

Book Review

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Volume 2 : Issue 2

Article Ref. #: 1000ANTPOJ2112

Article History

Received: September 8th, 2017

Accepted: September 21st, 2017

Published: September 21st, 2017

Citation

Yoder PS. Crossing the Loange: Congo pax service and the journey home – A book review. *Anthropol Open J.* 2017; 2(2): 40-44. doi: [10.17140/ANT-POJ-2-112](https://doi.org/10.17140/ANT-POJ-2-112)

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Crossing the Loange: Congo Pax Service and the Journey Home – A Book Review

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INTRODUCTION

John M. Janzen and Larry B. Graber spent two years from 1957 to 1959 as volunteers on Congo Inland Mission (CIM) stations in the Belgian Congo. This book recounts their adventures on several mission stations, their research into Chokwe (or Cokwe) history, religion, and music in the Kamayala area, and the three month trip they took by car from the Congo to Brussels, Belgium. They tell their story largely through the letters they wrote to their parents and hundreds of photographs of people and places. The title of the book refers to the Loange River that they crossed numerous times, a river that flows south to north through the heart of the territory served by the CIM missions.

It was no accident that these two young men at about age 20 served in the Belgian Congo. Both had grown up in Mennonite families--Graber in Oregon, Janzen in Kansas--and had filed for conscientious objector status when they became eligible for the draft. Once granted that status, they looked for a country in which to serve their two years of Selective Service through a program of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). Oddly enough, each of them had older sisters who were engaged to the first two MCC Pax men who had served under the Congo Inland Mission in that country. In the Foreward of the book Graber explains how they began discussing going to serve in the Belgian Congo. He writes:

John and I were school mates at Bethel College in Kansas. A tragic accident took the life of Larry Kaufman, my sister's fiancé, and left Fremont devastated at the loss of his close friend and work partner. That incident was the catalyst that started our conversations about seeking permission to go to the Congo to honor and continue their work, as well as to take some constructive action as affirmation of the sacrifices made by these young men. (p. 2)

Both of the authors tried to write weekly letters to their parents on their trip, and their mothers dutifully preserved them. In the summer of 2014, they met to discuss ways that they could share their memories, and decided they could publish excerpts from their letters home as well as photographs. Graber writes in the Foreward:

The why and wherefore of this project needs to be addressed. I agree. One reason, of course, is that the only reason our children and grandchildren are alive today to read this, is because we managed to survive. That took a certain amount of cunning and an equal or greater amount of good luck. (p. 4)

In essence, the book was written mainly for family and friends, but the letters and photos will be of interest to anyone who has had contact with missionaries in Congo or other African countries, and to those interested in the experiences of MCC volunteers overseas. The excerpts provide vivid accounts of the work these two volunteers performed on several mission stations as well as the interactions with the local population. The book can also be read as a coming of age text from the viewpoint of the actors.

The letters begin upon their arrival in New York City to take a boat to the port of Matadi, in Congo. Once they arrived at Matadi, they were assisted by MCC personnel and missionaries to make their way to Kinshasa, then to Kikwit and several CIM stations, and finally, to Kamayala where they spend most of their two years. That area of Congo near the border with Angola is populated mainly by Chokwe and Lunda peoples, cultural cousins in a way, with Chokwe as the majority group. Graber and Janzen studied Kituba, a trade language based on Kikongo. The languages they would hear in the Kahemba/Kamayala area were Kituba, Kichokwe, Kiruund (Lunda), French, and English.

This review focuses on two main themes: 1) the work the two volunteers performed for the missionaries and the institutions, the missionaries maintained; 2) the evolution of the terms and concepts they used in describing their work as they developed good relations with local people. The book also includes a separate chapter on Chokwe history, religion, and social structure written by Janzen, a text on Chokwe music written by Graber, and an account from their letters of their adventures in driving in a 1955 Citroen from Kamayala to East Africa, the Middle East, and on to Brussels, Belgium.

WORK ACTIVITIES

When Graber and Janzen arrived at the Kamayala mission station, they were given a house for themselves that had been built for missionaries complete with several bedrooms, a toilet, a kitchen sink, running water (cold), and a cook. One gets the impression that their role on the mission station was to do whatever the missionaries asked of them. Right away they began organizing supplies and spaces, and then began building furniture. Having grown up on farms, both Janzen and Graber were familiar with wood working and mechanics, so they were well prepared to build and repair all sorts of things. Their skills at building and repairing machinery and furniture freed up their supervisor in Kamayala (named John B. Jantzen) for other tasks. Their supervisor had been swamped with manual work, so when they arrived he just showed them around and suggested various projects they could undertake.

As Janzen writes in October 1957:

(after completing a particularly challenging repair) So it goes. We do odds and ends, fixing things that have been broken too long. John B.J. now spends most of the day in his office taking care of paper work. We're left to ourselves most of the time, and have almost 100 percent liberty on our projects. (p. 25)

In January 1958, after four months, Graber writes:

John and I are in the process of making a magazine rack for Mrs. Diller's birthday. A modern thing with wrought iron legs, glass sides, operating on a pivot point so it can move from side to side. Also, John made a really nice desk

that we are using in our house. We really have a lot of freedom to do the things we would like to do. We are free to design and build without supervision. The new Pax-boys at Mutena claim they are constantly being told what to do and how to do it. Often times we work for a whole week without Mr. Jantzen even coming down to see what we are doing. In order to keep things this way, we are doing the best possible work we can. (p. 30)

The minimal amount of supervision allowed them both free time to pursue other interests: take bicycle trips to remote villages, visit with village elders, or listen to Chokwe music in villages. In January 1958 Janzen writes:

After three months of work we've become adept in the art of bossing so that now we don't spend more than two or three hours per day with our workmen. For instance, we built school desks – mass production. It's a simple matter to make them now, all I do is hand out the lumber and give the specifications. After that I'm free to do something else... The result of the workmen's newly found efficiency is more spare time. (p. 31)

After 10 months of work, Janzen writes in July 1958:

As this is the dry season in Congo, every night the horizon is aglow from a number of plains burning. Hundreds of hunters flock to each big fire to cash in on the wonderful hunting opportunity. At first we too went to fires, but after the third one we decided it wasn't worth the effort. So to your concerned inquiry, we don't run off to every fire we hear of.

