

Black Nuns in Africa

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by Elizabeth Power

I was teaching in a secondary school in ex-British Africa for fifteen months. The following article is written from notes I made while in Africa. The situation may have changed in the two years which have elapsed since I left. I would imagine that if anything, relations between white and black nuns will have deteriorated still further with the growing African sensitivity to racial undertones in white endeavour among black people.

When I arrived at the Mission, on the first evening, one of the teachers said as he showed me around, 'There is the convent for the white sisters and that other building is for the black sisters'. My immediate reaction was to be shocked that there should be two separate establishments, one white, one black. But there were several reasons for this separation. The African sisters formed a diocesan community under the local bishop. The Missionary sisters were directed from Europe, and theoretically were working for their own replacement by converting the Africans. Also there was the argument that the African sisters would never develop responsibility and independence if they joined an established European community. And it would be detrimental to the growth of the African church to have Africans in missionary orders, ready to move on to new fields, instead of staying after the Missionaries had left to consolidate the Church among their own people. I was also told that Africans were bashful and inhibited in front of Europeans. So the 'separate development' made good theoretical sense.

The next day outside the African convent I saw young girls in dusty black garb that looked like prison uniforms, bare feet, cropped hair, sweeping the long dusty road up to the school with branches from trees. None of them looked up when we went by and the Missionary sister explained, 'These African sisters really know how to work'. I was struck by the fact that the African sisters wore black and the missionaries wore white.

Later I used to see columns of these girls in the black outfit with hoes over their shoulder, marching down to the field to dig. They would set out in the early morning and dig through the day to evening without a break. Again it was explained with pride. 'They have their field ready sooner than any of the other Africans. They really work'. Then I would see two young black figures, black skins, black habits, carrying huge baskets on their head up to the Missionary

fathers' house. The baskets were full of white laundry. I asked the sisters why the missionaries wear white clothes . . . 'because they're cooler and look fresher in this dust and heat'. Black faces and dusty black gowns look grim.

But I soon discovered that these black rags were for working. For clean activities, the African nuns wore khaki gowns down to the ankles, khaki bonnets something like an eighteenth century milkmaid, a black apron and bare feet. They looked most odd.

As I stayed longer at the mission and became more familiar with the social structure, I picked up the refrain, 'Black people are not like us', which was used by the white sisters to explain such diverse phenomena as the obviously superior living conditions of the white missionaries over their black sisters, the long hours of heavy manual labour performed by the African nuns in the service of the white missionaries (laundry, baking, cultivating, cleaning, etc.), the much inferior dress of the African sisters, and so on.

All during this time, I was unable to make any contact with the African nuns at all. Whenever they were walking along the road they kept their eyes to the ground, never greeted the people they passed nor smiled. When I approached the ones who taught in the Girls' School, they seemed cowed and ashamed. I was to learn later that this was 'behaviour fitting of nuns' and that it was written into the constitution not to greet on the road, etc.

I used to tell the missionary sisters that I wanted to visit the African convent and after about six weeks I was invited to go there. The convent was enclosed by a high wall with a heavily bolted door. I rang the bell and a little black nun in the khaki opened. As soon as she saw me, she turned away, murmured hurriedly to come in and scampered out. I was puzzled since I had not even said what I wanted. In a few minutes a white nun bustled in, greeted me and said how delighted she was that I had come. I asked her what she did there. 'Well, I just help them run things until they can manage by themselves' . . . 'yes, the convent was begun in 1930, but they do take a long time to learn. Africans aren't like us. They need us to show them how to do things'.

Then she took me to the chapel. It was the beginning of December, and according to a European tradition, there was a very elaborate crib at the back of the church, representing a whole village scene, with a cave and the family of Jesus in the middle. The figures were all hand carved in Europe, and imported to Africa. The whole idea was foreign to the local people. The sister said with great pride, 'You see they can learn. They made the crib almost by themselves. Of course we helped a little and I supervised, but they are learning. When we began with them they wouldn't have known how to make a crib like that'.

