

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# ‘Mutuality in mission’: studying the scholarly ideals and practices of Frans J. Verstraelen and Gerdien Verstraelen-Gilhuis (1942–89)

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## Abstract

This article sheds light on the scholarly ideal of mutuality in the work of the missiologist, Frans J. Verstraelen, and the historian, Gerdien Verstraelen-Gilhuis. The couple were active in Zambia in the 1970s and devoutly Christian. Stemming from the theology of mission, mutuality refers to mutual assistance between ‘localized’ churches relating to personnel, material resources and, importantly, ideas. The ideal was posited during mission conferences and the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) in an effort to alter the relationship between former colonial metropolises and churches in newly independent countries. By highlighting different types of sources from the Verstraelen Collection, an image emerges of how the ideal of mutuality manifested itself in scholarly practices of fieldwork and knowledge dissemination. This study was inspired by Larissa Schulte Nordholt’s recent doctoral research on the drafting process of UNESCO’s *General History of Africa* (1964–1998). In scholarly *personae* and ideals she identified a useful lens through which to explore how processes of knowledge production on the African continent changed along with political decolonization.

## Résumé

Cet article apporte un éclairage sur l’idéal savant de mutualité dans l’œuvre du missiologiste Frans J. Verstraelen et de l’historienne Gerdien Verstraelen-Gilhuis. Ce couple de dévots chrétiens exerçait en Zambie dans les années 1970. Issue de la théologie de la mission, la mutualité fait référence à l’assistance mutuelle entre Églises « localisées » concernant les ressources humaines et matérielles, mais aussi et surtout les idées. L’idéal fut avancé lors de conférences de mission et le Concile œcuménique Vatican II (1962-1965) pour tenter de modifier la relation entre les anciennes métropoles coloniales et les Églises dans les pays nouvellement indépendants. En mettant en avant différents types de sources de la Verstraelen Collection, une image émerge du mode de manifestation de l’idéal de mutualité dans les pratiques savantes de recherche de terrain et de dissémination du savoir. Cette étude s’est inspirée des récents travaux de recherche de doctorat de Larissa Schulte Nordholt sur le processus d’élaboration de l’*Histoire générale de l’Afrique* (1964-1998) de l’UNESCO. Elle a identifié dans les *personnages* et les idéaux savants un prisme utile à travers lequel explorer les processus de production du savoir sur le continent africain ont changé avec la décolonisation politique.

## Introduction

The early missiological and historical research of Frans Verstraelen and Gerdien Verstraelen-Gilhuis in Zambia took place amidst the rapid developments surrounding the decolonization of many African nations. Directly impacting both the Christian mission and the nature of knowledge production on the continent, these developments interrelated with the formation of new scholarly *personae*. Scholars studying Africa were confronted with the age-old question: what kind of scholar do I want to be?

The Verstraelen Collection<sup>1</sup> was added to the Library of the African Studies Centre (ASC) in Leiden in 2020. During his professional career, the Roman Catholic theologian and missiologist Frans Verstraelen (1927–) lived and worked in Ghana, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. His donation includes several hundred books on religion and politics in Africa, archives made up of research notes, correspondence, photographs, reports of field trips and diaries reflecting his long and prolific life in Africa. The collection also contains material from his first wife, the historian Gerdien Verstraelen-Gilhuis (1942–89), who wrote her thesis on the Reformed Church in Zambia and lectured on a number of topics relating to African Christianity, including (African) Church history at the University of Zimbabwe.

When compiling the inventory of the Verstraelen Collection in the ASC, past research experiences within the history of science and humanities guided my exploration of the archive. Scholarly archives have long been used to study the practices of knowledge production from a variety of angles. Within an African context, Lyn Schumaker's (2001) *Africanizing Anthropology* famously studied the politics, networks and interpersonal relations underlying anthropological knowledge production at the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in Lusaka. In a recent addition to this corpus, Larissa Schulte Nordholt (2019) analyses the drafting process of UNESCO's *General History of Africa* (GHA) through the lens of 'scholarly *personae*'. These *personae* can be seen as templates on how to be a scholar and include scholarly ideals, virtues and dispositions. With regard to GHA-contributors, Schulte Nordholt identified a balancing act between furthering the ideals of African collectivism and political emancipation, and the legitimation of African historiography as a reputable activity within Western academia. The balancing act necessitated a 'double-consciousness' illustrative of the complexity of the decolonization of scholarly practices. The topic of scholarly *personae* has not been widely explored in African contexts, but as Schulte Nordholt shows they further our ability to analyse how processes of knowledge production on the continent changed along with political decolonization.

