

# Much More Than Illustrations of What We Already Know: Experiences in the Rediscovery of Mission Photography

Paul Jenkins

Thanks to a number of foundations and other sponsors, the Basel Mission Archive in the last ten years has been enabled to document its collection of historical photographs and other types of image. Both the size of the collection and the age of the oldest photographs were surprising. In all, the archive houses about 50,000 images created before 1950. The archive's oldest photographs taken in Europe date back to about 1850, the oldest in Africa and Asia to 1860 or perhaps a little earlier.<sup>1</sup> The institutions that financed the cataloging showed interest in a pilot project that would address problems of access as well as conservation. The archive tackled both issues, concentrating on a body of 28,000 photographs and other types of image, half of them from before 1914, with 80–90 percent of them taken in Africa or Asia. The result is an interactive system that allows database searches of select images stored in an electronic image bank. The images then appear on-screen. This image bank becomes available for public use through a Web site in late October 2002.<sup>2</sup>

This essay is not the place to give an account of the ten-year project.<sup>3</sup> Instead, one fundamental and problematic issue in the Basel Mission's archival policy with old photographs will be raised, and the results that the policy enables will be illustrated by reference to a photograph of Pastor John Mosi (see photo above). The point at issue is the postulate, built into the mission's archival policy, that proper archival and research work with old photographs requires that they be cataloged individually, that is, treated as separate, individual documents. We have followed this principle in work done on the 28,000 photographs the archive now has "under control."

Anyone who has worked for any length of time with historical photographs will immediately recognize the controversies that this policy can generate. At one level the postulate is easy to defend. For people hungry for visual resources for the social history of Africa and Asia, what the archive has done is clearly important and justifiable. For many places in southern Ghana, Cameroon, Southwest India, South China, and Borneo, where Basel missionaries worked in the "classic" period of Western mission outreach, the archive presents a coordinated and docu-



Rev. Johann Mösi.  
Photograph by W. Zürcher. Courtesy of the Basel Mission Archive. Reference number E-30.86.229.

mented series of between 50 and 200 historical photographs, in some cases even more. For each location the Basel Mission Archive is probably the only source of an organized body of historical photographs currently available. Basel's archivists have also structured the collection's fuzzy borders, indicating which photographs were taken in a specific region, even when the exact site of origin is uncertain.

Individual cataloging, however, also presents immediately evident problems. First, it takes time and therefore costs money. Second, when cataloging of the Basel Mission collection was begun, I myself and the people I was in touch with certainly underestimated the number of holdings of photographs in the world and the volume of photographs in those holdings. It is not hard now to find statistics that seem to rule out altogether the idea of individual cataloging. An important European conference on work with collections of historical photographs held in September 2000 confronted participants with the dismaying figure that in Sweden, a country with a relatively small population, photographs are being taken at an average of one million per day.<sup>4</sup> Of course, situations vary. Situations where photographic documentation is rare—for example, the West African coast in the 1860s—contrast starkly with situations where its bulk is overwhelming. Not much imagination is needed to suppose, however, that the known photographs of the non-Western world before 1914 in organized collections, plus the number of photographs no doubt existing in forgotten cupboards, would quickly swamp the resources that archivists have for work in this field.

## Creating Value

For this reason I welcome the opportunity to write about cataloging and about the wider impact that visual sources from mission archives can have in the cultural and social sciences. Individual cataloging of historical photographs is valuable in itself—or perhaps better, taking up a phrase fashionable in central Europe, it *creates* value. My experience as archivist for the Basel Mission has convinced me that individual cataloging of photographs introduces a new quality into discussions of the past and should enable new forms of discourse about the past to develop. Using visual sources correctly and with the necessary rigor and accuracy

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could have as revolutionary an impact as working with oral sources had in African history a generation ago. Properly cataloged photographs should also be the basis for “schools for seeing,” in which reflective study of photographs helps people to perceive the deeper meanings and varied significance behind the historical and contemporary images used by modern mass media merely for their immediate impact.

Trying to prove these assertions in the abstract is unrewarding. Instead, I increasingly draw on experiences with specific photographs when attempting to evaluate what has been achieved in Basel. I would thus like to present a kind of “cataloging biography” of photograph E-30.86.229, “Rev. John Mösi” (first photo), in six short “chapters.” They show how an individual image, subjected to the attention of individual cataloging, can move from being one anonymous item among thousands of others to gain an individual profile and, even as a single photograph or as one of a small group of photographs, to offer unexpected information and point our thinking in new directions.

