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RESEARCH IN A POST-MISSIONARY SITUATION: AMONG ZAÏREAN SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME DE NAMUR

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1. *Introduction*

THIS essay describes my anthropological study of a specific institution of the Catholic Church, a Zaïrean sisterhood.[1] It was commissioned by a predominantly African group of sisters living in Lower Zaïre, members of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. The membership of the congregation in Zaïre today is almost entirely African. More than three-quarters of the one hundred sisters in Zaïre are local women. Most of them are second- or third-generation Christians. There are very few expatriates still working in the region.

The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, whose mother house is in Belgium, were founded in 1804 by a Frenchwoman, Julie Billiart, for the education of the poor. During its first hundred years, members of the congregation worked almost exclusively with girls and young women. It is not primarily a missionary order, although today its nearly three thousand sisters are to be found in eighteen countries throughout the world. As the membership of the order has become more

1. The research project was carried out over eight years (1980-88), during which time I lived and worked with the sisters in Lower Zaïre. After completing a study for the Zaïrean sisters themselves, I expanded the material in a more academic form as a doctoral thesis in social anthropology (Burke 1990). For a discussion of field methodology, see Burke 1989.

culturally diversified, so the question of inculturation (see Pickering above) has become an important issue. The principal work of the congregation is in education. In Zaïre, the sisters work in primary and secondary schools, in technical education and teacher training as well as in rural dispensaries and outreach health education programmes, and in basic development with village women. They serve primarily rural populations.

Members of the Sisters of Notre Dame first went to the then Congo Free State in 1894 to work with girls and women in rural areas, their work focusing on child care, hygiene and other 'domestic arts', basic medical care, cultivation of subsistence crops and, after a while, basic literacy. Until the late 1960s, most of the sisters who went to the Congo were Belgians. During the 1940s and 1950s, they helped train the first members of a local African congregation and in 1959 began to accept African women into the order, including some members of the local congregation. The sisters in the newly independent Congo became an established, independent province at the end of 1961. Since 1975, all the provincial superiors have been Zaïreans.

In 1980, at the beginning of my study, almost all of the African sisters in the congregation were Ntandu–Kongo from Lower Zaïre, with a few Yaka from the Kwango. The ethnic composition was beginning to change when I left in 1988, with more Yaka women joining, as well as a few Ndibu–Kongo from the region west of the Inkisi River, and a Tetela sister from the Kasai. Since then, women from the capital, Kinshasa, of varying ethnic backgrounds, have shown an interest in joining the congregation.

Sister Mbwanga Elisabeth-Marie, Provincial Superior from 1975 to 1981, who initiated the project described here, saw it as a means of documenting the evolving inculturation of the sisterhood, and in particular the ways in which the Zaïrean sisters were adapting the sisterhood to their social backgrounds as Kongo women. Sister Mbwanga asked me, as an anthropologist and member of the order, to carry out the study in the hope that it would help the sisters to become more conscious agents of their own self-definition. The initiation and conception of the project place it squarely in the wider context of discussions of inculturation.

When I went to live among the sisters in 1980, I was surprised to hear myself addressed by the villagers as 'Mama Kioni' (Kioni being a Kikongo rendering of 'Joan'). This was in marked contrast to the more usual greeting of *maseri* (the Kikongo rendering of the French *ma soeur*) that I remembered hearing on my previous six-week visit to the country in 1971. Eventually, 'Mama Kioni' became for me representative of the way in which the sisterhood was being socially reconstructed. Most of the African sisters grew up in the Kongo villages of Lower Zaïre. The Kongo are matrilineal and perceive the sisters in matrifocal terms. The 'celibate women of the mission' in this area of Zaïre are understood, in terms of the metaphor of maternity, as spiritual and social 'mothers for all the people', in marked contrast to the metaphor of sisterhood commonly used in Europe.

2. *The Early Africanization of the Church in Zaïre*

Before considering further the immediate context of the research project, I wish to reflect on the earlier history of the Africanization of the Church in Zaïre.

