

# **AFRICA CHRISTO!**

*The Use of Photographs in Dutch Catholic Mission Propaganda, 1946–1960.*

*Photographic Essay.*

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When describing the discourse of missionaries we usually let them tell a simple tale. Its narrative structure moves from black heathenism down below to shining Christianity up here. It is a tale of progress, of the possibility that “they” will become like “us”. Anything that is in the way of progress becomes an occasion for heroism and villainy, with the missionary as hero and his adversaries—usually a sorcerer or medicine-man—as personifications of evil. As Hayden White would say, it is a tale of continuity (“conversion”) interspersed with articulations of contiguity (that is, of differences that call for “war and extermination” (1976:189-190)).<sup>1</sup>

This representation of the missionaries’ tale may boost one’s anti-ethnocentric ego or support reductionist views of communication across cultural boundaries (see Beidelman 1982; for a critique, see Pels 1989), but it does not stand up to scrutiny. It suggests, wrongly, that the discourse of missionaries could escape the ambiguities created by the contradictions of the colonial encounter (Sider 1987). Not only have missionaries been highly sceptical of the necessity of unilinear progress, they have also, like anthropologists, explored and exploited differences beyond the boundaries of this simple tale. Maurice Leenhardt is one example (Clifford 1982). These less belligerent uses of contiguity become apparent when one focuses upon the use of photographs in missionary propaganda.

When I started reading *Africa Christo* (“Africa to Christ”), a journal published by the Dutch province of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost, I also thought it would conform to this civilizing myth.<sup>2</sup> At first sight, the Other seems to be represented in the prefabricated binary oppositions used by Europeans to identify difference: black versus white, wild versus civilized, ignorant versus rational, the free reign of passions versus self-control (pictures

1, 2, 3, 4). I was on the lookout for reports on the Vicariate of Bagamoyo in Eastern Tanzania, by then on the brink of becoming a fully recognized part of the Roman Catholic Church. To my disappointment I found that these reports, frequent in the late 1940s, give way during the 1950s to the more exciting tales from Cameroun and Angola. There, the church was not yet established and the true missionary pioneer could still be found. Their message was clear: glowing accounts of individual conversions under difficult circumstances and surveys of the increase of the number of Christians in the mission areas alternated with tales of the fight against superstition, Islam and the medicine-man. To that extent, White's analysis fitted the material at hand.

1. 1930s.<sup>9</sup> "Headhunter of South-New-Guinea." A showcase at a mission exhibition in the Netherlands, probably of the Society of the Divine Word's mission to Dutch New Guinea. The ferocity of the Papua clearly establishes an opposition between wildness and civilization. The association of wildness with animality, however, seems to be less frequent in missionary propaganda (compare with Corbey 1988). These showcases were meant to attract onlookers, while the missionary present at the stand would wait for an opportunity to start his tales by using the artefacts displayed on the stand. Though the religious brothers and sisters were also allowed their stands at the exhibitions, only the priests had the right to talk.



However, some of the messages, and a lot of the pictures, did not fit into this mould. In the issues of the late 1940s and early 1950s, the photographs often do not tell the tale of progress and opposition to progress. They present others without visible reference to what should, or should not, be the goal of mission work. The abundance of exotic images suggested that what was kept distant in print became present in pictures.

Not that this was an altogether innocent use of images of others. As its one-time editor, Father Rijnen, wrote, the journal was "both pulpit and collecting-bag" (*Africa Christo* 48/5 [1952]: front cover). While the message "from the pulpit" stressed the necessity of helping in the effort to bring all heathens into the Church, this help was also secured by selling the ambiguous attractions of the exotic. These attractions could hardly be publicly endorsed in print, but pictures were a fairly innocent alternative.

2. 1951. Page 166 from the *Bode van de Heilige Geest* vol. 47, no. 12. Its caption reads: "Father Henk Govers, C.S.Sp., has arrived, together with his camera, among the still very primitive people in the Oussoye area (Senegal, A.O.F.). His mission area is still full of fetishism and other primitive practices. 1. The King of Oussoye; one can hardly judge from his looks that he is also head-magician and grand-fetichieur of the area. 2. A burial-ground of fetishes in Oussoye. Father Govers has already found scores of these huts. 3. A hut of fetishes, that accommodates pigs' jaws and palm-wine pots, apart from other, here unnameable, objects." The text next to it is unrelated to sorcery: it is about the Holy Ghost Fathers' mission to the Amazon.



