating the in-house catalogue of the archive under his charge in light of fresh acquisitions. This enriching experience provided the initial incentive for the compilation of this paper.

Until not long ago, the WF were the largest missionary society to operate in Zambia. They were also one of the earliest to settle in the country, their first station among the Mambwe, in the Tanganyika-Malawi corridor, having been inaugurated in 1891, before the effective inception of British rule. The Mambwe themselves had long been harassed by the politically and linguistically dominant ethnic group in Northern Zambia, the Bemba, towards whom the WF directed their subsequent efforts. The establishment of Chilubula mission by the Bishop of the newly constituted Nyasa Vicariate, Joseph Dupont, in 1898 marked the beginning of the WF's colonization of Lubemba. Thereafter, they "were able to expand their work far more extensively than that of any other missionary society in Northern Rhodesia."⁵ By the mid-1930s, the WF were in charge of twenty odd missions, all of which located in present-day Northern, Luapula and, to a lesser extent, Eastern Provinces of Zambia. This chronological depth – coupled with the professional-like

⁴ Fr. Hinfelaar worked in Mulilansolo and Mulanga missions between 1958 and 1964. After being employed as the secretary of Archbishop Emmanuel Milingo in the 1970s, he directed the Ilondola Language Study Centre. He obtained his doctorate from the University of London in 1989. His publications include: "Women's Revolt: the Lumpa Church of Lenshina Mulenga in the 1950s", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 21 (1991), 99-129; *Bemba-Speaking Women of Zambia in a Century of Religious Change (1892-1992)* (Leiden, 1994).

⁵ P.D. Snelson, *Educational Development in Northern Rhodesia, 1883-1945* (Lusaka, 1974), 66. See also B. Garvey, *Bemba Land Church. Religious and Social Change in South Central Africa, 1891-1964* (Leiden, 1994).

interest in African history and ethnography which the evangelical policy of the WF seems usually to have stimulated⁶ – resulted in the production of a vast amount of materials of historical value. Partial exception made for some of the mission diaries and items of general correspondence, which found their way to Rome, the bulk of this documentation is now housed in the WFA-Z. It is to its institutional history and contents that we now turn.

II

Until 1996, the most substantial cluster of WF's Zambian archival records was kept at the Language Study Centre of Ilondola mission, which lies at a distance of approximately eight hundred kilometres to the north-east of the Zambian capital. The latter station was founded in 1934, and Bishop Heindrich Horst turned it into the episcopal headquarters of the Lwangwa Vicariate three years later. In 1955, when the headquarters were relocated in Abercorn (colonial Mbala), Ilondola lost part of its erstwhile prominence, but regained it from 1960 with the opening of a pioneering Language Study Centre. Although initially meant exclusively to train and initiate Catholic missionaries into Bemba language and culture, from the late 1960s, the Centre made its facilities available to the growing number of development workers and researchers operating in Northern Zambia. The success and international repute of the Language Study Centre owed much to the exertions of Fr. Louis Oger, who spent the best part of thirty years in Ilondola from 1968. The teaching of Bemba, however, did not exhaust Oger's scholarly energy, for his stay in Ilondola coincided with the inauguration of the archival section of the Centre. This Oger got under way by collecting and cataloguing such religious and secular records as the various WF's

⁶ For further comments on this, see G. Macola, "The Development of Historical and Ethnographical Writings in the Vernaculars of Colonial Zambia: Missionary Contribution to the 'Creation of Tribalism'", paper presented at the "History of the Catholic Church in Zambia Workshop", University of Zambia, Lusaka, January, 2002.

missions in the Bemba-speaking Northern and Luapula Provinces of Northern Zambia had hoarded up from as early as the end of the nineteenth century. Oger's task was greatly facilitated by a grant from NORAD in 1983.⁷

Upon Oger's death in 1996, the documentation he had accumulated was transferred to the Order's regional headquarters in Lusaka, which already accommodated intramural materials pertaining to the society's administration, its history and its personnel. While the decision to shift Oger's papers must be placed in the context of the current process of localisation – whereby WF's missions are being gradually handed over to the local church – its ultimate rationale was to overcome the problems posed by Ilondola's remoteness and enhance future accessibility of the Language Study Centre's archival holdings. Despite its having only recently acquired its present shape, the WFA-Z is not limiting itself to preserving its existing patrimony, but has initiated an active program of expansion. Particularly promising in this latter regard is the ongoing attempt to recover and integrate into the main collection mission records stemming from former or still existing WF's stations in the Chewa-speaking Eastern Province of Zambia.