In what follows I take the modest aim of highlighting different types of sources in the Verstraelen Collection which relate to the scholarly ideal of mutuality, rooted in the theology of mission. These sources focus primarily on research conducted in

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<sup>1</sup> Upon completion of my MA in Colonial and Global History at the University of Leiden, specializing in the history of field sciences in colonial contexts, I briefly took up archival work in the ASC. During this time, I compiled inventories of a number of new archives, among them the Verstraelen Collection. In preparation for this article I often deliberated with Kuki Noordam, then completing her MA in African Studies. During our talks she stressed the importance of giving ample attention to Gerdien Verstraelen-Gilhuis as well as Frans Verstraelen. At that time I myself was inclined to concentrate on Frans Verstraelen, as the majority of the sources in the archive are his. Now I am glad that I heeded her call, as it has enriched the final result.

Zambia in the 1970s. First, a brief contextualization is offered of the ideal itself – Frans Verstraelen’s socio-missiological work and Gerdien Verstraelen-Gilhuis’s historical outlook. Then, I focus on the way the ideal of mutuality manifested itself in the practices of both knowledge production and knowledge dissemination. By showing Frans Verstraelen stumbling on the shadow of a possible ‘*persona non grata*’ during his Zambian fieldwork, I connect scholarly dispositions and ideals with Lyn Schumaker’s conceptualization of field-sites as ‘negotiated spaces’ (Schumaker 2001: 227).

### **Postcolonial missiology and African church history: official reports, prefaces and essays**

When identifying scholarly ideals, contemporary developments within disciplines form a useful starting point. Based on this contextualization, one can study how individual scholars positioned themselves. Within scholarly archives, information about outspoken ideals leading research can be found in prefaces and essays, as well as commentaries on scholarly conferences.

The institute which first brought Gerdien Gilhuis and Frans Verstraelen together (in 1969) was the Dutch Interuniversity Institute for Missiological and Ecumenical Research (IIME), established in the same year. Tasking itself with studying recent developments within both disciplines, one of its first long-term projects ‘Mutual Assistance between Churches’ was influenced by the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) and a number of mission conferences preceding it. Vatican II had put in writing recent developments in the theology of mission in a rapidly changing, decolonizing world. It envisioned a move away from relations of dependency between Euro-American churches and so-called ‘young’ churches in Asia, Latin-America and Africa, towards mutual assistance regarding personnel, finances and (spiritual) ideas. This phase of interdependence followed on from a process of ‘localization’ of the ‘younger’ churches. The shift towards self-support involved local ministries instead of expatriate missionaries, material self-reliance and a sense of selfhood rooted in local history, culture and values. These various ‘localized’ churches making up the universal church were equal and could mutually assist each other in their joint cause (Verstraelen 1975: 3–13).

Although sympathetic to this concept and ideal of mutuality, minutes indicate that the IIME was cautious to uphold mutual assistance as an untouchable dogma within its umbrella-project ‘Mutual Assistance between Churches’ (Verstraelen 1972b: 2). It was acknowledged that ‘young’ churches could well desire isolation (moratorium) from old metropolises instead of developing reciprocal ties. Thus, mutual assistance was critically examined in the IIME’s interdisciplinary study, one of its sociological contributors asking whether it was not doomed to *remain* an ideal, given the power imbalances and structural inequalities between the global North and South (Jansen Schoonhoven 1977: 95). Based on biblical, historical and sociological analyses of the concept by various contributors, a socio-missiological case-study was to find out what the role of expatriate missionaries was within the localization process of an African church. This made the case-study an empirical test of the Vatican II blueprint of mission described above. Acting as one of the adjunct directors of the IIME, Frans Verstraelen eventually conducted the case-study in Zambia, the fieldwork of which took place between February and July of 1973.