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Obviously, the negative images stressing wildness, the evils of sorcery, or worse, were also important means in attracting benefactors. Such images have been in use in Catholic missionary circles since the end of the last century (Prud'homme 1984, Salvaing 1984). During the "grand mission hour" of Dutch Catholicism (Roes 1974), these images were exploited in journals like *Africa Christo's* predecessor, the *Bode van de Heilige Geest* ("Holy Ghost Messenger") and in mission exhibitions (see picture 1). But also in the 19th century efforts towards mass propaganda for Catholic missions, one can identify pictures not burdened with the oppositions of the civilisatory myth (Prud'homme 1984).

Judging from the 1940s and 1950s, the relationship between print and picture varied. While photographs of the activities in which the missionaries

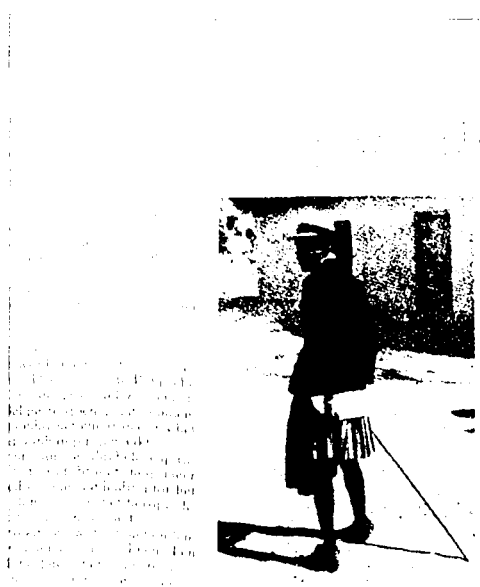


3. 1956. *Africa Christo* vol. 52, no. 6, p. 20: "A South-African fortune-teller". In another issue of *Africa Christo*, this same photograph is used with another caption, making the girl into a sorceress. This is not the only example of pictures being used for several purposes: one picture of an old man is first used with the caption "My old friend", and some years later with the caption "The power of the sorcerer still has to be broken". In the latter case, the picture was indeed used in the context of an article about *feticheurs*. The picture of the girl, however, stood in the context of an article not related to either South Africa or fortunetelling. These examples show (as does picture 2) that one cannot identify a 'sorcerer' from his or her photograph alone; at least a small amount of text is needed.

engaged were published, they usually only served as an accompaniment to the stories (of, for instance, a visitation journey by a superior). Pictures of medicine-man and their instruments could be published without a story, but found their textual complement in those stories where missionaries related their experiences in the war against superstition, cannibalism and magic. Moreover, as medicine-men or women could usually not be identified as such by photographs only, some comments in a caption were always necessary (see pictures 2 and 3). The most striking 'textless' use of images, however, is the presentation of strange pictures on those pages where they would attract the reader most: the front (and later on the back) covers. These pictures were, from 1946 to 1954, mainly exotic.

These pictures were usually more ambiguous towards the narrative structure of the civilizing myth. A classic image is that of the African in European

4. 1946. Page 48 from the *Bode van de Heilige Geest*, vol. 38–42, no. 4: "The gentleman has just earned a good sum in the mines." This is a classical topos of missionary, anthropological and other colonial discourse: the *evolué* making a fool of himself by wearing European clothes all wrong. Bernard Magubane has already vented his anger about these representations in an early critique of colonial anthropology (1971). It has been current in missionary literature from the end of the previous century (Prud'homme 1984: 38).



62 "Mijnheer heeft pas een goede deal verbonden in de mijnen."

It is the Dutch colonial version of the topos of the 'evolué' who has just earned a good sum in the mines. The man is walking on a path, carrying a cane and a bag. The caption reads: "Mijnheer heeft pas een goede deal verbonden in de mijnen." (The gentleman has just earned a good sum in the mines.)