The clothing of the subject is, as a general style, traditional among the people of the region known as the Cameroon Grassfields, a highland area around the city of Bamenda, where more than a dozen ethnic groups live in a mode of ongoing competition that has been appropriately called an informal hierarchy.<sup>5</sup> Some ethnic groups are organized as kingdoms, and others are more egalitarian. Although there is a fairly lengthy bibliography about the Presbyterian Church (formerly the Basel Mission Church) in this region, from the viewpoint of a historian of Africa, a satisfactory social, cultural, and intellectual history of the church in terms of regional social and cultural dynamics is yet to be written.<sup>6</sup>

Having established this background, we turn to the portrait of Pastor Mösi.

## Chapter 1: Creating the Database

During the initial cataloging process in the mid-1990s, taken as the first step toward creating the database, the photograph itself was inspected. The caption and the name of the probable photographer were entered in the database. The results read, “Rev. John Mösi. Photographer: Wilhelm Zürcher, between 1932 and 1945.”

It was clear that John Mösi was a pastor of the old Basel Mission Church in the Grassfields. The photograph could be dated to the 1930s or 1940s, given the presence of the photographer in Cameroon during those years. With this information (and the allocation of keywords), the essential elements in the initial cataloging process were complete.

The image remained in my memory, however, partly because of the apparent anomaly of finding a Basel Mission pastor of that time wearing traditional robes.<sup>7</sup> It stuck in my memory for another reason as well. Because of seeing photographs of missionaries from forty years earlier who are dressed in the same way, I had already begun raising new questions about the interpretation to be given to the robe Mösi is wearing.<sup>8</sup>

Initial cataloging yielded no hint as to what Mösi was doing or why he should be standing in a clearly traditional architectural setting, nor were we told where the photograph was taken. Simply creating the database supplied no information about the event in which he was participating or why he was presenting himself in this traditional way. Individual cataloging, however, meant that the image was given an unambiguous reference number. As needed, it could be recalled easily and reliably at any point in the future.

## Chapter 2: Incorporating New Research

In 1999 Richard Fardon, professor of West African anthropology in the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, visited the Basel Mission Archive. In his early fieldwork he had studied an ethnic group called the Chamba on the Nigerian side of the Nigeria-Cameroon border, in the region south of Maiduguri.<sup>9</sup> A number of groups in the Cameroon Grassfields claim nineteenth-century Chamba origins, not least the kingdom of Bali Nyonga (see “Chapter 4” below). Fardon had been extending his research to include these Cameroonian groups, looking especially at questions of cultural dynamics as probably relatively small groups of people brought their beliefs, customs, and social

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### John Mösi was pastor of the Grassfields church, but it was not clear from our cataloging what he was doing or why.

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structures into the quite new cultural context of the Cameroon Grassfields. During his 1999 visit he studied carefully the archive’s Bali Nyonga photographs, focusing on anthropological-historical information.

Fardon pointed out that the archive has a few photographs of people celebrating the accession in 1940 of Galega II, the new *fon* (king) of Bali Nyonga (photographs E-30.86.224–27; see second photo). Three of these photos (nos. 224–26) had in fact already come to catalogers’ attention because they raised a translation question that could not be easily answered. The original German captions refer to *die Gemeinde Grasland*. This phrase means literally “the Grassfields community” or “the Grassfields congregation.” Neither of these made sense. The question, Why would “community” or “congregation” qualified by “Grassfields” be in the singular and not in the plural? had no satisfactory answer.

A second question concerned a basic ambiguity in the word *Gemeinde* itself. In the usual Basel Mission language the term *Gemeinde* refers to a Christian congregation. In German, however, it can also mean the basic local unit of government, especially in Switzerland, where the *Gemeinde*, or local commune, is the foundation stone of the traditional democratic order. These photographs showed men wearing traditional robes and carrying weapons, so at first it seemed that *Gemeinde* was being used here in a political sense.

## Chapter 3: Gaining New Light

At this point the accuracy with which photographs can be retrieved once they have been individually cataloged intersected dramatically with Fardon’s interest in photographs from a specific locality. It turned out that the portrait of Mösi was part of the same film as the images clearly linked to the accession of the new *fon* in 1940, including those referring to the “*die Gemeinde Grasland*.”<sup>10</sup> With the Mösi picture seen as part of that series, it became much more likely that *Gemeinde* means “Christian congregation.” Here were the congregations *with their pastors!*

This conclusion inspired a search in the written records of the mission archive for any indication of an event of this kind

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from this part of Cameroon in 1940–41. Records from this time and place are somewhat sketchy, since the Basel Mission's German staff members were interned, but there was clear written confirmation that representatives of Christians from all parts of the Grassfields had indeed greeted the new *fon* of Bali Nyonga when the Grassfields Synod met in Bali Nyonga shortly after his accession.<sup>11</sup> The photographs are likely not from this post accession greeting but from the actual accession day, for it appears, from the phrasing of the captions of numbers 224–26, that the Christians of Bali Nyonga also presented themselves at the accession itself as a clearly identifiable group to welcome the new king.<sup>12</sup>

Having these sources, visual and written, working together in synergy was like being given new spectacles that registered previously invisible wavelengths of energy. Much more now became apparent in and around the portrait of John Mösi. The photograph made perceptible new and striking profiles in the social landscape of relations between the church/mission and the region's traditional polity.

