

African Nuns

An anthropologist's impressions

by Annabelle Lee

Having recent experience of the activities of several missions in part of ex-British Africa, I read with great interest Elizabeth Power's article 'Black Nuns in Africa' (*New Blackfriars*, December, 1966, and the subsequent exchange between her and Sr Anne Gregson, February, 1967) and, more recently, the correspondence about mission strategy in East Africa (August, 1967).

My work demanded that I should live with rural Africans in their huts and learn to speak their language. I spent most time in the diocese of one particular society of Roman Catholic missionaries, but I also saw a little of the work of three other Roman Catholic missionary societies and four Protestant ones. There were marked differences between these different missions, in their resources of finance and personnel, in their organization and the amount of responsibility they gave to Africans, in what they thought it proper for missionaries or Europeans to do, and in what they thought Christianity is concerned with.

I had for a long time thought it would be interesting to know about the way of life and attitudes of African nuns, but the first African nuns I saw on the central mission station I could only observe from a distance. Even those who were teachers had been trained to keep their distance from visitors so I could not speak to them. The missionaries took pains to point out to me that the African nuns had clothes in greater quantity and quality, better housing and bedding, and a more adequate and better balanced diet than nearly all rural African women. They did much hard physical labour, hoeing, sweeping, washing and carrying loads, but rural African women also do this, usually with a baby on the back and they have to carry firewood and water further than any nun ever does. The African novices are taught extreme types of obedience, for example they have to ask permission if they wish to sleep with one blanket instead of two, they look cowed and are taught to avert their gaze when meeting people in the path, but as a missionary priest was quick to point out to me, those who leave the convent and marry will probably be ordered around and beaten by their husbands who are likely to be drunkards. If the material condition of these nuns is measured against that of most women in the society from which they are drawn it compares favourably; indeed it would be hard to avoid this, for in the society I know any community of African women who pooled their resources and lived and worked together would be

bound to be more prosperous than those engaged in childbearing and supporting children and husbands.

However, there are other aspects of their position to consider and it was clear that for many missionary priests and nuns the African sisters were there to do the simpler, rougher tasks, to stay where they were put, and they were not expected to work out their own rule or responsibilities. I asked a priest who was a secondary school master why the African sisters did not wear shoes when European sisters, all brothers and all priests did. He told me that if they were allowed to wear shoes they would get swelled heads and indeed, in an area of Kenya where the African nuns had been allowed to wear shoes, Mau Mau developed. In fact, African sisters have recently been issued with sandals which they wear part of the time and so far this has had no disastrous results. The priest also explained that the African brothers wear shoes because they have to do heavy farm labour and look after machines. Actually it seems probable that there would be no African brothers if they had not been allowed to wear shoes. I was clearly not entirely happy about this and so I was given a valuable piece of information: 'Africans are not like us.'

Many Europeans rightly acknowledge that the missionaries know more about the local Africans than they do, but this particular piece of information seemed out of place when given to one whom they knew to be living for months at a time in African huts and speaking the local language which the missionaries themselves do not know. There was, indeed, one socially sensitive priest who understood the local language well and could speak a little but he received no encouragement from his superiors or brethren. It is a language spoken by over a quarter million people and understood by many more, but the missionary policy is to work in the *lingua franca* so they can be transferred easily from one area to another. There is also the advantage that if the African nuns are forbidden to speak their own languages, the missionaries can understand everything they say. However, the advantages of this are not mutual because when seminary boys have attempted to learn the mother tongue of the missionaries they were strongly discouraged. Some claim to have been punished for it. After seeing all this during my first tour I wondered what hope there was for an indigenous Church when the missionaries depart.

During my second tour I saw a greater variety of missions, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, working in different areas and I had given up hope of ever discovering much about African nuns from the places I knew best. However, towards the end of my time there, I was travelling in a different area and heard of a newly founded mission where I hoped I could spend the night, probably putting up my bed in the primary school. It turned out that there was a convent of African nuns from the area I knew well, with no European nuns. This was the first mission I had seen in this diocese where there

were only African nuns. The European priest was very helpful and decided to ask these African sisters to look after me.

I was presented to the superior who greeted me with courtesy and an understandable nervousness because, not only was this the first time I had stayed in an African convent, it was also the first time they had ever had a European visitor, let alone one like me. No European nun had ever stayed there. They were very willing and hospitable and ready to work. I had my own bedding roll with me but, of course, I was not allowed to make my own bed, nor to carry in my own luggage. The superior tried to work out how to categorize me. 'Are you a Christian?' 'Yes.' 'Not a *real* Christian.' 'Well, I hope so.' 'Are you a Catholic?' 'No.' 'Well you are *not* a real Christian. Do you follow Henry or Calvin?' 'Well, not exactly either.' We could not get much further on this one for a little while because I did not fit into the understanding of religious groupings they had been taught. They never eat with visitors and I failed to convince them that I normally ate African food, so I was given an excellent meal of a European food sitting in state with the superior beside me watching, pressing more and more food on to my plate, but not eating herself.