From very early on, the missionary church in the Belgian Congo put a priority on the development of local clergy and the Africanization of church personnel. Only four years after their arrival in Lower Zaïre in 1896, the Jesuits had been ambitious enough to set up a minor seminary. Although this project was abandoned within a year, it demonstrates the missionaries' resolve from the beginning to develop a local clergy. The first ordination of Congolese was in 1917, and on the eve of independence in 1959 there were 369 Congolese priests (Markowitz 1973: 115). The Jesuits, who worked in the Kisantu Diocese of Lower Congo, where most of the sisters of the order are based, succeeded in establishing a minor seminary in Lemfu in 1922 and a major seminary in Mayidi in 1933. The first three Congolese priests were ordained for the diocese in 1937. The first Congolese bishop was consecrated in 1956. Two further Congolese bishops were consecrated in 1959. By 1968, a majority of the country's bishops was Zaïrean. In 1972, 26 of the 46 Zaïrean dioceses were headed by Zaïrean bishops.

An interest in what later came to be known as 'inculturation' was already evident in the Church of the Belgian Congo in the 1940s. Among the more notable precursors of this movement in the Catholic Church were a number of expatriate missionaries and Congolese, including Placide Tempels, G. Mosmans, V. Mulago and J. Malula.[2] What is known today as the Catholic Faculty of Kinshasa was founded in 1957 as part of the University of Lovanium. From the start it has consistently encouraged the development of an 'African theology', especially through the teaching and writings of faculty members Mulago, Ngindu-Mushete (e.g. 1978) and Tshibangu-Tshishiku.

Slowly at first, and then more rapidly, African sisterhoods began to develop in the Congo. By 1955, there were 870 African sisters in the three Belgian colonies (Norberta 1955), most of whom were members of diocesan orders. Most of the local congregations in the Belgian Congo were founded prior to the end of the Second World War, 13 of the 24 being founded between 1930 and 1945 (Pro Mundi Vita 1980: 8). According to Church statistics, there were in 1970 almost 400 Zaïrean brothers and more than 1100 sisters. There were 29 entirely African congregations in Zaïre in 1979. The same report states that 2164 of the 4220 Catholic sisters working in Zaïre in 1979 were African (ibid.: 7).

One reason why there has been considerable interest over the last twenty years in what is termed the 'inculturation' of religious life in Zaïre has been the large number of local brothers and sisters. In 1979, the association of the superiors of the women's religious orders, USUMA (Union des Supérieures Majeures en République de Zaïre), organized a week-long colloquium on 'La Vie religieuse

2. See, for example, Tempels 1949; Mosmans 1961; Mulago *et al* 1956; and Malula's lecture (quoted in Mosmans 1961) making the case for a 'Black Christianity'.

féminine au Zaïre'. One of the topics addressed was how the sisters themselves understood the meaning of the inculturation of religious life. Among the points summarized in the final report of the colloquium were: 'This way of life does not uproot a Zaïrean sister from African realities as some have falsely said. In fact there should be no rupture or divorce between the local sisters and the Zaïrean population' (USUMA 1979: 23). The reports of the meeting's proceedings show that the discussions were by no means limited to theoretical concerns. There was frank exchange on such practical problems as the relationship of the sisters to their families, interpretations of the vow of poverty, difficulties met with by sisters studying in public institutions, and misunderstandings—especially by clerics—of the sisters' commitment to celibacy.

The early interest in inculturation of church practices may also be due to Belgium's position as a centre of the 'liturgical renewal' that preceded the Second Vatican Council. Archival sources document missionary encouragement of the use of local music, drums and other instruments in Catholic ritual. It is not surprising that, shortly after the Second Vatican Council had encouraged liturgical renewal and the use of vernacular languages in Catholic ritual, Zaïre quickly responded. As early as 1973, a Zaïrean rite of the Mass was introduced in an experimental form in Kinshasa. When it began to be extended into the rural areas, it was welcomed with the same enthusiasm and appreciation that it had received from the townsfolk. The Zaïrean rite of the Mass received formal approbation from the Vatican in 1986.

