

Communications from the Field: Missionary Postcards from Africa

The postcard phenomenon

The “Postcard Era” was a distinct historical phenomenon occurring in the years between the Spanish-American War and the First World War. Postcard collecting was widespread in Europe by the turn of the century, and the fad had caught on fully in the United States by 1905. At its height, postcard collecting was the subject of considerable satiric commentary, including the following by John Walker Harrington, published in *American Magazine* in March 1906:

Postal carditis and allied collecting manias are working havoc among the inhabitants of the United States. The germs of these maladies, brought to this country in the baggage of tourists and immigrants, escaped quarantine regulations, and were propagated with amazing rapidity.... There is now no hamlet so remote which has not succumbed to the ravages of the microbe postale universelle.... Unless such manifestations are checked, millions of persons of now normal lives and irreproachable habits will become victims of faddy degeneration of the brain....¹

The earliest picture postcards produced in Europe were not legal for mailing purposes but this had changed by the mid-1890s. The *Post Card Dealer*, a trade journal in the U.S., reported that 1,161,000,000 postcards were sent through the mail in Germany in 1906. Figures for the same year in the United States and Britain were 770,500,000 and 734,500,000 respectively. An explanation for these phenomenal statistics is not hard to devise. Advances in printing technology had made high quality but relatively inexpensive postcards readily available to the public for the first time. Practical aspects of the late 19th and early 20th centuries further set the stage: interest in far off lands surged as improved transportation and communication increasingly facilitated travel to far corners of the earth; the world scene was largely free from wars. As noted in Ian McDonald’s work *The Boer War in Postcards*:

The postcards were more than just pictures. They were a leap into the world of wider communication which has been such a feature of our own century. They suddenly made people more aware of the world around them...²

Postcards that offered visual evidence of missionary work overseas were part of a larger trend that catered to the West’s fascination with distant lands. In an essay in the book *Delivering Views : Distant Cultures in Early Postcards*, Christraud Geary notes that

In the second half of the nineteenth century physical and cultural anthropology emerged as major academic disciplines that also bolstered expansionist and colonizing efforts. Photography soon became one scientific means to document and survey all aspects of societies that had come under colonial domination.... Postcards helped to perpetuate and encode images of Africa, and they greatly appealed to the Western imagination.³

In many ways, the illustrations on missionary postcards were similar to engravings of scenes and individuals that had long appeared in missionary books and magazines, but the accessibility and novelty of the postcard medium added new dimension.

The function of missionary postcards

Postcards depicting missionary scenes generally were not utilized for direct communication from missionaries in the field to supporters at home, nor were they typically acquired at the sites that they depict. Rather, the postcards were produced by mission sending agencies and distributed throughout Europe and America as a means of gaining publicity and garnering support. As Kathryn T. Long of Wheaton College has noted in her article "Cameras 'never lie': The Role of Photography in Telling the Story of American Evangelical Missions":

In short, picture postcards carried on the range of tasks that missionaries traditionally had engaged in while home on furlough. Just as missionaries visited churches to tell about missions, to recruit others to join the missionary cause, and to elicit prayer and funds, so, too, picture postcards were to accomplish the same things when they arrived in the mailbox of a church or a Christian home.⁴

Messages on the backs of postcards in the Yale Divinity Library collection indicate that people used them in the everyday life to exchange ordinary greetings and information. While the majority of the missionary postcards in the Library's collection are blank, the handwritten message on the postcard in Figure 1 is typical of those that do exist. Addressed to Miss Etta Wolcott of Somers, Connecticut, April 28, 1911, it reads:

I found this card at "The World" exposition in Boston. Do you think we could teach at a school like this? My aunt is about over the grip but she is miserable in some ways still, and is likely to be all her life. We have suffered with the cold but it is warm now. I have been in town to the stores only once. A.C.K.



Figure 1

The majority of the missionary postcards in the Divinity Library collection date from the 1910s through the 1920s, somewhat past the height of postcard mania, but coinciding with a post World War I surge in mission interest, which was reflected in increasing numbers of missionaries being sent overseas. The suitability of the postcard medium for publicizing mission activity was clear. Visual images of the missionaries, the people they sought to reach, and their physical context could not help but arouse interest among the public and generate the financial support crucial to the missionary movement.

Postcards utilized techniques of "marketing" or persuasion to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the agency producing them. Postcards produced by nondenominational and faith mission agencies, as opposed to mainline church missions agencies, often took a more pointed approach toward gathering support for their work. The device of invoking missionary icon

David Livingstone in early 20th century appeals is illustrated in Figures 2 and 3. As Andrew Ross has noted, Livingstone was an emblem for missionary endeavor in British and American culture; biographies of Livingstone headed the “best-seller list” of the missionary biography industry that supplied the school and Sunday school prizes of late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain. The Livingstone postcard in Figure 2 was produced by an organization called “Missionary Helps” in Liverpool. Small print indicates that this organization had postcards on twenty different subjects available for purchase.

