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The First Spiritan Mission Method in Bagamoyo: Liberation of Slaves

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Johannes Henschel, C.S.Sp. is a member of the German Province. Ordained in 1961, his first mission was in pastoral work in Germany (1962 to 1980) and South Africa (1981 to 1982). He became the chief editor of the German mission magazine, *Kontinente* (1982 to 1992), then was assigned to the pastoral care of tourists in Bagamoyo, Tanzania (1992–1994) and from 1998–2002. His study of the mission methods of the first Spiritan missionaries in Bagamoyo is published in the booklet, *Bagamoyo 1868 – 1893: Place of no Hope for Slaves, Place full of Hope for liberated Slaves. Twenty-Five Years of Catholic Missionaries in Bagamoyo*. Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 2015.

“We shall fight slavery in East Africa. We shall ransom as many slaves as possible, settle them in villages, train them in handcrafts and schools and lead them to Christianity.”

THE FIRST SPIRITAN MISSION METHOD IN BAGAMOYO: LIBERATION OF SLAVES

In 1868, Spiritan missionaries started the Catholic Church in Bagamoyo on the East African mainland, an important harbor in the 19th century in the East African trade network. They intended to ransom slaves, following the program of Bishop Armand Maupoint, bishop of St. Denis, Reunion, who wrote: “We shall fight slavery in East Africa. We shall ransom as many slaves as possible, settle them in villages, train them in handcrafts and schools and lead them to Christianity.”¹ The archives of the Catholic parish in Bagamoyo have kept the oldest Records of Baptisms and Records of Marriages, beginning with the year 1870.

In this article, I examine the Spiritan method of building up the Catholic Church with liberated slaves. Contrary to Paul Kollmann, *The Evangelization of Slaves*,² who argues that the Spiritan missionaries regarded the ransomed slaves as slaves, it is my contention that they regarded the ransomed slaves as free persons and evangelized them as such.

Two questions come to mind. Why did the Spiritan missionaries liberate slaves? Did they force the liberated to become Christians? Let’s look at one series of figures. The number of enslaved East Africans from 1870 to 1885 was 202,000. Liberated were only 1,987, and out of these only 714 were baptized.³ This indicates that the slaves had freedom of choice as to whether to join the Christian faith and exercised this freedom unhindered. In examining this first Spiritan mission method in East Africa, I shall look at the following.

1. Slavery in East Africa during the 19th century.
2. The Anti-Slavery Movements and Spiritans in the 19th century.
3. The Liberating work of Spiritans in Bagamoyo after 1868.

Slavery in East Africa during the 19th Century

The number of slaves taken from West Africa to America between 1540 and 1900 is well documented: 11,769,000. For the East African slave trade, such accurate

documentation is not available. Figures vary from 30 to 40 million slaves (so Ki-Zerbo), 17.2 million (so Austin), and 8.9 million (so Lovejoy). Because the East African slave trade is not so accurately documented, the African historian, Tidiane N'Diaya, calls that trade "the hidden genocide."⁴ During the 19th century, plantations of sugar cane, coffee, spices and coconut trees were introduced in countries along the Indian Ocean. Such plantations demanded cheap labor, hence slaves. At the same time, Europe and India wanted more and more the ivory of the (male) East African elephant, ivory used for carving. Soon traders used slaves as porters and merchandise at the same time.

I follow Paul E. Lovejoy according to whom 1,487,000 East Africans were enslaved during the 19th century and forced to work, as follows.

347,000 or 23.3 % in Arabia, Persia and India;
276,000 or 18.6 % in Southern Africa;
95,000 or 6.4 % in Reunion and Mauritius; and
765,000 or 51.7 % in the East African coast.⁵

According to Lovejoy, 44,000 slaves were exported between 1840 and 1849, but 173,000 between 1850 and 1873 because farm-products got higher prices at the markets and more slaves were needed. Retained in East Africa were 147,000 slaves during the period from 1840 to 1849, mostly for the spice farms in Pemba and Zanzibar. But from 1870 to 1879, the number jumped to 188,000. The death rate of slaves on the island of Zanzibar alone is estimated at about 10–15% annually.