The next day was Sunday. I had told them that I was a God-fearer, a term which translates very neatly into their language and which I knew from experience can be discussed profitably with most members of the society in which they had been brought up. They had also discovered that I had a reasonable knowledge of the general routine on mission stations run by this order of missionaries, but they obviously had doubts what a European who was not a proper Christian would do during mass. Their own religious books were in the *lingua franca* which they knew I did not understand properly and there were none at all in their own language which I know better than any language other than English. The superior found what she thought might help me to occupy myself, two American pamphlets on St Martin of Porres, probably written for children. From these I learnt that during his life St Martin had had an impressive ability to be in two places at the same time. I imagine that the nuns had been given these pamphlets because they were thought to be improving religious literature in English which might be given to upper primary school children. However, if the nuns had been given such stories in their own language and had been allowed to read it without being told it was religious, and therefore to be accepted, I am sure it would have seemed as much nonsense to them as it did to me, unless of course St Martin was a witch or a sorcerer. That is what these particular Africans would think about anyone who is said to be able to be in two places at once, particularly if he also had an uncanny way with animals. Have we any right to call them superstitious when the Church lends its authority to this type of story?

The next day I departed explaining that I would come again in the

dry season and I asked what they would like me to bring them on my next visit. They did not ask for anything for themselves but suggested reed sleeping mats for their visitors, something which could not be bought locally.

Five months later I returned with the sleeping mats and over the next few months enjoyed their hospitality several times. The nuns are forbidden by their rule to speak local languages, but since I could not communicate with them in any other way, as a matter of courtesy they had to speak their own language with me. At first it was clearly difficult for them to remember to speak it after so many years of speaking the *lingua franca* in the convent, but gradually we got to know each other and they learnt about my work. They thought it must be very hard for me to live with rural Africans, almost a penance. I hope that I convinced them that I enjoyed it enormously and that is why I returned to do it a second time. I asked them about their lives and families, what part of the country they came from and how they came to be nuns; and they asked me about my family and how I had come to Africa.

When I visited them again I tried to arrive at a convenient time so I would not disturb them when they were about to pray. I imagined that they would have strictly ordered praying times such as I had known in other institutions and that they would feel guilty if these were disrupted, but this was not so. They always insisted in welcoming me before they went to pray—for what is five minutes one way or the other in Africa, or, for that matter, in eternity?

I tried to make myself useful about the mission. The youngest nun who cooked for the nuns and for the European priests wanted to know what was written on the packets and tins of food which the priests bought for themselves. The priests could not read the English instructions any more than the nuns could, so I wondered what they did when I was not there. This cook was exceedingly keen to extend her knowledge of European food so I taught her what I could from my limited knowledge and a good time was had by all. The mission had received some medicines as a gift and they asked me to translate the instructions from French and German into their language because neither the priests nor the nuns understood French or German.

I had to go every two weeks or so to the petrol pump and the post office which were near the convent, and when I did I took the opportunity of visiting the nuns. One morning I arrived looking extremely filthy and the priests, to whom I normally paid my respects before going to the nuns, were out. There was no bath in the nuns' house so the superior with initiative and consideration decided I should be sent to clean up in the priests' bath while they were out. These particular priests would not have objected, but few Africans brought up to be submissive to priests and Europeans in general would have dared to take the initiative. On another occasion she

helped me wash my hair in a bucket and was interested in her first opportunity to handle non-African hair. In the evening during their recreation time we listened to my tape-recorder, playing recordings I had made of stories of local history, praise-songs and folk tales, and they took an intelligent interest in it all. We began to joke in a way I had not believed possible. We agreed that I ought to stay with them for longer but wondered how. They suggested that I might become a proper Christian and join a religious order. I told them that the vicar-general of the missionary order had suggested that before when he wanted more English-speaking graduate teachers for his secondary school. I had told him that I would become a member of the order of missionary priests if the bishop would let me, but never, ever, a missionary sister. He had seen my point. I told the nuns about the two knots I was prepared to tie in my dog's chain which I often carried by fastening it round my waist; the first was for poverty in which, if taken to mean my standard of living in Africa, I could surpass all missionaries with ease; the second was for chastity on which I assumed we were equal, and the third was missing because I could never obey some of the rules which I thought were ridiculous. This incapacity for obedience would prevent me from joining the missionary order and anyway I could not speak the mother tongue of the missionaries. However, I would like to try to join their order because I would enjoy helping them to teach or garden and I could even cook a little and I knew how kindly they tolerated my deviant behaviour. I would need to be given special permission to speak their language. They thought this not unreasonable and they enjoyed elaborating telling me all the things I would have to do and imagining me trying to do them.