## Chapter 4: Establishing a Baseline

To sense the significance of this new information, we must review what we know about the history of the Basel Mission in the Grassfields. At the beginning of the German colonial occupation of the Cameroon Grassfields in the 1890s, Bali Nyonga was still a relatively young, dynamic, and expanding kingdom. Right from the start, it clearly tried to use the new German presence to further its own power, territory, and population.<sup>13</sup> In 1902–3 leading circles in the kingdom expended considerable energy in persuading the Basel Mission to found a mission station there, the first one in the Grassfields. We see the extent of its success in the Basel Mission's very early choice of Mungaka, the language of this relatively small kingdom, as its official school and church language for all the ethnic groups in the whole Grassfields. Basel Mission schools in the Grassfields thus became to an important

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### With visual and written sources working in synergy, John Mösi's portrait revealed much more.

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extent instruments of the Bali Nyonga attempt to extend cultural and political hegemony outside its normally accepted borders.

Most missionaries, however, had difficulty coping with the alien political and social structures of this African kingdom, and they did not find it easy to integrate the claims exerted by an African kingdom with their idea of what a congregation should be like. There is a long history of missionary disillusionment once it turned out that the early forecasts of large numbers of Bali Nyonga people becoming Christians were not fulfilled in the way the missionaries expected.

By the 1930s Basel Mission reports were stressing how few real conversions there had been within Bali Nyonga, that is, how few people adopted the Basel Mission mentality and lifestyle, and, a modern historian would want to add, how many remained tied into the power and status systems of the Bali Nyongan kingdom. One suspects that, in Grassfield terms, a legitimate and rational appropriation of Christian ideas and

beliefs occurred, though it was very different from the conversion the missionaries had been trained to expect.

## Chapter 5: Hearing a Different Message

Returning to the photographs and to the written record of Christians celebrating the accession of a new *fon* of Bali Nyonga, we can see that the Grassfields Christians viewed this kingdom, Bali Nyonga, very positively. This contrasts with the missionaries' negative assessment. The *fon* who died in 1940 was the old king, Fonyonga, who had invited the Basel Mission to the Grassfields in 1902–3. He was apparently popularly respected, for all his unbending "heathenism" in the eyes of the missionaries, as the founder of Grassfields Christianity. The Grassfields Christians welcomed the new king, Galega II, and they took part in ceremonies choreographed in a manifestly traditional way. There were no clerical suits, no sitting in rows of chairs under palm-leaf shelters, and, presumably, no hymns by Martin Luther or Paul Gerhardt. There must have been dancing instead, and men moving back and forth in loose military formation holding spears or shooting guns, a kind of coordinated activity that is central to this day in traditional Bali Nyonga festivals.

## Chapter 6: Returning to John Mösi

This cataloging biography has one final chapter. In June 2001 my Cameroonian colleague Jonas Dah supplied the information that John Mösi was a member of the Meta ethnic group. One of the more egalitarian groups in the Grassfields, the Meta are a large farming population. Though they had been present long before Bali Nyonga arrived on the scene, Bali Nyonga had attempted to integrate them as a subordinate population into their new and expanding kingdom. Indeed, at least part of the population of Meta was living in acute tension with Bali Nyonga in 1940. This tension escalated a decade later into intercommunal violence. John Mösi's portrait, however, suggests that, when he came to the 1940 accession celebration, he was to some degree accepting Bali Nyonga claims to hegemony, for he wore a robe that can bear this interpretation. It had been the kind of garment that within living memory had customarily been presented by the *fon* of Bali Nyonga to persons prepared to accept a role among his leading servants.<sup>14</sup> It probably still had this significance in 1940.