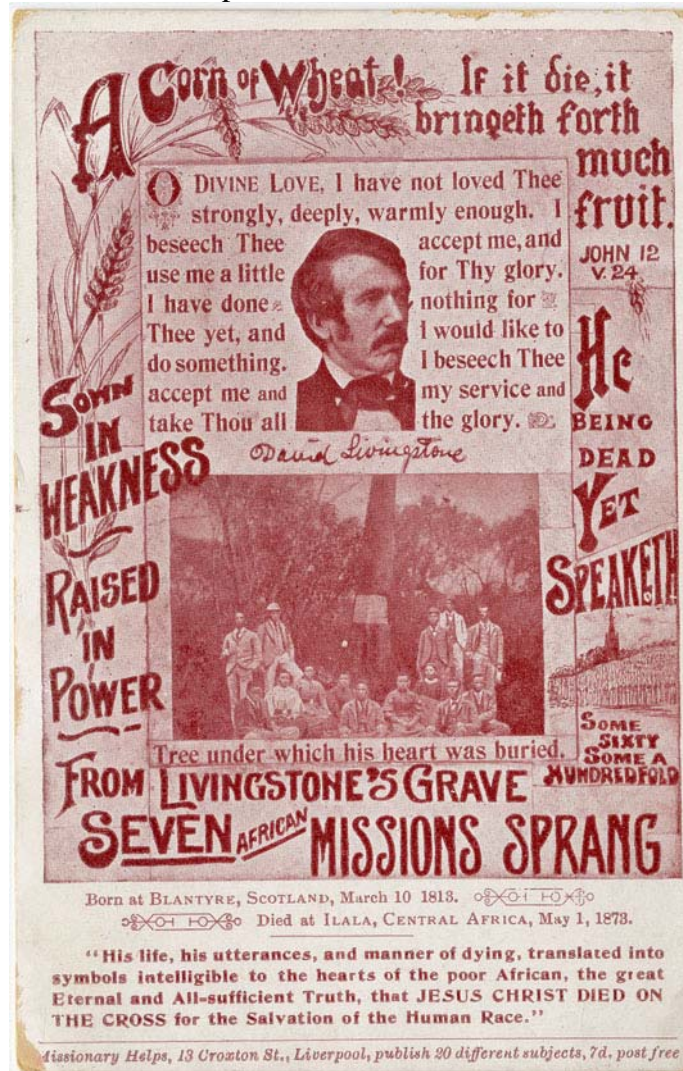


Figure 2

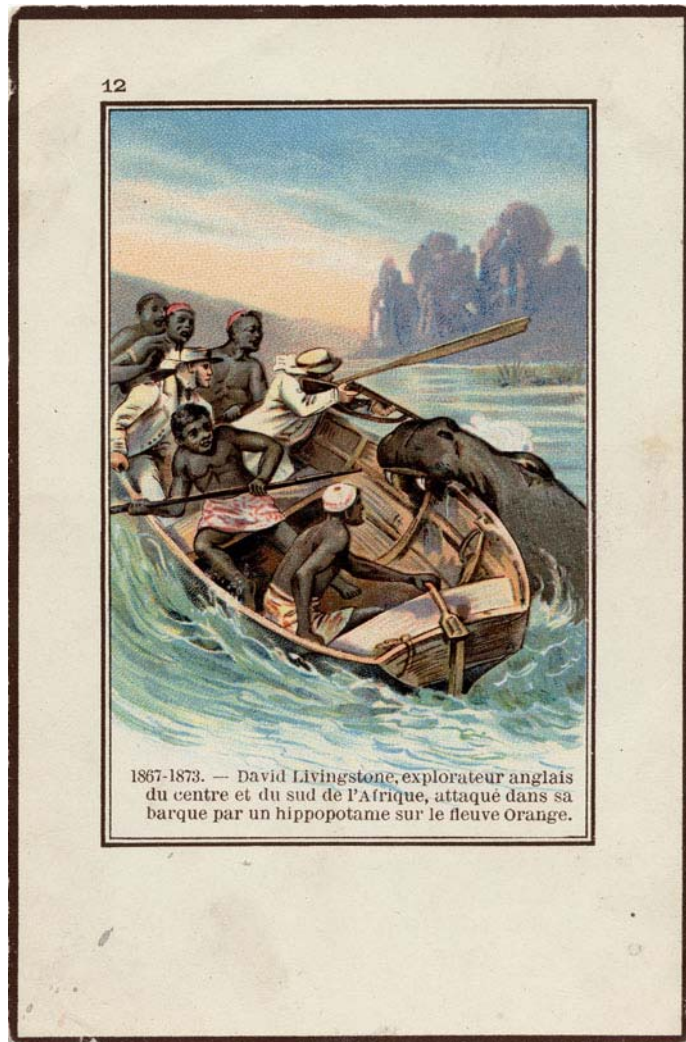


Figure 3

The missionary exhibitions popular in the late 19th and early 20th century were convenient points of distribution for missionary postcards. The “Official Handbook to the Missionary Loan Exhibition and Sale of Work in the Town Hall, Oxford, from October 23rd to 28th, 1899” with its description of “Courts” containing “specimens of Native Dress, Ornaments, Pictures, Weapons, Idols, and other images of interest, illustrative of the daily life and customs, Religions, Arts and Industries of the different races in [various countries]...” illustrates the scope and flavor of such exhibitions. Such items, along with the postcards, provide a glimpse of how the missionary movement provided a window on non-Western cultures for the Western public. The postcard in Figure 4 portraying “a group of Lokele natives” is an example of a postcard specifically produced for distribution by the East Midland Baptist Association in connection with the Congo Exhibition held in Leicester, November 12-18, 1928.



Figure 4

While most missionary postcards were acquired in Europe or America, at least one in the library's collection was actually written and sent from the location pictured. The message on the back of the postcard in Figure 5 reads:

26 Oct 1916

Dear Ina,

I have been traveling about with my hubby for past 6 weeks & most of the time by motor car. Yesterday I visited & spent the day at Lovedale Mission. Mr. Kirkland would have enjoyed it, I'm sure. It is a hive of activity....



Figure 5

The Lovedale Mission, founded by Scots in 1841, was renowned for its educational work, drawing students from a wide geographical area. A publicity pamphlet issued by Lovedale in the 1940s describes how Lovedale became a “tourist attention”:

...[Few] spots have come so much into the limelight as has Lovedale. Few are more frequently visited by tourists, insomuch that through Lovedale’s gates a continual stream of men and women – a large number of them distinguished in various walks of life – pass each year. By many, a tour in South Africa is reckoned incomplete without a call at this historic spot.

