

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

INTO AFRICA

Life on the mission station

This paper is the fruit of an 'oral history' interview with our fellow church member and friend, Ruth Page, whose working life was spent with the Baptist Missionary Society as a teacher in the Congo (Zaire). Our focus was primarily on what life was like for the missionary - the 'everyday life of mission folk' - rather than on the teaching and preaching missionary work - but the life-style reveals much about the nature of mission and is necessarily part of the missionary's impact on others. As Brian is an historian of technology, he particularly invited Ruth to talk about the equipment available to the missionaries and the African peoples among whom they worked. What follows is based on an interview recorded on 2 February 1994.

Brian and Faith Bowers

Ruth Page first arrived in the Belgian Congo in March 1945. In pre-colonial times the Kingdom of Kongo covered the area north and south of the Zaire River estuary, reaching some 250 miles inland, but in 1885 the Treaty of Berlin had divided the old kingdom into the present Angola, Zaire and Congo (Brazzaville), subsequent to Independence the Belgian Congo was renamed Zaire. Both names relate to the River Congo which dominates the land and which had earlier been called the Nzadi, rendered by the Portuguese as Zaire. Ruth had left Liverpool in February in a naval convoy, in war-time black-out. The British Government viewed missionaries favourably. The Missionary Society provided a list of registered candidates and they were exempted from military service. Ruth found she did not even have to go to a tribunal as a conscientious objector. Missionaries were given extra clothing coupons to equip themselves and could obtain passages on ships during the war - rare for non-service personnel. When a ship became available, so many passages were allocated for missionaries. Five travelled out on the *Copacabana*, a Belgian ship that had avoided blockade in a home port. On arrival at the port of Matadi, it became evident why this ship was allowed passage, for there were hundreds and hundreds of copper ingots lined up criss-cross on the quay. The ship took out salt - and missionaries - and returned with copper and uranium from Katanga for the war effort.

Ruth had taken an Honours Degree in French at London University, evacuated to Wales for much of her student time, and a postgraduate teaching diploma. Apart from teaching practice, she had had no professional experience before going to teach in Africa. She learned the Kikongo language on the station. Later while on furlough before she was to go to Kinshasa, she learned Lingala at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London from Malcolm Guthrie, professor of Bantu languages and a former BMS missionary.

At first Ruth was sent to bush stations on the lower river about half-way between Matadi and Kinshasa. Most centres of population lay along or near to the River Congo and its tributaries; the rest of the country was a vast jungle dotted here and there with tiny villages. Land belonged to tribes, rather than individuals, and sites for mission stations were normally acquired by negotiation with local chiefs. The station at Ngombe Lutete was established in 1884, on land first acquired by Stanley, whose porters slept there on the caravan route from Vivi to Kinshasa. The BMS acquired it by exchanging with Stanley a piece of land on the River Congo. By the time of Ruth's arrival at this station, a large tract of land with water available from three sources in the valleys was well developed with a school and dispensary as well as the church and had seven missionaries. After six months there Ruth moved to a second station, Kibentele, founded in 1921 on previously unoccupied land given by the local chief, a woman chief whose village was nearby. Three missionaries were based there: a married couple and Ruth. She took charge of the school and also went out into the villages, collecting pupils. The age range of the children there was not very wide because initial education was done in a network of village schools begun by the church. There were virtually no state schools at that time: Congo schools were either Protestant or Catholic, and this area had been worked almost exclusively by Protestant missions. Kibentele was named after the pioneer missionary, Holman Bentley, and Ruth was expected to follow in his footsteps. If she went to a village, local people expected her to do exactly what Bentley would have done. First she had to examine the school, then take a service in the evening, and perhaps have a campfire with stories afterwards - exactly like Bentley, who died in 1905! There had been others in between, particularly Mr Frame, who had done very good work from 1896 onwards. Ruth replaced a single woman teacher who was retiring. Her predecessor had not been out in the villages, so the itinerations were reverting to earlier practice.