W. Prud'homme, 'Le mythe de l'Évolué', in: *Le mythe de l'Évolué*, Paris, 1971, p. 10. The text is in French.

clothes, which deplored humorously the adoption of civilisation by the native (picture 4, see also Prud'homme 1984, Magubane 1971). Less paradoxical pictures often display a kind of ethnographic curiosity common to many missionaries in the field (picture 5). In all the exotic images, the associations with promiscuity, animality, wildness or aggression, so often attributed to the African in European discourse, are conspicuously absent (pictures 6, 7 and 8; compare with Corbey 1988). One is tempted to attribute this ambiguity towards the civilizing myth to the financial benefits to be gained from it for the missionary propagandists. Though this is surely the case, it should not be forgotten that the photographers were not the publishers of the photographs; the intention to make the photograph may not have been governed by the exoticism that governed its publication.

Until 1954, the covers of the *Bode van de Heilige Geest* and *Africa Christo* carried exotic images, occasionally interspersed with images from Dutch Catholicism or a missionary on trek.<sup>3</sup> In 1955, the visual hegemony of exotic images is suddenly broken. From that time onwards they are outnumbered by



HANDA-MOHE OPGESHAAT VOOR  
PUBERTEITSFEEST.  
Foto: C. Estermann, C.S.B.

de Jaargang No. 1  
Januari 1950

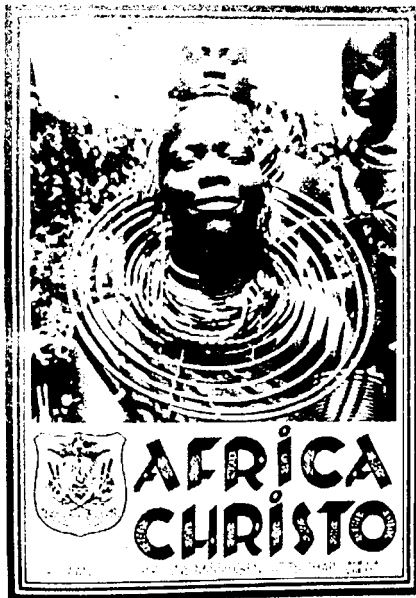
5. 1950. Cover of *Bode van de Heilige Geest* vol. 46, no. 1: "Handa-woman made up for puberty-feast." This is one of the photographs of Charles Estermann, a French Holy Ghost Father who engaged in ethnography in Angola. His photographs were often used for the cover of the *Bode van de Heilige Geest*. The editors usually stressed their ethnographic character, either by explicitly referring to the ethnographic capabilities of the photographer, or by using an ethnically specified caption such as this one.

Christian images, pictures that have nothing to do with either Africa or Christianity or pictures that do not display difference in any conspicuous manner. In 1959, a new image enters: that of African Christianity, in which the photograph of the negro or negress is no longer used to articulate difference, but to stress (Christian) continuity instead (pictures 10 and 11). Though in the 1960s the exotic image would occasionally reappear, it had lost its dominant position and was replaced by pictures that subordinated differences (in, for instance, skin colour) to marked continuities, in religion, in industry, in clothing or otherwise.

At the same time, the Dutch Holy Ghost Fathers started an ethnographic museum, which gradually developed into the Africa Museum (in Berg en Dal, near Nijmegen). This museum, too, quickly dispensed (overtly) with the goals of raising money and attracting candidates for missionary education by presenting exotic images. It was turned into a place where visitors could learn to appreciate the values of African culture (Hogema 1988, Eisenburger 1988).

This change was not unique to the Congregation of the Holy Ghost. In Dutch Catholic mission circles, it had already been in the air from the late

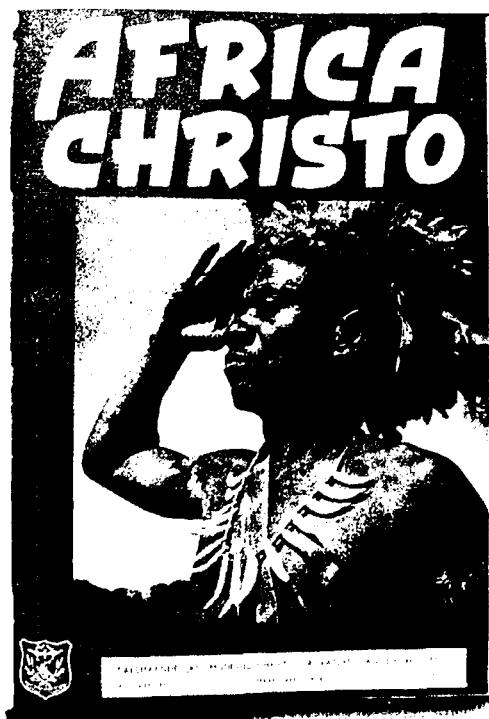
6. 1952. Cover of *Africa Christo* vol. 48, no. 3. The exotic is here much less associated with wildness as was the exhibition stand shown in picture 1. However, difference is clearly marked by the elaborate ornaments displayed.