Portrayals of indigenous peoples

While many of the postcards in the library’s collection seem designed primarily to publicize the producing mission agency’s work, other serve to provide information about non-Western peoples and customs. Postcards of the Basel Mission work in Cameroon and Ghana (Gold Coast) are particularly interesting for their illustration of indigenous customs (Figures 6 – 7.) The Evangelische Missionsgesellschaft in Basel was a major missionary force in West Africa and had an early interest in photographic depiction of its work. Established in 1815, the Basel Mission was an outgrowth of a revival movement that began in Britain, influenced the continent, and led to the formation of pietistic circles. The Mission undertook notable educational and industrial work in Ghana and Cameroon, including the establishment of the first cocoa plantation in the Gold Coast.



Figure 6

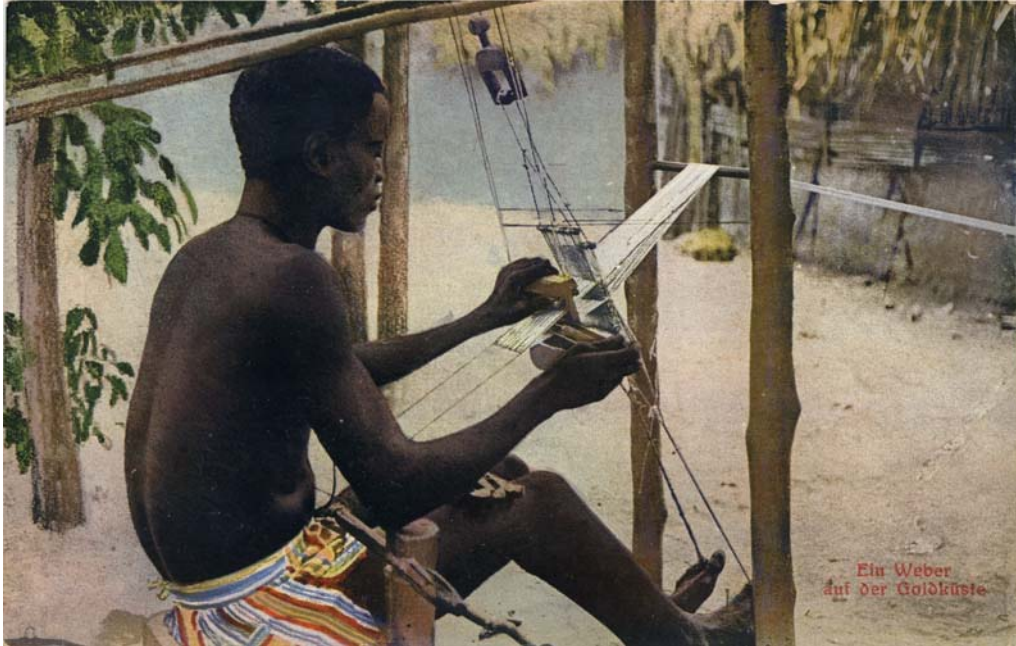


Figure 7

In his article “The Earliest Generation of Missionary Photographers in West Africa and the Portrayal of Indigenous People and Culture,” Paul Jenkins indicates that photographs were made by a Basel Mission missionary as early as 1857. As Jenkins notes, it is not surprising that mission agencies took an early interest in photography considering their aims and goals:

[Missionary societies] are in one sense communications systems linking people in the West with situations in the non-western world, and depending on the financial commitment of their supporters at home. A change in communications technology would be likely to interest at least some of them....⁵

Postcards in the library’s collection illustrate various points on a spectrum of photographic subjects described by Paul Jenkins, from sensitive portrayal of indigenous ways to glorification of the westernization of indigenous peoples.

Christraud Geary notes that postcards were often used to point out to home supporters what a stark contrast there was between Africans in their natural state and Africans who had been Christianized and civilized by the mission effort. Geary writes:

An obvious visual characteristics of many mission postcards is the contrast between dark and light, with the missionary father or the nuns, often clad in white, being the white/light (thus “pure”) protagonists, and the missionary charges presenting a distinct difference in clothing and race. Beyond the juxtaposition of skin and clothing color, and by extension race, is the contrast evident in the composition of many images. Frequently the missionary or a missionary sister dominates the Africans from a privileged position by standing in the center of or towering over a group of students, or by being seated, surrounded by missionary pupils. This common iconographic convention reinforces the centrality of the missionary, the hierarchy between the knowing and the unknowing, and thus the ultimate superiority of the whites.⁶

Postcards documenting Protestant missions in Africa

As noted earlier, postcards had a particularly important role to play for the so-called faith missions, which depended on unsolicited donations for the continuation of their work. The

Africa Inland Mission, for example, had a policy against solicitation of either workers or funds, but the Mission clearly needed to have its work made known to the public who could provide support; their postcards were designed to elicit a response, not just to inform. The Africa Inland Mission had its beginning in 1892 when Peter Cameron Scott felt called to establish a nondenominational mission that would operate on the principle of designated support, allowing donors to choose which workers and areas would receive their support. The Mission began its work in Kenya Colony shortly after the turn of the century, spreading into the Congo by 1912, then Uganda, the Central African Republic and the Sudan. (Figure 8)



Figure 8

One of the earliest faith missions, The Regions Beyond Missionary Union, had its origins in the East London Institute for Home and Foreign Mission established by H. Grattan Guinness in 1878. Its first field of work was in the area of the Congo River, in central Africa. This mission was first known as the Livingstone Inland Mission, and after 1888, as the Congo Balolo Mission. When the Mission began it was thought that it could be completely self-supporting, funded by the commercial activities of a series of Christian colonies along the Congo River, but this scheme did not work out and the Mission remained dependent on funds from its home base.