In 1949 Ruth returned to Ngombe Lutete where she founded the Girls' Domestic Science School, and then went to the Girls' School at Kinshasa 1954-5. After a year in Brussels on the Belgian Colonial Course she returned to Ngombe Lutete in 1956 and then to Kinshasa 1957-60. From 1961-66 she was at the secondary school in Kimpese, and spent 1968-75 at the secondary school at Mbanza-Ngungu, to which she returned for a post-retirement period, working in Christian education, 1978-80. The mission station at Kinshasa enjoyed wonderful terrain on the bank of the River Congo. Over the years the BMS had built a church, offices and houses for missionaries, and had given land for the printing press and bookshop, a house for the Bible Society Director, and a hostel for missionaries travelling through. The station had its own landing stage, built for the *Peace*, at the foot of the cliff. The Kimpese station covered thirty acres, acquired in 1908 for the training of teacher evangelists. There were separate student 'villages', out of sight of the main central area, which in Ruth's time comprised secondary school blocks, with scientific, agricultural and teacher-training streams, as well as the theological and women's

schools. There was also a large primary school, and a large church. The whole was set around a football pitch. In term-time weeks could pass without Ruth going beyond the confines of this mission station. Thysville/Mbanza-Ngungu is a town with a railway station, where Europeans used to stay overnight on the two-day journey from Matadi to Kinshasa in the days of the original narrow-gauge railway. The BMS site was near the railway, with church offices, flats, bookshop and school headquarters.

LIVING CONDITIONS

The missionaries had good houses of bricks made on the station. George Grenfell and others had early introduced brick-making to give healthier houses and the Africans soon used the skill acquired in building mission stations in their own villages too.

There was no running water: it had to be drawn from the river in the valley and filtered. The large pottery filters, about a metre high and very thick, were made by Doultons and imported. Two jars, like chimney pots, were set one on top of the other and in the upper went two big 'candles' of porous pottery which let the water through but held back the dirt. They got very, very dirty and silted up and had to be washed regularly. The water filtered through into the lower vessel and was drawn off by tap. Gradually the candles would wear thin and have to be renewed. All the missionaries' drinking water was so filtered and then had to be boiled, and the practice of boiling water was taught and encouraged in the community.

There was no electricity. They cooked on wood-burning, cast-iron kitchen ranges, with side oven, brought from England. These were quite efficient. Ruth still has the two-wicked paraffin lamp, which stood on her table and by which she worked for many years. Small hurricane lamps were used to go from room to room, or out in the dark - and it was dark by 6 p.m. Torches were no good because they could not obtain batteries. Hurricane lamps and paraffin, in 40 litre drums, could be bought at the Portuguese stores about twenty miles away.¹ School teaching took place entirely in daylight hours but some pupils would meet in classrooms in the evening to study by paraffin lamp. Local people also used little paraffin hurricane lamps but depended mainly on firelight: they usually just sat around the fire after dark or took a brand from the fire for a torch. If they had a campfire in the evening, sitting round and telling stories, they would each take a lighted stick from the fire to light their way back to their houses. Some villages were quite extended and the use of these brands from the fire, carefully fanned, were always a wonder to Ruth.

When electric lighting was introduced later, but rarely beyond the towns, it was less reliable than paraffin. The sugar company had its own generator. The mission station at Ngombe Lutete acquired a generator but after Independence that soon failed because of user error. One man, who became a millionaire, put up a generator for his village, but that was a rarity. When Ruth was at Kimpese, that

large station, shared by Swedish, American and British missionaries, had its own generator, probably fuelled by paraffin, but it only provided a few lights.² At Thysville they had electricity but it was 'quite dicey'. The wires were all external overhead and prone to fail in the heavy tropical storms. Ngombe Lutete had some cement buildings, built after the war with money from the Belgian government in recognition of the Congo war effort, and one stormy night the dormitory was struck. There was a white line visible on the cement where the thunderbolt had gone through, and a wooden pencil was split lengthwise, just by the head of a pupil, who was slightly burned.

COMMUNICATIONS

When Ruth first went to the Congo, radios were rare in this immense country.³ One man at her station had a radio receiver, and she remembers them hearing about the war ending in Europe. Their only means of communication was by sending a runner on foot. They used to send a schoolboy to collect their mail from Thysville, about seventy kilometres away. The Africans were great walkers, and would think nothing of a journey of ten, twenty or even thirty miles. They always preferred to walk barefoot - even if they had footwear, they would take it off for a long walk. Similarly they would play football barefoot.