3. *The Research Project*

Since the Second Vatican Council, there has been a keen interest in the Catholic Church in the importance of a dialogue between faith and culture (see Schreiter 1985; Shorter 1988; Burke 1990: ch. 6). This came to be known, particularly in the African context, as the theology of inculturation. In the words of the conciliar decree on the missionary activity of the Church, 'Let [Christians] be one with their fellow countrymen [*sic*]...giving expression to their Christian life in the social and cultural framework of their own homeland, according to their own traditions' (in Abbott 1966: 611). Following Vatican II, Pope Paul VI gave added impetus to the development of a theology of inculturation. His 1967 letter *Africae Terrarum* (see Hickey 1982: 176-97), addressed 'to the hierarchy and all peoples of Africa', demonstrated a very optimistic view of African traditions and spiritual values. In 1969, he became the first Pope to visit sub-Saharan Africa. At an all-Africa symposium of the Catholic hierarchy in Kampala, he addressed the bishops saying:

> The expression [of the one faith], that is, the language and mode of manifesting it, may be manifold. Hence, it may be original, suited to the tongue, the style, the character, the genius, and the culture, of the one who professes this one faith.

> From this point of view, a certain pluralism is not only legitimate, but desirable. An adaptation of the Christian life in the fields of pastoral, ritual, didactic and spiritual activities is not only possible, it is even favoured by the Church. The liturgical renewal is a living example of this. And in this sense you may, and you must, have an African Christianity. Indeed you possess human values and characteristic forms of culture which can rise up to perfection such as to find in Christianity, and for Christianity, a true superior fullness, and prove to be capable of a richness of expression all its own, and genuinely African. (Quoted in Hickey 1982: 203-4)

This theological tendency within the Church was reinforced by the growing concern for self-expression in the political arena throughout the world, especially in newer nation states, whose rulers reacted against decades of colonial tutelage. In Zaïre, the latter was formally expressed in the 'policy of authenticity' launched by President Mobutu in the early 1970s. Both the religious and the political movements encouraged people to greater self-consciousness and reflection on their cultural roots and experience. Even as early as 1971, when I was first in Zaïre on a visit, sisters told me that the president of the republic had said publicly that the celibacy of the religious life was inauthentic since historically there was no such tradition in Africa. This was a source of considerable worry to sisters who wanted to be true daughters of their people, while being faithful to the life they felt they were called to in the sisterhood.

Changes in the composition and organization of the order in Zaïre at the time had heightened the level of consciousness among the members. Between 1962 and 1978, there were two sisters from the British Province who worked alongside the Belgians and Zaïreans. From 1969 onwards, there were also a few Americans. This allowed the African sisters to witness variations from the familiar ways of the Belgian sisters in the interpretation of the sisterhood as well as in ways of relating to local people. The leadership of the province was also assumed by Zaïrean women. The first African provincial took office in 1976, and in the following year a Zaïrean was appointed as mistress of novices. All these factors made the local women more aware of their 'equal standing' within the congregation at large, reinforced by their greater opportunity to participate in the order's international gatherings.

The eight years during which I carried out my research comprised a very opportune time for the study. The older generation of Zaïrean sisters, who had entered the community in the 1940s and 1950s, still had vivid memories of their initiation into the life of the order, and of the models and expectations presented to them at the time that influenced their conception of the Catholic sisterhood. They spoke of their experiences in the 1960s as a Zaïrean minority among Belgian missionaries. With the 'second generation' of sisters, who joined the community after independence, they lived through the middle 1970s when many of the expatriates—particularly those who had held the principal positions in the communities and institutions of the province—left Zaïre. By the 1980s, expatriates were becoming an ever diminishing minority. During the years I lived in Zaïre,

the Kongo sisters were assuming full responsibility for the province. In this sense it constituted a post-missionary situation. Although my research documents the adaptations of a particular kind of institution introduced by Catholic missionaries, what it actually describes is how the Africans themselves have transformed the sisterhood.

4. *Research Findings*

As I tried to understand the form of the sisterhood that was evolving among the Zaïrean sisters, it became increasingly apparent that they were interpreting their experience in terms of models derived from four major sources: (1) life in the Kongo villages from which they came; (2) initial training in the congregation and experience of living with expatriate sisters; (3) Catholic mission practices, especially in the period preceding Vatican II; and (4) post-colonial political and urban culture. These models are not necessarily consciously held, nor are they equally important in all cases. The impact of the contemporary political and urban culture is particularly subtle. The primary sources for my understanding of it were the images projected by national radio and television broadcasts, the orchestration of visits by public officials and the directives given to schools for the daily *animation* sessions, in which students are required to chant slogans and songs prepared by the national bureau of the youth wing of the president's party. There was often a striking contrast between convent rhetoric and community practice. There were five areas of community life in which the influence of Kongo village life could be seen: (1) the sisters' self-understanding; (2) their models of social relationships; (3) the role of authority figures in group decision-making; (4) the causes and expression of social conflict; and (5) the ways in which social conflicts were handled and resolved.