One can go further. We know that a missionary was enrobed in 1902, which probably meant that the kingdom was trying to incorporate him into its leading structures. And as recently as 1972 my colleague Hans Knöpfli was incorporated in precisely this way (see third photo). As a result, he spent considerable amounts of time and energy sitting with other officials of a similar grade working out common solutions to the problems of the broader community, an experience that still plays a major role in his memories of three decades of work in Cameroon.<sup>15</sup>

## Wider Implications

The final step in approaching the image given in "Chapter 6" does not answer all possible questions.<sup>16</sup> Rather, as I suggested at the beginning of this essay, step 6 indicates a direction for research whose outcome is still uncertain but that can be pursued energetically with visual sources at hand. The first and second photos immediately prompt the questions: What role did the Grassfields Christians expect the new *fon* of Bali Nyonga to play in relation to their future? And what role was John Mösi—and with him the Grassfields Christian congregations of non-Bali

Nyongan ethnic groups such as the Meta—expected to play in the developing history of Bali Nyonga?

These questions lead to broader issues. It may be taken as axiomatic that the celebration these two photographs document was not simply about the past or the renewal of kingly rule but about broader issues, not least hoped for future developments. We may also be sure that the concepts and assumptions in the minds of the Grassfields Christians—concepts and assumptions that they would have held to a great extent in common with the new *fon*—would have been dominated by the categories and values regnant in Grassfields diplomacy, administration, and politics. But what these values, categories, assumptions, and concepts were, and what concrete expectations each side had for the other's behavior, remain unknown to me as an outsider. They certainly existed, however, and we must recognize their essential role in accounting for the dynamics of church history and cultural and political change in twentieth-century Grassfields.

Questions arising about the portrait of Pastor John Mōsi printed in the first photo have helped to focus attention on a set of events that are too easily forgotten in Western discourse about African churches and, indeed, that have been largely forgotten even in Basel Mission discourse about a much-loved African daughter church. Answers to those questions support an assertion given inadequate recognition in the West, namely, that African church history is very different from Western mission



*King Galega II is greeted by the Grassfields congregation on the day of his enthronement. Photograph by W. Zürcher. Courtesy of the Basel Mission Archive. Reference number E-30.86.226.*

*Six leading officials (Nkom) of Bali Nyonga, including the Basel missionary Hans Knöpfli, during the Lela festival. Left to right, using their traditional names, they are Ba Gwambula, Ba Gwanyama, Ba Gwanyebit, Ba Gwambila, Ba Gwangaduna, and Ba Gwanjigana. Photo taken December 1981. Courtesy of Hans Knöpfli; private collection.*



history. Intensive research and close attention is needed if African church history, with its key indigenous categories and mechanisms, different as they surely are from region to region, is to be properly and adequately perceived. Even a simple observation—that Christians took part as a clearly identifiable group in the event at which Pastor Mosi was photographed, although it was choreographed in an indigenous way—should give cause for thinking about indigenous church history in new ways and for upgrading expectations of work with visual sources. Evidently, visual sources are especially important when working on the history of cultures that themselves have a strong and complex tradition of using visual symbols.

The “rediscovery of mission photography” is not too strong a term for describing the new insights into Grassfields church history outlined above. Clearly, the process of rediscovery documented here and the further rediscoveries that may be possible in the future are intimately linked with the discipline of cataloging individual photographs. Here we clearly extend the term “cataloging” to include, where appropriate, rigorous intellectual encounter with an individual photograph or a group of photographs. Experience at Basel demonstrates that archivists working in this field must possess sound academic and scientific judgment if their work is to achieve the greatest possible results.

## Notes

- 1 See Paul Jenkins, “The Earliest Generation of Missionary Photographers in West Africa and the Portrayal of Indigenous People and Culture,” *History in Africa* 20 (1993) 89–118, reprinted in *Visual Anthropology* 7, no. 2 (1994) 115–45. This essay includes a plea to realize that all nineteenth-century missionary societies may have shown an early interest in photography.
- 2 The address is <www.bmpix.org>. Menus, keywords, and related information is all in English. Historical texts in German relevant to individual images (above all, captions) have also been translated.
- 3 See Barbara Frey Naf and Paul Jenkins, *Arresting Entropy, Enabling New Synthesis: Conservation, Access, and the Photographic Record of the Basel Mission, 1850–1945. Final Report of a Project, 1990–1998* (Basel: Basel Mission Archive, 1999).
- 4 Such topics were considered at the conference “Written in Light: Photographic Collections in a Digital Age,” organized under the patronage of the European Commission on Preservation and Access, London, September 12–14, 2000.
- 5 Jean-Pierre Warnier, *Échanges, développement et hiérarchies dans le Bamenda pré-colonial (Cameroun)* (Stuttgart: Steiner-Verlag-Wiesbaden, 1985), pp. 1–3, 260–85.
- 6 Jonas Nwiyende Dah’s *Missionary Motivations and Methods: A Critical Examination of the Basel Mission in Cameroon, 1886–1914* (Basel: Basel Mission, 1984) is preeminently a Cameroonian critique of Basel Mission work. Edward Lekunze’s suggestive “Chieftancy and Christianity in Cameroon, 1886–1926: A Historical and Comparative Analysis of the Evangelistic Strategy of the Basel Mission” (Ph.D. diss., Lutheran School of Theology, Chicago, 1987) is more oriented to analysis of the traditional African states’ policies toward the Basel Mission in the Cameroon Grassfields, although it needs a much more developed sense of the categories guiding that policy. Guy Thomas’s “Why Do We Need the White Man’s God? African Contributions and Responses to the Formation of Christian Movement in Cameroon, 1914–1968” (Ph.D. diss., School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2002) was completed too late for use in preparing this article. It will undoubtedly offer a new basis for study of the Basel Mission’s successor church in Cameroon.
- 7 When we compare this image with what we know of the practice of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana (the Basel Mission’s other historic African partner church), the contrast is striking. In the 1940s the Presbyterian Church of the Gold Coast was still resisting direct challenges to adjust elements of its culture, such as pastors’ attire, to the wishes and customs of the traditional kingdoms with which it had