The Regions Beyond Missionary Union postcards pictured in Figures 9-10 are distinctive for their condescending captions. One, portraying a “mother’s meeting on the Congo”, reads: “Naturally, a Congo woman in her primitive condition does not attach much importance to the art of needlework, and the lady missionaries of the Congo Balolo Mission consider they have accomplished something when they can persuade her to learn sewing.”

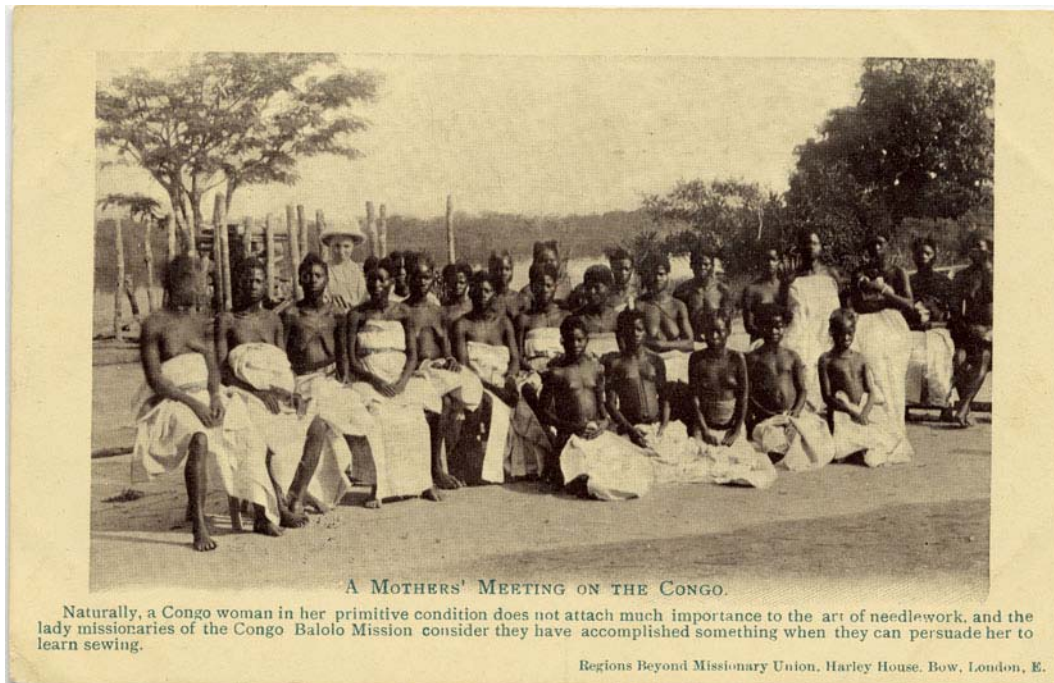


Figure 9

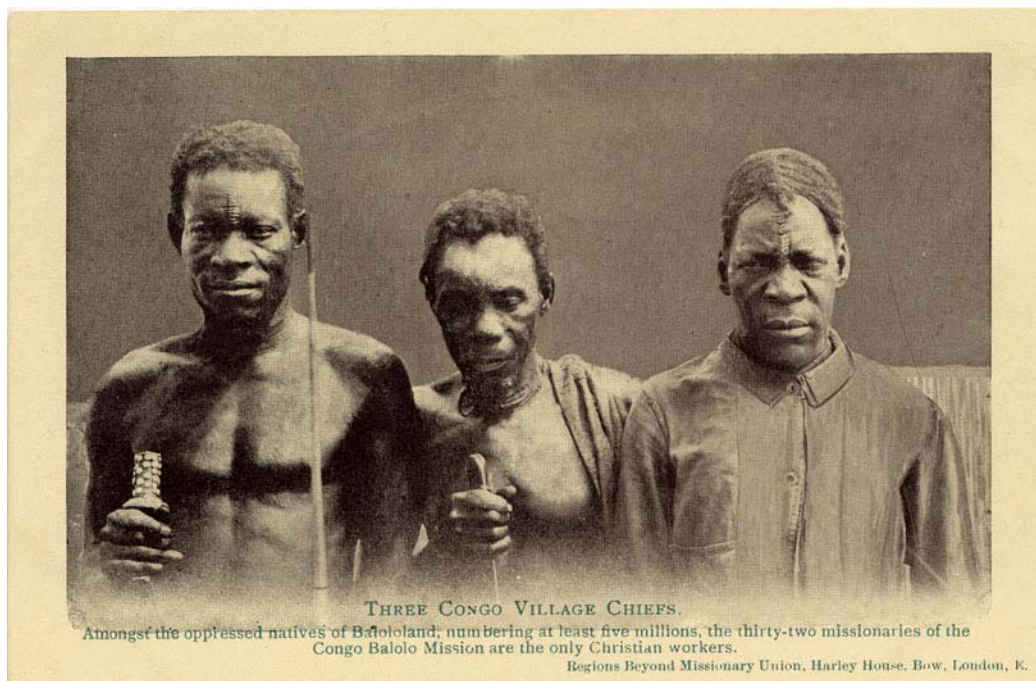


Figure 10

The postcards pictured in Figures 11-13, of a homegrown variety, were prepared to publicize the work of Edward Hodgson and the Congo Evangelistic Mission, a Pentecostal mission established in 1915 by an assembly in Preston, England. It was the Congo Evangelistic Mission's policy never to appeal for money, rather depending on God for support, but their postcards and publications could certainly be characterized as oblique appeals.



