Life and death, power and vulnerability: everyday contradictions at the Loango Mission, 1883-1904

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ABSTRACT  Everyday histories of places and the people who inhabit them can reveal the realities and nuances of negotiated colonial relations. Mission stations were significant sites of social and cultural confrontation and transformation. The Loango Mission on the West Central African coast was one such arena where mission priests, sisters and brothers interacted with local populations in day-to-day incidents and endeavours. Daily life was marked by contradictions. The missionaries might project power through hierarchical structures, material resources, and Catholic rituals, but experience was also marked by disease, death, and despair. The discussion documents daily life through letters, reports, photographs, published accounts and observations of the author on visits to Loango. Questions concerning the agency of local people – those who converted, those who doubted, and those who resisted – are raised. The paper ends by considering how the daily life contradictions at the mission might have affected African perceptions of the new faith.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, settlements associated with the growing colonial presence sprouted up throughout equatorial Africa. Symbolic of the changing times, administrative centres, military posts, commercial establishments and mission stations were carved out by Europeans and their African auxiliaries, at times through superior fire-power, at times through free or forced negotiations with indigenous authorities. Such settlements might be located at pre-existing African crossroads or at points which, although previously unimportant to local populations, suited the strategic and environmental needs of colonial agents. A century or so later, some of these sites have been abandoned and taken back by the equatorial bush while others are home to hundreds of thousands of people. The histories of these constructed landscapes have much to tell us about the contradictions of early colonial relations: power and vulnerability, visions and realities, conflict and accommodation, outward show and hidden fear. Recent perspectives on African landscapes have stressed their making as a continuous process, contested through physical, social and political practice.1 Here it is suggested that the everyday histories of such places and their inhabitants can deepen our sense of local realities while nuancing our understanding of negotiated colonial relations.

1 For a recent overview of the literature see the essays in the special issue of Paideuma on ‘The making of African landscapes’ (Luig and von Oppen 1997a) and especially their introductory essay (1997b).
The ebb and flow of daily life at mission stations was an intrinsic part of unfolding colonial relations. These establishments, once seen merely as instruments of European expansion, are now appreciated as sites of social and cultural confrontation and transformation. Such was the case at the Loango Mission, situated on the coast of west-central Africa (some 20 kilometres north of the present-day port-city of Pointe-Noire in the Republic of Congo), where the early years were filled with paradox and poignancy. The station was established by the Holy Ghost Fathers (also called Spiritans or Pères de Saint-Esprit) in 1883 as they expanded their evangelization northwards from earlier footholds in Angola. Loango then became the centre for the expansion of the vicariate of French Congo into the interior as far as Brazzaville. In 1886, in response to a request from the Spiritans for Sisters to train a first generation of Christian wives and mothers, the Mother-General of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Cluny (Soeurs de Saint-Joseph de Cluny) dispatched four missionary nuns from Paris to equatorial Africa.

The letters, reports, photographs and postcards, of these missionary Fathers, Brothers, Mothers and Sisters remain the principal voices in the reconstruction of the life of the mission community. Yet, while other voices – those of school children, Christian villagers, mission workers, indigenous clergy, novices, catechists-in-training, postulants and seminarians – remain muted, they are by no means silent. As missionaries voice their own frustrations, fears, and successes, and as they document specific daily-life incidents, subaltern agency can be discerned, and the common and divergent experiences of those who lived, worked, worshipped and died at the mission station are at least partially revealed. Nor did the mission exist in isolation. The local historical, physical and cosmological context also profoundly affected the evangelical project. The early years at the Loango station were full of contradictions. Despair co-existed with promise. The new life predicated on belief in the ‘good God’ was shadowed by clouds of disease, death and doubt. Missionaries might preach order and certainty but experience was troubled and tenuous.

Most examples of the ‘new mission history’ tend to focus on a wide region. Here we are concerned with the mission station itself rather than the Vicariate of which Loango was the episcopal seat. Of course, as we indicate, daily life at the mission station was much influenced by the wider context in which it was set. For the ‘new mission history’, see, for example, Radding (1997); Comaroff and Comaroff (1991, 1997), Landau (1995).

Missionaries wrote frequent letters and reports to their Superiors-General at their Mother Houses as well as to the Propaganda Fide (Rome) and the Propagation de la Foi (Lyon) which provided funding, especially for anti-slavery activities and work with children. These letters are voluminous, detailed on daily-life events, and, at times, quite personal. They are to be found in the archives of the Pères de Saint-Esprit (APSE) at Chevilly-Larue and in the archives of the Soeurs de Saint-Joseph de Cluny (ASSJC) in Paris. Reports were also published in the Bulletins and Annales of missionary congregations as well as contemporary Catholic publications such as Les Missions Catholiques. All these sources are quite detailed but in reading them critically, one has to remember the writer and the audience which affects the content and the manner in which the letters and reports are written. This, in itself, invites some interesting points of comparison in the individual testimonies. [References to these sources are given in abbreviated form, expanded at the end of the paper.]

At Loango, Father Marichelle, an amateur photographer, carried his camera with him on his missionary travels by bicycle. He also documented life at the central mission. By 1906, two series of postcards had been produced by the Loango Mission. These were sold locally to Europeans and sent to Europe. They were not only ‘good propaganda’ but raised funds for the mission. The archives in Chevilly-Larue have many of these early photographs and postcards. See BCPSE (Bulletin de la Congrégation des Pères de Saint-Esprit), 24: 267, ‘Mission du Loango, 1905-1907’.
1. Power, hierarchy and complementarity

The physical lay-out of the mission station exhibited the hierarchical and complementary relations of its inhabitants, based on race, gender and the culture of Catholicism. The initial agreement concluded by Vili chiefs with Father Carrie ceded 100 hectares. By the end of the century, additional land for the Sisters’ community, for Christian villages and for plantations had been acquired, so that mission land had tripled in size. The property and the buildings were symbolic of the sheer material and technical power of the missionaries, and the whole complex constituted a virtual political realm. French officials at the small, administrative post of Loango, three kilometres to the north, were mostly overwhelmed by the responsibility of launching massive expeditions into the interior, while the dislocation and accommodation strategies of surrounding African societies meant that there was little overt political resistance.5