Slavery in East Africa was really shocking. Reports about the trade were published in Europe. As more and more slaves were demanded, more and more were hunted down. N'Diaye says this about slave hunting.

*The slave hunters
attack villages during
the night,...*

The slave hunters attack villages during the night, kill the watchmen, set all houses on fire, kill old persons and children and take the others away as slaves. For the long march from the interior to the coast, the slaves are chained one to the other with a chain of iron or wood.⁶

Gebhard Schneider, following a report of the Spiritan missionary, Fr. Anthony Horner, C.S.Sp. portrayed the slave caravans as follows.

The slave caravans are really cruel. Men, women, and children were forced to march, in long lines, chained with iron chains from neck to neck, carrying ivory or other cargo. They are pushed on by the slave traders through forests, deserts, and rivers. Slaves who could not walk any longer were killed on the spot. Others died, totally exhausted.⁷

In Bagamoyo, the slaves were packed into sailing ships for transport to the slave market in Zanzibar. Fr. Horner reported this about the slave market.

Twice a day the poor slaves are sold to the highest bidder... The bidder examines the body of the slave whom he wants to buy. He checks the muscles. He orders the slave to run a short distance to see how the slave is walking and then he is sold. Females are checked into a cabin. How can I see this degrading scene without being disgusted?⁸

The Anti-Slavery Movements and the Spiritans

Europeans had a superiority complex. Up to the 20th century, they saw Africans as people without any culture and sometimes even as sub-human. The Africa expert, Leo Frobenius, wrote: “We have to keep in mind that even well-educated Europeans only a life time ago saw Africa as a hopeless continent and Africans themselves as barbarian and sub-human.”⁹ Only a life time ago - in 1933 this meant about 1850. In 1923 France, with French but also African soldiers, occupied the German area Ruhrgebiet. The German chancellor, Friedrich Ebert, protesting in the German Parliament, spoke of African soldiers of the lowest cultural level supervising the well-educated and trained European people of a higher cultural standard as violation of European culture.¹⁰ The two quotations reveal the prejudices and the superiority complex of the Europeans.

*...the “pro-slavers”
stood for an economy
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opponents of slavery
for an economy based
on modern machines
and fruits...*

However, by the end of the 18th century, Anti-Slavery Movements had started and the 19th century was marked by the fight of “pro-slavers” and “anti-slavers” – two views of Africans. On the one hand, Africans as sub-human or at least without any culture; on the other hand, Africans as equal human beings. But it was at the same time a fight of two economic systems: the “pro-slavers” stood for an economy based on slavery, the opponents of slavery for an

economy based on modern machines and fruits, in short, the use of steam-engines instead of the work of human beings and the planting of more sugar-beets than sugar-canes. In the USA, the fight culminated in the War of the States in 1863. Egon Flaig writes, “The USA were the only country in the world which had a “slave-free-zone” and a “slave-owners zone.” He posits that the USA war of 1863 had no economic reason; it was a war to stop slavery or to continue with it.¹¹

Spiritans on the Frontlines

Spiritans were not outriders of the Anti-Slavery movements, but were nevertheless on the frontlines. A number of essays in *Memoire Spiritaine*¹² affords a good view of the abolition of slavery and the involvement of Spiritans in this. This can only be expected of the sons of Claude Poullart des Places, the purpose of whose foundation was “to train ... missionaries and clerics to serve in hospitals, in poor parishes and in other abandoned posts for which the bishops can hardly find anybody...”¹³ Spiritans were involved in pastoral work in the French colonies where they met African slaves. When in 1790 the National Assembly of the French Revolution started to suppress the Spiritans, Lescallier, a former administrator in French-Guiana, testified that the Spiritans were doing “an excellent work in Guinea” among the African slaves.¹⁴ The mission method of liberating slaves had deep impact in Reunion, Haiti and Mauritius. In 1844 the French Government requested the Catholic Church in France to send 36 priests to Martinique, Guadeloupe, French-Guiana, and Reunion who would be able to prepare the 300,000 slaves there for the liberty soon be granted them and who would be able to calm down the slave-owners.¹⁵ Spiritans were the natural “experts” for such a work. Their ninth Superior, Fr. Amable Fourdinier, wrote to Cardinal de Bonald of Lyon on April 30, 1844, “Like us the slaves are created in the image of God and like us are redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ.”¹⁶

Spiritans were the natural “experts” for such a work.

