

THE MISSION SCHOOL AS LOCUS OF EVANGELISATION OF CHILDREN IN ZIMBABWEAN HISTORIOGRAPHY (1859-1969)

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Abstract

The modern mission in Zimbabwe was dominated by the 'mission school' as the key locus for evangelisation. Mission historiography in Zimbabwe is, however, divided on the real aim, value and purpose of the 'mission school' in the light of the pre-colonial and post-colonial political landscapes that provided the broader milieu for mission. Of special note also is the inchoate market economy that had sprouted in the country with the beginning of the colonial era in 1890. The paper explores two dominant historiographical trends regarding the 'mission school' with a view to showing how the historian's ideological perspectives too often colour the process and crafting of history.

1 INTRODUCTION

From 1859 when the first group of missionaries belonging to the London Missionary Society (LMS) arrived in Zimbabwe, the education of children was given priority in the endeavor to evangelise the people of Zimbabwe. A myriad of scholars on mission in Zimbabwe have something to say about the place and role of the mission school as an agency of evangelisation. However, different perspectives seem to inform the interpretation of the value, effectiveness, long-term implications and consequences of the mission school in the wider society. These are the issues that this paper will tackle.

2 PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

2.1 Definition of terms

2.1.1 Children

Van Delft (2000:6-16) characterises 'childhood' as consisting of three stages, that is early childhood (from birth to 5 years), middle childhood (5-8 years) and late childhood (from 8-12). When the child moves into the adolescent stage (13 to 18 years), he/she becomes a 'minor'. The ages given by Van Delft coincide more or less with the ages of pupils that schools enrolled in lower

standards. Hence we consider the definition appropriate as a heuristic instrument.

2.1.2 Evangelisation

For purposes of this paper we use 'evangelisation' as defined by the International Congress on World Evangelisation held at Lausanne in 1974. This congress defined 'evangelisation' as "the proclamation of the historical biblical Christ as Savior and Lord, with a view of persuading people to come to him personally and so be reconciled with God ... and identify themselves with his new community. The result of evangelization includes obedience to Christ, incorporation into his Church and responsible service in the world" (Van der Merwe 1982:25). From this definition, it is clear that 'conversion' is at the heart of the process of evangelisation.

2.1.3 Periodisation

The period that this paper investigates spans 1859 to 1969. The year 1859 is significant in Zimbabwe's history of modern missions since it was the year in which the London Missionary Society (LMS) opened its first mission at Inyathi in Matabeleland. This pioneer mission was later to be followed by a legion of missions established by other mission societies, especially after the colonisation of Mashonaland (1890) and the annexation of Matabeleland after the defeat of King Lobengula in 1893. The popularisation of the mission school as the locus of evangelisation continued right up to 1967 when the Rhodesia Front (RF) government passed the New Native Education Act, a piece of legislation whose real objective was to restrict the role of the Christian churches among the African communities. Subsequent statutes such as the Land Tenure Act (1969) and the Rhodesia Constitution (1970) were designed to pave way for the so-called Community Development and Council schools which eventually took primary education out of the hands of the churches (Weller 1984:211). For a better understanding of the political dynamics that impacted on the work of the missionaries, it is appropriate to distinguish the pre-colonial from the colonial period.

3 FROM INYATHI (1859) TO EMPANDENI (1888): THE PRE-COLONIAL PERIOD

Ndebele kings and their *indunas* were attracted by a number of material objects that the missionaries had. The use of the gun and the attendant marksmanship that some of them displayed, the ability to repair wagons and their beer and clothing, were some of the many attractions associated with missionaries. However, one outstanding skill that the missionary wielded was the ability to read and write. In spite of his still opposition to the Gospel, King Mzilikazi is said to have harboured a secret admiration for reading and writing. In 1867, just one year before his death, he granted Revs W Sykes and T M Thomas permission to establish a school at Inyathi. At the opening of the

school, he personally encouraged the young boys and girls who enrolled to “learn the white man’s book” (Weller 1984:20).