The Loango mission, like most Catholic missions where nuns were present, consisted of three sub-communities. At the centre, and always referred to as ‘the Mission’ (it contained the episcopal residence and the church), was the cluster of buildings occupied by the European male missionaries and by African men and boys. The original building put up in the last four months of 1883 consisted of a two-storey house with five rooms on the first floor where the white men lived, and a ground floor with a dining room, store room, and school room which the mission boys also used as a dormitory. A provisional chapel had been dedicated by the middle of 1884 and the interior furnishings were in place.6 Not only must the pace of construction have been impressive to onlookers such as the forty to fifty Europeans traders and officials who lived in modest buildings at the small and scattered settlement at Loango, and the local people, who mostly lived in dwellings with woven walls and thatched roofs,7 the quality of the building materials was impressive, since the priests brought boatloads of cut planks, barrels of lime and carpentry materials from Europe and the neighbouring Angolan mission at Landana. The builders, specialized carpenters and masons, who were often West Africans trained at other missions, were supervised by missionary Brothers. Two years later, a seminary was under construction, and by 1889 a noviciate for African Brothers had been completed. The exact dimensions of these buildings were delineated in published reports, sometimes accompanied by pleas for further donations to support the continuing evangelical crusade. The seminary, 30 metres long, 8 metres wide and with a 2-metre verandah, was reported to be ‘a vast building, very beautiful for this country’. By 1891 a new school building with a galvanized metal roof and with space for a kitchen, storeroom, office, laundry room, pharmacy and infirmary was in full use; warehouses to store the packages to be transported along the caravan route to interior missions were under construction; two segregated ‘pavilions’, one for Europeans and one for Africans, were added; a print-shop and bindery could hardly keep up with orders received from the administration and commercial establishments. Roads lined with coconut palms converged at the buildings of the central ‘Mission’ (BCPSE 14: 478; 15: 553-5; 16: 490-2, 499-500).

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5 Ernoult (1995); Marichelle (1898). The granting of land by local chiefs including the Maloango can only be appreciated in the wider context of French conquest and changing economic circumstances. See Coquery-Vidrovitch (1969) and Merlet (1991: 91-123, 421-41).
6 BCPSE 13: 869-74 (Carrie 19.9.1883, Jauny, 2.6.1885). This was achieved in spite of high seas that caused the loss of building materials as they were being unloaded, and gusts of wind and torrential rain that blew the roof off the provisional church and drenched the furnishings.
7 Among those who stopped at Loango ‘town’ en route to the interior and wrote about it in derogatory terms were Brunache (1894: 11-12), Castellani (1898: 35) and Maistre (1895: 5). Maistre, in comparison, noted that ‘the Catholic Mission is very well established’.
Set at a distance of about two kilometres from the priests’ establishment (according to Spiritan regulations) was a second major cluster of buildings belonging to the ‘Community’ or convent of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Cluny. The location on a hillside was at first thought to be highly advantageous because of the sea breezes, shade trees, and water supply but it proved to be unhealthy, marshy, and with poor soils, and was blamed for the particularly high rates of sickness and death that the women and girls suffered. Like the compound of the Fathers, the convent was self-contained, even isolated, according to the Sisters. Only on Sundays and special religious holy days did the women and girls come into contact with the male inhabitants of the mission (apart from the clergy), when they walked to the Mission church for services. On arrival the Sisters moved into rudimentary buildings but by 1892 a plan of the convent showed buildings that paralleled those at the main ‘Mission’, although smaller in scale; a public area with a chapel, shop, and parlour to receive visitors; a schoolroom, dormitories, ‘hospital’, and kitchens for African girls and women; and, for the Sisters, sleeping quarters, a kitchen, sickroom, and common room (ASSJC Croquis; Saint Charles 2.2.1887, 8.5.1889; BCPSE 13:873).

Finally, as the work became established, newly married Christian couples, who were seen as the future of the mission, were settled in a Christian village, Saint Benoit, about 800 metres from the Mission, with a second planned by 1891. Saint Benoit was composed of rectangular houses laid out in straight and orderly streets and built from local materials with woven bamboo and thatched walls and roofs. The elite status of the first Christians in the new society was marked in their dwellings; for, according to the Sisters’ report, ‘each family has a home that is large and better constructed than those of the pagans’. Around a large central cross the new Christians gathered for communal prayers and for meetings to discuss village affairs, as they might have gathered at the house of a chief or under a shade-tree in their previous life (BCPSE 15: 552; 16: 495; APSE Derouet/Barille 18.2.1902).

Around each of these sub-communities stretched the mission land filled with fields and plantations which were as much witness to mission productivity as its buildings were to European technology and wealth. The high costs of local produce – in part due to competition from those charged with provisioning the expeditions to the interior, in part due to scarcity – meant that hard work in the fields was not only a Christian duty but necessary for survival. Initially, rice and beans had to be imported at high prices from Hamburg to supplement what was produced locally, but gradually fields and plantations were established. Around the Christian village and the compounds of the Sisters and Fathers, chickens, ducks, sheep, goats, and rabbits were reared in pens (BCPSE 13: 870 Carrie 19.9.1883; Jauny 2.6.1885; Marichelle (1898: 571). Marshland was drained, but a large part of the property could not be cultivated because of poor soils and erratic rains. As they had drawn on other mission stations for skilled labour and building materials, so the Holy Ghost Fathers also imported seeds and plants from abroad. The Director of the administration’s experimental gardens in Libreville, capital of French Congo at the time, sent coconut-palms and seeds for apricot, clove, mango, cinnamon and fig trees which he had obtained from Cayenne and the Antilles. The Director of the Museum of Natural History in Paris sent seeds from the Indies to plant bread-trees, avocados and different types of bananas (APSE Carrie/Mintier 1.5 and 13.5.1898; BCPSE 16: 500-1, 503).