After Independence in 1960, when the situation became very serious with the army in revolt and it was important to keep in contact, transmitting equipment was installed at the mission stations. Each station had a 'transceiver', and was allotted certain pre-arranged times in the day to call Kinshasa. This system was reserved for important messages, like needing urgent drugs, or reporting someone ill, but it did work. After a time the transceivers began to break down so a European radio ham was sent out to service them, touring all the stations. The postal and telephone systems have broken down again with the renewed troubles of recent years, but the BMS has maintained a satellite telephone link between Kinshasa and London. This is quite expensive and not always reliable, but has been considered necessary. It has been possible to fax London from Kinshasa too, but not between stations - and Yakusu, for instance, is a thousand miles from Kinshasa.

Boats along the rivers remain an important means of transport. The copper and uranium from Katanga must have been carried by river to Kinshasa and then by railway to Matadi. The only other possible route would have been by the Benguela Railway from Katanga, but goods travelling by that would have been shipped at Luanda or Lobito. There was very little air transport in Ruth's early days in the Congo, although during the war there were a few Royal Air Force personnel in Kinshasa. They left a hut later used as a church, and a road was named L'Avenue des Aviateurs. One of these airmen, also named Page (his and Ruth's grandfathers were cousins), married a missionary.

In Ruth's early days, itinerations around the village churches had to be done on foot or, occasionally, by bicycle. The Africans were skilled at building suspension

bridges of canes and creepers across the tributary rivers. She never knew how they managed to get the first creepers across to begin building. Ruth only once crossed one of these bridges: 'It swayed all the time as you walked along it, but you could not turn back so you had to go on. It must have been thirty feet above the river between two cliffs. You had to climb up a ladder against the tree trunk to get on to it. We managed to get all the things across safely although it swung about very much, people helping us with the more bulky loads. There were spaces where it had worn away. The bridge was high up, stretching from the branch of a tree on one side to one on the other. To descend on the far side we had to monkey down a palm tree.' All the time they were conscious of the current in the river below, not to mention the possibility of crocodiles. Happily, she was on a circular tour so did not have to return that way.

There is motor transport to most places now, but the roads are poor. The bridges they had to cross in lorries were 'very dicey too'. There was one macadamized road from Kinshasa to Matadi, via Kimpese, which Ruth drove along many times. Although roughly following the line of the river, it is rarely very close because that would be too hilly. With heavy use and minimum maintenance, this road has now deteriorated badly. The other roads always varied according to the weather, even landrovers could get stuck in some conditions. You got through -or you did not! Ruth had a bicycle all the time she was in Congo and used it to get around the vast station because in the heat of the day walking was quite tiring. Sometimes she cycled outside but 'it was rather bumpy'.

Ruth first flew in 1947 when she had to be flown to London via Brussels with a badly fractured elbow, which never really mended ('I hang together with wire'), but that did not prevent her returning to work. That flight was agonizing, in spite of painkilling drugs and caring stewardesses: it was not a pressurized aircraft 'so every time you went into a cloud, you bumped'. Missionaries normally went by ship until the mid-1950s, when it became cheaper to fly. Now there are several flights a week from Europe to Kinshasa and Brazzaville, a very different town founded by the French in competition with the Congo Free State, only five miles across the river.

LOCAL TECHNOLOGY

In Ruth's day the mission had portable typewriters and a very old-fashioned duplicating machine - a flat-box type where you pressed the paper down and rolled over it. This was used for school examination papers. Apart from that, 'We didn't have much really. It was a question of being resourceful.' There would be a Singer sewing machine on every mission station (to make school uniforms) and in every village; these were known as 'singers' [pronounced as though they had more to do with French monkeys than English choristers]. They were privately owned by those who had saved up enough to buy them from the Portuguese traders. The dexterous Zairians took to tailoring. The machines were mostly hand models, with a few

treadles - 'but that was posh'. These machines were very robust. The men did the tailoring, and made the women's clothes.

Grasscloth was woven locally and baskets, mats and rugs, but no other cloth. Kinshasa had factories early for making cloth, as cotton was grown in the country. Ruth never met weaving as a cottage industry and surmised that cotton might be harder than wool to spin by hand. The people kept some sheep but in that climate they were not wool-providers: they did not have thick coats and looked more like goats.

