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Agony on the Zambezi

THE FIRST CHRISTIAN MISSION TO SOUTHERN AFRICA
AND ITS FAILURE 1580 - 1759

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In June 1860 David Livingstone, in the course of his second great missionary journey, reached Zumbo at the junction of the Luangwa and the Zambezi and came across a long abandoned and ruined Chapel. In other parts of Africa he had found relics of the old Portuguese missionaries,¹ and on this occasion he commented, "One can scarcely look without feelings of sadness on the utter desolation of a place where men have met to worship the Supreme Being and have united in uttering the magnificent words 'Thou art King of Glory, O Christ!' and remember that the natives of this part know nothing of His religion, not even His name."² He wondered why the failure had been so complete and whether it might not be because the Missionaries had been associated with the slave trade. He also regretted that there was no literature on the subject similar to that of the more recent Protestant missions.

In surmising that the failure might have been due to a connection with the slave trade Livingstone was not correct; nevertheless the failure could hardly have been more complete. Gonçalo da Silveira, Zambezia's first missionary, had arrived in 1560; Frei António Nunes da Graça, who died at Tete in 1837 may perhaps be considered its last. After he died the country remained as if no missionary had ever set foot in it. The cause of the failure is a sad but fascinating problem. It is true that it cannot be quite divorced from the general decline in Catholic missionary

endeavour, which began with the expulsion of the Jesuits from Portuguese territory in 1759, which sank to its nadir with Napoleon's suppression of the Congregation of Propaganda, and which showed signs of ending only a decade after Waterloo. Nevertheless the failure of the Zambezi missions is a separate problem, because it seems fairly clear that it had come about before the general weakening of Catholic missionary endeavour. It can hardly be denied that the Jesuits had been the most effective missionaries on the Zambezi, and yet eight years before their expulsion their Provincial could write sadly from Goa that he did not consider Zambezia part of his Province, since all that was done there was the baptizing of a few children in times of famine and disease. Adults, he said, accepted baptism easily, but afterwards did not live as Christians, and so added to their guilt and brought excessive grief on those who had worked for them.³ This is not isolated evidence. Dr. Alexandre Lobato quotes the *desembargador*, Morais Pereira, as writing to the King two years later that in three days journey from Quelimane towards Moçambique and in ten days on a boat between Quelimane and Sena he had seen neither a church nor a cross; as the population to the south was under Portuguese rule, he had to conclude that the Africans were as deprived of the light of the Catholic religion as they had been before the coming of the Portuguese.⁴ Other evidence of the almost complete

failure could easily be given.

Nevertheless until the last three years, it was impossible to do more than surmise, as Livingstone had done, about the reasons for the failure; and the difficulty was the one that had faced him, the lack of any comprehensive account of the subject. Alexandre Lobato's work and to a lesser extent that of Fritz Hoppe⁵ touch on missionary endeavour; their main concern, however, lies in the administrative and economic spheres, and though they throw much light on missionary history, they only touch it incidentally. António Alberto de Andrade's valuable collection of documents⁶ also says much that is important about it but it forms only one of the many subjects which the records describe or comment on. The same may be said of the documents published by Luiz Fernando de Carvalho Dias.⁷ Those whose reading was confined to English were particularly handicapped and indeed still are. It is true that they have Theal's magnificent volumes⁸ which placed scholars everywhere in his debt, but there has been little in English since then. The work of Welch was demolished by Professor Boxer in an article which was as devastating as it was unanswerable;⁹ similarly, the six pages which Duffy devotes to missionary work in Moçambique from 1506 to 1800 are too inept to be taken seriously.¹⁰

In the last two years, however, the subject has been brought into the open by two books which expressly treat of it and give a comprehensive view, based on research which is wide and thorough. One is Paul Schebesta's *Portugal's Konquista Mission in Südost-Africa*, and the other *Mentalidade Missiologica dos Jesuítas em Moçambique antes de 1759* by António da Silva, S.J.¹¹

Schebesta's work spanned a lifetime. He came to Moçambique when a young man in 1912 as a member of the Society of the Divine Word which the Holy See had ordered to take over the missions of Portuguese territories for the third time. However, after working for four years he was interned as a German when Portugal entered the First World War. He was sent to Lisbon, where he learnt Portuguese, came to know Portuguese historians and also the libraries of Lisbon. The rest of his life was spent as an ethnologist, and it was as such that he made his reputation. But ethnology kept him in touch with history, and over the decades he amassed much historical material. In 1961 it was suggested that he should make use of this to write something to commemorate the arrival of the Society of the Divine Word in Moçam-

bique, but in fact his work went well beyond this original intention and developed into a general history of missionary endeavour in South East Africa.