The complementary input of the mission population was essential for the success of all these endeavours, and the whole affair was orchestrated from the top by the indefatigable Monsignor Carrie, Bishop of French Congo from 1886 until his death in 1904. This was a case of micro-management – at least on paper – with rules for the
smallest details of daily life such as sweeping the yard. Off the mission press poured streams of pamphlets and booklets on all aspects of the workday, on the duties and rights of segments of the mission population, and on their proper relations with each group categorized according to their place in the mission and church hierarchy. Enclosed with the 1901 annual report to the Propaganda Fide in Rome was a selection of these publications: not only examples of catechisms in French and Fiote, and directives for the training and work of catechists, but others concerning the ‘Rules for the Children of the Mission’ (1890), ‘Work of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Cluny in French Congo’ (1897), ‘Rules for the Major Seminary’ (1898) and ‘Organization of the Mission of French Congo’ (1898). Another publication that appeared at frequent intervals, Le Mémorial du Congo Français, carried circular letters from Monsignor Carrie and news from around the vicariate. Literate Christians were thus kept abreast of events, papal decrees and new rules, which they could disseminate to the masses – as they understood the teachings.

Agricultural labour, at the heart of daily life, was almost entirely in the hands of the children who constituted the vast majority of the mission’s population. They worked four to five hours in the fields, six days a week. The girls were supervised by a young Sister, often from a peasant family in rural France; the boys by Brothers, both African and European. At this early period, the children were quite small and required constant supervision. At the Sisters’ compound in 1889 there were forty-five children, but only six over twelve years old (Carrie 1890: 3-5, 8, 45-6; ASSJC Saint Charles 8.8.1889; Règlement 2.2.1892; BCSSJC 17: 589 Report from Loango; Les Soeurs de Saint-Joseph 1896: 24-5). At the Christian villages, the women cultivated the land while the men went into wage-labour as workers, craftsmen and clerks, either on the mission property or at the nearby administrative and trading centre. When the rains were good all available hands turned out in the fields. In 1891, children, seminarians, and novices put in 100,000 plants in less than three days: manioc, potatoes, tomatoes, peas, and carrots (BCPSE 16:501). The sermons and essays by bishops and church worthies on the importance of hard work and discipline as a tool for raising African populations out of their childish and slovenly ways was a fortunate corollary to the need for African labour in mission daily life.

Between the different compounds there was also an essential complementarity, especially between the Sisters’ and Fathers’ communities, where single men and women lived with large numbers of children. On arrival in 1886, the four Sisters were met by two priests, who took them to their rudimentary convent, where the Sisters found that ‘everything for our needs has been provided’ (ASSJC Saint Charles 2.2 and 9.8.1887; BCSSJC 17: 587-92). When frequent sickness at the Sisters’ compound was attributed to poor drainage, workers arrived from the Christian villages to build ditches; likewise, when buildings needed repair, Brothers and other male labour came from the Fathers’ Mission. Nor did the complementarity of daily life tasks end at the essentials; for when the priests were sick the nuns arrived with tempting soups. In 1889 the Mother House in Paris received a request for a mould for desserts, which the Sisters served when the

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8 Archivio Storico della Congregatio pro Gentium Evangelizazione (Rome, formerly Propaganda Fide), N.S., vol. 238, P. Carrie, Coutumier de l’oeuvre des enfants dans le Vicariat Apostolique du Congo Français (1890); Oeuvre des Soeurs de Saint-Joseph de Cluny dans la Mission du Congo Français (1897); Règlement du Grand Séminaire (1898); Cérémonial pour la réception des catéchistes dans le Vicariat Apostolique du Congo Français (1899); Organisation de la Mission du Congo Français (1898), etc., all published at the mission printing house. Other pamphlets can be found in the archives at Chevilly-Larue. See also Delcourt, n.d.

9 The classic text for the Holy Ghost Fathers was by their founder: see ACPSE Liber mann.
Fathers had important European visitors (ASSJC Saint Charles 8.5, 9.7 and 15.11.1889; 13.6.1894). Doing the church laundry was also a matter of reciprocity: in return the Fathers provided the Sisters with a chaplain who presided over Mass, confession and retreats (ASSJC Saint Charles 2.2.1887). The laundry and sewing rooms at the convent were essential in the daily-life reproduction of mission life, as were the workshops in the Fathers’ compound. Women and girls not only created, repaired, laundered and ironed their own clothes and linen, they did likewise for the priests, male workers and schoolboys – darning socks, making cassocks for the clergy and robes for the choir and seminarians, and sewing trousers and shirts. The Sisters also turned their European convent training to good effect in richly embroidered vestments and cathedral linen. As Mother Saint Charles wrote home, ‘Monsignor wants everything for the services to be beautiful’ (ASSJC Saint Charles 9.7.1889, 17.3.1892). Skills learned by African women as seamstresses became useful cash-earning opportunities in later life.

Training a first generation of African priests, Brothers, Sisters, and catechists was essential for the transmission of the faith, and the high death rate among Europeans made this task all the more pressing (ASSJC Saint Charles 2.2 and 10.4.1887, 28.1.1891). Nowhere was there doubt about place in the Catholic hierarchy, as European notions of race and gender were integrated in the rules of the new African church. In his report on the period 1886-91 for the Propaganda Fide in Rome, Monsignor Carrie included a section on ‘The Native Clergy’:

We have tried to give our pupils an African education, that is to say, in accord with the needs and resources of the country, and with the capacities and aptitudes of the pupils ...We want to preserve for our clergy and for all called to work for the church this simplicity of customs so well suited for Africa. We think that to put them on the same material footing as European clergy would be a grave misfortune for them and for their country ... these native priests and nuns must not, according to your will and that of our Superiors-General, be incorporated into European Congregations in view of the too great differences that exist between the one and the other on a material level (MCF 1/8: 16 Rapport Quinquennal 1886-1891).