Figure 11



Figure 12

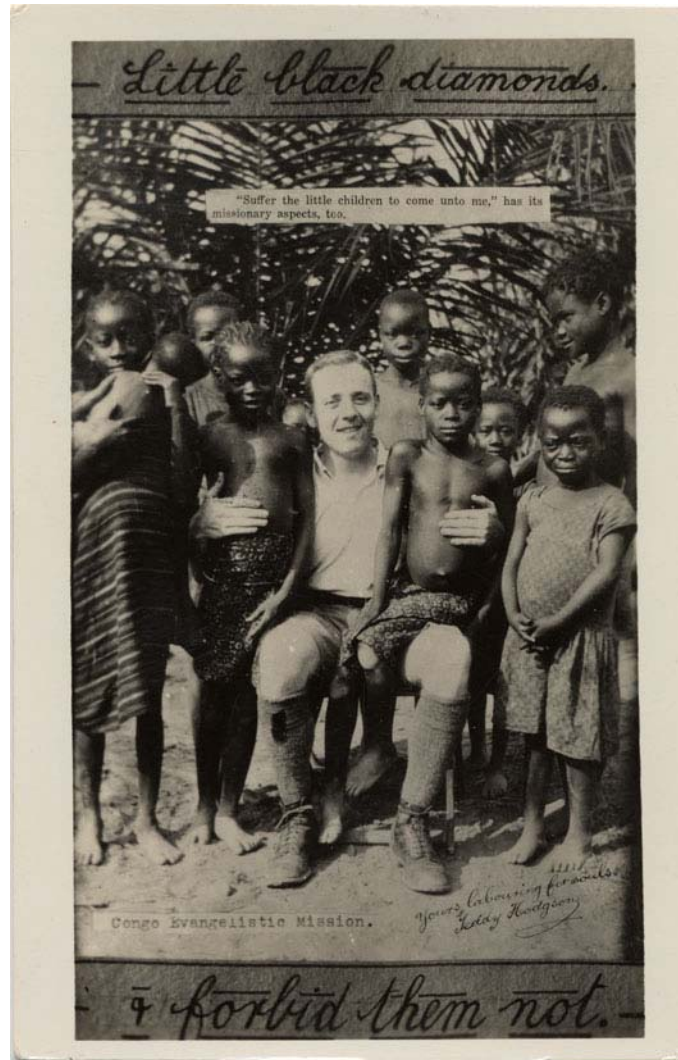


Figure 13

The “mainline” Protestant mission agencies in Britain and America also produced postcards documenting their work in Africa. The postcards in Figures 14-15 document work of the Universities’ Mission to Central Africa. This mission traced its origins to David Livingstone’s visits to the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge in 1857, when he challenged the students to carry on the work he had begun in Central Africa. Oxford and Cambridge, joined by the Universities of London and Durham, responded to Livingstone’s appeal, but it was soon realized that the Mission should be an integral part of the Church of England mission work, not an independent venture. Early efforts of the Mission to reach tribes in the neighborhood of Lake Nyasa were much hindered by tribal wars and the devastation of the slave trade, but at length it was successful in establishing work in Tanzania, Zambia, and Malawi. In 1965 the Universities’ Mission merged with the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts to form the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.