1940s onwards, when some missionaries started to warn their colleagues that the struggle against the "carnal lusts of the uncivilized or half-civilized" was being replaced by the fight against "the satanic lust of power of godless communism and exaggerated and irrational nationalism" (as a 1947 report in the *Dutch Journal for Missiology* goes). This writer argued that one should no longer exhibit exotic products and sensations, nor merely hold collections, but strengthen one's "mental armour" by prayer (Drehmans 1947: 89–90).

The impatience with "missionary romanticism" grew during the 1950s. It seems that growing political consciousness and aspirations toward independence in Africa and parts of Asia were foremost in the minds of the missionaries who pleaded for a more mature account of what was going on in the former mission areas (Huber 1988: 170. For the same process in Belgian mission movies, see Vints 1984).

These discussions came to a head when the old style mission exhibition was questioned and eventually replaced by a completely renewed format. The AMATE-exhibition was first set up by the Associated Missionaries (*Vere-*



7. 1953. Cover of *Africa Christo* vol. 49 no. 2. Again, the marks of difference are conspicuous (the headdress, the necklace), but the picture is neither frightening nor repulsive. In fact, I would suggest that the man takes a pose well-known from romantic literature and movies about the American Indian: shading his eyes from the sun, the native stares into the distance, probably with those enormous powers of the senses which the degenerated European has lost — or so the adventure books tell us.<sup>10</sup>



nigde *Missionarissen*) in 1957. Ethnographic items were excluded as much as possible, in favor of a presentation that stressed the missionary effort and its achievements only (picture 9; see Dirkse 1983: 46). One commentator qualified the old set-up as a jungle of "crowing parrots, blinking light-effects, movable puppets, ethnographic horrors and papua-skulls and ... sensational stories."<sup>4</sup> A collaborator in the AMATE-exhibition said: "For Africa, this meant that one could talk about masks and magic, but only in relation to the work of conversion, not just to sketch the atmosphere" (Eggen 1988: 60–62).

The Catholic elite supported the functionalist style of the new exhibition, but most missionaries did not: they felt handicapped without their ethnographic items, that is, without their visual aides for telling missionary stories. Moreover, now they were asked to lecture upon the general missiological aspects of the process of christianizing, something in which they had never been trained.<sup>5</sup> Soon, the original designers of the AMATE had resigned and the missionaries again smuggled in their treasured curiosa to tell their tale with (picture 12).

8. 1957. "Workers for Africa." Cover of a special issue of *Africa Christo*, dedicated to the propaganda for religious callings of religious brothers. The brothers, subordinate to the priests, were supposed to handle practical affairs in the mission's homeland and in the mission areas. After the Second World War the number of callings rapidly decreased, the first sign of the diminishing importance of a religious career to Dutch Catholics. It may be important that for this special issue a cover was chosen which exemplifies the exotic at a time when Catholic modernizers were agitating against the use of these images.



On the one hand, one could say that the builders of the AMATE, the editors of *Africa Christo* and others who wanted to present a modern view of Africa within mission circles penetrated the hypocrisy of presenting exotic images in order to raise money. On the other hand, one of the comments on the AMATE-exhibition rightly stressed that the presentation of exotic artefacts

gave the missionary the opportunity to spread appreciation and respect for the country which had become his second home.<sup>8</sup> This might seem a fanciful argument if it was not strengthened by the fact that the Africa Museum in Berg en Dal took precisely that course from 1957 onwards, by shedding its original make-up as a mission museum and dedicating itself to the proclamation of the value of African culture.