As for the European Sisters, the bishop’s rules stated that, ‘they must be entirely submissive to the Head of the Mission’ and ‘in their conduct follow the rules’ that had been laid down by him. European Sisters, in this view, were not even ‘missionaries’ for he went on: ‘since the work of the Sisters is, by its nature, secondary to that of the Mission and subject to immediate dependence on the ecclesiastical Superior, it follows that he has the right to judge the distinctions that can be made between the Sisters and the Missionaries’. This included the right to ‘change’ the Mother-Superior of the convent or have her recalled to France if there were disagreements (Carrie 1897: 12). Developing his Rule for ‘Native Sisters’ who, according to contemporary practice, were to be part of a Third Order, the bishop of Loango also built in directives that demonstrated their subordinate position: ‘they may never be on the same footing as Europeans as regards clothing, food and lodging. They will not wear stockings or shoes’. Finally, the ‘Native Sisters, thus trained and formed by the Mission, belong exclusively to the Mission and can never be taken from it, for whatever reason, without the consent and authorization of the Superior of the Mission, who will use them according to the needs of the Mission and in consultation with the Superior of the Sisters of Saint Joseph’ (Carrie 1897: 9-11). Similar directives existed for the behaviour of male African novices, postulants, Brothers
and priests, who like their Sisters were part of a Third Order and denied integration into the European congregation.\textsuperscript{10}

2. Disease, competition and vulnerability

Power displayed in constructed landscapes, in material wealth and in lines of authority can mask vulnerability, and a reading of missionary letters and reports reveals not only the triumphs but the problems of life at Loango: exhaustion, frustration, doubt and suffering. The early mission station had not one but two Achilles’ heels: first, high rates of disease and death, and second, competition and resistance to key aspects of missionary work from surrounding populations.

Sickness and death were constant companions for mission inhabitants, whatever their age or origins. This was the situation throughout much of equatorial Central Africa at the time. Although the use of quinine as a prophylactic and curative drug for the biggest killer, malaria, was well-established, there was still resistance to its use, and correct dosages were as yet uncertain (Cohen 1983). Throughout west-central Africa, epidemics of yellow fever, typhoid and smallpox could sweep away populations in discrete waves, while endemic problems such as gastrointestinal sickness, leprosy and tetanus could take their toll. Increased mobility exposed workers to new disease environments, and tens of thousands fell victim to sleeping sickness at the turn of the century (Headrick 1994: 33, 41-43, 70-1; Curtin 1998). Such problems often attacked impoverished populations weakened by food shortages, by droughts and the profound disruptions of the times – often interrelated phenomena.\textsuperscript{11}

At the Loango mission the inhabitants were felled by diseases, both old and new. While written records and tombstones visibly document European deaths, accounts also reveal high rates of disease and mortality among children and workers. Of the twenty-one Sisters who arrived between 1886 and 1900, eleven died, eight were evacuated home sick and two were left when the decision was made to close the convent in 1900. Resources were always overstretched. The Sisters were never more than four in number: one was generally bed-ridden, another was nursing her and the sick children, one had to oversee kitchen and laundry work, and the remaining one might be teaching the catechism or supervising the children in the fields. In January and February 1892, two Sisters died of typhoid, and in March, two were seriously ill and another, newly arrived, was looking after them.\textsuperscript{12} In 1897 the monthly letter to the Mother House reported that the Sisters had been sick and more than a month had passed since they had visited the villages (a not uncommon state of affairs) (\textit{ASSJC} Saint Charles 13.10.1897). In 1898 Father Derouet wrote in desperation to the Mother-General begging for reinforcements. There had been three deaths among the Sisters in a year, and the death of the Mother Superior had left everyone despondent and two young Sisters on their own at the convent (\textit{ASSJC} Derouet 24.8 and 25.11.1898). In 1900 three more Sisters were dispatched from Paris; but they contracted yellow fever when the boat stopped at Dakar, and two died soon after being carried ashore at Loango (\textit{ASSJC} Carrie/Soeurs 5.8.1900; Saint Prix 8.8.1900.). The male

\textsuperscript{10} The African religious, male and female, were part of a diocesan order called the ‘Congrégation de Saint Pierre Claver’. Carrie first developed his views on indigenous orders in \textit{Règles des Frères de la Congrégation de Saint Pierre Claver} (Carrie 1891).

\textsuperscript{11} For the undermining of Central African society, see Vansina (1990) and Headrick (1994: 43); for famines see Iliffe (1987: 6, 156-9).

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{ASSJC} Saint Charles 17.3.1892. Overall figures include three Sisters who worked at Loango and then were sent to a small mission started at Buenza on the caravan route to Brazzaville where only one survived before the convent was closed.
missionaries also suffered many casualties. When Carrie died in 1904, twenty-nine European priests and Brothers had died in his vicariate since the mission was established in 1883, and many of these at the central mission station (APSE Friteau). In one year, 1892, ‘fevers’ killed two young priests and a Brother; at another point in the same year the Sisters wrote home that ‘all the Fathers were sick’. In 1893 the death of a young priest and the Brother who was most fluent in Fiote and in charge of construction was ‘devastating’.13

The loss of African novices and Brothers, who provided daily-life support and represented the future of evangelism, was a particularly heavy blow. Of the three young women who entered the Sisters’ novitiate in the 1890s, two died and one left to be married. Nor were the postulants much help. They were young – mostly under twelve – and they were given to running away when faced with problems: a Sister whom they disliked, the death of a friend, or the demands of convent life (ASSJC Saint Charles 22.2 and 13.6.1894, 3.8.1895; Saint Prix 20.3 and 22.11.1899; BCPSE 17: 479-80; APSE Vicariat). In August 1898 Father Derouet informed the Mother-General that all the postulants had fled during the night and that the priests were trying to round them up (ASSJC Derouet 24.8.1898.). The death of African seminarians and Brothers was a common refrain in the reports of the Holy Ghost Fathers. Of the first three African priests who were trained and ordained during the 1890s, two died a few years later (BCPSE 22: 622-3; 23: 109-10).

The death of three Sisters in a single year, 1897-8, brought their work to its knees. The death of the newly arrived Sisters from yellow fever caused a flight of children, and Monsignor Carrie decided to close the convent and evacuate the remaining Sisters to France or to Mayumba on the Gabon coast. These last two Sisters took with them the six remaining girls ‘who had nowhere to go’ (ASSJC Carrie/Soeurs 5.8.1900). In her last letters from Loango Mother Saint Prix wrote, ‘even the Fathers only come in an emergency’ and ‘we are in quarantine. A black priest comes to say Mass and he burns his cassock afterwards. We are objects of terror for all of Loango’ (ASSJC Saint Prix 12.7 and 8.8.1900). Nor were the men in much better shape in spite of their greater resources. In 1900 four were repatriated to France and two died. In 1904 Monsignor Carrie died, leaving one European priest and eight African Brothers at the Loango Mission station (BCPSE 21: 619, 621; 23: 110).