Spiritans started the mission in Reunion which had about 71,284 inhabitants, 45,000 of whom being slaves from East Africa. The treaties of the British with the Sultans of Zanzibar in 1822 and 1845 had limited the export of slaves from Zanzibar to Reunion. But the French farmers who owned huge farms in Reunion knew a way out. They continued to buy East Africans as slaves on the slave market in Zanzibar, baptized them on the way back, and imported

Johannes Henschel, C.S.Sp. them into Reunion as “Christian contract workers.” That provoked the Spiritans, especially Fr. Alexandre Monnet (1812-1849). He sent reports to France and encouraged the Anti-Slavery Movement. In Reunion, he became known as “father of the Negroes.” In 1847 the famous anti-slavery fighter in France, Victor Schoeller, published his proclamation to stop slavery immediately. The French farmers in Reunion saw Fr. Monnet behind this and tried to kill him, but he was protected by the slaves. The Governor of the island responded to the outbreak of revolt by the slaves by arresting Fr. Monnet and sending him back to France, but he was welcomed there as a “freedom fighter.” Victor Schoeller congratulated him in public and the Spiritans elected him as the 10th Superior General.

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(1812-1849)*

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Very important for the work on behalf of slaves was also Fr. Frederick Le Vasseur (1811–1882) who was born in Reunion to a rich farmer who owned huge coffee and sugar-cane farms and many slaves. It seems that the father of the young Le Vasseur was in contact with the Spiritans because when his son left for Paris for studies he asked him to make contact in Paris with Fr. Nicolas Warnet who had also worked in Reunion. One may presume that Fr. Warnet and Le Vasseur discussed much about the East African slaves in Reunion. Le Vasseur decided to become a priest and left for Reunion where he worked closely with Fr. Monnet. In 1842 he became, with Fr. Eugene Tisserant and Fr. Francis Mary Paul Libermann, a co-founder of the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary. He was the one who brought Fr. Monnet into contact with Fr. Libermann and prepared the 1848 merger of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit with the new Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary. Upon the merger, Fr. Libermann was elected as the 11th Superior General and Fr. Monnet, the former Superior General of the Spiritans, was appointed bishop of Madagascar.¹⁷ Interesting is that Fr. Monnet and Fr. Le Vasseur inspired Bishop Armand Maupoint of Reunion so much that he started the mission to Zanzibar (1860/1863) and to Bagamoyo (1868) with Spiritans, the main aim being to liberate slaves.

Haiti was another important place for the mission theology of Fr. Libermann. Fr. Eugene Tisserant (1814–1849), a co-founder of the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary, had his roots in Haiti. He was the grandson of the famous freedom fighter, General Beauvais. He was born in Paris in 1814 to a chemist and his wife, the daughter of General Beauvais from Haiti (called Santo

The declaration of human rights in the USA in 1776 and the French Revolution in 1779, with the slogans Freedom, Equality and Brotherhood, encouraged freedom fighters to stand up for the rights of the African slaves.