Schebesta makes many mistakes in detail, either because he wrote the book when he was nearly eighty, or because someone else had to see it through the press. It shows that his researches into the Lisbon archives were wide, but he admits in his preface that they were not methodical, because he never thought that he would write a book on the subject. This presumably accounts for some unexpected gaps in his otherwise very full bibliography. Nevertheless to him must be given the credit for opening up the subject as a whole, and coming to at least some tentative conclusions about the reason for the Mission's failure.

Fr. Silva's work is longer and more thorough. It is largely based on letters, now in Rome, from the Jesuit missionaries on the Zambezi, and inevitably suffers from the drawback of being slight where the letters are few. Those from the first half of the seventeenth century are fairly abundant, those from the second half less so, and those from the eighteenth century less so still. The Jesuit Catalogues at Rome giving the personnel of each mission; and sometimes information about conditions and material resources, are a valuable supplement to the letters. Taken together they form perhaps the best collection of records on the history of Zambezia during these centuries, and Fr. Silva has done a service to students of African history in bringing them to notice. He himself says that his work is not primarily historical; it is rather an investigation into missionary outlook and method. But to clarify these Fr. Silva uses an historical approach. So in practice the work constitutes a history of the Mission from 1610 to 1759, and it would appear to be a starting point for any further investigation.

This article therefore puts forward tentative opinions about the failure of the Mission, drawn from the evidence provided by Schebesta, Silva and previously published sources. It is concerned with the Mission only from the time of its permanent establishment about 1580 until 1759 when its failure was clear. Consequently it is not concerned with Silveira's Mission in 1560-61 nor with the subsequent expedition of 1571-3 and Francisco Barreto and Vasco Homem which was accompanied and described by the Jesuit Francisco Monclaro.

Schebesta singles out as perhaps the principal cause of the failure the identification of the missionaries, notably the Dominicans, with the Con-

quista politics of the Portuguese. When the famous Joao dos Santos reached Sena on 22 August 1590 he found two of his brethren there.¹² This was the fragile beginning of Christianity; henceforward it kept pace with the advance of Portuguese trade, and, to a lesser extent of its armed forces, and among the witnesses of the treaty by which the Monomotapa, Gatsi Rusere, on 1 August 1607 granted the gold, silver and other mines in his lands to the King of Portugal was Frei Joao Lobo, Vicar of the Church at Luanze,¹³ who thus played a role similar to that of Charles Helm when two hundred and eighty years later he witnessed the Rudd Concession. The identification of Conquista politics and Christianity, Schebesta claims, is well illustrated by a document written in the second decade of the seventeenth century by Francisco de Avelar, the Dominican friar. Avelar had accompanied Diogo Simoes Madeira's troops in 1609, when they tried to get hold of the silver mines which were supposed to exist at Chicoa; he had then taken specimens of the silver found there back to Lisbon where he wrote his "Relação".¹⁴ In this he recommended sending troops to safeguard the route to the mines, and young girls whom they might marry. He advised too about the sending of ships from Moçambique to Portugal, with cargoes of silver, gold, copper, iron, ebony and slaves. In return for being admitted as a brother in arms of the King of Portugal the Monomotapa should hand over to him all the mines in his Kingdom, and allow the Portuguese to build forts in it and make all chiefs in it acknowledge themselves vassals of Portugal. As Schebesta remarks,¹⁵ this is the crudest colonialism envisaging the exploitation of the native peoples for the good of the mother country.

The outlook of Avelar, Schebesta claims, characterised the Dominican missionary effort throughout. They thought that the Africans must be made subject to Portugal, and then they could be made into Christians. When, after the revolt of Kapararidze, the Dominican, Luiz do Espirito Santo, managed to get his own candidate made Monomotapa, he was obliged to acknowledge himself a Portuguese vassal, and Dominicans became chaplains at his zimbabwe. Christianity could hardly have identified itself more completely with the Portuguese Conquista.