While sickness and death undermined the missionaries’ effectiveness, it was only part of the story. A second fundamental problem was their inability to attract and retain potential converts. The priests and the Sisters characterized their reception in the surrounding villages as mainly friendly and the people as willing to listen to them, but ‘unfortunately it generally stops at that’ (BCPSE 14: 478); the Vili were ‘friendly but … indifferent to our religion’ (BCPSE 15: 551). Twelve years after the arrival of missionaries, ‘we have tried to attack paganism among the most influential chiefs, but we have not converted them’ (BCPSE 17: 484). While wealthy men might give up a few of their children to attend the mission school, the gesture was probably a means of signalling friendly co-existence rather than a desire to embrace the new religion.

In trying to acquire children and young people for Christian training, the missionaries were in competition for control of social and economic resources, not only with village elders but also with other Europeans. Competition for girls was played out over such

13 BCPSE 16: 488-9, 17: 479-480; ASSJC Saint Charles 17.3.1892. ‘Fiote’ was the late nineteenth century term used by Europeans for the peoples and language they encountered among the coast between Cabinda and the Kwilu river.
issues as initiation rites (tchikumbi), polygyny and motherhood. It was not until the 1920s that Vili families began to entertain the possibility that a convent education might enhance a girl’s prospects of marrying an elite husband and the numbers of girls enrolled in Catholic programmes increased, especially in urban areas.\textsuperscript{14} Initially, the priests wrote enthusiastically about the number of boys who were brought to the mission by their families, but the retention rate was low. Once they had acquired some literacy, boys – sometimes only ten to twelve years old – searched out wage-labour in European factories. Missionaries were battling a decades-long tradition of emigration by young men from the Loango Coast to work as sailors, domestic servants and artisans on all points of the coast from Benguela to Libreville.\textsuperscript{15} After the opening of a railway to the interior through Belgian Congo in 1898, the caravan trade, which had been at the heart of the Loango economy, came to an end and the Vili diaspora was accentuated. A series of droughts and famines in the 1890s and an epidemic of sleeping sickness which decimated lower Congo populations between 1896 and 1905 also took their toll (ASSJC S Anne 20.10.1899; BCPSE 16: 500-01; 19: 404; 21: 620; Headrick 1994: 43). The missionaries wrote of ‘empty villages’ and reported that ‘the natives are rarely in their villages, and when we find them there, they only listen to instruction when they cannot do otherwise’ (BCPSE 20: 404). By 1900 the arrival of concessionary companies which occupied two-thirds of the Loango vicariate posed further problems for the recruitment and retention of boys, since families preferred the immediate rewards of wage-labour on plantations to the expense of sending their sons and nephews to the mission school. ‘The companies are taking the majority of our Christians’, wrote the missionaries. Recruiting agents were arriving from Grand Bassam and Cameroon as well as Belgian and French Congo (APSE Schmitt/Carrie 30.4.1899; BCPSE 21:624-5).

After a promising beginning, therefore, missionaries were less sanguine about the results of their labours by the 1890s. Not only were they losing boys: girls who were alienated by mission life had the options of running away, hiding in villages or living with white men in Loango town. A decade or so after the founding of the Christian village, Monsignor Carrie noted only twenty families, a small number compared to the numbers of boys and girls that enrolled at the schools. In a scathing report of 1900 on the lack of success of the Sisters in training Christian wives, the priests noted that there were ‘only four to five mothers of Christian families worthy of the name,’ but the comment also reflected the persistence of Vili adherence to their perception of ‘good’ mothering (BCPSE 17: 483; APSE Loango Mission Council 9.9.1900). Two years later the situation was even more bleak: ‘the fathers have deserted their families for jobs on the railway, on an expedition or at a trading factory ... the sanctity of marriage has been trampled underfoot’ (APSE Sainte-Enfance 14.10.1902). Resistance by African families to handing over their children pushed the Spiritans into alternative strategies, namely themselves acquiring children who could be educated, baptized, married and settled as the nucleus of Christian families. Fathers and Brothers combed villages for the dispensable elements of society, whom they often identified as ‘slaves’, ‘orphans’, or the sick. These they ‘redeemed’ out of marginalization and brought to the mission, where they now ‘belonged’ as children of the mission. These children constituted a ‘large part’ of the mission population according to reports, and it was from

\textsuperscript{14} I am exploring these issues more fully in my forthcoming book on Catholic women in twentieth century Congo.

\textsuperscript{15} On emigration from the Loango coast, see Martin (1985 and 1995: 18-30).
among them that some of the first African priests and seminarians emerged. Moving children between stations to suit the resources and goals of missionaries is one of the hidden stories of early colonialism in equatorial Africa. Carrie and other priests travelled far into the interior in search of children to ‘redeem’. Children might start their journey from the Ubangi region, arrive at Brazzaville and the nearby Linzolo stations, and then begin the arduous trek along the caravan route to the Loango Coast. This was particularly true of girls, who were brought to the Loango Mission to be trained by the Sisters before the founding of the Brazzaville convent. In 1892 Monsignor Carrie arrived from the Linzolo station (where there were no missionary Sisters) with fifteen girls – all under fifteen years old. He had left behind others that were ‘too young to make the journey to the coast’ (APSE Sainte-Enfance 1886-87, 1891-92, 1889-90; BCPSE 16: 495). In the long run, the policy proved to be untenable: it was costly, since the children had to be maintained entirely by the mission; they were just as likely to run away as local children; and they were usually weak, in poor health and particularly susceptible to illness.