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Domingo up to 1795). Haiti/Santo Domingo was the main supplier of sugar and coffee for France. In 1789, 530,000 of the 600,000 inhabitants were African slaves. The declaration of human rights in the USA in 1776 and the French Revolution in 1779, with the slogans *Freedom, Equality and Brotherhood*, encouraged freedom fighters to stand up for the rights of the African slaves. The uprising ended in bloodshed. In 1792 the revolutionary government in Paris passed a law which gave freedom to all slaves. The government of Haiti refused to accept that law and the fight resumed, now under the leadership of Generals Toussaint Louverture and Louis Beauvais. They won the fight and Santo Domingo was declared the free Republic of Haiti. However, Napoleon restored slavery and suppressed the newly freed government of Haiti. General Louverture was put in prison in France and died in prison. General Beauvais died on the way to France. In Paris, the Tisserant-Beauvais house became the meeting point of the freedom fighters of Haiti. Here Fr. Eugene Tisserant, grandson of General Beauvais, introduced Fr. Libermann to Isaac Louverture, the son of Toussaint Louverture. From him Fr. Libermann got to know of the successful revolt of African slaves in Haiti.¹⁸

Mauritius must be mentioned in this context. Here Fr. James Laval (1803–1864) was laboring for 80,000 former East African slaves who received their freedom in 1833. Fr. Laval knew by experience how interested the Africans were to receive proper education and formation and how much they helped one another in the Small Christian Communities which he had started.¹⁹ He informed Fr. Libermann about all his experiences. Fr. Libermann collected all pieces of information from Frs. Le Vasseur, Monnet, Tisserant, and Laval, reflected upon them, and drew up his own theological conclusions which can clearly be seen in the 1849 *Reglements* of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. The upshot of this was that the members are to be advocates of the weak and oppressed. Here are two examples.

Article IX. They will be advocates, defenders and supporters of the weak and “little ones” against those who oppress them (Daly, no. 316, p. 119).

Article XVII. Missionaries will do all they can to establish between rich and poor, White and Black, that Christian charity which causes all men to see themselves as brothers of Jesus Christ

The Irish Spiritan, John Daly, writes that through the afore-mentioned Spiritans Fr. Libermann became aware of the way the blacks had been oppressed and humiliated. They were compelled to be slaves and servants. Libermann gives examples of their qualities - their capacity for organization shown by the various struggles for liberation on the Antilles; the success of those who had received technical, commercial, and school education and which demonstrated that they could follow all kinds of studies. Libermann saw the people of Africa as open and generous, contrary to what he felt was the self-centeredness of Europeans.²⁰

The Liberating Work of Spiritan Missionaries in Bagamoyo after 1868

Spiritans were the pioneers in Bagamoyo. They came to Bagamoyo in 1868 following the 1848 merger of Fr. Libermann's foundation and the earlier Congregation of the Holy Spirit. They met Africans who were humiliated by slavery and tried to carve out a new future for them. A premise for this was the mission method of liberating slaves. The Spiritans who came to Bagamoyo were well prepared for their work. They trained the freed slaves in various workshops for arts and crafts and in agriculture, and started schools for the boys.²¹ Well prepared also were the Sisters of the Congregation of Daughters of Mary who worked together with the Spiritans. They taught the girls sewing and housekeeping. Their Congregation was founded in Reunion in 1849 by Fr. Frederick Le Vasseur and Aimée Pignolet des Fresnes. A letter from the Generalate of the Sisters in St. Denis, Reunion, says that "The first six Sisters were of humble origin. They came from very poor families. Four of them were former slaves or descendants of former slaves who received freedom in 1848."²² John Baur writes that "The Sisters belonged to the afore-mentioned Congregation which was founded in Reunion to enable girls of humble origin, former slaves, to enter religious life. Now they became missionaries to the homeland of their ancestors."²³

They trained the freed slaves in various workshops for arts and crafts and in agriculture, and started schools for the boys.

Four visions

Already in 1868, specifications of the Spiritan Constitution of 1878 were binding on the missionaries.

No. 96. X. The missionaries have to commit

themselves to fight slavery and the dreadful slave trade. They shall ransom as many slaves as possible and lead them to Christianity.

In an 1867 letter to the Spiritan generalate in Paris, Fr. Anthony Horner outlined some visions of the missionaries.

