SECULAR AND SACRED AT CHIKUNI: 1905-1940

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INTRODUCTION

 Writers have spoken of mission stations in Africa both as cultural melting-pots and oases.¹ Such imagery generally implied that missionaries were often agents of social change as much by example as by explicit teaching or preaching. By their presence they communicated values and skills, especially where Africans attended their boarding schools.

 This article will describe the setting of a Jesuit mission, Chikuni, in southern Zambia, emphasizing the socio-cultural backgrounds of the missionaries in order to show how the Jesuits at Chikuni communicated Catholic values. By doing so, I do not wish to imply that the explicit teaching of the missionaries was unimportant. Rather, I shall argue that, at the beginning, material benefits constituted the main attraction to the mission. However, once someone had become part of the mission school, farm, or hospital, the day-to-day presence of the missionaries proved to be the main source of deeper commitment to the Christian way of life.

 The present article will propose that, while the local people were inspired by the example of the Chikuni missionaries, the Jesuits’ secular activities and their lifestyles created a paradoxical image in the minds of their converts. We shall see how, for example, they favoured the development of a prosperous peasantry through their educational endeavour. From the Jesuit perspective, the people would thereby preserve much of their traditional way of life and yet would profit from the economic developments which accrued from the expansion of the copper mines as well as the advent of the railway to Tongaland. Nonetheless, in the eyes of local Tonga, becoming prosperous peasantry was only a step on the way to more full scale modernity associated with industrialization. The mis-
sionaries themselves embodied many aspects of such modernity, yet they wished to limit African access to it. Their presence and activities contained an ambiguity that, as we shall indicate, had within it the seeds of a more integral social development that would foster self reliance.

The Modern/Traditional Dilemma

Fr. Moreau, a French Jesuit of peasant background, founded the Chikuni mission in 1905. From its beginning it had some form of school at its main centre and eventually it developed outschools. From 1926 onward, the main mission had about 70 students annually, both boys and girls. The highest level reached by the boys was Standard VII. The mission also included a 10,000 acre farm, and, from 1920, a convent and a small hospital. Between 1905 and 1940, Chikuni mission had a largely European administrative staff, although many Africans were employed as teachers, farm workers, and general assistants. The Europeans at the station were mostly Jesuits, though from 1920 onward there were four or five Notre Dame Sisters. From 1908, Fr. Moreau and the Jesuits living at Chikuni resided in a redbrick house. Materials for the Jesuit house had come from Bulawayo, as did the materials for the building of the church in 1911. The construction of European-type houses was hardly remarkable to the missionaries, but for Africans such buildings prompted amazement and emulation. Besides the red brick, zinc-roofed, buildings, the mission included mud-and-pole edifices which served as school rooms. All the buildings lay within a few hundred yards radius of the 1911 church tower whose bell sent forth:

... its summons, calling people to Mass, and thrice a day reminding them of the great mystery of Incarnation.3

While many Jesuits worked at Chikuni between 1905 and 1940, Fr. Joseph Moreau was the only one to span the whole period. He was superior of the mission during all this time and much of its atmosphere and character appears to have derived from him.4 One of Moreau's main educational aims was to develop a model farm. From his experience with this project he wrote a book in the vernacular on farming. As a priest, Moreau's primary purpose for being in Tongaland was evangelization, yet he did not view farm-