During this six-month stay in Zambia, Gerdien Verstraelen-Gilhuis functioned as the IIME's primary documentalist and was tasked to orient herself on the 'new directions and methodologies' within African historiography. Her IIME-report paid considerable attention to the historiography of African churches and forms a useful source on her scholarly outlook (Verstraelen-Gilhuis 1973). Arguably, there was no better time or setting imaginable to explore these 'new directions', with the drafting committee of the GHA convening in Lusaka simultaneously. Thanks to the mediating role of committee member Mutumba Mainga, Verstraelen-Gilhuis was able to observe one of the GHA meetings herself (Verstraelen-Gilhuis 1973: 1-2). Yet a forum meeting organized by the Historical Association of Zambia proved livelier and less technical, as committee members Bethwell Ogot, Adu Boahen, Gamal Mokhtar, and Ivan Hrbek discussed the fundamental principles of the GHA project with students and other visitors. As Schulte Nordholt emphasizes, the GHA's explicit historiographical and political ideals of anti-Eurocentrism, political emancipation and African collectivism were not uncontested by participants and commentators (Schulte Nordholt 2019: 195). In her IIME report, Verstraelen-Gilhuis expressed this diversity. While lauding the general departure from former Eurocentric perspectives as 'necessary, enlightening and liberating', later prefaces and essays show her balancing scholarly rigour with emancipatory ideals, often repeating Joseph Ki-Zerbo's now well-known warning 'not to exchange one [Eurocentric] myth for another' (Verstraelen-Gilhuis 1973: 5; 1982: 18, 25; 1992: 67).

The GHA was not the only project of its kind, as Verstraelen-Gilhuis referred to similar 'intellectual projects of decolonization' in her own work on church history (Schulte Nordholt 2021: 11). Notable here are the CEHILA (Comisión de Estudios de Historia de la Iglesia en América Latina) and CHAI (Church History Association of India) projects on the history of the church in Latin America (starting in 1973) and the history of Christianity in India (starting in 1974) respectively. They tried to offset the Eurocentric notion present in older mission histories that religious innovation, initiative and leadership in the global South were reserved for Euro-American actors. As outlined by Verstraelen-Gilhuis in an essay on this new strand of church historiography, these projects shared the GHA's emancipatory aims as well: 'Besides a scholarly goal, there is a pastoral one. What is needed in the current phase is the strengthening of self-awareness and one's own identity as a group' (Verstraelen-Gilhuis 1992: 67). Her own doctoral research on African leadership and initiative in the development of the Reformed Church in Zambia was partially inspired by such a call from the United Church of Zambia (Verstraelen-Gilhuis 1973: 27).

To bring the Verstraelens together again we ask the following: What might Verstraelen-Gilhuis have meant by the pastoral goal of strengthening identity and self-awareness of the 'young' churches in the 'the current phase'? The phase in question could well be the creation of selfhood in the process of 'localization', a stage in the process towards interdependence of churches. Although this connection is not made explicit in her 1973 IIME report, Verstraelen-Gilhuis was outspoken about the ideal of mutuality in her work as an IIME documentalist, on which we focus later (Verstraelen-Gilhuis 1973). Let us now turn to the manner in which the practices of Frans Verstraelen's case-study in Zambia reflected the scholarly ideal of mutuality.

### Setting up research in a ‘negotiated space’: minutes, correspondence, interim reports

Studying the manifestation of the ideal of mutuality in scholarly practices requires sources which delve more into everyday realities. The research process of Verstraelen’s Zambia Project is well-documented in the archive, which includes notes about early IIME meetings, correspondence with Zambian clerical institutions and an interim report to the supervisory-commission of the IIME.