My approach was a sociological one, in which I considered only the observable dynamics in the life of the group, with a particular emphasis on identifying the consistent, repetitive patterns that emerged. The data were drawn from concrete experiences in communal life. I did not address questions of religious belief. The first parts of my study, treating perceptions of womanhood and patterns of social relationships, demonstrated how the sisters were reconstructing the sisterhood in terms of Kongo metaphors and idioms. The latter parts revealed areas in which there was a considerable gap between commonly articulated rhetoric and actual practice, particularly in the role of the superior in group decision-making, and in how the sisters coped with conflicts among themselves. In both areas it was evident that the religious training that the sisters had received when joining the congregation contradicted in several ways how such matters would be understood and dealt with in the Kongo villages where they had grown up. Throughout, the data pointed to underlying tensions between expatriate

and Zaïrean members, as well as among the Kongo sisters themselves. To the extent that the Zaïrean sisters were aware of these conflicts and differences, they seemed to be much freer in sorting out for themselves the choices they wanted to make. This has become easier since they became the dominant majority holding almost all the positions of responsibility within the province and its institutions. It became clear to me that the transformation of the sisterhood by the African members was not a matter of a simple choice between Kongo models and foreign alternatives. It was, rather, a question of the dynamics of the group's continual integration and rejection of different organizational possibilities and its perception as to whether these were appropriate or not in terms of its lived experience.[3] A striking aspect of the study was the historical documentation of how the sisters have come to understand their choice to commit themselves to a life of celibacy (see Burke forthcominga). Most of them have grown up in the villages of the matrilineal Kongo. Their perception of celibacy is matrifocal, that is, it is understood by them in terms of the metaphor of maternity. The sisters see their vocation as a call to a social and spiritual maternity among their people. As I mentioned above, it is quite common for Catholic sisters—whether local or expatriate—to be addressed as *mama*. The title of address more commonly used in Europe and North America, sister, is only ever used in its localized French form *maseri* (from the French *ma soeur*), rather than the Kikongo equivalent *mpangi* (sister/brother). The application to the celibate sister of the title *mama*, the usual form of address for a Kongo woman who has borne children, implies a different perception of sisters from that held by Westerners.

The kinship terminology used, as well as observed patterns of social interaction, show how the sisters draw on Kongo idioms in structuring and patterning social relationships among themselves (see Burke forthcomingb). The language used reveals how the religious community is recreated, as a micro-society, through linguistic patterns derived from the Kongo household. The two dominant Kongo-derived models of social relations I term Kimpangi and Kimbuta. The former refers to the relationships between kin members of the same generation, the latter to relationships between members of different generations. These models are manifested not only by the sisters' use of kinship terminology appropriate to these relationships, but also by associated patterns of social interaction. The recreated micro-society includes not only living and dead members, as in Kongo clans, but also expatriate groups and individuals, incorporated through kinship terms. This use of the idiom of Kongo kinship within the community seems to have developed spontaneously since the mid-1970s, the time when Kongo sisters became dominant in numbers and authority. There does not appear to have been any formal discussion before it was

3. Such continual integration and rejection is, of course, characteristic of all living societies. The work of Erekosima and Eicher (1981; see also Eicher and Erekosima 1982), on what they term the 'cultural authentication' of imported textiles among the Kalabari of West Africa, offers interesting parallels for the study of the 'inculturation' of Christian practices.

incorporated into the sisters' everyday language. Even though French remains the common language of the community, among themselves the sisters address one another as *yaya* more commonly than *ma soeur*. *Yaya* is the Kongo term of address for one's older sibling.[4]

Drawing on the Kongo ethnographic studies of Joseph Van Wing (1921, 1938), P. J. Mertens (1942), Wyatt MacGaffey (1970) and John M. Janzen (1967), and my own observations in local villages in the region, it is possible to identify two models of authority. The more authoritarian one I term Kimfumu (*mfumu* being the Kikongo word for a chief and the prefix *ki-* a signifier for 'concerning'), while the more consensual type may be called Kinzonzi (*nzonzi*, being the Kikongo word for conciliator or facilitator). In the first instance, the locus of decision-making is the chief; in the second instance, it is the group for which the chief serves as the articulator of the consensus view at the end of a long palaver. The former model was reinforced by the colonial administration, and by the missionary priests in the hierarchically organized Catholic Church. In contrast, the Kinzonzi model seems to have been more frequent in everyday village life, with chiefly authoritarian decisions only operating in very restricted domains.