The identification need not of itself have been disastrous, and indeed perhaps not very harmful, if the Portuguese had maintained the Monomotapa as a strong ruler, though admittedly a vassal. But they showed open contempt, both for Mavura, the first Christian Monomotapa, and for his suc-

cessor who was baptized with great pomp on 4 August 1652. His orders were ignored and he was made to look contemptible before his own vassals. Schebesta quotes from the *Livros das Monções* two petitions sent by the Monomotapa's Dominican Chaplains in 1640 and 1645 deploring his position and describing the bad behaviour of the Portuguese, both to himself and to his subjects.¹⁶ Twenty-two years later the well known report of the Jesuit, Manuel Barreto¹⁷ repeated the unhappy story. The Dominicans had hoped to convert the Monomotapa, and through him to impose Christianity on the country. But though he was baptized, all his power was taken away and he could not have established Christianity, even if he had had the will to do so. Portuguese misconduct had made them and their religion disliked, so when the Rozvi chief, Changamire burst into Mocaranga and destroyed Dambarare and other fairs in 1693, he was welcomed by the Africans, and Portuguese rule and such Christianity as there had been in the north-east of the present Rhodesia ended completely.

As the Dominicans seem to have considered themselves primarily as ministering to the Portuguese, they do not seem to have done much direct work for the Africans. In 1696, after they had been in the country over a hundred years, Frei António da Conceição, the Augustinian Administrator of the Rivers, said in a Petition which he made to the Conselho da Junta das Missoes at Goa that there was not a single missionary who worked among the Africans and taught them Christianity.¹⁸ When the Dominicans attempted to answer his criticisms he spoke out more forcefully,¹⁹ saying that in spite of their high claims, there were no Christians on the Rivers, apart from the Portuguese, Goans and their slaves, whom out of the kindness of their hearts they had allowed to be baptised. The only Dominican who had ever known an African language was himself an African. Not a single Dominican, he claimed, had ever shed his blood for the faith. Gonçalo da Silveira was the only true martyr of Zambezia. Presumably the implication is that the others had been killed because they were assisting the invading Portuguese. If the Dominicans regarded themselves primarily as ministering to the Portuguese, one can appreciate the grounds for these criticisms, excessive though they appear at first sight.

Too much identification with the Portuguese Conquista may largely explain the failure of Christianity to strike any root in Mocaranga where, after all, the Portuguese were only strong from about 1610 to 1693. It would appear, how-

ever, that additional reasons explain its failure in the Zambezi valley from Quelimane to Zumbo, for in most of this area Christianity had some influence from about 1580 to 1837.

One such reason was poverty. Portugal was anxious to help, made promises and tried to fulfil them, but the authorities in Goa found the task beyond their means. Fr. Silva, drawing on the 'Documentos Remetidos da India' in the Torre do Tombo at Lisbon, shows how during the decade 1620-1630, though the reasonable endowment of 100 cruzados a year was made for every religious, the money was frequently not received.²⁰ As time went on and as the embarrassments of the Portuguese crown increased, payments became smaller and more irregular and the result was seen in the proposals of Frei António da Conceição at the end of the century. After six years in Zambezia and his experience as Administrator, he attributed the small progress made by Christianity there to lack of missionaries, and their lack of resources. This forced them to trade in order to live, and so made them neglect their pastoral duties and act in a way out of keeping with them. He wanted sufficient means to be guaranteed to them, and then the enforcement of the Bulls excommunicating any cleric who took part in trade.²¹

By the time that Frei António da Conceição had made his suggestions Mocaranga had been lost to the Portuguese, but had they been put into effect the history of the missions along the Zambezi which were left to them might have been very different. Little effective was done, however, and religion went from bad to worse. Forty-seven years later Frei Joao de Nossa Senhora, one of the greatest Dominicans ever to come to East Africa, became Administrator, and the picture which he gives in his letters about the state of Christianity is a shocking one. Churches are described as ruinous, clergy are few and remiss and little is done or perhaps can be done for the laity, black or white. One of the major causes of the devastation is, again, material poverty. In theory the Dominicans could rely on tithes and on their income from the crown. In practice both were failing them: the *prazeros* would not pay tithes and money was not coming from the royal treasury.²² Other sources confirm what Joao wrote in his letters. After the criticisms made of them by António da Conceição, the Dominicans made a considerable attempt to improve and their late Vicar General in Goa, Frei Francisco da Trindade, came to Zambezia as their Superior. He brought reinforcements and tried to ensure that they got some knowledge of the local language.