The levels of sickness at the mission did not go unnoticed by the local populations who had given their children to be educated. School attendance and the presence of boarders was highly fluctuating. In 1893 the priests reported that the work had declined. Twelve children had died from smallpox and the numbers leaving the mission had doubled. Out of one hundred and thirty children only forty were left (BCPSE 18: 544-5; ASSJC Saint Charles 12.11.1893). Some mothers who had told the Sisters that their girls should be well-fed, well-clothed and not worked too hard, withdrew their children when the missionaries seemed to fail in their undertakings. In 1894 there were many deaths among the children, and the Sisters wrote that ‘the parents think we do not look after them well enough’ (ASSJC Saint 25.5.1894; Les Soeurs de Saint-Joseph 1986: 27). The next year, after more deaths, the Sisters reported, ‘we have not replaced the children who have died. Parents say that our hill is not good. We had more than a hundred but now we only have sixty’ (ASSJC Saint Charles 13.3.1895). The death of Mother Saint Charles, who had been at the mission since its foundation twelve years previously and was well-known in the surrounding villages, ‘shocked’ local populations and caused a ‘flight’ of small children and older girls (ASSJC S Anne 23.8 and 19.9.1898; S Odette 12.11.1898; Derouet 24.8.1898).

Noting in 1896 the ‘numerous ups and downs of the work with children’, and that the schools did ‘not give much encouragement for the future’, Monsignor Carrie was forced to craft a different policy. Given the loss of young people to the factories and the high costs of maintaining those ‘redeemed’ from servitude, the mission was to become more selective in the children that it recruited, especially as far as boys were concerned. Only the ‘most intelligent’ were to be enrolled in the schools, those who would stay and become catechists or seminarians. Other children could be admitted for other purposes (for example, manual labour in fields and plantations) but not for the schools. A shift in emphasis was signalled to work beyond the mission station, where catechists and their wives would spearhead the evangelical work in ‘rural schools’. These would receive periodic visits from itinerant priests and Brothers, and costs would be much lower, since children lived with their families. From these rural centres the best students would be recruited for the mission, which was now to become a centre for the training of a

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Christian elite (APSE Sainte-Enfance 1897-98; BCPSE 18: 544; 19: 403-404; 20: 402). Breaking the new ground for Christianity at the grass-roots was now to be firmly in the hands of African Christians themselves.

3. Sacred space, dangerous ground?

The Loango mission was not only a material landscape and a focal point of community life: it was a centre of devotion and a sacred space where European missionaries and African converts imprinted the land with the marks of Catholic orthodoxy. As frontier Christians shaped their spiritual landscape, they filled it not only with buildings and architecture but with sacred statues, cemeteries, devotional processions and the portable aspects of their faith: images, medals, scapulars, crucifixes and rosaries. Such symbols of ‘material Christianity’ were especially important at a time when Europeans were still deficient in local languages, religious texts were not yet translated, and local populations were insufficiently literate to read the Gospels or catechism.17

The work of creating the essential religious environment started as soon as the missionaries landed. When the first buildings were erected, the Fathers set aside part of a room as a place of prayer. Lack of a space in which to reserve the Host was a ‘trial’ and only resolved after a year at Loango (BCPSE 13: 870). The Sisters in their first letter also informed their Mother-General that they did not yet have a chapel but had set aside part of a room as a provisional sanctuary where the Bishop conducted Mass (ASSJC Saint Charles 4.1, 2.2, 10.4, 8.5, 5.6.1887; BCSSJC 17: 5).

Once the chapels were finished, their sacred power was enhanced with appropriate religious objects. These were provided on request by patrons in France. Letters record the care with which such objects were selected and installed, both for the intrinsic importance of the exercise and to reassure the church hierarchy that everything was in good Catholic order in the equatorial regions. The arrival of a ‘magnificent altar’ was a landmark event (BCPSE 14: 479). Statues of the Sacred Heart, Saint Joseph and Notre Dame de Victoire were received with great satisfaction. Frames were made for the Stations of the Cross, and the Way of the Cross inaugurated. Pictures of Père Libermann and Mère Anne-Marie Javouhey (the founders of the two Congregations) adorned the walls. Favourable patrons at Loango town also helped out. In 1891 the wife of the Treasurer and the only white woman in Loango presented the Sisters with holy images and a carpet for the chapel. De Brazza himself paid a visit to the Mission and later sent a statue of Saint Pierre Claver (ASSJC Saint Charles 28.1 and 20.12.1891; 2.7.1894). Such images were useful teaching tools as well as objects of piety. In 1889 the Sisters wrote that they were waiting anxiously for the arrival of two statues, ‘so as to inspire our little ones with the love of Jesus and Mary... Our children are beginning to love Saint Joseph... and are asking him to cure one of their number who is sick’ (ASSJC Saint Charles 8.4.1889). Nor was it sufficient that symbols of power were placed in interior courtyards or niches in churches. The missionaries took particular pride in raising Christian symbols to points where they could be seen from afar, as they ‘challenged existing maps of power’.18 Thus, the cross in Saint Benoit was reported to be 8 metres high and could ‘be seen from the surrounding villages’ (BCPSE 15: 551-2). An even more visible landmark was a 2.5 metre statue of the Sacred Heart which, as part of the 1891 Christmas celebrations, was placed on the

17 For an interesting discussion of this point, see McDannell (1995).
18 Ranger (1987). These Zimbabwean missionaries were, however, unusual in their attempts to appropriate pre-existing holy places and incorporate them into a Christian ‘map’. There is no evidence that Loango missionaries adopted such innovative strategies.
roof of the Father’s house, where it stood fifteen metres above the crowd and could be seen ‘from the harbour and more than a league from the Mission’ (BCPSE 16: 499).

The feast days of the church were celebrated with special food and clothes, a respite from work, and large devotional processions. Such occasions marked the festive calendar of the church and set the mundanity and repetitiveness of everyday life (affirmed in many of Monsignor Carrie’s rules) in high relief. The Holy Ghost Fathers were particularly adept at the pomp and ceremony of the church and recognized the value of such ‘propaganda’. Carrie furthermore believed that ‘holiness will penetrate through the senses and then to the spirit and heart’ (Delcourt n.d.: 172).

In 1891, for the first time, Corpus Christi was celebrated with a procession which drew in all members of the community:

A magnificent portable altar was ornamented and skillfully decorated by the nuns of Saint Joseph and by Madame Carrieu, wife of the commissioner-treasurer of the colony and an excellent Christian, at the foot of the cross in the village of Saint Benoit. Along the route we admired the triumphal arches artistically made and ornamented by the seminarians and school children under the direction of Père Louet.