The first school to be established in the Ndebele kingdom was doomed to failure, however. Missionary records testify to the failure as noted by Weller (1884:20): “A large number of pupils came on the first day, in response to the king’s command that they must learn the white man’s book. On the second day, attendance was smaller, on the third smaller still, and on the fourth it was down to 16. By the third week, the school had disappeared.” As Weller further observes, “The time of Africa’s thirst for education still lay in the future - for the time being there was no obvious advantage in going to school.” Later attempts to open schools in the kingdom met with the same fate.

In 1879, twenty-two Jesuits under Fr Depelchin, who were members of the Zambezi mission, joined the LMS in the Ndebele mission field. In 1888, after many years of toil without converts, Fr Peter Prestage was finally granted a huge piece of land to establish a mission among the Impande people. In a society that was socially divided into ‘regiments’, the Impande people constituted the lowest tier that was called the Hole. These were former Shona captives who were integrated into Ndebele society (Bhebe 1979:7-8). Fr Prestage opened a school that was initially regularly attended by sixty children. Their attendance was however short lived. It only lasted for three months as the children were busy in the fields since it was harvest time.

Before long, Fr Prestage abandoned the mission in fear of being caught up in the conflict between the Ndebele and the British South Africa Company (BSAC) over control of Mashonaland. This was the last attempt by missionaries to set up mission schools in the Ndebele kingdom in the period preceding the annexation of Matabeleland by the BSAC in 1893/1894.

4 THE FAILURE BY THE MISSIONARIES TO EVANGELISE CHILDREN

Many reasons have been offered by scholars to account for the LMS’s and the Jesuits’ failure to evangelise and convert children to Christianity. The historian who dominates this period is Ngwabi Bhebe, whose 1979 book on western Zimbabwe remains a key reference work on the period under review. Bhebe’s conclusions are a result of his analysis of the missionaries’ records, which highlight their understanding of the Ndebele kingdom and its people. Key among the reasons for the missionaries’ failure to attract children for instruction and conversion were the opposition and indifference of kings Mzilikazi and Lobengula to the Christian Gospel. Both Mzilikazi and Lobengula did not lead the way by sending their children to school. When requested by missionaries to send his children to school, Lobengula flatly refused to do so (Bhebe 1979:62). Apart from the attitude of the kings to the missionary presence, the compactness of the Ndebele state, as well as the integrity of its culture and spiritual systems, constituted a serious inhibition and impediment that the missionaries found difficult to penetrate.

Efforts to establish schools for children ended in utter failure because their parents and/or *indunas* withdrew them to work in the fields or to join military expeditions. In a show of indignation against Christian influences, communities “went so far as to exercise violent coercion on converts (adults) and to accuse them of witchcraft” (Bhebe 1979:119). To illustrate the seriousness of the violence and intimidation against people who showed interest in the missions, Bhebe recounts the story of a young girl who became interested in reading and writing in the 1870s. Her family faced the wrath of fellow villagers who accused her of witchcraft before chasing her away from the village. Her clothes were “savagely stripped away and her books confiscated by the accusers of her family. After much pleading from the missionaries the king resettled the family” (Bhebe 1979:63).

Similar forms of ‘instant justice’ deterred many from identifying with the missionaries. It is easy to see the hidden hand of the chiefs and diviners in acts like these meant to purge the community of ‘undesirables’. The chiefs and diviners felt “threatened by the efforts of Christianity both on their authority over the people and on the authority of the parents over their children” (Bhebe 1979:21). From such demonstrations of community anger, Bhebe concludes that the Christian Gospel represented by the missionaries constituted a threat to the Ndebele culture. Its values were not only contrary to theirs but were also “largely incomprehensible to them, and did not offer any more solutions to their everyday problems than their traditional values” (Bhebe 1979:44). Thus failure with the children mirrored the missionaries’ failure with adults such as the kings, *indunas*, diviners and parents. For these reasons, the Jesuits were essentially correct when they left the kingdom in 1888, arguing that the Ndebele society “was permeated through and through by a powerful traditional religion which set its face against the evangelisation of its adherents” (Bhebe 1979:61).

Apart from the reasons given by Bhebe, missionary historiography tends to give preponderance to the military nature of the Ndebele kingdom as responsible for the failure of the missionaries. For instance, Smith (1928:53), a former missionary in Zimbabwe and Zambia, argues that missionaries left no imprint on the children mainly because of “the iron military discipline enforced and the sanguinary and warlike character of the Matabele”. Another former missionary to Zimbabwe, Paul King (1959:13), advances similar reasons when he writes, “Like a Bantu Sparta, the country was divided into military regions, and the young men collected into regiments where they were kept in enforced celibacy and trained to the only glory they knew - the glory of bloodshed. Adopt Christianity, and they would have to repudiate all those things which they esteemed most highly, and follow the settled life which they despised.”