He himself produced some books in it, four being attributed to him.²³ Unfortunately the improvement was not lasting, and in 1719 there occurred an incident which was symptomatic of the general decline, the abduction by a Dominican of a daughter of the Monomotapa.²⁴ Twenty years later the King of Portugal was reporting to Goa that in view of the bad conduct of the Dominicans their places might be taken by Jesuits or by secular priests.²⁵

A report that preceded these strictures was, however, written by one of the Dominicans themselves, the Administrator, Frei Simao de S. Tomás, a man worthy to rank with Joao de Nossa Senhora; the manuscript is in Goa but the substance has been given by Schebesta.²⁶ Hearing bad reports of his subjects on the Zambezi he decided to visit them, but the Governor of Moçambique, it was thought at their instigation, tried to stop him, and one of the Jesuits overcame his opposition. All he saw confirmed his worst impressions. Though warned of his coming, the Dominican chaplain at the Monomotapa's zimbabwe left beforehand to go off trading at a gold-mine fourteen days' march away. Satisfied that he had neglected his duties Frei Simao removed him from office, but the recalcitrant friar refused to go. Another one of the Administrator's subjects had only spent fourteen days on his Mission in two years. In all, his subjects only amounted to seven and they were keener on trading than on pastoral duties.

Judgment on them must not be too harsh. The royal *congrua* and other payments in Zambezia were made, not in coin, which hardly existed, but in cloth, and the recipient, even though a cleric, had to find a market in order to live. The gold, ivory or other commodities which he received in exchange would then be used to buy what he needed. He had to be an itinerant salesman; but it is not hard to see the appalling effect that this would have on missionary life.

However, that this was not the fundamental reason for failure is seen by a consideration of the Jesuit missionaries during the same period. There is indeed one condemnation of them, that of Inácio Caetano Xavier, Secretary to the Governor of Moçambique from 1758-1761.²⁷ He says that in common with other religions they encourage vengeance, hatred, discord, ambition and immorality. They are worse than the others in that they spread fire and sword through their Kaffir dependants. They also pile up riches by means of trade which is their business. He asks

the Governor to make sure that no Jesuit heard of what he had said because he had got into trouble with them before for revealing some dishonesty of theirs, and what he had to suffer in consequence still made him shudder. If they got to know what he had revealed about them they would put him in their Green Book in pursuance of their *Monita Secreta*, and that would be like having hell in this life.

The day before Xavier wrote this, another letter was being sent to Portugal by the Dominican Prior of Moçambique accusing him of embezzlement, of not paying his debts, and of making trouble; after three years as Governor's Secretary he was dismissed for taking bribes and other misconduct.²⁸ I have given his words at some length because they are the only categorical condemnation I have met of the Jesuits in Zambezia. Almost all other references are embarrassing in their unanimity and the extent of their praise. I have already mentioned the King's suggestion that they should take over the Dominican Missions. Reports sent to or from Goa and Lisbon, and quoted by Schebesta, Theal and Alcântara Guerreiro, are uniform in their praise. António da Conceição was critical enough of the Dominicans, but he had no blame for the Jesuits, and attributed everything he had been able to do in Zambezia to the example of the Jesuit, Sebastiao Berna.²⁹ Neither had Simao de S. Tomáz anything bad to say about the Jesuits. Indeed, it seems to have been they who made his Visitation possible.