Although the IIME was wary of mutual assistance becoming an untouchable dogma within the contents of its analysis, the research structure of the case-study was a separate issue. The socio-missiological case-study was seen as an opportunity for mutual assistance in and of itself. Verstraelen’s notes of IIME meetings indicate that the case-study was to be a ‘joint venture’ with an African Church (Verstraelen 1972c). A favourable reply came from the Catholic Secretariat of Zambia, a body coordinating the nine Zambian dioceses and the four Catholic missionary societies. The upper hierarchy of the Zambian Catholic Church had been Africanized to a considerable extent at the time of Verstraelen’s fieldwork, including vocal proponents of the process of localization, such as Archbishop Emmanuel Milingo (Lusaka) and Bishop Medardo Mazombwe (Chipata). The Secretariat deliberated with the Zambian Episcopal Conference, which ultimately authorized the study. For reasons explained below, Zambian and expatriate clergy were suspicious of studies performed by foreign researchers (Verstraelen 1972a: 3–4). Thus, approval was granted upon the condition that the bishops and the Secretariat retained the right to censor the results before publication. Again, in correspondence with the Secretariat, Verstraelen emphasized that the research ‘should be considered to be theirs’, a phrasing and outlook which the Secretariat adopted within its own channel of communication about the project, the newsletter *Impact* (Verstraelen 1972d; Catholic Secretariat of Zambia 1973).

Apart from formal approval, the joint nature of the research meant that the needs of the Zambian Catholic Church were taken into account, relating both to the person of the researcher and to the scope of the project. Initially, the IIME proposed to select a Zambian researcher (Verstraelen 1972a: 3). When one proved unavailable, the bishops eventually accepted Verstraelen, having indicated that they would prefer a Catholic with experience in Africa. Regarding scope, the Catholic Secretariat accepted the IIME’s proposal to make in-depth studies of both a rural and an urban diocese. Yet, they valued a nationwide, ‘total’ perspective as well, as not all four missionary societies were active in the dioceses selected for in-depth studies (Verstraelen 1972a: 2). In a practical sense, Verstraelen relied on the help of Zambian clergymen in disseminating questionnaires across Zambia’s nine dioceses and for contacting interviewees in Lusaka and Chipata.

This process of negotiation feeds into Lyn Schumaker’s conceptualization of field-sites as a ‘negotiated space’ (Schumaker 2001: 227). Gatekeepers to such spaces, like the Zambian and expatriate clergymen, occupy a position of authority within it and can thus shape processes of knowledge production. They can open the gate and allow a curated peek inside, or keep it closed. Schumaker continues by arguing that pre-established patterns of access to this space can aid researchers, as previous interactions with scholars help inhabitants to grow accustomed to new inquiries (Schumaker 2001: 15, 91). At the same time, the nature of these previous interactions

can influence both the overall stance of inhabitants towards new outsiders and the way they redact the information and ideas they share. The scholarly *personae* of the past researchers in question may well have influenced these previous interactions, as they manifested themselves in scholarly practices.

Considering these dynamics, it is important to ask what kind of missiologists were appreciated in Zambia of the 1970s and who were considered '*personae non grata*', as Schulte Nordholt phrases it (Schulte Nordholt 2019: 183). As previously alluded, Verstraelen's interim report noted wide-felt suspicion of research among the Zambian bishops and clergymen (Verstraelen 1973: 4). This sentiment was aggravated or caused by the *Tanner Report*, a sociological study conducted in 1970 which sought to explain the low interest in religious vocations among Zambians. This was a pressing and sensitive problem in relation to the process of localization, as the number of Zambian newcomers could not match the dwindling amount of expatriates. In a scholarly sense, the report had been ill-received due to perceived over-generalizations, bias and recommendations which were theologically uninformed. Verstraelen was apprised of these perceived shortcomings before his fieldwork commenced, as indicated by notes in his archive.