Iron must have been smelted locally for centuries. Smiths were highly regarded in the community. They made tools, such as hoes, and weapons, such as spears. Women made pottery by hand, not on a wheel, although the finished work looked as good as if wheel-thrown. They were jealous of this ability and refused to share their skill by teaching pottery in school. Ruth never saw a man making pots. Palm oil was made from red palm nuts; this very rich oil is used for cooking. Palm oil with manioc leaves is a highly nutritious food and widely used.

The people took readily to new technology. Over the years individual villagers would save up to buy a small lorry to take their produce to the towns to sell. The resourceful Africans learned about car maintenance as they went along: when they broke down they had little choice but to go into the forest and find something to fix it with! If a missionary's car broke down, there was always someone in the village who would come and look at it.⁴

TRADE

The first stations that Ruth served on were near the Angolan border and most small trading was done by the Portuguese. Belgians did more official jobs: they were the administrators, health visitors, and doctors, and ran the big companies, like the huge sugar plantation and refinery. Africans have an inborn instinct for trade. They would buy something, go miles to market and sell it for a bit more: some became quite wealthy. Ruth was puzzled by their ability to think in fives. There was a small Portuguese trading post about five miles from one village with goods priced in Belgian francs. An African woman who had never been to school would look at something priced sixty-five francs and tell you it was thirteen *mpata*. An *mpata* was worth five francs. If you asked the price of their purchase, they would never tell you in francs but always in *mpata*. This only seemed to work for fives. If you bought from a woman at the door a couple of items at three francs each, like a little bundle of greens and a couple of eggs, making six francs, you could not give her a five and a one franc piece for the two. You had to have something that looked like three, and something else that looked like three. Yet they could divide large figures into fives intuitively. They certainly had a grasp of money and value and were never 'diddled' at the market.

Some women would carry on quite big business: they would take a lorry full of produce up to Kinshasa, sell it and use the proceeds. It is quite difficult to buy up

a whole lot of stuff, sell it, make a profit and then go and do some more, but some had a real flair for this. They would know how much they had made, although the record-keeping was all in their heads, and they would not tell their husbands. Some people said the women were downtrodden, but a woman would carry on her own business quite independently of her husband.⁵

TRIBAL LIFE

The area where Ruth worked was matriarchal: people belonged to their mother's tribe and the mother's brothers were important and fathers fairly unimportant in the family. Elsewhere in the Congo, at Bolobo for example, society was patriarchal and one belonged to one's father's tribe.⁶

When Ruth went to the Congo, slavery was still quite widespread, with Africans enslaved to other African tribes. If in a slave family, one was born a slave. The practice evidently went back to the external slave trade, which affected this area right up to the 1870s.⁷ People might be enslaved to another tribe in order to provide slaves for the traders and the practice lingered on. It was not talked about much, but Ruth knew people who paid the ransom to redeem the mother, and hence the family, from slave status. For the missionaries, it was a good illustration for redemption.

There were strict ethnic rules about which tribes you could marry into, intended to keep the race pure and strong. Marriage into one's own clan was not permitted, nor into certain other tribes because of past relations. A girl knew she could only marry a boy from permitted tribes. Since the tribe could be very extended, this was a big taboo. By the end of Ruth's time there, some freedom was becoming possible, but the tribe still had to approve the choice of partner. Without such approval, it was felt that the marriage could not work. One boy said he would accept any girl chosen for him provided she was willing to train at the mission first. The family duly chose a girl and the missionaries trained her. Ruth dined with the couple on a return visit in 1987; it had proved a very happy marriage.

Before education hit them, village men spent a lot of time talking and smoking in a communal meeting place reserved for the purpose. Women would take food to their husbands there. Men would always have eaten separately from the women in those days. The men cleared the ground of trees for planting, but the women would hoe and sow it. Young girls could add to the family income by growing and selling peanuts. 'Really the women did most of the work - it was a women's world in that sense. They would look after the children, draw the water, go off to the fields, come back and cook. The men did not have a very big role in village life apart from settling palavers and talking and organizing the village and all that. They seemed to spend a great deal of time talking. They would go out and hunt the meat, but not on a daily basis. If there was a tribal fight, the men would be off to that'.

The skilled blacksmith was an important man in every village; they were wise

men who told stories and created proverbs. Men were skilled in collecting palm oil from the tops of trees: 'That was very special, the way they climbed the very tall palm trees. They had very, very strong fibres in a loop and they would loop it round themselves and go up a very tall pine tree just by leaning against the loop backwards and jerking it up. It was a great skill. They would hang a calabash to collect palm oil.'⁸ Nevertheless, women did most of the work of the village.