The Zaïrean sisters often said that 'the Superior decides all', reflecting the Kimfumu model. This was no doubt emphasized in their mission training and initiation into the congregation. Close observation of actual decision-making, however, suggested, a quite different picture. Although the emphasis on the Kimfumu model greatly shaped the 'ideology of chiefship' among the Kongo sisters, and was the more commonly articulated rhetoric, the Kinzonzi model figured prominently in the arrangement of daily affairs. The sisters were very critical of authoritarian superiors.

Other contradictions between rhetoric and practice in the area of group decision-making also suggested that there was a considerable 'lack of fit' between convent and Kongo social organization. The ways in which community members coped with conflicts among themselves differed from the usual pattern of clan palavers observed in Kongo villages. It also revealed contradictions between local models and those stressed by Belgian missionaries during the early training of Zaïrean sisters.

The palaver, with its extensive 'talking out' of problems by all members, is the common method adopted in Kongo villages for both inter- and intra-lineage disputes, including charges of witchcraft. It illustrates clearly how the Kinzonzi model operates. Kongo Sisters rarely have recourse to the palaver model to address social tensions in the community. In the village, simple interpersonal conflicts are often resolved by the individuals immediately concerned, sometimes with the aid of a third party. Relative age is an important determinant of the

4. Indeed, *yaya* is used even when an older sister is speaking to a younger member. In the lay Kongo kin group a younger brother or sister would always be addressed by the term *nleke*. Among the sisters it is very rare to hear another called *nleke*. The sisters explain this in terms of their showing respect to one another.

procedures followed, especially in deciding on the necessity of enlisting a third party. When the Kongo sisters admit to small conflicts among themselves, they often resolve their differences in a similar way. At other times, however, two contradicting models seem to operate.

Even more important than the virtual absence of the use of the palaver for the resolution of social conflicts in the community is the extent to which the expression of conflict is literally muted. Whereas local villagers—especially women—give expression to their feelings and 'let off steam' in a very unrestricted way, their expression is toned down or even wholly repressed among the Kongo sisters. This is probably due to their internalization of an ideal of the religious life received from the missionaries. The following words, from the Gospel according to Matthew, were often quoted in community: 'I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother, "You good for nothing!", shall be liable to the Council; and whoever says to his brother, "You worthless fool!", shall be liable to the fire of hell' (Matt. 5: 22). Apparently, not much thought was given to interpreting or explaining this statement in terms of local psychology; nor was it given to the words of St Paul 'Let not the sun go down on your anger' (Eph. 4: 26)—and I never heard anyone quote the first part of this verse, 'Be angry, but do not sin'. These counsels, interpreted literally, left no time for the cooling down of aroused emotions. For the Kongo sisters there was an unspoken tension between their sincere desire to live up to the Christian ideal and the practical difficulty of having no way to let off steam, which, in contrast, is so generously allowed for, expected even, in the village. Kongo sisters often even denied that they have any pent-up emotions. In marked contrast to villagers, the sisters tended to either repress or totally deny any conflict among themselves. Since there was little inclination even to recognize the existence of strained relations, Kongo methods of coping with the tensions of group living and of handling internal disputes were not drawn upon. Although the Kongo sisters have socially reconstructed the Catholic sisterhood by using, adapting and transforming Ntandu institutions and social sensibilities in other areas, this is not yet the case in conflict resolution.

5. *Afterthoughts: Missionaries and Anthropologists*

The aim of my study was to help the sisters situate and visualize their own experience more clearly. An anthropological approach, with its comparative perspective, may often sharpen the analysis of what seem to be, for the members of a group itself, insignificant, mundane and banal daily experiences. Because to the actors they appear to be of so little importance, they frequently remain at an unconscious level of awareness. This is particularly so when people are living

through a period of considerable social change and reorientation. The descriptions and observations offered in my study were those of an outsider. Their aim was to stimulate reflection on the part of those who are living the experience and thus to help them become more conscious agents in shaping their own lives as African members of a religious congregation with roots in early nineteenth-century France.