Arriving at the Christian village, the Bishop blessed the Very Holy Sacrament, the seminarians sang ‘perfectly’, and as the benediction was pronounced, three canons were fired together with a fusillade of rifle-fire (BCPSE 16: 497-8.). The installation of the statue of Our Lady of Lourdes was particularly significant for a community where illness was a daily affair. It was a place where the sick and dying would go to pray for recovery (BCPSE 17: 480). A description of the dedication of the statue gives a sense of the spectacle on the feast of the Immaculate Conception:

On the 5 December, on the holiday of the Immaculate Conception towards five in the afternoon, the Fathers in their robes, the Brothers, the children of the Mission, and the girls of the Sisters walked in procession to the foot of the statue of Our Lady of Lourdes, carrying banners and torches and singing litanies for the Holy Virgin. The broad avenue lined with banana trees and all around the statue had been decorated with care. Two lines of multi-coloured Venetian lanterns lit up the decorations. In the middle of this illuminated space was the beautiful statue of Our Lady of Lourdes, 1.70 metres high, which had been tastefully painted by Father Le Louet. It appeared more beautiful and majestic than ever on its pedestal. After the Magnificat, which was performed in two parts, Father Sauner gave a short, moving address on the splendour and power of the Immaculate Virgin. Then the Bishop in his pontifical robes, with Father Levdan as sub-deacon, solemnly blessed the statue. After the ceremony we returned in procession to the church with flaming torches, chanting Ave Maria. (Quoted in Witwicki 1995: I, 103-4.)

Funerals also traced the contours of the mission land. They were crowd-drawing occasions which must have resonated with local populations, for whom the rituals of death were among the most important in life (Martin 1986) The death of a missionary brought a closing of the ranks among Loango Europeans who gathered at the Mission church and followed the cortège to the cemetery where, by century’s end, lines of tombstones marked the graves of the Sisters, priests and Brothers. For the funeral of Mother Saint Charles, who died after twelve years at her post, ‘all the colony came to the funeral and Africans also in large numbers’. Crowds gathered along the route to the cemetery to watch the procession go by (ASSJC Derouet 24.8.1898).

What, then, might Africans make of the life and death struggles at the Loango mission? This is, of course, difficult to ascertain, especially at a distance of a hundred years, but some clues – ‘implicit African ethography’ (MacGaffey 1995: 260) – may be found in contemporary records and in the work of scholars on neighbouring, related societies. Richard Gray, discussing the relations of Africans and missionaries in the lower Congo and northern Angola from the sixteenth century, has written that ‘one of the
deepest desires of all African societies [was] the anxiety to eliminate evil.’ He goes on to say that ‘Evil was experienced as that which destroyed life, health, strength, fertility and prosperity... At times of prolonged crisis, the burden of evil could be almost unbearable... The new religion [African Christianity] was often seen as a fresh source of supernatural power’ (Gray 1990: 5-6). As villagers grappled with all manner of disasters, from colonial conquest to concessionary company exploitation, from labour emigration to the crisis of sleeping sickness, the arrival of a fresh mode of supernatural assistance seemed to offer hope of ‘a return to a pristine order’ (ibid.). The exploration of many avenues in the treatment of disease is central in Bakongo therapeutic strategies, according to John Janzen and Wyatt MacGaffey. Contemporary Christians will routinely seek out diviners to explain sources of witchcraft suspected as the cause of their troubles and consult healers for remedies, although, in the bureaucratic sector of their lives, they also attend church and hospital (Janzen 1978: 3-11; MacGaffey 1986: 18, 248; Hagenbucher-Sacripanti 1994).

Such selective adaptation of Christian rituals and practice was common among those who lived around the Loango Mission station, although missionaries saw it otherwise as ‘backsliding’ or inherent weakness. ‘The Fiote, little energetic by nature, will not be a Christian of granite as exists in Brittany’, wrote one (BCPSE 17: 484). Villagers recognized the priests as religious specialists and called them *banganga* (sg. *nganga*), as they did local experts; the Sisters’ medicines were *bilongo*, the term used for the medicines manipulated by experts, and added to *minkisi* power-objects to make them potent.19 The missionaries and catechists could not keep up with the demand for medals, crucifixes, scapulars and images, although their supporters and patrons in Europe dispatched these objects of Christian piety to equatorial Africa by the tens of thousands (ASSJC Saint Charles 4.1.1889; ASSJC Saint Prix 22.12.1898, 18.6.1899; Witwicki 1995: I, 328-38). Many found their way into the hands of devout Christians, for they were easy to understand as objects of power. Indeed, the efforts of early missionaries to replace ‘fetishes’ with meaningful symbols of Christian piety may have anchored more firmly the very beliefs which the missionaries were trying to eradicate (Witwicki 1995: I, 121). A great deal of interaction was based on what has aptly been called a ‘dialogue of the deaf’ or a ‘shared’ and ‘double misunderstanding’ by Europeans of Africans and by Africans of Europeans, as each observed the practices and rituals of the Other through the lens of their own world view.20

The mixed success of early missionaries and their vulnerability can thus be placed in the context of prevailing belief systems, as well as in a physical, economic and social context. Indeed, they were inseparable. The competition was not only for physical and human resources but for souls. Around the Loango station, the missionaries found many alternative sources of spiritual power, from the Vili royal settlement at Diosso, only a few kilometres inland to the huts of religious specialists in villages. Although the political power of the ruler (Maloango) had long been circumscribed by economic and social transformations that had been underway for over a century, the Vili ruler remained at the heart of resilient local cults (Martin 1972; Hagenbucher-Sacripanti 1973). At Diosso,

19 ASSJC St.Prix 7.2 and 21.4.1900; MacGaffey (1991: 4-7 and passim). MacGaffey writes that ‘in Kongo thought a *minkisi* (pl. *minkisi*) is a personalised force from the invisible world of the dead’. It can be manipulated by an initiated expert (*nganga*) in rituals that involve an object container-object (bag, pot, gourd) to which the *bilongo* is added.

20 MacGaffey (1995: 251). MacGaffey acknowledges his borrowing of the phrase ‘dialogues of the deaf’ from Doutreloux (1967: 261), which is a study of the neighbouring and related Yombe populations.
with its population of around 10,000, the missionaries had not succeeded in placing a catechist by 1910 (Marichelle 1898: 617).