5 THE PLACE OF THE MISSION SCHOOL IN COLONIAL ZIMBABWE (1890-1969)

In its colonisation of Mashonaland the BSAC found keen support from a number of churches that included Anglicans, Methodists and Catholics. Each of the churches entered into an agreement with Cecil John Rhodes and his administrator on the role they were to play in the colony. Some of the churches provided chaplaincy services to the first batch of 500 settlers who marched to Mashonaland and hoisted the British flag on 12 September 1890. The Jesuits returned to Zimbabwe under the patronage of Cecil John Rhodes. They catered for the educational needs of the settlers' children and the children of the Shona. Meanwhile, the Dominican Sisters under Mother Patrick were the leading health provider in the colony.

One of the clauses in the agreement between the BSAC and the churches was that the former was to grant land to the latter for the purposes of carrying out mission work. By 1923 churches had already received 325 000 acres. The relationship between the churches and the BSAC made the superiors of the missions that were established very powerful and influential over the local chiefs (Weller 1984:53). Clearly, colonial domination brought about unparalleled erosion of the political authority of traditional chiefs. Consequently, Weller (1984:53) argues, "politeness to chiefs was now a matter of courtesy, not of life and death, since responsibility for public order, communications and personal security had been assumed by the new Administrator (of the BSAC)".

The power of the BSAC and of the missionaries got a sudden boost after the defeat of Lobengula (1893) and of the Ndebele and Shona in their uprisings of 1896 to 1897. The power of the traditional chiefs was further weakened and the powers of the colonial administrators increased. Weller (1984:55) makes a very poignant point when he examines the consequences of the Shona's defeat at the hands of the BSAC. He writes, "Chimurenga I had been presented to the Shona as a war of religion by their leaders who had promised supernatural immunity against bullets and the support of Mwari with all the tribal spirits or *mhondoro*. Not only had the Shona been defeated but with them their dead chiefs and their God." The defeat had tremendous consequences for the Christian religion. Christianity emerged the greatest beneficiary since it emerged as the new spiritual power that both the victor and the vanquished would in future identify with. Little wonder therefore that as the 20th century dawned, Zimbabwe started to experience unprecedented numbers of baptisms. Equally, more Christian villages were founded after Chimurenga I. By 1906, Chishawasha alone, under the Jesuits (founded in 1891), boasted of having six mainly Catholic villages on its mission farm. These villages became invaluable reserves for the mission work among the young (Weller 1984:55).

Victory for the BSAC also opened up the country to the capitalist economic system that thrived on foreign investment, private ownership and the sourcing of cheap labour. The BSAC passed a battery of tax laws that forced peasant families to sell their livestock in order to pay poll tax, hut tax and a number of taxes that included cattle and dog taxes. Furthermore, the colonial land laws forced many young people off the land where their forbears had for generations eked out a living. They were forced to look for work on the newly established white-owned farms and in the industrial and urban centres. Some

of the critical skills of the newly established capitalist economy were reading and writing. The easiest, and most systematic, way of acquiring some of these skills lay in the school system. Literacy suddenly became a skill in high demand among the African people in Zimbabwe. Parents decided to voluntarily send their children to school in order to acquire the reading and writing skills that many already believed to be “the *amasalamusi abelungu* (miracles of the white man)”. Little wonder therefore that between 1897 and 1923 Kalanga chiefs approached missionaries requesting them to open up schools in their chiefdoms. They helped the missionaries to direct their efforts at children, arguing that “adults were too old to alter” (Bhebe 1979:32).

In an effort to boost the confidence of the churches in Zimbabwe, the Company introduced the policy of ‘grant-in-aid’ in 1910 to support mission-aided education for Africans in the reserves (Hallencreutz 1998:71). The introduction of the grant-in-aid policy effectively made the 20th century the era of the school in Zimbabwe. Tens of hundreds of schools were set up at mission centres or in the villages under missionary supervision.