III

The holdings of the WFA-Z (as distinguished from those of the excellent adjoining library) are arranged into nine categories, each of which marked by a specific code. These are: “Bemba Manuscripts” (1M); “Bemba Dioceses” (2D); “Bemba Publications” (3P); “White Fathers' Society” (4WF); “Zambia White Fathers” (5ZWF); “Recordings” (6R); “Chewa Manuscripts” (7M); “Chewa Dioceses” (8D); “Chewa Publications” (9P). As indicated

⁷ This reconstruction is based on L. Oger, “The Archives at the Ilondola Language Study Centre”, *History in Zambia*, 13 (1983), 47-58, and idem, “Where a Scattered Flock Gathered” *Ilondola 1934-1984. A Catholic Mission in a Protestant Area (Free Church of Scotland), Chinsali District (Zambia)* (Ndola, 1991). For Oger's linguistic work, see his Bemba course *Icibemba cakwa Chitimukulu* (Ilondola, 1982).

above, the last four classes are quite new. Although their contents are expected to grow significantly in the near future, there are still relatively few historical records included in them. The rest of this section, then, will be exclusively concerned with the first five divisions of the inventory, i.e. the Lusaka headquarters' original holdings and Oger's collection.

Scholars interested in the growth and social history of the Catholic church in Northern Zambia could do worse than spending a few days sifting through the documents comprised in sections 2D and 4WF. "Bemba Dioceses" consists of eight sub-categories, the first of which – "Activities" (Ac) – contains thirty or so vernacular writings relating to such lay organisations as the Legio Mariae, the Xaverian Movement and the Catholic Action from about 1960. The second sub-section – "Bible" (Bi) – includes unpublished Bemba translations of the Bible or excerpts of it, the earliest available text, by Fr. L. Guillerme, dating to 1909-1910.⁸ Collections of Bemba hymnals, catechisms, devotional and liturgical tracts constitute the next four sub-classes (Hy; Ca; Dv; Li). While pastoral letters and diocesan statutes are assembled under the label "Establishment" (Es), complete series of sometimes obscure church magazines and newsletters, both in English and Bemba, are stored in the "Periodicals" (Pe) sub-category.

Most of the archival records kept in section 4WF – which also comprises collections of such published missionary journals as the *Chronique Trimestrielle de la Société des Missionnaires d'Afrique (Pères Blancs)* and the *Petit Echo* – are to be found in the following two sub-categories: "History" (H) and "Letters" (Le). The former contains published and unpublished histories both of the WF's society as a whole and its complex

⁸ L. Guillerme, "Milumbe ya kwa Bwana Jesu", manuscript, 1909-1910, WFA-Z, 2D-Bi 07.

Zambian trajectory; the latter is essentially composed of instructions and communications from Cardinal Lavigerie's successors as Superiors of the Order.

But it is to the first, third and fifth divisions of the list enumerated above that those of us with an interest in Zambian history beyond church matters ought to turn unhesitatingly. Unpublished secular writings produced by WF operating in Zambia's Northern and Luapula Provinces in the course of the past one hundred or so years form the core of "Bemba Manuscripts", the single largest deposit in the WFA-Z. Compiled mostly in French, English and Bemba, these texts reflect the WF's anthropologically-oriented approach and are indeed subdivided into the following sub-categories: "Culture" (C); "Education" (E); "History" (H); "Language" (La); "Music" (M); "Oral Tradition" or, perhaps more aptly, literature (Ot). The authors were particularly intrigued by the quantity and quality of the vernacular histories and ethnographies contained in sub-sections C and H. Even if the majority of these Bemba writings appear never to have been forwarded to Rome, a number of them, in virtue of the very early timing of their composition, are invaluable historical records, which can be presumed to reflect a relatively unadulterated picture of Northern Zambian societies and their traditions. While, for instance, Frs. Jan van Sambeek and Eugene Welfele's studies of Bemba customs are surely to be ranked among the first examples of vernacular ethnographies in colonial Zambia,⁹ Fr. Edouard Labrecque's collection of Shila traditions is a source which no student of the pre-colonial history of the Luapula valley can afford to ignore.¹⁰ "Individuals" (I), the last sub-category

