2. A simple way of copying documents

SIMPLE DO-IT-YOURSELF MICROFILMING
A suggestion for IAMS members

At the U.S.A. African Studies Association meeting in Washington in 1982, Dr. Thomas Q. Reefe of the University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill) gave a paper on DIY microfilming using the kind of equipment most of us carry around on journeys anyway. The idea rang a bell with the DAB Core Group - we are in principle in favour of local church archives and above all against unique documents being "collected" by Western libraries and archives. A simple way of copying documents, which can even function where there is no electricity supply, sounds very attractive to us. Everyone can be helped by it. There is a much better chance for rare manuscripts to survive if they exist in more than one copy. Our Western institutions, where teaching and writing about Third World Churches can easily lose contact with reality, could gain an opportunity to build up documentation on local churches, while respecting the local churches' sound instinct that their documentation should remain in their own hands. Hence our summary of Dr. Reefe's suggestions in this number of Mission Studies.

1. The Essential Equipment for DIY Microfilming

(a) a 35 mm single-lens reflex camera, with a lens which can focus down to about 50 mm.

- "35 mm." refers to the type of film the camera takes - the standard rolls of strip-film 35 mm. broad. (This is the commonest type of film in use in cameras and fits the standard microfilm reader when developed).

- "reflex" refers to an arrangement of mirrors which allows the viewfinder to look out through the lens which takes the photograph. This means that you look through this lens directly at what you are going to photograph - i.e. you can see (a) that the camera is going to photograph everything you want photographed (no loss of the tops, sides or bottoms of pages) and (b) that the page is well in focus. It is extremely difficult to do accurate close-up photography using a camera with a separate view-finder.

- "a lens which can focus down to about 50 mm." allows you to get close enough to your document for good microfilming.

(b) an easily portable tripod

If you are a photographer who travels with an old-fashioned tripod, models can be bought which allow you to photograph vertically downwards. If you keep your luggage to a minimum you can buy a Pocket Clamp in the shape of a "G" to fix your camera to a chair or table, and this gives you an improvised tripod whenever you want to make microfilm. (The Pocket Clamp sold by our local photographers in Basel weighs 300 grams and is 14x8x4 cm in size).
(c) a cable release
(d) a supply of black and white film about ASA 100

2. The Method

If you like travelling light, you need no more equipment for microfilming. You find yourself, let's say, in a village pastor's house and looking at a document you would like to study yourself at leisure, and which in any case appears to have an intrinsic value which justifies making a copy.

So:

(a) you ask permission to make a copy (rarely refused, according to Dr. Reefe even in national archives in countries like Zaïre and Cameroon)

(b) you set up your equipment not in direct sunlight, but in uniform light shade

(c) if you are using a Pocket Clamp to make a chair or table your tripod, remember that it is probably easier to adjust the height of the document than the camera (lay the document on a board with bricks or books underneath)

(d) the important thing is to make sure the document is as flat as possible, and as far as possible vertically underneath the lens. I.e. no side of the document should be further away from the lens than another. But remember: your object is to produce readable not perfect microfilm. However: when checking the focussing through the view-finder pay especial attention to the margins of the document.

(e) the cable-release is important, because it causes the minimum of "shake" when the photographs are taken

(f) with this method you can photograph 2 pages of a document simultaneously (i.e. the left- and right-hand pages) unless the format is enormous. So that a routine 36-exposure film can photograph a 60-page document plus title-page and index; and even a 2-300 page document uses only 4-5 films.

(g) if you start filming a lot some sort of simple technique is necessary to keep order. Write each new film a new title, for instance, which you photograph with the first exposure. Or repeat the last exposure of the film you have just ended on the first take of the new film.

(h) at the end you have a negative on your developed film - but many of us work happily with white print or writing on a black ground, which is what you get if you put your developed film in a microfilm reader. In Europe or North America duplicating microfilm of this kind should present no problems.

3. Some further thoughts

(a) Puritans among us may ask if a single-lens reflex camera is not too much of a luxury consumer article to be carrying when visiting