

From Fr. Etienne Sion M.Afr, Tanzania

Walking in the Footsteps of the Missionaries of the First Caravan

In the year 2008, the Missionaries of Africa celebrated 130 years since the first 'White Fathers' entered Tanzania, in 1878. Various celebrations were held in different regions of Tanzania: Bagamoyo, Tabora, Mwanza, Kigoma, Karema and Mbeya. Those living in Dar-es-Salaam went to Bagamoyo to re-enact the arrival by boat of the first 10 missionaries, and the welcome of the Holy Ghost Fathers already established there since 1868. After a celebration in the first Catholic Church built in Tanzania, the whole crowd went up to the River Ruvu, where our missionaries encountered the first difficulties of their long trip to Ujiji and Uganda via Tabora. But none among the crowd went further.

Since then, I always wanted to cross the River Ruvu and to walk in their steps. This dream was partially realized in April 2010. In 2009, the Community of Agape opened a Formation House – of which I am in charge being the Chaplain of that Community – in the diocese of Morogoro, at the foot of Mount Kungwe. Reading the diary of the first caravan, I noticed that they passed on the Northern side of Mount Kungwe, only two hours walk from the new centre, established on the southern side. So, with the members of the Formation House, we planned to walk from there up to Mpwapwa, about 250 kms, as a kind of spiritual experience before closing the year. It took us quite a time to prepare ourselves spiritually, psychologically and physically. During the whole Lent we fasted, skipping the midday lunch and prayed everyday, reading the Bible and the diary of the first caravan.



On Sunday the 11th of April, we all left Kungwe Centre and set off to our first station. We were eleven: 5 young men, 4 young women, a mature woman and I. I took the car with the luggage to collect the driver and conductor coming from Agape, Dar-es-Salaam, and a nurse helping for the cooking. We all met at Kiroka our first Camp. From there, I walked with them the whole way until Mpwapwa, while the driver and the two others were going by car to setup and prepare for the next station. We all arrived at Mpwapwa according to the schedule, on Friday the 23rd of April. We were all in good condition physically and psychologically, astonished to have walked so easily! Each day, we walked about 20 to 24 kms, leaving the camp around 6.00 or 6.30 in the morning, as the Missionaries of the first Caravan did. At the beginning, we celebrated Mass at 5.00 am, but later on, because of the Christians we met on the way, we celebrated Mass late in the afternoon. Along the way, we stopped for half an hour to relax and read the Bible and reflect on it.

We tried as much as possible to follow the road the Missionaries followed, which was in fact the main road the caravans of slaves were passing. In the preparation of the safari, we went by car to try to find the different places written on the map left by the Missionaries. We had to face some chal-

lenges. First, the spelling of many names written in the diary is different from the actual spelling which made the preparation of our safari more difficult. People are used to saying that the European deformed the pronunciation of the names.

Secondly, there were many names written in the diary which are not written on the map. However, in our safari, with a little bit of observation, common sense and talking with the elders, we could find many places where the Missionaries really walked. People gave us some other names for the same places, and so we were able to identify the names written in the diary but which are not in the map of to-day. For example after staying at Kikundi, they did not sleep at Kiroka, the 'pagazi' being afraid of lions, who have eaten 5 people in the preceding years, but they pushed on to Mohale. Mohale is nowhere to be found in the actual map but, after talking with elderly people, they explained to us that Mohale was on the other side of the Ngalo Pass. So the Missionaries, leaving Kikundi passed Kiroka, climbed for a whole hour passing through the 'défilé' and finally, arriving on the top, they saw a '*magnifique plaine*'. They descended slowly to Mohale, which is now part of Kingolwira, a sisal estate. On our safari, we slept a Kiroka not knowing where Mohale was. But the next day we passed through the 'défilé' and saw Mohale on our right as it is written in the diary.