Although a comparison between the two warrants a closer look at Tanner's own documentation, there are differences in both the set-up process and the tone of the final report which bear mentioning. In his introduction, Tanner wrote that his clerical commissioners in Zambia had made no reservations about the nature of his enquiries and report, and preferred an 'outside foreign perspective' without personal involvement (Tanner 1970: 2). By the commissioners, the *Tanner Report* was seen as a cooperative effort only insofar as it reflected the standpoints of the interviewees (Counihan 1971). When Verstraelen arrived, a number of Zambian clergymen in the Chipata diocese were suspicious of such research done 'purely from the outside', initiated without their involvement. Only by local mediation could they be persuaded to introduce Verstraelen into their parishes. As described, the IIME's outlook of mutual assistance had resulted in more cooperative research preparation, even leading one reviewer to label the Zambia Project a 'self-study' (Verstraelen 1977: 2). Early IIME minutes referred to the project in similar terms, calling it a 'self-survey' (Verstraelen 1972d: 3).

Regarding tone and substance, Verstraelen's final report reflected the IIME's aim to prevent dogmatism and neo-paternalism relating to the above-mentioned Vatican II blueprint of mission. In practice, this meant that Verstraelen revised this theological framework in his conclusion the better to match the Zambian context. Furthermore, instead of formulating concrete recommendations, which 'should be formulated on the spot by all people concerned', he ended his report with twelve questions aimed to foster discussion (Verstraelen 1975). Meanwhile, Tanner included a total of 131 recommendations in his report, phrasing them all rather directly ('The Church should...'). Nsolo Mijere, one of the Chipata clergymen initially refraining from cooperation, wrote a favourable review of Verstraelen's final report. Laying out his views on the nature of research – posing questions and indicating trends and developments, but not prescribing remedies – he applauded Verstraelen for skilfully avoiding 'stir[ring] in festering wounds' and 'stepping on toes' (Verstraelen 1977).

### 'Exchange': mutuality in knowledge dissemination

The ideals making up scholarly *personae* do not just encompass knowledge production; they can include the favoured routes of its spread as well (Paul 2016: 141; Schulte Nordholt 2021: 109). Much can be said about how Verstraelen and Verstraelen-Gilhuis made their own publications readily available in Zambia. Yet here I focus briefly on the role of Gerdien Verstraelen-Gilhuis in the circulation of knowledge produced by others.

The ideal of mutuality resurfaced in the policies of the IIME's documentation department, which collected periodicals and publications from similar institutions all over the world (Jansen Schoonhoven 1977: 82). Functioning as the IIMEs primary documentalist in 1972, Verstraelen-Gilhuis initiated and edited the periodical, *Exchange*, which was to contribute to the mutual exchange of ideas. This exchange especially needed to involve publications from Africa, Asia and Latin America, 'often too little known and too little taken into account and quoted in western thinking' (Verstraelen-Gilhuis 1972). Editions of *Exchange* centred around specific themes, one of the first of these being an issue on 'Mutuality in Mission', which reflected views on the concept coming from Asia. By amplifying voices from the global South, Verstraelen-Gilhuis consciously related to the global politics of knowledge production.

### Conclusion

In this study, the ideal of mutuality has been described as assistance between 'localized' churches relating to personnel, material resources and, importantly, ideas. Based on the equality of the various 'localized' churches making up the universal church, the ideal manifested itself in cooperative research practices, an avoidance of paternalism in presenting conclusions and an amplification of perspectives from the global South in missiological discourse. Such practices can have important effects on field-sites, as previous interactions with Tanner made gatekeepers at various levels cautious of the IIME project. Upon Verstraelen's arrival scholars such as Tanner might have been considered *personae non grata*, but let us not forget that two years prior, Tanner's study was commissioned in such a way because he was a foreign outsider without any involvement. When the outcome disappointed, clerical institutions steered towards supporting a more cooperative research style when confronted with a new scholar. This indicates that in 1970s Zambia, clerical stances on what constituted 'good' researchers were not yet set in stone. This image seems to have been clearer for the historiographical circles traversed by Verstraelen-Gilhuis in Zambia, suggesting that developments among scholarly *personae* occurred at different paces within different disciplines.

Besides its value for understanding developments within various disciplines, Herman Paul argues that the study of scholarly *personae* could serve as the basis for moral self-reflection in the present (Paul 2016: 147–50). Students from former colonial metropolises who struggle to position themselves when first conducting research in former colonies can look at the manner in which past scholars approached similar questions. I for one do not consider myself a Christian, but the ideal of mutuality does speak to me.

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