

E I L A H E L A N D E R

Source Criticism and Cultural Models

Constructing Life Histories of Women Missionaries

“But is there enough data?” is a question many scholars have faced, when they have embarked on writing about women, who so far have been less visible in historiography.¹ However, completed research projects have shown that lack of data has not been a major problem.

This was also my experience in 1995 when I started my research project on Finnish women missionaries and the local development in Africa. The project covers the time period 1946–1995 and four African countries: Ethiopia, Tanzania, Namibia and Botswana.² The skepticism of the male leaders of the mission society in question concerning the existence of data has proved to be unfounded. The abundance and variety, instead of scarcity, of data has become one of the major methodological problems of the research. Though the main focus in my project is on the local development in Africa, it is necessary also to deal with the life histories of women missionaries.

Primary data consist of written documents produced by women missionaries: official reports and circular letters, and personal diaries and private letters. All official records and some private diaries and correspondence are available in the mission archives. Several women, when they heard about the research project, sent in their personal diaries and private letters. Either private research projects or research efforts launched by the mission on women missionaries and started earlier on have produced taped interviews and returned questionnaires, which had not yet been analyzed, and were now made available to my use. I have also personally interviewed a number of women missionaries. Since I focus especially on the impact of

¹ For example, in earlier mission histories women have been relatively invisible because scholars have relied on official church and mission documents that generally exclude women. See e.g. Flemming 1989: 8.

² The study concentrates on one of the leading mission societies in Finland, the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission (FELM). The study covers about 300 women.

women missionaries in a particular social and cultural setting, it became necessary to get the viewpoints of the people among and with whom they have worked. This I have done and still continue to do through field work in the respective countries.

Problems posed by the nature of data

Research work is an interpretive enterprise. The variety of sources poses some central methodological questions for constructing religious life histories (Burgess 1982). There is an apparent discrepancy between the source categories concerning the content of the information. Private diaries and letters provide information on women's work and life which is not available in official reports and letters. They reveal dates, events and individuals which are not mentioned elsewhere. In historiography the question of discrepancy is normally solved by comparing the sources with an aim to arrive at the "true picture" of how things have been. Such a picture is believed to portray not only the true life situation of the individual or group in question but, depending on the nature of the data, also the epoch and time situation itself. From the viewpoint of social sciences and comparative religion one will ask: could the variety of sources be approached and utilized in some other way?

The second question posed by the data concerns the content of each source category. The information can be located on the continuum "highly subjective — stereotyped". Subjective information, including reflections on personal experiences may not be the best source e.g. for constructing the flow of historical events, but it is of uttermost importance if we want to show how "individuals respond to social constraints and actively assemble social worlds" (Plumer 1983: 5). It is precisely from this standpoint that I was led to ask about the value and validity of less subjective information in constructing religious life histories. The problem I faced was not the abundance of highly subjective information but data which followed certain patterns and could be termed as being stereotyped. Not only the official circular letters, which were sent to a wide audience, but also letters to family members tend to follow in both cases fixed patterns, though differing from each other. The same was the case with the interviews. In interviewing women missionaries concerning their past in mission work, the repeated standard formula of the information offered to me troubled me first. I found it difficult to grasp the "real" feelings and experiences of these women. This led me to ask: "Who determines the 'reality' of the given information?" During the course of the research

work, I have come to a conclusion that patterned, stereotyped information is more valuable than what has been thought thus far. Its usefulness and value depend on the focus of the research. Life history has been described as "the account of a life, completed or ongoing" (Mandelbaum 1982: 146). In studying the collective or individual religious life histories, it is important to focus not only on the flow of historical facts and events but also on the socio-cultural level, which determines the influence and even the presentation and interpretation of the history. At the social level the focus will then be on how women missionaries have coped and cope with the social settings they find themselves in. At the cultural level it is important to notice that women missionaries cross several cultural boundaries. When relating to their mission board or supporters, they act within the Finnish cultural framework. In their work they encounter a new culture in which encounter their role may vary e.g. from a total stranger to a marginal member. And last but not least, even the missionary institution itself has a culture of its own!