6 THE PLACE OF THE SCHOOL IN THE WIDER EVANGELISTIC SCHEME OF THE CHURCH

The ‘grant-in-aid’ support for church-run schools had a significant influence on the churches’ pastoral programmes that deliberately focused on children. In explaining the churches’ shift from adults to children, it is important to observe that earlier attempts to attract adults had not yielded positive results during the pre-colonial and the early colonial periods. Before long, missionaries realised that “adult converts could rarely be expected to maintain their religious practices” (Weller 1984:60). Disappointments with adult conversion led the missionaries to switch over to schools. Because of the popularity of the schools, more and more children responded more readily to the preaching and teaching of the missionaries (Weller 1984:71).

Immediately after settling into a province or district, mission societies founded mission stations which acted as the nerve centres of the church’s pastoral and educational programmes. The mission superior proceeded to set up village school (out-schools) that fed into the mission centre’s pastoral and educational activities. The day schools that proliferated in the villages suddenly became the main vehicles of evangelisation as children, and often parents, identified with the church that controlled the school.

7 CIVILISATION AND CHRISTIANISATION: A DOUBLE AGENDA

Historians differ in their assessment of the usefulness of the education that missionaries offered to the African child. While some historians are quick to

highlight the positive elements of the education imparted at a time of transition from a peasant communal to a capitalist economy, others are highly critical of it. For us to appreciate the two perspectives it is important to first examine the curriculum offered by church-run schools.

8 THE CURRICULUM OFFERED BY THE SCHOOLS

The children who went to mission schools and/or mission-run village schools were taught a variety of subjects. Bhebe (1979) notes that missionaries combined both spiritual and secular dimensions. He goes on to observe that, “the two aspects were so intertwined that their institutions often performed dual functions: the church was at the same time the school”. The three Rs, the singing of hymns and catechism had a very central place in the curriculum. They were blended with industrial education in the form of subjects such as gardening, bricklaying, carpentry, printing, blacksmithing, laundering and farming.

The nature of the curriculum that each school offered often reflected the financial capacity and skills base of the missionary society that controlled the school. It was also designed to be gender specific.

If a school enrolled only boys or girls, the curriculum was designed to meet that specific constituency. Within the Anglican Church, schools for girls such as St David’s (Bonda) and St Faith’s (Rusape) offered subjects such as laundry, sewing, cookery, nursery and housewifery (Evans 1945:54; Bhebe 1979:145). Meanwhile, boys’ schools offered industrial subjects such as carpentry, seasoning of local timber, gardening, tailoring and other trades (Bhebe 1979:144). To the extent that this education was academic, religious and industrial, the assumption one is bound to make is that it was aimed at forming a balanced person who would be of tremendous value to society in general. To what extent then did mission education contribute to the general advancement of African society? Many writers and commentators on Christian mission address this question in various ways. However, there are two dominant views that are easily detectable. The first one presumes that mission education had a very positive influence on the African children by virtue of the Christian values that underpinned it. However, the second view raises questions around the ‘real’ as opposed to the ‘assumed’ motives and purposes of the education that missionaries offered to the African child. Furthermore, it questions the appropriateness of the methodology they used. Below we briefly highlight the key ideas that underpin the two perspectives.

9 THE MISSION SCHOOL WAS A GOOD MEANS TO A GOOD END

Many writers often restate the missionary perspective that positively evaluates the role that schools played in the overall programme of evangelisation. The schools were believed to be a way of penetrating the pagan world of the Shona and Ndebele people by infusing it with Gospel values. Thus, the

schools that the churches established were meant to transform the world of the Shona and Ndebele people by Christianising its citizens. The following quotation from Maxwell (1999:153) captures this view:

The missions, with hardly an exception, have always given education a prominent place in their programme. If they were asked the reason, they might reply that the schools have been their best evangelistic agency. Probably ninety percent of the Christians have come into the Church by way of the school.

That the missionaries wanted to build a Christian society through the schools is clear when one considers the reasons given for establishing schools for girls. Boarding schools for girls were invariably established at centres adjoining boys' schools. In the Anglican Church, St David's (Bonda), which took over from St Monica's, was built in the neighbourhood of St Augustine's Boys' School. Among Catholics, such gender partnering of schools was often done by the religious orders. For instance, whilst the Jesuits specialised in building boys' schools, Dominicans concentrated on girls' schools.