I told them what really put me off were the terrible black clothes the novices have to wear. These are made of the cheapest black cloth which rural women usually wear for work with one piece wound round the chest and another round the waist. They do not appear ugly worn in this way because the whole figure looks reasonably well proportioned and there is no black near the face. However, the novices' badly shaped black dresses of the same material make them appear hideous, more so than most Europeans would appear in the same garments. We had a good giggle about my trying to be a novice and they told me they had to wear the black clothes in mourning for my sins. The kitchen girls then came to join us and we decided we had better change the tone of our conversation in case we gave the wrong impression and discouraged any who might consider entering the convent.

In that climate 5.30 a.m. is the time when I sleep best and so I was a sufficiently improper Christian to avoid mass on weekdays, but I went to midday and evening prayers when I could. The gentle hum of 'Ora pro nobis' is not a bad background noise for collecting one's thoughts and one day when I did not immediately stand up and

walk out at the end of their prayers the superior leant over and asked me if I was feeling ill. I remember once being taught that during the Middle Ages the monastic orders such as the Cluniacs had very long communal offices because this was the easiest way of keeping unlettered peasants in order and that the Cistercians departed far from the accepted norm when they provided for long periods of private prayer. These African nuns have presumably been given a routine based on the same assumptions and which, from this point of view, more closely resembles that of Cluny than that of Cîteaux. There is much regimented repetition of prayers, they say the rosary thrice daily, but they are not given any opportunity for discussion nor for private reading. I think that I ought to have more idea than other Europeans how Africans from this area think and also what ideas it is possible to translate into their language. However, I remain uncertain about their mental response to the liturgy and all the religious teaching they receive. There is no form of prayer or liturgy which I can see to be obviously well suited to their way of thought and life and so it would seem worth taking the risk of encouraging them to think and discuss among themselves and see what emerges. There was a bush church in the next diocese less than twenty-five miles away where drums and African tunes were used with good effect, but these nuns were never given the opportunity of hearing them. If they were allowed to investigate this sort of thing and discuss it they might find something much more worthwhile than repeating in chorus a restricted number of formulae, partly in a language none of them understand and partly in the *lingua franca* which they do not understand completely.

I became quite attached to these nuns; we write to each other and I hope to return again. I thought a lot about the possibilities for African religious orders, or particular Christian communities, especially ones for women in countries where, if all men are to be monogamous, there will be a surplus of women of marriageable age, and where women generally live a life of hard labour and subordination. These nuns were obviously effective in the work they did, although they might have been trained to do more skilled work if anyone had thought of it at the right time. They were pathetically ignorant about the Church outside their diocese and were never invited to think for themselves what the Church ought to be doing or what their role might be. The European priests appreciated their domestic services and said they had never been looked after better by European nuns. I was convinced from their conversation and behaviour towards me that the African nuns could overcome the attitude of cowed submissiveness and lack of independent confidence which is acquired in the years of unthinking obedience before they are professed. It is much easier to found an order for African nuns demanding an obedience which they say is like putting a rope round your neck and handing the other end to your superior, than to found

one which demands a sense of intelligent responsibility. Only the latter is likely to cause Christianity to become a potent force in African society.

Many missionary priests freely admitted that if all the expatriate missionaries were suddenly withdrawn the Roman Church in this diocese would collapse. I believe this to be true because the teaching has emphasized dependence on priests and obedience. One of the kindest men I have ever met was in charge of a mission station established seventy years ago where nearly all the local population who had not got good reason for being Muslim, were Christian, that is they had been baptized. The fact that the mission had been at work in the area for so long was immediately obvious from the comparatively orderly behaviour in church. However, the priest knew that the task of making them good Church people was still before him. He was very popular with his parishioners because he was even-tempered, kind to all, very generous with mission property and assisted everyone he could with transport in this remote area. There were a large number of teenage girls living on the mission where it was hoped they would stay until they married or entered the convent. There were strict rules about where they could go and whom they might visit so that the object of keeping them on the mission until they were married might not be defeated. One year there were said to be more pregnancies among unmarried girls on the mission than among those outside. If any of the mission girls disobeyed the rules, they were beaten by the priests, one European and one African, in front of the other girls. The European priest told me that it hurt him more than it hurt them and it obviously did, so I asked why he did it. He answered: 'They must obey.'

