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A FRESH LOOK AT THE RURAL ASPECTS OF THE HISTORY OF THE
BASEL MISSION, 1860-1914, THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHS

I

Since the late 1970s we have become increasingly conscious in Basel of the
potential importance of the collection of photographs in the Archive. At a rough
estimate there are 20,000 of these, 85-90% of which record Third World scenes,
well over a third of them from Cameroon and Ghana/Togo (in a proportion of
3:2).

The earliest photographs in the collection date from ca. 1860. (Timothy
Garrard has recently identified the photographers who contributed to our
collection from Ghana and Togo in the 1860s as Wilhelm Locher of the Basel
Mission and Christoph Hornberger of the Bremen Mission.)

For organizational reasons the Archive collection of photographs ends with
the years after World War II. The photographs from the 1860s and 1870s are
restricted in number. But a lot of photography went on in the Basel Mission in
the decades before World War I, and this is probably the most important part
of the collection.

The Mission's interest in photographic images was not primarily scientific.
As a result the documentation of individual photographs (recording of date,
place, photographer, subject) is often very inadequate. Nevertheless Christ-
traud Geary and Timothy Garrard have shown that the intensive study of the
photographs from a specific area plus collation of what documentation we have
can result in a very much enhanced identification of individual photographs.
(By collating the BM collection with other series of photographs from the
German colonial period in the Cameroonian Kingdom of Bamum Christraud
Geary has established that several photographers were present at one and the
same festival ca. 1910, taking photographs of the same events from different
angles ...)

Efforts to improve the standard of cataloguing and documentation con-
tinue.

II

The photographic collection in the Basel Mission Archive can, of course,
serve as a resource for research on a number of topics in African history - i.e.
in the history of the areas of West Africa in which the Basel Mission worked.
An introductory essay on this theme was published recently in African Arts
(Jenkins & Geary: Photographs from Africa in the Basel Mission Archive, in: African
The series of photographs to be shown on this occasion, however, is primarily focused on Mission History - and not even in the first instance on African Church History. The photographs are taken not only from our collection, but also from five collections in Switzerland and Southern Germany which offer photographs of rural life in central Europe before 1914 - the Archiv für Denkmalpflege in Bern; the Herzog collection in Basel; the Landesbildstellen in Stuttgart and Karlsruhe; and the Sammlung Scherer (Thomas Weiss) in Ravensburg. They are presented as a photographic essay on the theme "Villagers as missionaries" - the suggestion that up to 1914 the experience of growing up in a traditional central European village played a major role in determining both the objectives of these missionaries and the kind of general impact they had.

Naturally, looking at photographs cannot replace the quantitative analysis which is at the heart of social history writing. This presentation continues a line of research on whose documentary basis I reported at the ASAUK Conference in Oxford in 1978 (see Missiology, 1980, 425-432 Villagers as Missionaries – Württemberg Pietism as a 19th century missionary movement). This paper offered the hypothesis that:

- the great majority of Basel missionaries right up to the end of the 19th century had grown up in a traditional village milieu;

- villages in this sense were small communities with a strong subsistence element in their economies and no "safety net" outside the village when the crops failed; and places where the traditional technology lived in symbiosis with a still-traditional agriculture.

The evidence for treating this hypothesis as serious is partly circumstantial. Basel Missionaries came primarily from the German state of Württemberg (and to a lesser extent from Baden) where industrialization, defined as substantial changes in patterns of production or consumption which embraced broad segments of society, only occurred with the "second industrial revolution" (electricity, chemicals, the petrol engine) from ca. 1900.

In the Basel Mission Archives it is above all the curriculum vitae (Lebensläufe), in which the young men applying to join the Mission describe the course of their lives and their reasons for regarding themselves as called to be mission-