There must be some reason for this surprising contrast, and it may well throw some light on the history of the Mission and its failure. One reason perhaps was that by a decision made about 1623 the Monomotapa, and with him the whole of Mocaranga, were left to the Dominicans. The Jesuits may have regretted this, but it was probably a blessing; as they were less involved with the Monomotapa they were less involved in Portuguese Conquista politics, and so were better able to keep to purely missionary work. There is one great exception, the *Informação do Estado e Conquista dos Rios de Cuama* of Manuel Barreto,³⁰ which Schebesta pronounces as having been written in the same spirit as the "Relação" of Avelar. But he says that Barreto was hardly typical. During the period 1610-1759 this characteristic was not prominent among the Jesuits.³¹

However, a more important reason was that from the start they seem to have placed less reliance on the income granted to them by the crown, and have realised that they would have

to depend on such lands as were given to them or that they could acquire. Fr. Gaspar Soares, the actual founder of the Mission, wrote in 1610 that they would have to be content to live on African food, that is, on meal, rice and vegetables, in which the land was very productive, as it would be for all crops if they were planted.³²

Some time before 1624 the crown gave them a *prazo* at Chemba, two and a half days' journey upstream from Sena, for their support.³³ Another at Caia followed, two days downstream from Sena, and another at Marangue, near where the Zambezi is joined by the Ruena. These they proceeded to develop; and Lobato says that, although agriculture was a secondary activity in Zambezia as a whole, it was clearly promoted strongly by the Jesuits.³⁴ What he says is confirmed by the praise given in 1636 to the Jesuit plantations at Luabo by Pedro Barreto de Rezende, the Archivist of Goa and Secretary to de Linhares, the Viceroy,³⁵ and by the comment of the *desembargador*, Morais Pereira, in 1752 about the crops cultivated at Marangue and the commerce from there into the surrounding bush.³⁶ During the course of time other *prazos* were acquired, and some idea of their extent can be gained from the list given by António Pinto de Miranda in his "Memória Sobre a Costa de Africa" which he wrote about 1766.³⁷ This shows that in Quelimane they had two *prazos*. In Sena they had Caia which António da Conceição found poor and which was poor in 1766,³⁸ and Chemba. In Tete they had six *prazos* in Portuguese territory and seven referred to as in *serras de fatiota*, that is, in the territory of native rulers.

Taking Zambezia as a whole, they were among the prominent landholders, but were far and away from being the greatest. These were among the *prazo* holders of Sena, where, for example, Dona Inez de Almeida Castelo Branco held the *prazos* of Gorongoza and Chirimgoma, either of which would have been sufficient to swallow up all the Jesuit *prazos* put together.

However, while the Jesuits had seventeen *prazos*, the Dominicans had at most seven and they were all small. So they could not rely on them to the same extent, and when royal support failed them they were forced to become traders, with the consequences we have seen. The Jesuits, on the other hand, had a sufficiency.

Whilst the Jesuits were not pre-eminent in their holding of land, they were in the number of slaves possessed; no less than 5,100. Only Dona Inez de Almeida Castelo Branco with her huge *prazos* at Gorongoza and Chirimgoma had more.

The Dominicans only had 1,400. It must be emphasised that this was only domestic slavery. At this period there was little overseas slave trade in Zambezia. The few who were deported had been condemned to it as a punishment for some crime, and the prospect was so loathed that sometimes they preferred to be condemned to death and even committed suicide to escape it.

In Zambezia the slave was fairly sure of being protected and fed, and that meant much, because for the contemporary African murder and starvation were far more real than were the political theories of Locke and Rousseau. Some became slaves voluntarily. Mauriz Thoman thought that the work imposed on them was not very heavy; indeed, ten times less so than that imposed on the peasantry of Europe. Their master had to treat them with some consideration, because flight was easy and recovery impossible.³⁹

The missionary had a strong reason for having as many slaves (perhaps, indeed, they had better be called dependants) as possible, because in this way he could hope to build up self-contained Christian communities. He would teach and direct; they would provide the labour from which the produce would come, which would feed all alike. We can see a coherent and intelligible plan. Inevitably it was said that the Jesuits piled up riches, notably by Inácio Caetano Xavier and later by Captain Nunes, the great-grandson of the man who got orders from Pombal to arrest the Jesuits and who met Livingstone.⁴⁰ But, as Lobato says, their wealth could not be realised. It took the form of buildings, *prazos* and well-behaved, well-disposed Africans.⁴¹ This accords with what was said by Mauriz Thoman, one of the Jesuits expelled in 1759, that when their property was seized all the money that was found was 3,000 guilders (about £250) at Sena, the Mission headquarters, and debts in all the other houses.⁴²