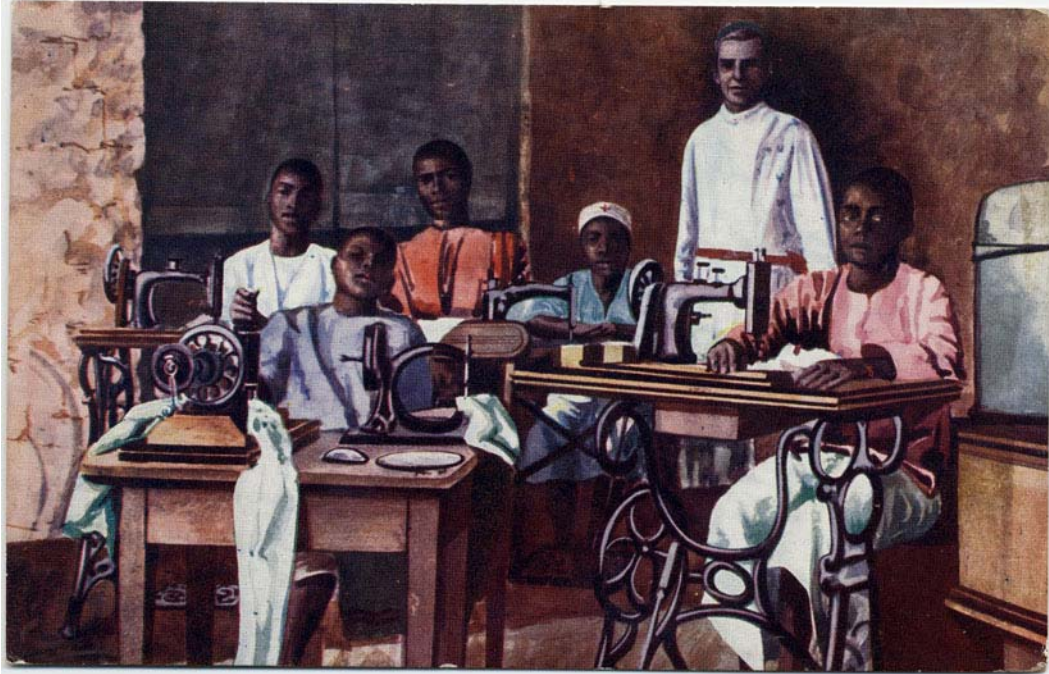


Figure 14

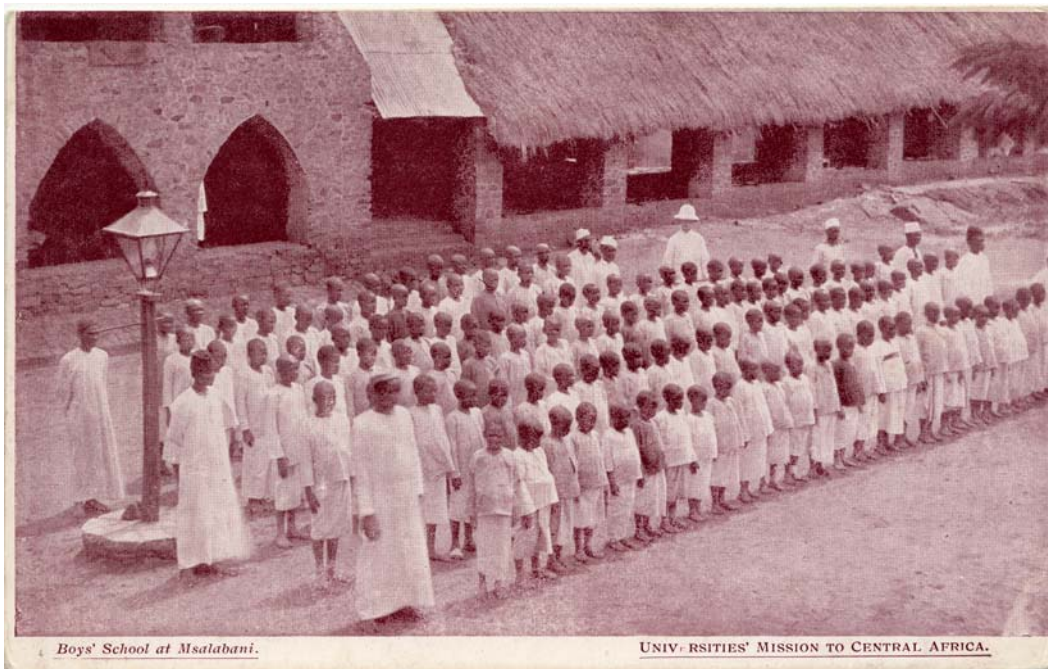


Figure 15

The Church Missionary Society, representing the evangelical wing of the Anglican church, was established in 1799 as The Society for Missions in Africa and the East. Its work in Africa was concentrated in Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and the Sudan. Figure 16 shows a caravan of CMS missionaries.



Figure 16

Personalized postcards shown in Figures 17-18 publicize the work of Rev. and Mrs. John M. Springer, American Methodist missionaries in Central Africa. The message on one, addressed to Pearl Van Wagoner of Valparaiso, Indiana, reads: "The Mission Study Class will meet at the church Friday 4 p.m. Be sure to come. Sincerely, Mrs. Putnam."



Figure 17



Figure 18

Postcards documenting Catholic missions in Africa

The majority of the postcards in the library's collection document the extensive and complex web of Catholic missions in Africa. Protestant and Catholic mission agencies in Africa were antagonists, each with their own segment of home supporters. The differences between Protestant and Catholic mission work in Africa are too complex for discussion in this context, but the following passage from T. O. Beidelman's work *Colonial Evangelism: A Socio-historical Study of an East African Mission at the Grassroots* provides a glimpse of the contrasts, some of which are evident in the selection of postcards available at the library:

A C.M.S. missionary once confronted a Roman Catholic priest from Ilong (just southeast of Ukaguru) with the fact that while the Catholics did have 440 converts (far more than the handful in the C.M.S. at the time), only 20 were literate. The Protestant claimed this reflected shoddy standards. The priest retorted that one did not have to read to enter heaven. The C.M.S. could not conceive of conversion without literacy since they set such store on reading Scripture, especially the New Testament. Despite this, as the years passed, Roman Catholics developed impressive educational facilities while the C.M.S. fell behind. In large part, this change in Catholic policy toward literacy related to their quick response to the obvious demands for education set by colonial administrators, even when this might inhibit attention to evangelism... [The C.M.S.] demanded a radical alteration in Africans' lifestyle as a sign of grace and was unforgiving over serious moral lapses. Catholics set greater store in teaching the formal ideas and practices of the Church and expected occasional lapses which the institution of priestly confession was ordained to administer....⁷

The postcards in Figure 19-20 depict Catholic schools in Africa. Educational work was of primary importance to Catholic missions in Africa. As noted in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* article on mission work in Africa:

[missionaries] traveled through the bush country penetrating villages and parleying with native chieftains to win them to Christianity. This direct approach rarely succeeded.

Africans scarcely felt a need to change their religion, especially when this involved changed in morals such as the renouncing of polygamy. Confronted with the reticence of adults, missionaries had to address themselves to youth, and organize schools, especially boarding schools...



