Maurice Briault, André Raponda Walker, and the Value of Missionary Anthropology in Colonial Gabon

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Scholars interested in colonial Africa have long turned to the ethnographic writings of missionaries as sources of information. Yet these sources immediately pose a series of difficulties. Anthropologists such as T.O. Biedelman have critiqued the ethnocentrism of missionaries and their collaboration with colonial regimes. Furthermore, as missionary anthropologist Sjaak van der Geest has asserted, “In the training of anthropologists, the image of the missionary is presented and ‘cherished’ as a deterrent, as an example of what an anthropologist should not be.” As Van der Geest and Jon Kirby demonstrated in their review of over 70 ethnographies written by secular anthropologists in the mid-twentieth century, Anglophone anthropologists rarely discussed missionaries, save in

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disparaging ways. Though no similar overview has been attempted on francophone ethnographies on Africa, there is little doubt that one would find similar results. French anthropologists active in Gabon such as George Balandier and André Mary rarely referred to missionary ethnographers, while the late Stanislaw Swiderski, an expert of Central Africa’s syncretic bwiti movements, detested missionaries as agents of European oppression.

Catholic missionary ethnography in Gabon during the colonial era as exemplified by the works of Maurice Briault and Andre Raponda Walker are analyzed in this article with the aim of sifting them for usable material from the point of view of contemporary Africanist historians, in spite of their datedness and particularly Briault’s French colonialist connections. Maurice Briault (1874-1953), a missionary in Gabon at the turn of the twentieth century, published a series of books that upheld the image of the wise French priest dragging reluctant Africans towards a confrontation with modernity. His works reached a wide audience in France, and he helped produce exhibits on African culture for Pope Pius XI and served as an expert on colonial matters in the Vichy era. His colleague André Raponda Walker (1871-1968), the first Gabonese priest whose research spanned a range of disciplines, actively promoted the idea of a Gabonese national identity through documenting the rich cultural heritage of Gabon. Their careers support the assertion of Peter Pels and Oscar Salemink that missionaries worked as ethnographers to create ethnic labels, ascertain social rights, and create support for missionaries among a wider public audience.

The writings and careers of the two men provide rich veins of material for understanding the lived worlds of Gabonese people in the early twentieth century. In particular, this essay reviews how Briault’s discussions of mission life expose the gendered struggles of Fang men and women to obtain

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6 On the 1925 exhibition for the Pope, see Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, A History of the Church in Africa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 629. Briault participated in a series of talks held under the auspices of the Pétainist Institut Maritime et Colonial during World War II. His lectures were published in La Mer et l’Empire, 3rd series (Paris: Ariane, 1945.)