

“You Must First Come Here and Wash the Black Men White.” German Missionary Nuns in Colonial Togo, 1897-1918

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This paper discusses the missionary encounter between the Servants of the Holy Spirit and Togolese women in the context of gender and ethnicity. The Servants of the Holy Spirit are a German Catholic congregation of missionary nuns, which was founded in the Dutch town of Steyl in 1889 with the particular goal to assist male missionaries by working towards the proselytization of non-western females. Since 1897, stable numbers of Servants of the Holy Spirit departed for what was then the German colony of Deutsch-Togo, where they established and maintained five women’s convents and affiliated girls’ (boarding) schools and dispensaries. There they lived and worked in close collaboration with indigenous girls and women until January 1918, when the last nuns, alongside with the rest of the German population, were forced to leave the country by the new British colonial administration.

In contrast to much of modern mission historiography, which has often failed to address the gender and race biases that characterize colonial archive inventories in Europe and ignored the importance of women’s experiences and practices to mainstream historical narratives, this paper privileges the sources that were produced by women. These are mostly the correspondence of nuns with Europe, their travelogues, chronicles, reports, articles, photos and publications. Inspired by postcolonial theory and the works of women’s historians of Africa, I will moreover reflect on these sources critically and discuss the Servants of the Holy Spirit’s historical archive as part of a larger story of domination and control. Focusing on what Nakanyike Musisi has called the roles of eyes and pens as “indispensable constructors of colonialism” (Musisi 2002), I will raise the questions of how to study and how to represent the “other side” of the missionary encounter, the indigenous population in Togo more generally and its female half in particular. Thereby much attention is paid to the interpretation of (cultural, racial) difference given the fact that it was the nuns’ pens that recorded their engagement with the indigenous girls and women at a period that was marked by unequal power relations.