Thus, the Dominican Convent was built as the partner school to St George's, St Dominic's to St Ignatius, Mukaro to Gokomere, etc. Girls' boarding schools were built "as the result of a request made by the boys, who said they did not wish to marry heathen girls" (Maxwell 1999:58). Bhebe (1979:142) confirms this missionary approach to the education of the girl child when he says: "Methodists as well as other missions in general were preoccupied with producing the future wives of their educated staff and Christian boys ...". Clearly, both in theory and practice girls were to be educated in order to prepare them for marriage. The promotion of Christian marriage was another key means of increasing Church members and perpetuating Christian values. As is clear from this approach, the churches advocated the creation of an alternative patriarchal society differentiated from African society by its Christian values. However, Christian patriarchy had a lot in common with Shona and Ndebele patriarchy. This is why the subordination of the girl child was taken for granted by both the missionaries and Shona and Ndebele parents. It was not uncommon for girls to go to local village schools while boys were allowed to go to boarding schools (Bhebe 1979:137). While the boy was given education that enabled him to earn money, and to head the Christian family, the girl was provided with education that prepared her for a subordinate life as a 'helping hand' to her husband.

Although Bhebe (1979:142) claims that the London Missionary "added the ideal of equality between the sexes", he does not substantiate what such an ideal entailed.

Writers also highlight another approach that missionaries often adopted. This approach centred on the urgency of making the school a means of liberating the African girl from oppressive African traditional practices, especially polygamy and the espousal of girls by their parents (*kuzvarira* in Shona). The motif of liberating the girl child from the incubus of African culture often came to the fore as one of the main reasons for the establishment of schools for girls. At one time or another, missions offered refuge to young girls who ran away from traditional marriage arrangements. Maxwell (1999:47-48) writes

about girls who were espoused to older men fleeing to mission stations in search of alternative patrons. Hence, the Church became an outlet for gender liberation. The twist to the 'female flight' discourse is the new evidence brought out by Maxwell to the effect that it was not only tolerated but was "even encouraged by some sections of the white community, particularly missionaries". In his view, missionaries who subscribed to this view supported "progressive individualism" over African communalism.

From the girls' perspective, joining mission stations provided "a new source of meaning for marriage, patriarchy and a sense of choice" that had to be understood within Christian individualist conscience (Maxwell 1999:109).

That the school was mainly a means to the goal of evangelisation is amply captured in the writings of both Maxwell (1999:97) and Bhebe (1979:130). The former summarises the understanding that most missionaries shared, namely that "if you have not got the schools and hospitals, you will not get the Christians". The latter argues that it was "easier to bring the new faith to homes of a literate society than to illiterate people. Those who were able to read brought scriptural literature which they studied at home in the presence of their families. In this way the Christian religion spread from the stations to the furthest points where the missionary staff might never hope to reach". Similarly Evans (1945:48-49) summarises the critical importance of the school in the Church's wider process of evangelisation by a quotation from Rev R H Clarke, priest-in-charge of St Columbus' Anglican Church, Bulawayo, who said: "There is no pressure put on the children, but if they are with us for six years, from Sub A to standard IV, the Church cannot fail to leave its mark on them, and some of the best teacher-catechists in the district first heard the Gospel in the school." Like Rev Edwin Smith (1928), Rev Clarke is fascinated with the statistics of the converts.

10 MISSION EDUCATION AS HANDMAID OF WESTERN IMPERIALISM

Literature on mission work in Zimbabwe also reveals both a mild and a brazen critique of the value and purpose of mission education and the methodology used in its transmission. Some critics highlight the dilemma in which the missionary was caught in as he tried to 'civilize and Christianize' the African child. The Jesuits are presented by Bhebe (1979:143-4) as an example of missionaries who used mission education as a means to establish an elite class which was beholden to the white aristocracy in the country and beyond. In the view of this religious order, it was desirable to "produce a small class which was equipped with western ideas and which would bring civilisation and Christianity to the pagan and traditional societies both by example and by direct instruction". Bhebe's analysis of the education offered by the Jesuits at Empandeni led him to the conclusion that the African pupil was fed with inferior education compared to that given white children. Furthermore, the African child was taught to be servile to the white man. He/she was taught "to submit cheerfully to the destiny so long foretold, a servant of servants shall he

be unto his brethren". In a no-holds-barred critique of the education that the Jesuits at Empandeni offered, he describes them as purveyors of "the doctrine of creating docile, subservient and Christian black drawers of water and hewers of wood for the white superior and master race in Zimbabwe ...". Furthermore, Bhebe portrays their refusal to open up higher education to the black students as backward compared to developments in schools run by Protestant churches.