In short, there would appear to have been in the Jesuit *prazos* good conditions for missionary work. Africans fairly permanently settled, adequate but not super-abundant material resources, missionaries who made good attempts to master the language, who opened a school at Sena and who were never reproached with lack of devotion. Yet the failure was almost complete. In 1777 the number of Christians in Sena, Tete and

Quelimane was stated to be 249, 478 and 163 respectively.⁴³ Numbers had certainly gone down since the expulsion of the Jesuits eighteen years before, but even if we assume that they had gone down by half we are left with only 1,780. Clearly only a small proportion even of the 5,100 slaves in the Jesuit *prazos* were Christians.⁴⁴ How are we to account for this almost complete failure after 150 years?

Climate and sickness played their part, as did the consequent lack of permanency among the missionaries, who either gave up their lives or returned to India to save them. But more important than anything was that the Africans seemed impervious to Christian teaching. Missionary after missionary repeated that they would accept baptism readily enough, but would soon give up living as Christians. In particular they would not give up polygamy. Christianity had not sufficient appeal for them. They had little of the sense of sin which as the Psalms show so penetrated the Jews of old. After death their spirits could expect continual association both with living members of their family and with other family spirits like themselves. So the Gospel fell on deaf ears. It demanded much and seemed to offer so little.

Theologically this is sound enough. The Gospel is to be preached to all men, but it is for God to decide when they shall listen to it. He gave His revelation to the Jews through Moses; but the Gentiles were left outside. Their day came after Pentecost. We do not know whether the twentieth century is to be for Africa what the first three centuries were for the peoples of Europe. But we do know that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were not, and according to human judgment could not have been.

It must finally be added that owing to our conduct of human affairs it is the bad that tends to get reported, so that it may be remedied. The good is taken for granted. We hear of Frei Nicolau de S. José scaling the walls of a house to run away with the Monomotapa's daughter. We do not hear of the dozens who, lonely and remote, away from all familiar comforts, often ill with fever, struggled with little-known languages in the Zambezi heat to teach Christ to those who understood Him so little. Only if that could be known would our idea of the old Zambezi Mission be a true one.

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35. SCHEBESTA, p. 161.

36. LOBATO, p. 137. PEREIRA, M. 1752 "Memórias da Costa d'Africa Oriental" MS No. 826 Fundo Geral, Lisbon, National Library. This document was published as anonymous by ANDRADE, pp. 189-224, and in *Anais*, 1954, 9, 217-249; but LOBATO, pp. 137, 138, 145 identifies the author as Morais Pereira. *Comércio* may mean no more than sale of what was grown or made on the property; it would therefore not constitute trade as defined, and condemned, by Canon Law, namely, the purchase of commodities so as to sell them unchanged at a higher price.
37. Printed by ANDRADE, pp. 231-302. There are at least two other published lists of *prazos* dating from the same period: "Relação das Terras que possuem os moradores estabelecidos nos Rios de Sena" printed in *Anais*, 1954, 9, and another in the book published by the Portuguese Government in 1890, *Memória e Documentos acerca dos Direitos de Portugal aos Territórios Machona e Nyassa*. Pinto de Miranda's list is the fullest and is followed here.
38. ANDRADE, p. 258.
39. THOMAN, M. 1788 *Reise und Lebensbeschreibung*, Augsburg, Matthaues Riegers sel. söhnen, p. 138.
40. LIVINGSTONE, *Missionary Travels in South Africa*, p. 643.
41. LOBATO, p. 56.
42. *IBID.*, p. 138.
43. HOPPE, pp. 74-75.
44. It has recently been claimed that Pinto de Miranda's figures of the number of slaves in the *prazos* are certainly exaggerated by at least half, NEWITT, M. D. D. 1969 "The Portuguese on the Zambezi: an Historical Interpretation of the Prazo System." *J. Afr. Hist.*, 10, 77. This would give a more favourable picture of the Jesuit missionary effort; but it does not upset the general conclusion that its success was very limited.