To some extent, then, the move towards a more modern, less distracting and hypocritical form of mission propaganda also strengthened the simple story of the civilizing myth. The ambiguities of the original presentations of exotic images were suppressed in an attempt to reassert this story, no longer as a goal but as an accomplishment. Now that the mission areas were on the brink of political and religious maturity, missionary propaganda reversed its original attitude towards "exaggerated and irrational nationalisms", to escape the accusation of being an obstacle in the way of progress. This story could not be held up in the face of what the older missionaries wanted; but more important, neither could it be sustained after the relativist eruptions accom-

10. 1960. Cover of *Africa Christo* vol. 56, no. 1. One of the early examples of the topic of African Christianity on the covers of *Africa Christo*, comparable to the African priest doing a baptism (picture 9). In pre-1955 covers, a different colour of the skin was reinforced by other markings of difference (see pictures 6, 7, 8), but in this photograph the difference in skin colour is a reinforcement of the universality of the church, which bridges all differences. The African sister is the embodiment of a fulfilled mission.



panying the Second Vatican Council. But that is another story, and it is not a simple one.

## NOTES

1. White distinguishes between two "modes of relationships" between the normal and the abnormal: a mode of continuity which presupposes a "common stuff or essence" shared by both, and a mode of contiguity which appeals to a criterion of difference in the first place. According to White, the mode of continuity is more amenable to practices of conversion, while contiguity lends itself to "war and extermination". The following photo-essay can be read as a critique of his view that the relationship of continuity "is certainly more productive of tolerance ... than that of contiguity" (1976: 190).

2. This reading is part of a project to determine to what extent the myth of civilisation expounded in Catholicism was relevant to the experiences of missionaries in a diocese in East Tanzania, and to the experience of the Africans whom they wanted to convert. This research has been, and will be, made possible by the Graduate School of Sociology of the Universities of Leyden and Amsterdam, and the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research.

3. Among "exotic" images, I have not only counted the pictures of negroes which emphasize difference, but also pictures of palm trees, tropical forests and other representations of natural exoticism.



11. 1962. Cover of *Africa Christo* vol. 58, no. 4. In an article in *Africa Christo* on the subject of the Africa Museum of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost, an African crucifix was discussed (*Africa Christo* 53/3 (1957): 23). The article is one of the earliest examples of the "respect for African culture" theme that would dominate the museum's policy for the years to follow. The curious paradox of the essay was that it stated that African Christians deplored the use of African statues in their church: they preferred the "real" art of white saints with golden crowns. The appreciation of the statue on this cover is therefore not "respect for the African", but a form of relativist Christian aesthetics becoming more and more common in Europe during the years of the Second Vatican Council.

4. This criticism, however, was thought to be too extreme by B. Sondaal S.J., reporting on it in the *Volkskrant* of 27th April 1957.

5. *De Tijd-Maasbode*, 6th December 1960.

6. W. v.d. Marck en C. Brakkee, in *De Bazuin*, 14th July 1957.

7. Editorial, *De Linie*, 1957 (precise date of publication unknown).

8. G. van Winsen, in *De Linie*, 1957 (precise date of publication unknown).

9. Fer Hockstra, of the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Nijmegen, has been of great help in finding photographs of mission exhibitions. H. Boellaars O.F.M. Cap. and G. Meyer O.E.S.A. have given their kind permission for these photographs to be reprinted here. The photographs of the mission journal have all been made by myself, but without the help and advice of J. Hogema C.S.Sp., they could not have been reproduced here, nor could this essay have been written.

10. Obviously, this suggestion presupposes knowledge of the motivations of the photographer, knowledge which we do not have. However rigorous our use of iconography or semiotics, it cannot presume to replace knowledge of the photographers' practice. I think Corbey has similar problems with the interpretation of colonial nudes (see 1988: 79, 80, 89).

12. 1960. Part of the African section of the AMATE exhibition. In this part it is clear how the ethnographic objects reintroduced by the missionaries disturbed the serene functionalism of the original design. Though the photographs on the left display difference, the portraits on the right do not. The spear and shield, statue, mask and other curiosities, however, disturb the neat order in which the photographs had been placed (even the curtain is sagging). The caption "Revolution? Evolution?" is ironic: for the designers of the exhibition, the revolution gave way to more tardy progress.



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