CrossMark

Archival Reports

Kikongo in the High North: Swedish Sources on Moyen Congo

Manon Schouten

Abstract: This report presents the archives of the Swedish Mission Association [SMF] (*Svenska Missionsförbundet*) which operated in French Moyen Congo during the Interbellum. The archives are part of the Swedish National Archives (*Riksarkivet*) in Stockholm and could be seen to provide a counterweight to French official administrative records.

Résumé: Ce rapport présente les archives de l'Association Missionnaire Suédoise [SMF] (*Svenska Missionsförbundet*) qui opérait dans le Moyen Congo français dans l'entre-deux-guerres. Les archives font partie des Archives nationales suédoises (*Riksarkivet*) à Stockholm et pourraient être considérées comme contrepoids aux archives administratives officielles françaises.

Introduction

Anyone wishing to reach a properly deep understanding of any historical development or event in Africa during the colonial era must explore a wide range of sources. My own choice for my analysis of André Matswa's *Société Amicale* was to pursue archival research as the starting point of my

History in Africa, Volume 45 (2018), pp. 483–489

Manon Schouten (1996) is currently a student on the African Studies Research Master programme at Universiteit Leiden. For her History Bachelor thesis she investigated the success of André Matswa's *Société Amicale* in Moyen Congo during the Interbellum; and as part of her work for this thesis she conducted research using archives in Sweden. E-mail: manon_schouten5@hotmail.com

© African Studies Association, 2018
doi:10.1017/hia.2018.2

https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2018.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

investigations.[1] To my surprise I ended up in Stockholm, at the Swedish National Archives. There I stumbled upon a treasure trove of files on the Swedish missionaries of the Swedish Mission Association [SMF] which operated in French Moyen Congo during the Interbellum.

The presence of Swedish missionaries in French Moyen Congo might seem unexpected, but in fact Swedes were among the first European "explorers" of the Congo, with the Swedish captain A.E. Andersson, for instance, assisting Henry Morton Stanley in the 1880's.[2] The first Swedish missionary to visit the Congo was sent out in 1881 by the Livingstone Inland Mission as a "foreign missionary," but within a year the Swedish Mission Association began to establish its own mission stations in Africa.[3] Axelson points out that Swedish operations in colonial Congo were quite extensive, both compared to the activities of other nations there and to Swedish activities elsewhere in the world.[4] Merely by looking at French Moyen Congo during the Interbellum we can see the presence of Swedish mission posts at or near Pointe Noire, Loubetzi, Indo, Mboka, Kolo, Ngouedi, Boko, Madzia, Musana, and Brazzaville (including Mansimou).[5]

The greatest the value of the Swedish records is that the SMF considered the Lower Congo of prime importance, whereas the other European mission societies more or less neglected the Lower Congo, preferring to focus on the Upper Congo.[6] That fact raises the importance of the Swedish records that cover events in the Lower Congo area, in particular those

[1] André Matswa (French spelling: Matsoua) was a Congo-born intellectual who served in both the French civil service and the French army at the beginning of the twentieth century. After completing his military service he travelled to Paris where he came into contact with the upcoming anti-colonial and pan-African movement of the Interbellum. Inspired by this he started his own pro-Congolese activism movement, called the *Société Amicale des Originaires de l'A.E.F.* (*Société Amicale*). Matswa promised to support his fellow Congolese both financially and in spirit, and his movement became very popular. An extensive description of the Société Amicale is offered by Andersson. See: Efraim Andersson, *Messianic Popular Movements in the Lower Congo* (Uppsala: Studia Ethnographica Upsaliensia XIV, 1958).

[2] Harald Jenssen-Tusch, *Skandinaver i Congo. Svenske, Norske og Danske Mænds og Kvinders Virksomhed i den Uafhængige Congostat* (Aarhus: Thrues Bogtrykkeri, 1906), 14.

[3] For an overview of mission activities and establishments during this early period, see: Sigbert Axelson, *Culture Confrontation in the Lower Congo. From the Old Congo Kingdom to the Congo Independent State with Special Reference to the Swedish Missionaries in the 1880's and 1890's* (Falköping: Gummessons, 1970). Jenssen-Tusch concluded that by 1900 Swedish officers, sailors, and missionaries belonged to the standard personnel of any European settlement in the Congo (Jenssen-Tusch, *Skandinaver i Congo,* 14).

[4] Axelson, *Culture Confrontation,* 220.

[5] Official numbers of mission members, active missionaries, and buildings in use by the SMF are recorded in the official mission station dairies and in conference minutes.