Godfrey Kapenzi (1979) stands out among the scholars who are highly critical of the methods adopted by missionaries in the process of evangelising the African. He is also critical of the legacy that mission schools have left in African society. His main argument is that by virtue of sharing the same Enlightenment worldview with the settler and trader, the missionary brought untold 'alienation' to the children that they targeted for conversion and acculturation through the school. He argues, "If the school is concerned only with the children, it takes them further and further away from their parents and their homes, and this in turn will bring suffering and misunderstanding between the old and the young" (Kapenzi 1979:70). While he is certainly correct about the epistemological cleavage that the school created between children and their parents, he does not seem to appreciate the role of other forms of 'schooling' that missionaries invested in, such as Sunday school and night school (cf Smith 1928:69, 155).

Secondly, Kapenzi (1979:19-20) dismisses the process of Christianisation as a deliberate form of 'bleaching' of Africans by Europeans. "Christianization meant the transplantation of European technology, culture, history, religion, morals, government system, habits and manner. It was plainly and simply cultural domination and not dialogue or interaction, and like all the self-appointed deliverers and saviors, the missionary exhibited considerable cultural and racial arrogance and the accompanying intolerance to any aspect of African culture considered to be repugnant to western values and morals, to be a hindrance to Western civilization."

Thirdly, there are questions as to whether the school did more about the preparation of children to earn money than it did to prepare them to be converts. Bhebe (1979:151) is of the view that the legacy of the school was over-estimated by people who believed that it was the main source of converts. The thrust of his argument is that the village school only offered lower primary school, that is, Sub Std A up to Std 3. As a result, "many children left before they were accepted as full members of the Church and often lapsed into old habits".

11 SPECIAL SCHOOLS

Schools for the disabled, blind and deaf are forms of 'special school' that hardly feature in Zimbabwean mission historiography. The lacuna can possibly be explained by the fact that these special schools have always been relegated to the margins of mainstream education. Because of their special needs, disabled, blind and deaf children are often hidden from public view,

and are left to 'rot' at home or are sent away to 'special schools' where other members of the family, and indeed the community, lose contact with them. Van der Merwe (1982:33) considers these schools forms of Christian service that "still bear an impressive witness today and should be continued in future". He refers in particular to the Copota School for the Blind (1927) and the School for the Deaf (1948) founded by the Dutch Reformed Mission in Masvingo province.

In Van der Merwe's reckoning, "there is abundant evidence that the pupils attending these schools have greatly benefited materially and spiritually". Little has been written about similar schools which other missionary denominations set up, like the Loreto School for the Blind and the Deaf, which during the war of liberation was forced to move to Harare where now it operates as the Emerald Hill School for the Blind and the Deaf.

12 CONCLUSION

While there are disagreements on the 'real motive' that moved the missionaries to introduce schools to educate children, this paper shows that there are two predominant ideological positions informing the way history is interpreted. There is a preponderance of evidence that shows that schools run by the mission churches were not 'mere bait' for conversion. This point is manifest not only in writings by missionary historiographers such as Smith, Van der Merwe and others; it is also confirmed by 'academic' historians such as Bhebe (1979:130) and Weller (1984:60).

While it would be naïve to dismiss the influence and impact that the mission-run school had on conversion trends in Zimbabwe, it is interesting to note that only a few historians like Bhebe and Kapenzi raise serious questions about the efficacy of the mission school in the process of evangelisation. Indeed, such questions are appropriate, and need to be followed up, considering the living evidence characterised by the phenomenal growth in membership registered by African Initiated Churches (AICs) in Zimbabwe during the 20th century in spite of the fact that the colonial authorities refused their leaders permission to establish their own church schools.

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