I got to know one of the younger priests who had recently come out from Europe and was restless in an institution run by less educated older men some of whom had not been back to Europe for more than ten years. He was more receptive to new ideas than most and was keen to discuss his experiences with someone nearer his age with a knowledge of Africans outside the missions. He told me he had thought of all that people gave up to become members of a missionary order and he could not understand why Africans were not more obviously grateful to them. I suggested it was understandable if one realized that they saw the missionaries in command and living well and that Christianity as it was presented to them appeared to be primarily a system of authority, to which he retorted: 'But it is a system of authority.'

This stress on obedience and authority is accepted amongst the missionaries themselves, but it has often prevented them from serving as effectively as possible those they have been attempting to evangelize. Its effect is also apparent in the way in which African Christians in general, and African nuns in particular, are expected to think and behave. The whole mission organization appeared to be

based on the idea that priests are superior to lay people and men are superior to women; and when you add also that Europeans are superior to Africans, it is clear that European priests are at the top and African nuns at the bottom. However, the difference between the top and the bottom is so generally accepted by all that there is no obvious friction between them. Understandably the greatest friction occurred between those closer to each other, between the European and African nuns.

On the whole the African nuns are less educated than the missionary nuns, but this is not always so, because some of the older missionaries have had five years of primary education and many more only eight years, while a few of the Africans have had eight or ten years' education and speak English. It is already stated in theory that African nuns must be trained to take over the work of the European nuns, but the missionaries hardly seemed enthusiastic about carrying out their own policy. Within a decade it should be relatively easy to increase significantly the proportion of African nuns who have full primary education and to give some of them a serious vocational training. It will be more difficult, but not impossible, to train African nuns for teaching in secondary schools and to run dispensaries of a better quality than many of those which already exist. The missionaries told me that Rome has spent vast sums of money on upper primary and secondary education in seminaries when no more than two per cent of the boys who entered the bottom form have been ordained. Apparently there is no such fund for training nuns, nor for catechists, though there would be a much better return on the money invested if they did bother more about this, for from what I saw in other dioceses and among other denominations it was people such as nuns and catechists who were the most effective Church members. If the Church expects to continue to expand in Africa it may be centuries before there are enough priests to run everything and to perform services at least weekly within reach of the majority of Roman Catholic Christians. A Church with the present clerically-dominated structure is unsuited for effective work in most of rural Africa, particularly in the large, sparsely inhabited areas.

I saw enough of Africa to know the difficulties of decolonization in many fields. Before I had a chance to know these African nuns I would probably have accepted that it would be impossible to train African nuns to perform the tasks at present performed by the missionary nuns, but I now believe that this is probably the sphere in which Africans could take over most quickly. This particular missionary order has virtually no nuns qualified to teach in secondary schools where instruction is in English and the standard of most of the dispensaries they run is nothing to boast about. There is an element of truth in the accusation that Africans who are suddenly promoted are likely to become damned by at least one of the three

Ds—dames, drink and debt. However, I have never heard of African nuns accused of being promiscuous, dishonest, embezzlers, idle or drunken, and I do not consider that anything of this sort would occur even if they were allowed a much greater share in the responsibility of the work of the Church.

This article is about my experience of a particular missionary order which is probably an extreme case, but it is not atypical. On the whole the more educated missionaries, particularly the younger ones from the professional classes of more prosperous nations, tend to have higher professional standards themselves and to train Africans to accept more responsibility, but no mission is entirely beyond criticism. One root of the trouble lies in the *Weltanschauung* and education of the missionaries and this is only likely to change slowly. I hope that all missionaries are not suddenly withdrawn because there is a need for people with particular skills and also for any who have an enthusiasm for the society in which they work and its language and culture. Most Europeans, including missionaries, thought I was mentally and socially warped because I obviously enjoyed my life in the bush, yet in doing this I acquired a social and linguistic knowledge none of them possessed and which, had they possessed it, would have enabled them to be more effective missionaries.

The number of places where European and African priests live together is increasing but there are still priests, mostly Europeans and a few Africans, who do all they can to avoid having to live together. The position among nuns is much worse. I know of no mission where they normally live in the same building and eat together and, although they may work in the same place, for example in a dispensary, or school, or garden, I have no evidence that they ever share their interests and ideas or regard each other as friends. I am sceptical about the idea of a nun's vocation and the virtues of their particular type of communal life, but I am, nevertheless, absolutely sure that the particular African nuns I know are convinced of their own vocation. I remember with great pleasure the time I spent with them, my respect for them grows continually, and I hope that some day some European nuns will decide to live with Africans and that they will then find them as sensible and congenial as I found those who I hope will now remain my friends for life.