On their journey between Kungwe to Mpwapwa, the Missionaries stayed at a place where there were bamboos, in Swahili, Mianzi. We slept at a small village called Vianzi and the people told us that there was a forest of bamboos formerly, still some parts remained, but we did not see any. In one place the environment is still as Fr. Deniaud wrote: '*comme dans un parc*'. But on the whole, the environments are completely different. Instead of paths there are roads, sometimes tarmac roads, bridges over big rivers, railways; instead of 'Pori', there are big villages or towns, and so on. Only the mountains and rivers are still there which give us some indications. Nothing remained of Simbamwene, the famous village which H.M. Stanley described so enthusiastically. People showed me three different places which are believed to be Simbamwene: Kaole near le convent of Sisters at Kigurunyembe, Misongeni and still another place not too far away. It seems to me that Simbamwene covered a large area.

With Mama Mkuu, the Mother General of the Sisters of Mgolole, diocese of Morogoro, we went to see an old woman fully alive, Zuhula Hussein, the grand daughter of Simbamwene. According to the diary Simbamwene is a man. When the Missionaries passed there, he was no longer ruling but his daughter was. For Zuhula, her grand mother was Simbamwene! And true enough according to H.M. Stanley, Simbamwene wanted her daughter to rule with this name. The tomb of Malkia, the Queen Simbamwene, is there in the middle of the town of Morogoro, while her father, Simbamwene himself, is buried near the Kingo Mosque. Zuhula Hussein complained that a few years back some Germans came to see her and asked her some questions about Simbamwene. They bought 'her book' and the throne of Simbamwene! Her stick and collar are still among her relatives, but they were not present at that moment.



When the Missionaries established their camp near the river Mwere or Morogoro, at one km from Simbamwene, they chose a place under a '*Mparamusi*' tree surrounded by jungle. Now it is situated in the centre of Morogoro, a town of more than 150.000 inhabitants, spreading from Mbuyuni to Mazimbu. It took us one and a half day to walk through it on foot.

I was thrilled to pass through the valley of Mkondowa between Kilosa and Kidete, where no road has been built. The Germans constructed the first railway at the beginning of the 20th century, following more or less the path of the caravans. The countryside is 'magnifique', forested hills on both sides and fields in the valley near the river. Unfortunately, big inundations occurred at the end of 2009 and the beginning of 2010 and brought a lot of destruction. No train is passing anymore. The waters of the mighty river destroyed two bridges and damaged the railway in nine different places. The fields of bananas, maize, rice and so on were all submerged and the crops destroyed. Now the river is 200-300m wide with a little bit of water flowing between the '*bancs de sable*'. The army is everywhere to help to reconstruct the railway. The Lake Ugombo, mentioned in the diary, has disappeared completely since 1998 due to repeated inundations.



At Mpwapwa, the end of our journey, we paid a visit to the Anglican Church, as our predecessors did. We saw, as it is believed here, where H.M. Stanley slept under a tree on his way to find Livingstone. Nearby, there is the path which the caravans followed. At Mpwapwa itself, in the bus station, there is still a big tree and a well where people travelling were drawing up water. Under the tree, slaves were bought or sold. Those who were not good enough physically were hung on the branches of the tree.

The next day we met the retired Anglican Bishop of Mpwapwa, the Right Rev. Simon Chiwanga, a former Minister of Education of Tanzania, in the year 1970. He was very happy to receive us and, being fond of the history of the past, he gave us some explanations about the beginning of Mpwapwa Mission. It was started in 1876 as a post to help the caravans of missionaries to reach Uganda. Following the appeal of the Kabaka of Uganda to have missionaries, which H.M. Stanley published in the Herald News, the Church Missionary Society (CMS), answered by sending a team of twelve people. The easy road was via Kenya where the CMS was already established, but they preferred to pass through Tanganyika because of the fear which arose after the murder of Bishop Hamington.