Figure 19

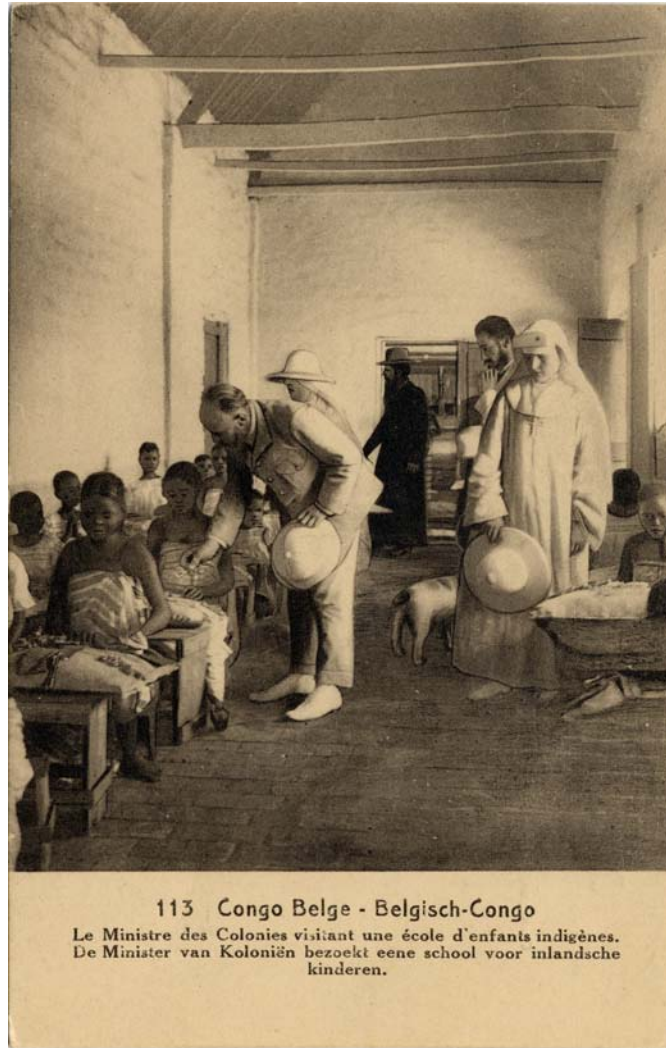


Figure 20

Shown following are samples from the library's collection of postcards documenting Catholic missions.

Figure 21-22 Cameroon: Postcards issued by the Holy Ghost Fathers, who took over work in the French sector of Cameroon following World War I focus somewhat more than those of other orders on indigenous custom.



Figure 21



Figure 22

Figures 23-24: Also from Cameroon, these curious postcards are of a more recent vintage.