In all traditional situations, in matters of trading, hospitality, or things connected with the family or with death, the people knew exactly what to do. They knew what was expected of them. They had more difficulty with things introduced by Europeans. The impact of education changed life dramatically for their sons, but many proved highly intelligent and took readily to the new culture, their ability and flexibility often amazing their teachers. They lacked a sense of competition, which seemed strange to Europeans conditioned to compete almost from birth, but in the African village everyone was equal. When the school arranged some competitive sports with prizes, the teachers did not predetermine the best prizes but let children choose in the order in which they came in. In an African village, no-one wanted to excel because anyone, apart from the chief, who stood out as specially clever or successful or popular would be dubbed a witch and thrown over a cliff, or made to take the poison ordeal and drink *nkasa*. It would be against one's own best interests to be competitive! It was much better to be average. After 1960, when so many Zairians did well in many fields, Ruth used to wonder where all that ability had been hidden before, but concluded this complete lack of competitiveness was the underlying reason. The wisdom and ability were there, but culturally it did not pay to stand out. Those who did, those who might have made great leaders, had for generations either been taken away as slaves or killed off. Being nominated chief of the village was a complicated process of consensus, and authority given in this way was acceptable.

Colonial rule created an atmosphere in which Africans could succeed, though not within it, because the Belgians were only interested in creating lots of primary schools, to provide clerks, not managers. They had no wish to educate Africans to a level where they might compete with their rulers. Yet the colonial system changed things, so that after Independence they were ready to surge forward. Plenty of latent ability was revealed once their resistance to succeeding began to go under European influence. They have emerged from their tribal culture to run banks and businesses with great success, some becoming virtual millionaires before the recent troubles.

THE EUROPEAN PRESENCE

Apart from Portuguese traders, Belgian administrators, and the missionaries, there were periodic visits from Belgian 'agents sanitaires', who were not doctors but were trained to diagnose, and school inspectors. The Belgian administration was good on health, checking each village every year, and requiring everyone to appear and be

tested. For certain diseases, like sleeping sickness and tuberculosis, treatment was compulsory and free. Sleeping sickness was almost eradicated, but is now sadly on the increase again.

There was good liaison between the various Protestant missions. There was a Belgian Roman Catholic mission not far from Ngombe Lutete and relations were not bad, with contact increasing over the years.

EDUCATION

Elementary teaching, roughly 'infant' and 'junior', was done in the villages. The mission school at Ngombe Lutete was set up as a senior primary school in 1884, and educated both sexes right from the beginning, which was especially unusual for a boarding school. Ruth thinks that in Britain only Quakers had mixed boarding schools at that time. The syllabus was the same for boys and girls. There were usually fewer girls because there was more work for them at home. Later, when the boys began to value educated wives, it began to make economic sense to send girls to school as the dowry price would be higher. At that stage there was a very big group of boarders.

Eventually, in the year of Independence, Ngombe Lutete opened a full secondary school, which survived the evacuation of July 1960.⁹ The people were eager to see education developed. In the aftermath of the Independence troubles, the World Council of Churches sent a delegation to Kinshasa to see what might be done to help the church in Zaire. Ruth attended a meeting on the BMS compound when prominent African leaders were asked what help they would like. Probably the WCC anticipated requests for sacks of rice or other food aid, but the Africans declared: 'What we really need is a secondary school'. Switzerland built, staffed, and equipped two, at Matadi and Kinshasa. The churches began to open secondary schools right, left and centre. They lacked both money and personnel but they went ahead anyway. It was a bit hit-and-miss but secondary education was under way.