She told me there were two missionary nuns living with the African sisters, herself and another. 'We must share with them if we

want to teach them.' I was surprised at this in view of the superior living conditions in the white convent. In fact, on questioning I learnt that they never ate with the African sisters – 'You know they don't eat like us and their diet is of maize and beans every day.' The African sisters sleep in long dormitories, but the two white sisters have single rooms on the floor above, 'otherwise we would never have any privacy'. And of course, they wear shoes, and white habits, and don't dig the fields. 'But we do live here and go to chapel with them, except for the Sancta Missa when we go home to our own sisters.' She also told me that she was the Superior of the African convent, but that one day they would be ready to run themselves.

I asked the sister if they had any trouble getting girls to enter the convent. She said that too many wanted to join, and that only girls who could do hard manual labour and who were absolutely obedient were taken. These were the key virtues. I defined these as acceptance of white domination and the virtue of doing the donkey work for the missionaries.

I learnt that the African convent was 'independent' financially. They laundered for the white fathers and cultivated vegetables and fruit for the white sisters and fathers, and baked bread for the whole mission. In exchange they were given land to cultivate their own food, maize and beans; enough money to buy khaki and black cloth; also the supply of electricity and water.

As I walked round the African convent with my white hostess, I would greet the sisters, but they only cast their eyes to the ground and looked away. The chatter of the Missionary was empty beside the cowed and silent ranks of the Africans. Occasionally, she would summon one of them, and explain to me: 'This is one of our best workers' or 'this little one came from a pagan family when she was 15, but she's coming on nicely'. And the girls would stand stiff with embarrassment under our gaze, not understanding our language, humiliated by our patronage.

And so the tour dragged on and finally I escaped, feeling suffocated and despairing. I felt very differently about missionary endeavour now, and very unsure of my own place in it.

But the seeds of revolution have been sown. The African Government has ordered that all primary schools be staffed by Africans and has refused to give any more grants to white teachers or white run schools. Faced with this, and with increasing discontent among the stifled African sisters, the Mission began to train African sisters for teaching, and there are now about 20 of them qualified. They draw government salaries, and obviously as their numbers increase, the convent will indeed become financially independent of the white missionaries. Also of course, the more educated sisters there are, the more intolerable white domination becomes. African sisters are being invited to Teachers' Conferences in the capital, while the Missionaries are being excluded. African sisters are being selected

for scholarships to study abroad, though as yet the missionaries have prevented any sister from leaving Africa. The local people too are beginning to protest at the way their daughters are treated, and at the 'anti-African' rules which they are made to follow. For example no sister is allowed to go into any home in the area. Now, since most of the girls are local this means that they live beside their families, ignoring them, refusing to greet their fathers or to help their mothers. And within the African social context, both of these are serious affronts. The fathers of the African nuns became enraged about two years ago, and marched up to the Mission, demanding that their daughters be freed. The Mission was in uproar for a while, but the protest was temporarily suppressed. It is still a burning issue, and fathers are now refusing to allow their daughters to join the convent. Recruits are coming from further and further afield. I was told by some girls, 'Anyone who lives near the Mission would have more sense in these days than to join the African convent'.

Tension was mounting visibly in the months before I left. No new white sisters had come out from Europe in the last three years. Apparently they were expecting to be expelled, not by the Government I learnt, but by the African bishop who was expected to succeed the dying old missionary bishop. The African sisters qualified to teach were sent out into the bush school, to prevent them from creating ferment in the main convent. The missionaries refused to share their work with the Africans, so the mission stations were portioned out, some to be staffed by African sisters and priests, some by the Missionaries. Also the African sisters who go to study teaching are allowed to wear sandals now.

It is hard to predict what course events might take in this Mission, as it is hard to predict the future of the African Church as a whole. The situation I have described is particular to the one mission that I know well but the conflicts described here, and generated by missionary intervention in Africa may be much more widespread than is yet recognised. Little is known of traditional African philosophy and religion; little is understood of the new attitudes of modern Africa. And so the 'Missionary Church' of old Africa will disappear, as Africa and Africans move themselves into the arena and tell us who and how they are. White missionaries, it seems to me, are not needed to teach the Gospel, but to stand aside so that Africans can be free to discover the Gospel for themselves.