MISSIONARIES AND ANTHROPOLOGY: THE CASE OF THE SCOTS OF NORTHERN MALAWI

BY

PETER G. FORSTER
(University of Hull, England)

It is here proposed to examine the Scottish missions and their contribution to the ethnography of the Ngoni, Tumbuka and Tonga of northern Malawi. This case-study will be preceded by some general considerations regarding the relationship between missionaries and anthropologists. Particular concern will be given to changes in perspective over time.

General Considerations

It might be anticipated initially that Social Anthropology, with its Enlightenment origins, would mix uneasily with missionary work. Rationalist commitments have been very common among anthropologists; traditional religion might be admitted to have a social function, but the same would not be likely to be said of Christianity imported from the West. Yet there has been evidence of individuals such as Edwin Smith, who have successfully spanned the anthropological and missionary tradition; moreover the journal Africa was partly a missionary foundation. Missionaries became increasingly interested in anthropology in the 1920s; this was particularly evident at the International Conference on the Christian Mission in Africa at Le Zoute (Het Zoute) in Belgium in 1926. By this time conversions were becoming more numerous, but missions still saw church discipline as problematic, and anthropology was seen as a source of possible preventative measures; moreover, "adaptation" to African tradition was to become the watch-word for the future.

In practice, too, missionaries have had to develop a much closer relationship with Africans than most other Europeans in Africa were prepared to contemplate; in particular they had to avoid total absorption into the "Environmental Bubble" (Cohen 1977: 16)
where most expatriates tend to congregate. (Even today Europeans travelling on low-status transport in Africa are frequently assumed to be missionaries.) Missionaries were usually obliged to learn the local language, and knowledge of it had to be sufficiently sophisticated to make sense of Biblical notions. The missionary usually had the advantage even over the anthropologist of a long period of stay.  

These factors led to provision by missionaries of written accounts of the people around them. There was, however, often a premium upon distortion. An appearance of degradation could encourage support (especially financial) for the mission more effectively than could a more accurate account; missionary meetings at home could be a form of entertainment at a time of fewer alternatives; while "muscular Christianity" and assumptions of divine protection were other sources of distortion. An important consideration in examining missionary accounts is the question of the balance between discussion of the activities of mission staff and of the customs of the local population. (Thornton, 1983.)

Where the attempt at ethnography was made, certain preoccupations were in evidence. Beliefs were an obvious source of interest, but the attitude of the missionary to them could be complex. Religion as such was not an aberration to missionaries, but pagan religion usually was: though some aspects of it might be seen as a foundation upon which Christianity could usefully build. More problematic still is the case of magic and witchcraft; here perhaps the agnostic is better able than the Christian believer to concede to them some social function. Particular condemnation was often reserved by missionaries for traditional medical practice, especially since some mission staff were qualified medical doctors: Livingstone seemed exceptional in his view that medical colleagues were to be respected (Ramsford 1978: 80). More often the traditional practitioner was seen as flouting Christian doctrine by being a magician, and medical theory by being a quack; and additionally he was a competitor for the mission hospital (Gelfand 1964: 307).

The missionary was in any case the agent of change, and Christianity is potentially critical of societies in which it is planted. Traditional social institutions can therefore receive critical attention, and this is especially true for marriage and family patterns. Polygamy is the obvious case in point, also various aspects of sexuality and even dancing. A further area of tension was beer-