At Ngombe Lutetè the school staff was always very stretched. Graduates went straight from university into secondary school teaching. Ruth worked under three African headmasters who had only just qualified themselves - which sometimes stretched relationships. The school had both a science and an arts section. Ruth taught French and English, and some religion. One year she was asked to teach technology - but deems that best forgotten! Pupils learned both French and English. The secondary school at Kimpese, founded before Independence, was required to follow the Belgian programme, so had to teach Flemish too. Ruth and her colleagues were each required to spend a year in Belgium 'learning French' in the 1950s, in order to get a subsidy for a Protestant school. Such subsidies only became available in 1948 under a Labour government. Before that only Belgian - Roman Catholic - missions got subsidies. The year in Belgium might have made sense before going to Congo, but would not have been possible during the war. Those in Congo before 1 January 1945 only had to spend six months in Belgium, but Ruth

went just too late so was required to spend a full year 'learning' a language she knew well.¹⁰

Educating boys for a profession was an enormous cultural change, but boys from a protestant school could get jobs with the Belgians, nearly always in an accounts department, because they had a reputation for honesty. Ruth could walk into the accounts department of any firm in Kinshasa, and indeed right across the republic, and be greeted by someone saying, 'I was at Ngombe Lutete'. The school was strong on moral teaching. In that situation, teachers either had to be strict morally or not at all; the missionaries chose to be strict. If pupils fought, they were expelled. They knew that when they came, as had their fathers before them. They did not fight. Cheating was not allowed: they knew that they would not get their diplomas if caught cheating. They learned it simply did not pay to break the rules, so honesty became a habit. The teachers had to work hard, supervising everything carefully, to develop this habit, but it gave the school this good reputation. After Independence bribery became a problem in society at large: there were always people willing to pay to pass state examinations, but the mission schools would not tolerate this. Similarly with sexual activity, they knew the ground rules. Maybe the missionaries were applying the requirements of a different culture, but these moral standards were respected beyond the church. After Independence and the army revolt, it became harder to maintain such standards, but Ruth knew students who tried, like one who refused to give a bribe for a visa. 'She would not give it so she did not come. It is quite a lot to forgo a visit to Britain'. Not all would be so conscientious, but integrity and probity are less fashionable in Britain today, and bribery and corruption not unknown.

Many pupils from their school went on to university. A number became medical doctors, while others took PhDs in chemistry, agriculture, mathematics and other subjects. After Independence, various governments around the world gave student bursaries as one way they could help the country. Students went to Moscow, Belgrade, France, Germany, the USA . . . they would just take off anywhere they got the chance. They were not afraid to tackle new languages: they would go to Russia, take a three-months crash course in Russian, and then go straight to Moscow University. After retiring to London, Ruth was invited to be a presence 'from home' at several of her former pupils' degree ceremonies around Europe. One is now a doctor in Bonn, having married a German woman. A chemist proved a brilliant doctoral student at Namur. Another studied physics in the University of Zurich. These students were well able to hold their own in such universities. Back in Zaire, in 1960 there were no mathematics graduates at all but by the time Ruth left in 1980 African women were lecturing in mathematics in the university. Ruth also takes pride in two paintings done on the rough wood of her tea chests in 1945 by an African, Albert Ndombe, who later became a distinguished artist, exhibiting in Belgium.

One of her former students took a doctorate in communications at Louvain.

Recently he wrote, 'I have to pay a tribute to your English lessons, your initiative to create an English Club', recognizing his debt to the grounding at Kimpese. He is now the Field Director, with a staff of twenty, for an NGO, an international scheme for child sponsorship in Senegal. Writing in beautiful English, he congratulated Ruth on maintaining her 'perfect French'! He has co-authored a book of over a thousand Congolese proverbs, originally collected by André Reichmanns, the son of a former Governor-General tragically killed in 1960 in spite of being strongly pro-African. Reichmanns and his wife used to go round the villages collecting proverbs, with their African dog, a basengi, a special variety that does not bark.

Ruth was intrigued by the Africans' attitude to languages. If they went from one tribe to another they did not worry about using a different language - they just learned it, and approached other languages needed for their studies in the same way. It never occurred to them that they could not study for a doctorate in another country because of the language. 'That language thing is a real enigma. The women who have never been to school will move and be talking a new language in no time at all. Some of the languages are related but some are quite distinct - it does not seem to make any difference.' Ruth herself learned African languages without much difficulty, but had to do so 'in a European kind of way. I had to write it down and see it, and understand why the sentences were formed like that in a grammatical kind of way.' Thanks to Holman Bentley's Kikongo grammar and dictionary she 'was able to do it in a structured European way which suited me, like the way I learned French. I don't think I would have found it so easy just to pick it up like they do, but that may be just from force of habit.' The Africans learned in a different way, yet when taught in a European way, as when Ruth taught them French, they liked grammar and soon wrote very well. A number did degrees in French, enjoying the literature too. They could learn the European way more easily than Ruth could their way.