I have in mind to start a new colony in Bagamoyo. Our married couples can get their own piece of land and can start their own house-holdings... The first nucleus shall grow. Not only because children shall be born, but also because other Africans shall join. With our young Christians we shall start new Christian villages in the interior.²⁴

The letter enunciated four visions.

1. To start "Freedom Villages" for ex-slaves.
2. To transform these villages into Christian Villages.
3. To start new villages in the interior.
4. To start such villages with Christians from Bagamoyo.

Spiritans missionaries ransomed slaves and also received slaves ransomed by the British, German, and French authorities. We read that for the period 1870–1920, 234,000 were enslaved and 3,626 ransomed.²⁵ The number of ransomed slaves who were baptized cannot be given because in the Baptism Records pages for some years have been lost. Totally lost are the records of the years from 1885–1887. John Patrick Kieran gives the number of the inhabitants in the Christian Freedom Village as follows.

In 1872: 322; in 1873: 324; in 1877: 400 children and 40 adults; in 1878: 480 children and 70 adults; in 1880: 500 children and 70 adults.²⁶

For the period from 1870–1882, 506 ransomed persons were baptized, 129 being children born to Christian parents and 20 persons who had been abandoned. The ages of those 506 who were ransomed and baptized between 1870 and 1882 were as follows.

1 to 9 years: 160; 10 to 19 years: 282; 20 and older: 32; no age indicated: 32.

The number of baptized children born to Christian

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parents indicates that the Freedom Village changed to become a Christian Village. The 20 abandoned persons were aged slaves who were sick or who could not work any longer or children of slaves whose parents abandoned them “at the beach,” at the entrance to the mission, or on the way to us. That is, in places where the missionaries could find them. The missionaries did not force the ransomed to be baptized. This becomes more evident when one reads the Baptism Records and the Records of Marriages in tandem. For example: on June 5, 1871, 9 couples got married. The assisting priest was Fr. Anthony Horner. All bridegrooms and brides had been ransomed from slavery. Two brides had been baptized the day before they got married. One bridegroom, Antonius Mtoumoula, asked for baptism only on May 11, 1872 when his daughter Alicia was baptized. The records mention the couple, Eugenia and Ndege. Ndege never asked for baptism as the entries to the baptisms of his children indicate. Eugenia, an adult ransomed from slavery in 1868, asked for baptism on April 12, 1879. But she had brought her son Lucas for baptism already on June 26, 1876. This open pastoral method of the missionaries is remarkable. They ransomed slaves, but did not force them to become Christians.

One vision of the pioneer missionaries was to open new missions in the interior, but they had to postpone this. In 1870 a cholera epidemic burst out in Bagamoyo and lasted up to 1872. In 1872 the terrible cyclone Kimbungu destroyed almost all the buildings and on top of this the German–French War of 1870/71 cut off all support and supplies coming from Europe. Only in 1877 could Fr. Horner open the first new mission in Mhonda. Now the third and fourth vision of the missionaries became reality: young Christian couples from Bagamoyo accompanied the missionaries and became co-missionaries to other Africans. On November 11, 1880, six couples got married who were appointed for Mhonda. They were very young. The brides were 18 and 19 years old and of the bridegrooms, one was 18 years, another 20, two were 21, one was 23, and one was 27 years of age. For 4, no age is indicated.

Final Reflections

The missionaries ransomed slaves, freed them from slavery, and carved a new future for them by giving them elementary education and formation and training in

different skills. They encouraged them to get married, being sure that family life is for the ransomed ex-slaves the best way into a new future. They even expected that they could become co-missionaries to fellow Africans. From 1880 to 1888, altogether 92 young couples left Bagamoyo for Mhonda, Mandra, Morogoro, Tununguo and Ilonga. The Spiritan missionaries of Bagamoyo fulfilled the vision of Fr. Francis Libermann who in 1847 wrote his missionaries in Dakar:

Relate to them as if you were their servants and they were your masters, adapting yourselves to their style of doing things. Your sole purpose in all this must be to perfect and sanctify them and to raise them up from their oppressed state to become a people of God.²⁷

Libermann and his missionaries were convinced that the Africans were as “intelligent as we are” and that their faults were only the effects of slavery. To liberate them from slavery means to enable them “to realize their full potential.”²⁸

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Endnotes

¹Bishop Armand Maupoint in 1858 to Propaganda Fide, Rome. Unpublished manuscript: archive of the Catholic Museum, Bagamoyo. Author and date not indicated.