[6] Axelson, *Culture Confrontation*, 206–207.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2018.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

regarding messianic popular movements.[7] In addition, living among the local population sometimes offered the missionaries unique insights into local public matters. The Swedish missionaries were able to develop those opportunities not only by learning the local Kikongo language[8] but because they professed a Protestant Christian faith. The Swedish missionaries differed further from the French missionaries and administrators in that they were not native French speakers, nor were they involved in France's "mission civilisatrice." The Swedes' greater freedom of action shines through in their writings and documentation – the Swedish mission reports sometimes include criticism of the French authorities.[9]

The Mission Archives of the Swedish Riksarkivet

The SMF material on Moyen Congo forms only a small fragment of the riches that are stored away in the Swedish Mission Archives, because the SMF's total "colonial" collection covers documents from French Equatorial Africa, Belgian Congo, China, India – even Turkestan. The SMF documents run from 1876 until 2013, but the period between the 1920's and the 1960's yields the most results and quite naturally, there are generally more documents available from later times than from the earliest periods. The collection is stored at several locations in Stockholm city and county, while part of it is located approximately 65 km away in Uppsala. The material itself is highly diverse. For instance,

[7] Important for information on messianic popular movements emerging in the Lower Congo area during the Interbellum (notable examples are Kimbanguism and the Khaki-movement). Axelson offers a chronological overview of relations between Swedish missionaries and the messianic popular movements in twentieth century Congo (Axelson, *Culture Confrontation*).

[8] In the case of Moyen Congo the Swedish missionaries learned Kikongo and were constantly trying to find the best way for the mission to communicate with the population, as illustrated by Axelson in his *Culture Confrontation*. This is related to Protestant dogma, in that because believers are expected to formulate their own interpretations of the Bible the Swedish mission deemed it necessary to translate it into Kikongo as well as to preach in the language.

[9] For instance, Missionary Sjöholm referred to the construction of the Brazzaville-Océan railroad as "a case of pillaging by the whites [the French]" (Axelson, *Culture Confrontation*, 265), while Missionary Lundgren wrote that the recruitment of the workforce for said construction always caused a great deal of fuss amongst the locals, because "the state militias are dark angels who treat the people in a manner opposite from humane" (Riksarkivet Döbelnsgatan, *Dagbok för Musana Missionsstation* (1927–1935), 31 January 1931). Lastly, Missionary Johansson reported the following concerning the consequences of the infamous colonial porter system: "Now there is not one village to be found on the route to Diadia. All have fled in terror of Bula Matadi [the white colonizer]. One can surely say that such a government eats up its people. Information has also been received that many of the porters who were forced to go to Mpumbu to carry, are now dead and buried" (Axelson, *Culture Confrontation,* 264).

https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2018.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

at the Swedish National Archive's Döbelnsgatan site in Stockholm city I stumbled upon reports of developments within the mission posts, minutes of conferences, diaries, and an impressive quantity of secondary sources such as dissertations and publications on Congolese history. I also found bibles in the Kikongo language, postcards, photographs, and even audio material.

The Döbelnsgatan site has been closed since August 2017 but the documents have been sorted and moved to other archive locations. Of particular value is that the Riksarkivet holds not only Swedish state and mission documents, but also the private collections of a number of missionaries who lived and worked in the African colonies. Almost needless to say is that material of a more personal and informal character is to be found in those collections. During my own research at Stockholm's Marieberg archive I saw that such documents sometimes contain bold statements opposing official policy.[10]

Naturally, most of the documents in the SMF archives were written in Swedish, in particular the letters, protocols, reports, and conference minutes that were circulated within the Mission itself. However, a large proportion of the material consists of copies of French Colonial protocols, decrees, official decisions, and reports, as well as correspondence in French among Swedish and French missionaries and administrators. Similar types of documents are to be found in English, although there are fewer of them. Because the Protestant SMF stimulated its missionaries to learn the local languages it is even possible to find in the Moyen Congo collection documents written in Kikongo. In any case, it appears that the Swedish missionaries maintained documents concerning the SMF in good administrative order regardless of the language in which they had been written.

Convenience, Drawbacks, and Public Access

All the archive buildings are equipped with convenient workspaces and visitors are welcome to spend as much time as they require in the reading rooms, computer rooms, at private workstations, and in the cafeteria. It is to be recommended that before actually going to the archives a visitor should at least try to gain some idea of the details of material of interest. By that I mean such things as an idea of the size of the collection, or its precise location – an

[10] For instance, I consulted the private archive of Missionary Emanuel (Manne) Lundgren [1898–1975]. What he and his colleagues spoke of in their personal letters did not always correspond with what they told French surveyors who came to visit the Swedish mission stations to check on undesirable activities (the Swedish missionaries wrote down what had been said to French supervisors in their mission dairies, and discussed the more important matters during SMF conferences). However, the question remains whether or not looking at non-governmental sources (oral and written) reveal governmentality to be complete or frayed. White rightly discusses the limitations of archives in relation to their locations. See: Luise White, "Introduction – Suitcases, Roads, and Archives: Writing the History of Africa after 1960," *History in Africa* 42 (2015) 265–267.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2018.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

especially useful thing to know since certain collections are split up over sub-collections which might well be stored at different locations. For that purpose the SMF website may be consulted or contact may be established with the archive's staff.[11] Obviously, prior knowledge of how bulky the research material is will help any researcher with planning, and my own experience in Sweden is a good illustration of that. I had not expected the Swedish material to be very extensive, so I made the mistake of simply requesting the entire Moyen Congo collection held at the Arninge archive location – without realizing that it amounted to more than forty boxes and folders!