The dynamic and innovative nature of local belief systems is well-documented in contemporary sources. If the Vili were engaged in selectively incorporating elements of Christianity, the missionaries believed they were at war with local religious specialists. In 1890 Carrie decided not to put a cross in the mission cemetery, since it would attract the attention of the ‘pagans’ who might desecrate it (BCSSJC 17: 589, 591). The Sisters believed that their toughest competition came from women and that ‘the women fetish priests are even more extreme than the men’. In 1899 two of the nuns set off for a village which had ‘resolved to launch an assault against them, but in vain’ (ASSJC 22.2 and 15.7.1899). In the same year, the missionaries claimed that two catechists and two graduates of their school had been poisoned, but Carrie advised a young priest to ‘go slowly with attacks on fetishes; we do not want to turn the population against us’ (APSE Carrie/Le Roy 25.1.1899; Carrie/Mintier 21.1 and 30.1.1899). Missionary letters are full of reports on tiger-men who were said to eat their victims and of new and old ‘festishes’ well into the 1930s. Even if such descriptions and interpretations must be understood in the prevailing European cultural discourse of ‘primitive’ religions which had evolved over several centuries and was applied in ‘novel cross-cultural landscapes’ (Spyer 1998: 1, and Introduction), they also bear witness to the vitality of local systems of belief, as do minkisi power-objects themselves and indigenous interpretations of them.²¹

Thus, in the context of these high levels of disease and death, it seems likely that the withdrawal of children and the low rates of conversion at the Loango mission during the first two decades of its existence derived not just from fear of contagion and physical harm but from lack of confidence in the new religion. If the sacred space in villages was dangerous ground for missionaries, was not the sacred landscape of the mission station dangerous ground for local people? The material and supernatural resources of the missionaries seemed no more capable of dealing with ‘the burden of evil’ than those of religious specialists and healers in surrounding villages (Gray 1990: 5). While whites with their military presence, their technical knowledge, and their material worth represented repositories of great power in a region which reeled under the multi-faceted assault of colonial conquest, missionaries and African Christians suffered too. Were the Christian specialists with their power-objects and rituals any more efficacious in mediating misfortune than local banganga and minkisi? Apparently not.

4. Conclusion

Yet the Loango mission survived these early years, and the numbers of the baptized continued to grow slowly, as the emphasis moved away from the mission station to the work of itinerant clergy and ‘rural schools’ run by catechists. Whereas some Christians continued to kneel and pray at the statues and crosses at the mission station, many more carried the portable power-objects of Catholicism into the countryside.

Whereas daily life at the Loango Mission, in its early years, impressively displayed the ability of European missionaries to recreate in equatorial Africa the material and spiritual environment of contemporary Catholicism, it strikingly revealed vulnerabilities. Local conditions and responses played a large role in shaping successes and failures. As studies elsewhere have shown, colonial hegemony had to include elements of consent

among subject populations.\textsuperscript{22} From day to day, the situation could fluctuate dramatically, revealing the fragility and strengths of the colonial presence at a particular moment in time. The misfortunes that had led to the closing of the convent in 1900 were temporary and, in the long term, proved to be part of the ebb and flow of mission life. As Europeans gained access to better medical care by about 1910, their high mortality rates declined. Among African populations health seems to have continued to deteriorate under the onslaught of colonialism, at least until around 1930.\textsuperscript{23} In 1907 the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Cluny returned and moved into a new convent at a more central location. Mission schools became more attractive as they became associated with social advancement. With the French colonial government investing little in social resources in Equatorial Africa until after the Second World War, missionaries provided the main educational opportunities.

As the twentieth century progressed, modern economic forces were a determining factor in the fate of Loango as an administrative and religious centre. The need for a modern port brought a flurry of construction at Pointe-Noire to the south. Its commercial importance was enhanced in 1934 when the Congo-Océan railway from Brazzaville was finally completed with Pointe-Noire as its Atlantic terminus. In 1948 the episcopal seat was moved from the now marginalized region of Loango to the burgeoning city, and growing urban parishes became the centres of mission work.

Today Loango is a peaceful backwater, and not much remains to bear witness to the drama of a century ago.\textsuperscript{24} On the hillside, where administrators and businessmen once orchestrated the supplying of large caravans to the interior, little trace of the old Loango town remains. In 1986, when the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Cluny marked their centenary in Congo with an open-air Mass and a pilgrimage to the site of their first convent, they found few remnants of the spot where the first Sisters and their early converts lived, worked and died. At the former mission of the Spiritan fathers, none of the wooden buildings have survived. Termites made the old church dangerous, and it was taken down and the remaining planks carried off by villagers to use in construction. Even the old avenues of mango trees are under sentence of death as they become targets for charcoal-burners.

Yet Loango’s significance as a religious site has not been lost. A new seminary building was opened in 1960 and a modern church completed in 1970. Near the site where the Christian village once stood there is now the convent of a contemplative order of nuns, the \textit{Soeurs de la Visitation}, and near the site of the old mission, a community of the \textit{Chemin Neuf} found a place of refuge following their retreat from the war zone in the interior. From there one can walk past the tombstones of the bishops of Loango, including that of Monsignor Carrie, and down an alley lined with mango trees to arrive at the beach. One looks out over a spectacular bay where fishing canoes dot the waters as they have for centuries. But Loango Bay also carries the marks of time. In the far distance, flares from off-shore oil rigs can be seen and patches of oil stain the sand. They mark the exploitation of Congo’s wealth as surely as anchored slave- and trading- vessels did a century and more ago. Turning back one passes the old cemetery with the tombstones of early missionaries and the first African Brothers, priests and Sisters. It is the early age at which they died that grabs the attention. There is concern that coastal

\textsuperscript{22} See the essays in Engels and Marks (1994).

\textsuperscript{23} Headrick (1994) argues that French colonialism caused a decline in health in French Equatorial Africa which continued to the 1930s.

\textsuperscript{24} I last visited Loango in June-July 2000. See also Ernoult (1995: 59-60); \textit{Un centennaire} (1986); and personal communication from P. Guy Pannier and Jean-Pierre Godding.
erosion by the sea may threaten the graves. It is all a reminder of the dynamic nature of landscapes and of the people who create and recreate them every day.

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