As Stanley and Cameron were well received by the small chief of Mpwapwa, the CMS thought to establish a station not a mission, in 1876. Clark and Robinson were the first Europeans to live there. Later on in 1878 Dr. Bakta came and started a small clinic while Charles Prize and Henri Cole started the mission. They built the first church with a grass roof, a little bit on the hill. From there they could see the plain below. From that point the caravans of slaves led by the Arabs were could be seen from far. So the Missionaries were gathering the people and all together attacked them and set the slaves free, and they became Christians. That's why Busheri burnt this first church. At that time, the Sultan of Zanzibar, Said Bargash, considered Tanganyika as his own country. In the beginning of 1905 Arabs were fighting the Germans. In Mpwapwa, they succeeded for a time to overthrow them and ruled for some years.

What astonished me most during this 'safari' was that everywhere we planted our tent or slept in the church, we were well received by the Christians. When the first Missionaries passed there, no one was Christian among the indigenous population. But I believe they planted the seed of faith everywhere they passed, by praying and celebrating the Eucharist. Now Christians are everywhere. From the first station at Kiroka to the last



at Mpwapwa, we passed through 10 parishes: Kiroka, Kigurunyembe, St Patrick Morogoro, Modeco Morogoro, Kihonda, Kimamba, Ilonga, Kilosa and Mpwapwa, situated in two dioceses. These are the fruits. Missions were established in 1883 by the Holy Ghost Fathers, only five years after their passage, in Kigurunyembe; in 1885 in Ilonga, only seven years after passing there. Fr. Deniaud noticed in his diary that it was a good place to establish a mission: many villages and fertile soil. On Sunday the 18th of April, we celebrated Mass in the new church at Ilonga.

Before arriving at Kigurunyembe, Mama Mkuu with many sisters welcomed us at the foot of a Baobab tree, at Misongeni. From then on, with the sisters singing at the top of their voices, we walked five kms, up to their house built near the Mission. They received us and we spent the night here. The next day we went on with more sisters singing aloud up to the 'Prokura', the bishop's house of Morogoro, taking the old road made by the Holy Ghost Missionaries. His Grace Telesphor Mkude spoke to us with encouragement and we went on up to the middle of the town to look for the tree – '*Mparamusi, taxus elongatus*', as it is written in the diary – where the first Missionaries had their camp. Nothing is left. We found only a small foot-bridge built in concrete by the Germans over the River Mwere. Mama Mkuu accompanied us up to the Church of Modeco and all the sisters left us, except two of them who walked with us up to Mpwapwa. At Ilonga, another sister joined us with two girls of their domestic school. Finally we were more than 20 arriving at Mpwapwa.



What the young people learnt from this safari was essentially that everything is possible to all who believe. Nothing is impossible to God! If the Lord has spoken, it will be done. This is a word of our Lord Jesus which everyone knows by heart but few experience it to be true. Before starting our safari there were unspoken fears: what about being sick? What about walking long distances? What will happen to us if we cannot cross the river? What if it rains? And in fact it was the rainy season at its peak! And so on. Days were passing and fears disappeared.



I wanted to share with them the missionary spirit, to grow in the virtue of endurance, the virtue of the missionaries 'par excellence'. In the victory of Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit we can face any adversity. Christ wants the Gospel of salvation to be preached by words and deeds and enables us to do so. We were tired each day arriving at the camp, but every morning we felt refreshed as if it was the first day! Those who were sick were healed during the safari: no fungus anymore, no blisters, no fever and no malaria!

They were all impressed by the welcome of the people. They experienced a little bit of the sufferings of the first Missionaries, and somehow the sufferings of the slaves being treated as donkeys! They were happy, too, to learn more about the history of their country and they enjoyed its beauty. Now they would like to repeat such an experience. Maybe, if the Lord wants, next year, with another batch of students, I will go on safari to look for the exact place where Fr. Pascal died and maybe find out, more or less, where he was buried. Nothing is impossible to God!

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