Certainly the original documentation of photographs in the Basel Mission Archive has proved to be very fragmentary. Even specifying the place where a photograph was taken often requires an act of judgment on the part of the cataloger. For this reason, in part, cataloging at the archive is never an anonymous activity. We routinely record who was responsible for initial cataloging of a photograph, who contributes further insights in its analysis, and when they do so.

If researchers simply leaf through loosely organized card indexes of photographs to find visual “proof texts” for assertions that everyone tends to think must be true anyway, they can be found. But such an approach does not further the cause of understanding, and each time it is followed, another opportunity to put research on a new and extended footing is lost. Photographs can have the power to energize and mobilize historical and cultural research, and not only in the field of indigenous church history. Other themes (e.g., the social history of missionary life) can also benefit from injection of this source of new information. Achieving this potential, however, depends on our understanding the grammar and syntax of working with visual materials, and it depends not least on our applying precision to questions of when and where an individual photograph was taken and what is going on in it.

- long been linked. But here is a Cameroonian pastor of the equivalent church wearing traditional robes—and also carrying a gun!
- 8 Paul Jenkins, “Warum tragen die Missionare Kostume? Forschungsmöglichkeiten im Bildarchiv der Basler Mission” (Why are the missionaries wearing fancy dress? Research possibilities in the photo archives of the Basel Mission), *Historische Anthropologie Kultur, Gesellschaft, Alltag* 4, no. 2 (1996) 292–302.
- 9 Richard Fardon, *Raiders and Refugees: Trends in Chamba Political Development, 1750–1950* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), and *Between God, the Dead, and the Wild: Chamba Interpretations of Religion and Ritual* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1990).
- 10 Unusual in the Basel Mission Archive, the photos E-30 86 219–33 are contact prints that seem to come from the same film. E-30 86 228, which is not referred to in detail in this article, is a portrait of another Grassfields pastor, Elisa Ndifon, also dressed traditionally, presumably on the same occasion. E-30 86 219–23 are general images of Grassfields congregational life, and E-30 86 230–33 are portraits of named personalities dressed in Western clothing and evidently not taken during the accession of Galega II.
- 11 See page 7 in Wilhelm Zurcher’s annual report for 1940 (dated March 28, 1941) in file E-5-2 15, Basel Mission Archive.
- 12 The Christians of Bali Nyonga, like the traditional groupings, had gone onto the marketplace in front of the palace to participate in the traditional death celebrations of the old king in 1940. Albert Angst, “Der alte Fonyonga gestorben,” November 1, 1941, a report in file E-5-2 14, Basel Mission Archive.
- 13 Eugen Zintgraff, *Nord-Kamerun* (Berlin: Gebrüder Paetel, 1895), provides the classic description of the first contact between Bali Nyonga and the Europeans, in this case an expedition traveling in the name of the German colonial government.
- 14 Jenkins, “Warum tragen die Missionare Kostume?”
- 15 The quality of Hans Knopflr’s contacts with Grassfields culture and Grassfields kingdoms is documented in his four-volume work on the craftsmen and craftswomen of this area. The full title of volume 1 is *Some Traditional Craftsmen of the Western Grasslands of Cameroon: Crafts and Technologies* (London: British Museum, 1997). Volumes 2 and 3 are *Sculpture and Symbolism* and *Utensils for Everyday Life* (Basel: Basel Mission, 1999 and 2001). The fourth volume is scheduled to appear in Basel in early 2003.
- 16 “Final” here refers merely to the state of the art in cataloging photographs as of the spring of 2002.



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