MUSIC

Most Africans are naturally musical, harmonizing readily like the Welsh. Above all, they sing. African music uses different intervals from European, so it sounds quite different. They compose a lot and have their own instruments. One, a *biti*, is just a little hollow wooden box with pieces of very thin, iron wire of different lengths fixed at one end. They will just walk along the path, twanging a tune. Other instruments, made with dried gourds and strings, are plucked. They sing European songs by tonic solfa, as taught by the early missionaries (the system was popular in English churches at that time). They sing the Hallelujah Chorus in tonic solfa right across Zaire - as taught by Bert Cox at Kimpese. Sometimes they teach African music in tonic solfa too. Ruth recently met a group of young African singers in London and found them practising in four parts from tonic solfa.

THE UNITED NATIONS PEACEKEEPING FORCE

Independence arrived on 30 June 1960; twelve days later, on 12 July, the Congo government called in the United Nations because everything was disintegrating rapidly. Such turmoil had not been anticipated. The Belgians were treated very badly and many Belgian women were raped, so they quickly left the country. Most protestant missionaries fared better - they were not Belgian. As events following Independence were unforeseeable, the missionaries had been told in advance that they should do what seemed right and appropriate in the event. Since they could not really move freely at that time and could not easily consult their mission headquarters, the missionaries offered their services to the United Nations in any way that would help to restore stability. Dr Carrington acted as interpreter to General van Horn, a Swede who spoke no French. The UN officers did not really know anything about the situation. They were just picked up from the Gaza Strip and airlifted to the Congo, knowing nothing about the country, the customs, the geography, or the climate - not even that it was the dry season. Van Horn's Chief of Staff was a French Canadian, his batman was Swedish. There were just twelve officers of assorted nationality, using as their headquarters some bedrooms in the Stanley Hotel in the centre of Kinshasa. After a struggle with her pacifist conscience, Ruth concluded it was all right to help a peacekeeping military mission so she took her own typewriter and sat in one of these hotel bedrooms typing letters and translating messages for the army. Everything went back to the UN General Secretary, Dag Hammarskjöld.

Troops flew in from here, there and everywhere - Ireland, Algeria, Morocco, Ghana, Nigeria, Indonesia. It was really dramatic - and dreadful for generals who were often glad of the missionaries' local knowledge. They would talk about sending something by post and wonder whether it would get opened - not realizing there was no postal service. It took them a while to realize just how bad the situation was. At one point, they were planning to send the Irish troops to the middle of the jungle, and the Ghanaians further east where the climate was better. On hearing these instructions, Ruth warned that it would be unwise to send the Irish there without jungle training or preparation, whereas Ghanaians might be expected to have some experience of comparable conditions. She was glad when they acted on this advice and generally found them 'very nice to work with'.

An English missionary, who was fluent in Swedish as well as French, worked for the UN civilian director and Ruth for the military. Between them, these two had the whole United Nations operation in their hands, but never told anybody else what they were doing. Ruth knew where all the troops were although she had never taken any oath of loyalty or secrecy. She actually typed the military orders when they took over Katanga. In a way it was thrilling because they felt they were being useful in a chaotic situation. The UN had not sent any women secretaries or other back-up personnel in with these twelve officers, because it was too dangerous. The missionaries were relatively safe because they were well-known around the town yet

not identified with the Belgian administration, so the people had nothing against them. Daphne Park, now Baroness Park of Monmouth, was at the British Embassy in Kinshasa and knew all the African politicians. She and Ruth both had 'one of those little grey Citroen cars, like little dustbins', and she once told Ruth, 'I'm all right because if I drive round the city in mine, they think it's you!' Their reputation gave the missionaries a privileged position which enabled them to assist the United Nations.

Ruth remembers once, when the Canadians got caught up at Stanleyville, having to translate the instruction, 'If necessary, use force'. She translated this as permission to shoot if necessary, but the telegram was rejected. There was a slight difference of opinion about what was meant by using force. 'I do not know how you use force in the English sense of the word if you cannot shoot in a military situation. You could not really use your hands! But they queried my translation. I do not see how in a military situation, using force can be other than being allowed to use your gun if you need to. Anyway it was rejected, which I found linguistically interesting.'