The distribution of the material among several archive locations is of course something of a disadvantage to researchers with limited time to spend in Stockholm. Having some idea in advance of where the research material is stored can therefore be crucial; for example the Arninge archive is housed 25 km from the city centre. Fortunately however, all the archive buildings are accessible by public transport and all offer public vehicle-parking space. Part of the Swedish National Archive's policy is that one of its fundamental tasks is to be accessible to the public, and therefore in accordance with Swedish law most documents are available to view. The colonial and mission collections are openly accessible in their entirety.

Unfortunately, the SMF collection of the National Archive has not yet been digitized. Researchers in Sweden must therefore be aware that they will have to consult physical documents, and that material has to be requested in writing on an application form giving the collection or document title and code along with the researcher's personal information and signature. If the collection or file title and code is not known, a staff member will help find it by showing the researcher how to search for it either in a digital catalogue or an actual old-fashioned paper folder. The staff aim to provide visitors with requested files within thirty minutes, and during my visits to the various archive locations they never failed to achieve that. However, it might happen that a file turns out to be stored elsewhere than where the catalogue states it is stored, or even that a certain folder or collection is still listed but seems to have disappeared from the archive's storage.[12] Such cases are related to the

[11] The official website is https://riksarkivet.se/ and it can be consulted in Swedish, English, Finnish, and German.

[12] I can provide one example of this from my own experience. On my last day in Stockholm I visited the Marieberg archive site intending to look at some original photographs that might form a valuable visual addition to my thesis. From what was listed in the catalogue that I had seen on previous days I was looking forward to receiving a box of photographs from Moyen Congo taken by Missionary Manne Lundgren himself in the 1920's and 1930's. This box was supposed to be part of his private collection, but when I requested it, it could not be found, allegedly because photographs were generally stored apart from written documents. I must record here that the staff in Marieberg did their absolute best to help and eventually managed to find me some more boxes with other photographs related to my research topic.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2018.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Archive's reorganization projects. Of course, it is disappointing and perhaps even frustrating when that happens, but in defence of the National Archive and its staff I must say that the lion's share of the documents are stored efficiently, attested in most cases by the staff's accomplishment at providing visitors with requested material within the promised half hour. On top of that the staff members are most helpful in doing their best to find suitably relevant alternatives to missing documents.[13]

Limitations of the SMF Material

The role of the Swedish missionaries to the Congo was different from that of the French, although their Northwest European frame of reference was similar. The aim of the Swedes, of course, was to spread the Protestant message, so their documentation was intended to serve the ends of the SMF. What they wrote about has therefore provided us with serendipitous information, such as that of André Matswa and his *Société Amicale*, and no great conclusions may be derived from it. Valuable as such documents are as a first hand record, nevertheless they do embody methodological barriers which can impede understanding of events. Similarly it must be taken into account that archives are institutions in their own right; they create just as much as they register. The SMF archives are classified according to strict principles formulated by Swedish archivists, who register things according to their own interpretations. Finally it should be noted that the Swedish missionaries did not present an undifferentiated unity, for while most of them adopted a critical stance towards the French colonial state, some operated more in line with the colonizer.

Conclusion

For small communities within African colonies the psychological dimension is underexposed. Regarding the initial success of the *Société Amicale* in Moyen Congo, the experiences of the colonial population are in any case hardly ever discussed in official French reports from the Interbellum. However, in the Swedish mission archives I found documents that helped to explain their motives, which were variously overlooked or denied by the French authorities. In fact, the day-to-day agency of often unnamed individuals is as essential to our understanding of the dynamics of anti-colonial resistance and pan-Africanism as are the actions of political leaders. So far our knowledge of local resistance and prophetism in French Equatorial Africa, and of André Matswa and his *Société Amicale* in particular, has been based mainly on records from the French state. Consulting the Swedish

[13] That is to say, do not be reluctant to share your research interests with the archive staff; everyone is very approachable and helpful.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2018.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

National Archive is therefore well worth considering for any researcher interested in the experience of individuals under colonial rule in any of French Equatorial Africa, Belgian Congo, China, India, or Turkestan. In most of the SMF documents there is at least some space reserved for discussion of what was happening on the ground and how the population was reacting to it; and depending on the topic, modern readers of the Swedish documents might be surprised by what they contain. By a happy chance the Swedish mission documents offer sources containing a great deal of extra value to a wide range of research topics.

References

Andersson, Efraim, *Messianic Popular Movements in the Lower Congo* (Uppsala: Studia Ethnographica Upsaliensia XIV, 1958).

Axelson, Sigbert, *Culture Confrontation in the Lower Congo. From the Old Congo Kingdom to the Congo Independent State with Special Reference to the Swedish Missionaries in the 1880's and 1890's* (Falköping: Gummessons, 1970).

Jenssen-Tusch, Harald, *Skandinaver i Congo. Svenske, Norske og Danske Mænds og Kvinders Virksomhed i den Uafhængige Congostat* (Aarhus: Thrues Bogtrykkeri, 1906).

White, Luise, "Introduction – Suitcases, Roads, and Archives: Writing the History of Africa after 1960," *History in Africa* 42 (2015), 265–267.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2018.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press