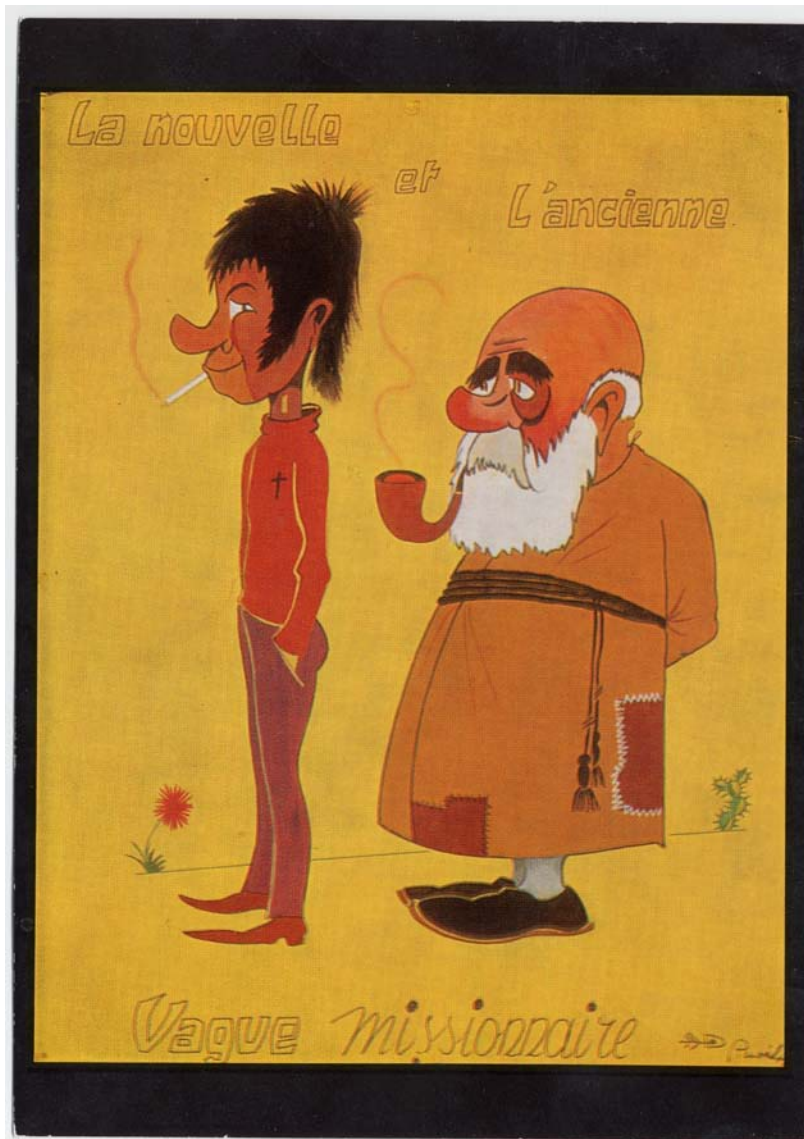


Figure 23

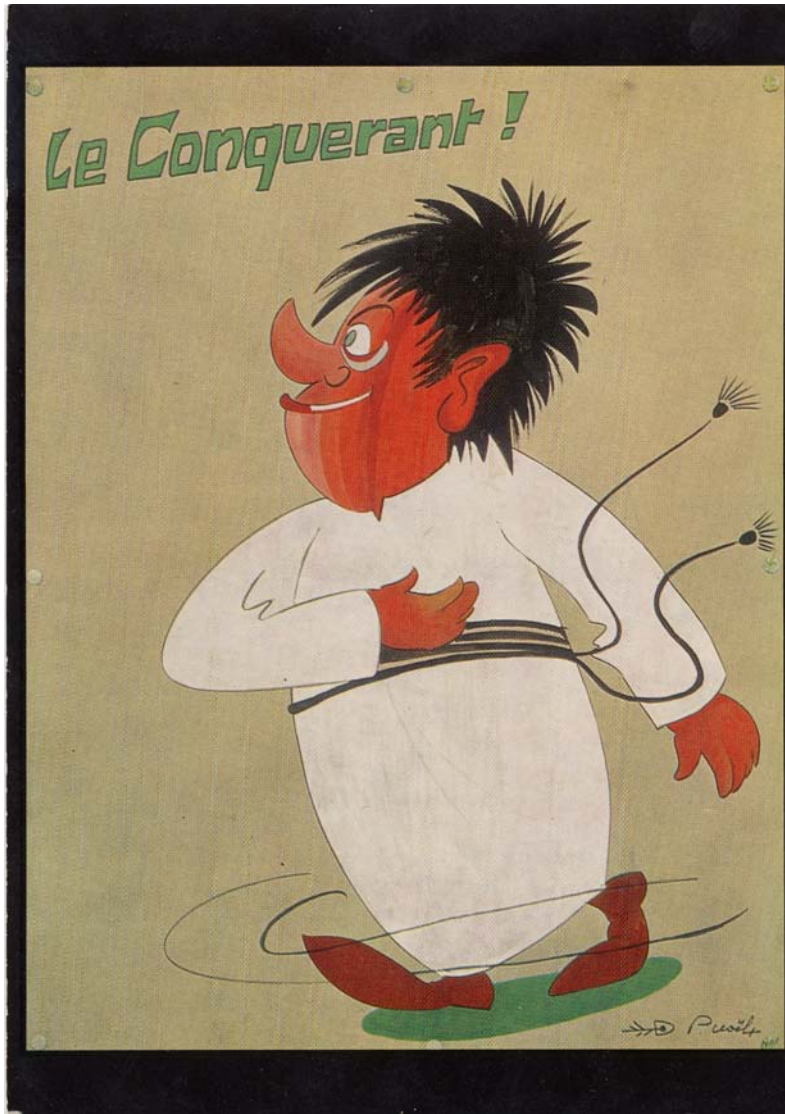


Figure 24

Figures 25-28: Togo. As in the case of Cameroon, Catholic missions in Togo changed hands in the aftermath of World War I. Togo was a German protectorate from 1884 to 1919 and then under French supervision until 1960. Beginning in 1892 most Catholic missionaries in Togo were German-born members of the Society of the Divine Word. These missionaries were deported after World War I and replaced by missionaries of the African Missions Society and various other congregations. In this case, the German postcards (Figures 25-26) focus on indigenous phenomena while the French postcards (Figures 27-28) primarily depict mission activities.



Figure 25



Figure 26



Figure 27

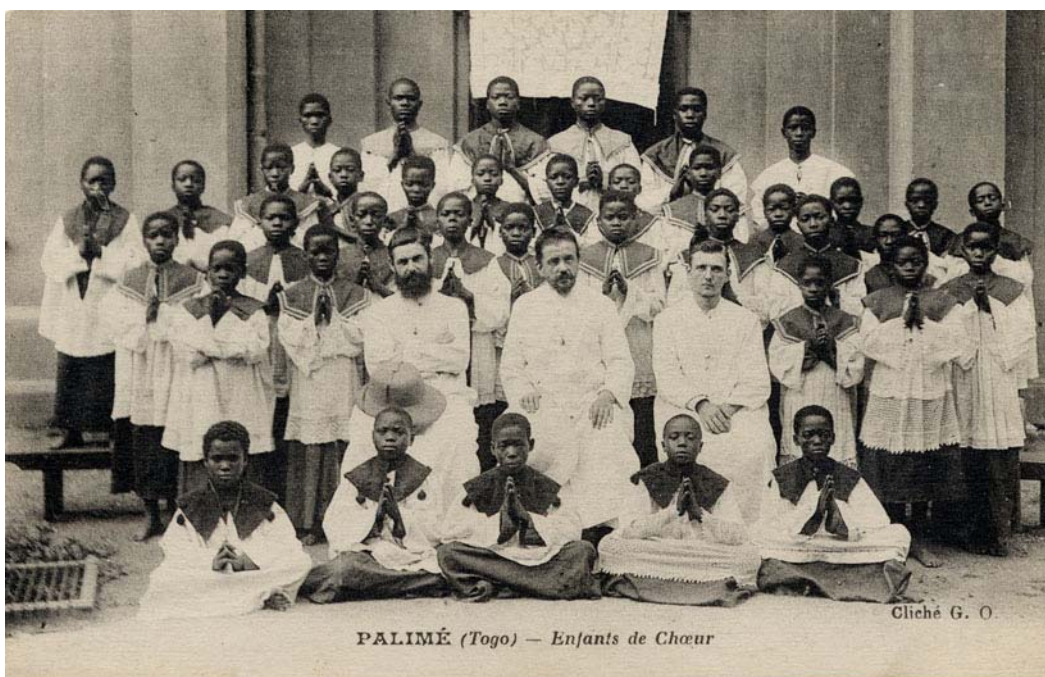


Figure 28

The images provided by missionary postcards give us an interesting glimpse into the Christian missionary enterprise and its impact on society. They illustrate the customs, methods, and technology disseminated by the missionaries, provide depictions of indigenous life, and shed light on the culture of the missionary enterprise in the early 20th century.

¹ John Walker Harrington, "Postal carditis and some allied manias" *American Illustrated Magazine* 61:5 (March 1906), p. 562.

² Ian McDonald. *The Boer War in Postcards*, (Mbabane, Swaziland: Bok Books International, 1990), p. x.

³ Christraud Geary. "Different Visions? Postcards from Africa by European and African Photographers and Sponsors" in *Delivering Views : Distant Cultures in Early Postcards* edited by Christraud Geary and Virginia-Lee Webb. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), p. 147.

⁴ Kathryn T. Long, "'Cameras 'never lie'": The Role of Photography in Telling the Story of American Evangelical Missions" *Church History* Dec2003, Vol. 72 Issue 4, p 820-851.

⁵ Paul Jenkins, "The Earliest Generation of Missionary Photographers in West Africa and the Portrayal of Indigenous People and Culture" *History in Africa* 20 (1993), pp. 89-118.

⁶ Geary, p. 151.

⁷ T.O. Beidelman, *Colonial Evangelism: a socio-historical study of an East African mission at the grassroots*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), pp. 88-89.