⁹ J. van Sambeek, "Imyendele ya Babemba", typescript, 1922, WFA-Z, 1M-C 39 (this has been published in L. Oger, ed., *Bemba Cultural Data. Bemba Texts. Volume I* [Ilondola, 1982], 1-52); E. Welfele, untitled, manuscript, n.d. (but not later than 1920s), WFA-Z, 1M-C 79.

¹⁰ E. Labrecque, "The Story of the Shila People, Aborigenes of the Luapula-Mweru along with Their Fishing, Hunting, Customs, Foklores and Praisewords", typescript, 1946, WFA-Z, 1M-H 6, 7.

of section 1M, includes the personal papers and correspondence of some prominent WF – most notably, perhaps, Fr. François Tanguy’s, the well-known scholar of Bemba language and culture. Some of the entries in his “cahier personnel” and diaries date to the 1910s and revolve around such subjects as sorcery, divination, African marriages, and so on.

Somewhat confusingly, other missionaries’ private papers are to be found in “Zambia White Fathers”, the fifth section of the archive.

The contents of 3P – “Bemba Publications” – are not archival materials *strictu sensu*, but their rarity and value amply justifies their being stored away from the main library. This unrivalled collection of virtually every Bemba publication ever produced in Zambia from the early twentieth century to date comprises more than three hundred books and pamphlets. Religious and fictional texts make up the bulk of the series, but “tribal” histories and ethnographies are also conspicuous in it.

Apart from the aforementioned private papers, section 5ZWF consists of three more sub-categories. The first two – “Correspondence 1” (Cor 1) and “Correspondence 2” (Cor 2) – include a number of early communications between missionaries and colonial officials. Most precious of all is a series of French letters written by Bishop Dupont in the late 1890s, the time of the WF’s encroachment upon a not-yet-subjugated Bemba country. The originals are preserved, but in light of their uniqueness and perishableness, interested researchers are normally requested to peruse photocopied versions. Also, with a view to making them available to local scholars, who might not be conversant with French, accurate English translations of the most significant pieces have been prepared by Fr. Maurice Gruffat, Fr. Hinfelaar’s assistant. The same applies to some of the items which constitute “Mission Documents” (Md), the last sub-section of 5ZWF. The documents in question – mission diaries, lists of personnel, minutes of house council meetings, etc. –

pertain to the administrative lives of individual mission stations. While most – but by no means all – of the mission diaries are copies of the originals housed in the Generalate in Rome, the other records cannot generally be found anywhere else.

IV

At this still relatively early stage, the attempt to solve the problem of accessibility, which underlay the transfer of Oger's collection to Lusaka, has not been entirely successful, as a lack of human resources continues to hamper the functioning of the WFA-Z. In the absence of a full-time archivist, Lusaka-based WF, no matter how personally keen on research they might be, are not always able to provide the required supervision and assistance. Scholars and students, however, can and do obtain permission to consult the holdings of the archive, but an introductory letter stating the field and level of the ongoing or prospective research is an absolute precondition. All preliminary correspondence ought to be addressed to

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Once admitted to the WFA-Z, visitors are expected to select the documents they wish to study on the basis of the detailed in-house inventory; direct access is usually forbidden.

Although researchers may see fit to keep within reasonable limits their demands upon Frs. Hinfelaar or Gruffat's time and patience, there are no restrictions on the number of files that can be ordered for consultation. Whenever possible, as has already been mentioned, xerox copies rather than the originals will be produced. While neither photocopying nor printing facilities are presently available *in loco*, there exist provisions for the use of laptop computers. A small user fee is normally charged to cover the costs of maintenance and expansion. Given the indisputable value of the collection and the very concrete prospect of immediate research progresses which it holds out, most historians will surely consider this to be a negligible price to pay.