The situation was bad, but would have been much worse without that UN peacekeeping mission which brought a semblance of order to the city. Connor Cruise O'Brien was later, and not unreasonably, to question the Katanga operation but at the time Ruth felt the UN personnel were doing the best they could. They certainly worked hard. It felt as though they were all, missionaries included, working sixteen hours a day. Ruth worked for them for about twelve weeks, until they gradually brought in official UN translators, secretaries and other personnel. Eventually the United Nations paid the BMS for her services.

* * * * *

Ruth remembers her years in Congo/Zaire with great joy, but it is overcast by her sorrow at the situation there today, which is very bad though it does not hit world headlines. The plight of this country, which has such great potential mineral wealth and such able people, is grievous to one whose working life was spent serving there in the name of Christ.

NOTES

These notes, amplifying Ruth's account, were supplied by Mr P. E. T. Briggs, brother to the editor, who also served with the BMS at that time.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>1 Paraffin pressure lamps were often used by missionaries. They had to be primed, which took time, but gave out a strong light - although this raised the temperature and attracted insects. Tilley produced a paraffin lamp with a mantle which gave a good light, needed no priming, and produced less heat, but the mantle was fragile.</p> <p>2 Electric generators, made by Lister & Petter, ran</p> | <p>for three to four hours per evening and gave adequate lighting for staff houses and common rooms, but not for public places and student villages.</p> <p>3 Early radios were powered by wet car batteries which were heavy and needed constant recharging. Sound modulation and constant retuning prevented good reception. Later dry</p> |
|--|--|

- batteries were much more efficient but more expensive and could not be recharged.
- 4 Another popular import was the ubiquitous HMV gramophone, which became a favourite entertainment in the villages, with breakable 78 records, very heavy arm, steel needles, wind-up handle, and a large shell-like speaker.
 - 5 Other women traded equally vigorously but never made a profit. They just enjoyed the social contact and market gossip. Husbands were quite happy with the arrangement.
 - 6 In the upper river society was definitely matriarchal. The key person was the 'sango botomali' - the 'father woman', i.e. the maternal aunt.
 - 7 Domestic slavery may well have been an indigenous practice, pre-dating the European slave trade.
 - 8 Palm nuts were also used to produce palm wine. This was very popular - but banned to church members!
 - 9 The secondary schools at Ngombe and Bolobo were not purely local schools but designed to serve all the churches in which the BMS was involved.
 - 10 The Belgian course was not only for language study but designed to impart Belgian culture and inform missionaries about Belgian colonial policy and administration.

Ruth Page died on 20 July 1996. 'Christian Connections UK-SA' have recently established a scholarship fund to train for Christian ministry dedicated women from backgrounds of poverty and deprivation in South Africa, and a few weeks before Ruth's death received her permission to name these Ruth Page Scholarships, in honour of a life devoted to educating Africans for Christian service.

* * * * *

AN APPEAL FOR INFORMATION

Dr David Wykes of Leicester University is preparing an introduction for a microfilm edition of the Thompson List manuscripts in Dr Williams's Library. The List prepared by Josiah Thompson during the early 1770s is the most important survey of the strength and state of Dissent before the 1851 Religious Census. Josiah Thompson (1724-1806) was minister of the Baptist Church at Unicorn Yard, Southwark, until August 1761, when he retired from the active ministry to live on a substantial inheritance. In retirement he undertook to collect materials for a history and account of the contemporary state of dissenting congregations in England and Wales. The collections are of considerable importance, not only for the statistics recording the number of congregations and ministers in 1772-3, but for the histories of many congregations 'taken from their Church Books, the Testimony & Report of old People, private Papers, & other authentic Records', which are no longer available to the historian.

Part of the work for the new introduction involves identifying the different versions of the Thompson List. Four copies belong to Dr Williams's Library, all of which contain significant differences from the other volumes. Other copies are held by Bristol Baptist College and the British Library. A further copy of the List belonged to the Bunyan Meeting, Bedford, in the late 1940s, but this cannot now be located. Dr Wykes would be grateful for any information on the possible location of the Bedford volume, or indeed any other copies of the List, and for information on Josiah Thompson. He can be contacted at Department of History, University of Leicester, Leicester, LE1 7RH (0116-2522 818; messages, 2522 803).