Like interviews, reports and letters are interactive products. They do not speak only of the writer's world, but also about the writer's perceptions of the recipient (Plummer 1983: 23).³ It is important to recognize the purpose for which the documents have been written. All narratives are told in a particular socio-cultural setting and from a specific point of view. For example, one function of the official reports and circular letters has been to defend the mission work and to raise financial support. Such patterned forms of information reveal the cultural models of each cultural setting. According to Holland and Quinn, "Cultural models are presupposed, taken-for-granted models of the world that are widely shared (although not necessarily to the exclusion of other, alternative models) by members of a society and that play an enormous role in their understanding of that world and their behavior in it" (Holland and Quinn 1987: 4). "Cultural

³ Thomas Luckmann elaborates the point: "Human communicative acts are predefined and thereby to a certain extent *predetermined* by an existing social code of communication. This holds both for the 'inner' core of that code, the phonological, morphological, semantic and syntactic structure of the language, as well as for its 'external' stratification in styles, registers, sociolects, and dialects. In addition, communicative acts are predefined and predetermined by explicit and implicit rules and regulations of the *use* of language, e.g., by forms of communicative etiquette. Furthermore, communicative acts are a form of social interaction and are therefor predefined and predetermined by non-communicative rules and regulations: by institutions, a set of social relations, a system of production and reproduction, in short, by a historical social structure." Luckmann 1995: 176.

models" is a concept developed within anthropology. Within sociology the equivalent concept could be "collective representations". In other words, patterned information like religious slogans and phrases reveal important information about the cultural settings in which the women missionaries live and work.

Cultural models and communication

Cultural models not only frame people's experience. They supply also interpretations about that experience and inferences about it. Gubrium, Holstein and Buckholt point out that collective representations act as frameworks for organizing and making sense of everyday life. By entering into an interpretative process they mediate individual biography and interpersonal relations, reflecting and maintaining culturally promoted understandings of, and orientations to, everyday life (Gubrium, Holstein and Buckholdt 1994). Holland and Quinn argue that "When interpretation and inference call for action, the cultural understandings also define the actor's goals" (Holland and Quinn 1987: 6). This motivational aspect is emphasized by D'Andrade, who calls the cultural models cognitive schemas and sees as their main function to guide action. "...a person's most general interpretation of what is going on will function as important goals for that person" (D'Andrade 1992: 30). This applies also to a person's perception of the past. Strauss points out that cognitive schemas not only mediate the interpretation of on-going experiences but also the reconstruction of memories (Strauss 1992: 3). In other words, when the focus is on individual perceptions, feelings and experiences and not on historical facts, patterned information is to be viewed rather as cues or keys to women missionaries' perception and interpretation of the past.

Such arguments and approach to culture suggest that patterned forms of information may give more information also about individual lives than what is thought of at first glance. Holstein and Gubrium point out that the interpretative practice which involves the articulation of publicly recognized (and standardized) structures, categories or images establishes a middle ground between macro and micro forms of analysis. According to them, since interpretation is shaped by locally available and recognized and accepted resources, meaningful experiences are more socially than privately constructed phenomena (Holstein and Gubrium 1994: 267; see also Silverman 1987).

Thus, the collective representations provide a religious rhetoric e.g. for interpreting the cognitive conflict and stress in a new cultural setting. The repeated statements about difficult life conditions — even in situations where they do not differ considerably from what one has been used to in Finland — reveal one of the central cultural models of the missionary culture. Missionary life must consist of difficulties and trials and how an individual should not only survive but also come out victoriously! In the missionary culture the solution is found within the religious field: one is on the great commission, being sent out by God who has promised to supply the individual with the needed power to overcome all obstacles.⁴ The emphasis is on a test, on the ability of a foreigner to encounter a foreign culture and be able to carry out the work for which one has embarked on in a strange situation. Looking at such data within the framework of genre analysis, it reveals that we deal here with a particular kind of communicative genre which organizes, routinizes and provides a solution to communicative problems that may arise between the missionaries and the recipients of their information. It upholds and maintains the missionary culture and the social order within it (see Luckmann 1995: 182).

It is important to notice that cultural conceptualizations of the world are not the only determinants of behavior (Holland and Quinn 1987: 6; Holstein and Gubrium 1994: 268). People are not automata, who only adapt to patterned expectations. The availability of multiple sources saves the researcher from the danger of relying on one type of source only and the consequent danger of arriving at a one-sided picture. The discrepancy in information between the source categories is not only a question of historical accuracy but one of a cultural conflict. For example, accounts of personal diaries differ from public circular letters. Naturally the difference is understandable from the private-public -viewpoint. But there is more to it than that. Such sources can also be used to analyze how women missionaries balance between the different socio-cultural worlds they find themselves in. They give information on women's feelings, experiences and goals and motivations, and to what extent they are in line with the different cultural models of their socio-cultural settings.

⁴ The same pattern can be discovered in the descriptions of academic field research. The very nature of field work is represented as that of overcoming obstacles. Instead of divine intervention the power not only to survive but to be able to carry out one's mission of academic work is drawn from one's academic skills!

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