A study of this sort—indeed any ethnographic endeavour—needs to carefully record coexisting contradictory models and internal conflicts. Such tensions indicate domains of continuing negotiation and adjustment in the group's developing identity. An approach that respects persons as the active subjects of their own history has broad implications for studies of minority peoples and colonial regimes, as well as for mission ethnographies.

The intention of the project was to focus on the inculturation of religious life. My approach was quite different from that frequently seen in books and articles on inculturation by missionaries and theologians. It examined patterns and practices in the life of the Catholic sisterhood in Lower Zaïre today as they are being interpreted by Kongo members of one particular congregation. It was not concerned with how an African theology of religious life might be formulated, nor with prescribing how the members of the congregation might adapt the received institution to their social and cultural setting. Rather, the study examined how the sisterhood is perceived and understood by the Zaïrean sisters and the Kongo people among whom they live. What has happened in the communities over the thirty years since Kongo women first joined the order appears to have been a spontaneous development, rather than the consequence of any preconceived programme of 'Africanization'. Consequently, my study presents a reconstruction of the Catholic sisterhood from a quite different point of view from that which informs most of the sparse literature on this topic.

In recent years, many studies have examined the question of inculturation. Most such research within ecclesiastical and missionary circles has developed along two main lines of inquiry. First, there is the investigation of local African institutions with a view to adapting them to Christian practice, an approach often coupled with an historical approach (see Schreiter 1985). Secondly, there are those studies that aim to develop a theological base for promoting the inculturation of the Gospel and church institutions. These often remain at a rather abstract, theoretical level. They may be helpful, and have a place, in intellectual circles, but they are not necessarily immediately useful to the people involved. My method has been much more empirical, as well as being directly concerned with the lived experience of a particular group of African sisters.

My research calls into question the many quasi-anthropological studies of inculturation by students of theology. Their approach is all too often premised on what the Asian theologian Pieris (1988: 52) calls 'an instrumental theory of inculturation', which aims at using local cultural categories as tools for doctrinal transmission. These studies are also too frequently concerned with orthodoxy and orthopraxis—a common preoccupation of clerics. My research also calls into question anthropological writing that has approached the study of missions

primarily in terms of formal structures and bureaucratic organization, with too much emphasis on a clericalized Church with its hierarchy and rituals.

In his study of African Christianity in seventeenth-century and colonial Soyo, Richard Gray points out how 'there is nothing static about orthodoxy, and one of the most powerful influences for theological development has always been the encounter with different cultures' (1990: 77). He further states that 'Christianity in Africa was never synonymous with the missionaries' understanding of the faith; the encounter with Africa involved a process of interaction in which Africa's distinctive characteristics and contributions have become ever increasingly prominent' (ibid.: 84). The starting-point of any research of this kind must be the experience and perceptions of the people concerned as active subjects, not passive objects. Here lies one of the major weaknesses in the type of study carried out by Beidelman (1982). His monograph focused almost exclusively on the missionaries. Moreover, his material shows no openness or objectivity in treating the group researched, when a minimally sympathetic posture is necessary for any anthropological endeavour. In Beidelman's representation of the mission situation, the Africans with whom the missionaries interacted are not active agents in the encounter. This is not to say there is no value in such critical studies, but they need to take account of the people themselves.

My research project, undertaken at the invitation of the sisters themselves, demonstrates that the 'objects' of evangelization may themselves be interested in how anthropologists perceive their situation. A degree of reflexivity may help the anthropologist interpret the field experience; it may also serve to empower those peoples undergoing social changes brought about by encounters with other groups and traditions to be more conscious agents in integrating, adapting or utterly rejecting alternative ways and institutions. Clearly, by the very nature of their enterprise, missionaries set out to be agents of cultural change. But those who are the receivers/hearers of their messages are not obliged to be mere passive agents. The research project described here suggests that a serviceable testing-ground for the validity of the inculturation approach to the study of missions may well be provided by anthropological studies of post-missionary situations.

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