²Kollman, Paul V., *The Evangelization of Slaves and Catholic Origins in Eastern Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2005).

³Lovejoy, Paul E., *Transformation of Slavery* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 151; see also documents in the archives of the Catholic Museum, Bagamoyo.

⁴N'Diaye, Tidiane, *The Hidden Genocide. History of the Muslim Slave Trade*. German edition (Rowohlt-Verlag 2000).

⁵Lovejoy: *Transformation of Slavery*, 152.

⁶Cf. N'Diaye, *The Hidden Genocide*, 132-133, summarized.

⁷Schneider, Gebhard, *Die katholische Mission Zanguebar. Tätigkeiten und Reisen des Pater Horner* (The Catholic Mission of Zanzibar: The Work and Travels of Father

Johannes Henschel, C.S.Sp. Horner), Regensburg 1878, 49.

⁸Fr. Anthony Horner, July 8, 1863. See the Central Archives of the Spiritans, Chevilly/France.

⁹Frobenius, Leo, *Kulturgeschichte Afrikas* (Culture History of Africa). Phaidon-Verlag 1933, 12.

¹⁰*Informationen zur politischen Bildung*. Heft 314 (Berlin 2012), 11.

¹¹Cf. Flaig, Egon, *Weltgeschichte der Sklaverei* (World History of Slavery). Beck-Verlag 2009, 208-209.

¹²*Mémoire Spiritaine : Histoire, Mission, Spiritualité* (Spiritans Memory: History, Mission, Spirituality). A journal of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, French Province, published in Paris. It ran from 1995 to 2007.

¹³Letters patent of 1726, cf. Daly, John, C.S.Sp. *Spiritans Wellsprings* (Dublin/London: Paraclete Press, 1986), 8.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 10; Koren, Henry J, C.S.Sp., *To the Ends of the Earth* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1988), 114, note 66.

¹⁵Daly, *Spiritans Wellsprings*, 14.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁷Koren, *To the Ends of the Earth*, 152-153.

¹⁸Koren, *To the Ends of the Earth*, 217.

¹⁹Cf. Rath, Joseph-Theodor, C.S.Sp., *Jakob Laval – Der Apostel von Mauritius* (James Laval, the Apostle of Mauritius), Knechtsteden 1978, 257, note 11.

²⁰Daly, *Spiritans Wellsprings*, 195ff. (summarized).

²¹Cf. Congregazione dello Spirito Santo, *Brief History of Tanzania and the Coming of Spiritans to East Africa*, 2015, 5. Also James Chukwuma Okoye, C.S.Sp., „Spiritans and Education. An Overview.“ *Spiritans Horizons* 9 (Fall 2014), 59.

²²Letter kept in the archives of the Catholic Museum, Bagamoyo.

²³Baur, John, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 1994), 119.

²⁴Fr. Anthony Horner, 1867. Central Archives of the Spiritans, Chevilly/France.

²⁵Cf. Lovejoy, *Transformation of Slavery*, and documents in the archive of the Catholic Museum, Bagamoyo.

²⁶Kieran, John Anthony, *The Holy Ghost Fathers in East Africa 1863–1914* (London, 1966), 109

²⁷Libermann Letter to the Community of Dakar and Gabon. *Notes et Documents IX*, 324-332. Also *A Spiritan Anthology. Writings of Claude-François Poullart des Places (1679-1709) and François Marie-Paul Libermann (1802-1852)*. Chosen and presented by Christian de Mare, C.S.Sp. (Roma: Congregazione dello Spirito Santo, 2011), 287.

²⁸Cf. Fr. Libermann in his Memorandum to Propaganda Fide in 1845.