Nevertheless, we could if we wanted to. We're not forced to do anything, really. Our freedom extends even to the category of our work, to the extent that we are given suggestions, and we proceed as we see fit.

Now then, current projects include: preparing for conference at Mutena the last week in July. ... Before the conference, though, we'll build about 100 school desks, about 15 school book cabinets, a gas pump shack, and do repair work on the guest house. (p. 62)

The book also serves as a character study of the two authors who displayed their affection and respect for their parents, thanking them at times for their upbringing. As Janzen writes in August of 1958:

I don't feel right unless I tell you something about the week's work. Coming from the Louis Janzen family, I guess this is proper. Every day between 7:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. excepting noon I have a pervading sense of work pushing me – I have to get out and do what's to do. That trait from way back on the farm seems to have stuck. Although it didn't seem so virtuous then, and was painful at times,

I, nevertheless, have you, father; to thank for it. (p. 66)

The way the two of them performed earned praise from their supervisor who writes a letter to their parents in September 1958:

Almost a year has sped by since the arrival of John and Larry here at Kamayala. All of us here have learned to appreciate the boys, and we shall surely miss them when the time comes for their departure. They have been a tremendous help to us here. Innumerable odd jobs have been performed by them which would have taken a very large part of my time had they not been here. (p. 69)

Eventually both Graber and Janzen moved from manual labor and supervision of building furniture to institutional support roles, with Janzen working in the local schools and Graber serving as a medical assistant to doctors and nurses. Then each of them was reassigned to another CIM mission: Janzen to Mukedi and Graber to Kandala, and then Nyanga. Graber spent time in Kandala to assist in building a church. Janzen was to supervise the construction of a new hospital. He writes in March 1959:

My destiny is settled, my fate has been sealed. The middle of next month I'll be moving to Mukedi, to finish the state-subsidized hospital being built there now by Larry Rempel. He's going home on furlough toward the end of May and hopes to get the shell done by then.

You clamor for day-to-day activities. Today I spent all day on building and organizing – revising the garage-book-storage-house-bookstore, into neat separate rooms in the same building. (p. 92)

Writing soon after his arrival in Nyanga in April 1959, Graber says:

My initiation to Nyanga was a good one. Hardly have time to breathe. 6 a.m. Thursday I began activities in the hospital. I filled medical prescriptions until about 7:30 ...

There is a lot to learn from Jim Diller. He is a genius of a doctor and takes time to explain things to me as he works. He says I will be helping him with surgery. (p. 142).

The letters contain relatively few comments about the missionaries for whom they worked. One finds a several references to how much they learned from a few of them and some comments critical of certain individuals. The letters chosen feature adventures and major challenges; they provide few comments on times they may have been discouraged, lonely, or despondent. Given the freedom they were given to make their own schedules in their first 18 months, one can assume they enjoyed much of what occupied their attention.

As indicated earlier, the two volunteers drove a Citroen purchased in Kikwit from Congo to Belgium once they had completed their service. The book includes excerpts showing how

meticulously they prepared for their trip, calculating all costs for supplies, food, and lodging before they requested permission from their parents and supervisor in the US to purchase a car and drive to Belgium rather than take a plane. Their letters include descriptions of challenges they faced on the road as well as accounts of the tourist sites they visited.

WRITING ABOUT LOCAL PEOPLE

One of the most interesting aspects of these letters is the way that they show the gradual evolution of their opinions of local people, the Congolese. The authors do not call them Congolese; they are almost always Africans, or sometimes natives, and occasionally, Chokwe. Of course both authors are acutely aware of how they initially wrote about the locals, and how that changed over time. Janzen writes in the Foreward:

Perhaps not surprisingly, the early letters radiate a colonialist outlook, namely that Africans in general, and Chokwe in particular, are “backward”, “primitive”, in need of the civilizing influence of more “advanced” peoples, to help them “progress,” to move forward toward civilization. We are also struck by the judgmental tone in some of our letters, calling individuals or whole groups dirty or lazy. Since we were with a mission, the civilizing work was to be accompanied by evangelization of the heathen. (p. 5)

The terms and ideas of both Graber and Janzen in speaking of the local population do not originate with them, of course, but rather, reflects a discourse common in the 1950s in Kansas (and in the US) about Africa and Africans. Here are a few examples to consider:

Graber writes in October of 1957 not long after they arrived.

The place we are living is really tops. We have our own bedrooms, one very nice bathroom, cold shower, and running water; toilet, sink, etc. We have a nice living room and dining room combination. We have a kitchen, pantry and storage room. Also a nice front porch. You are undoubtedly surprised to hear of all these luxuries. Congo is not as backward as many people think, at least not for the white people. The natives live in bamboo huts with grass roofs. Many young children have no clothes. Looks like a breeding ground for disease. (p. 21)

Janzen writes in October of 1957, about events on a bicycle trip:

... deep in the interior of Africa civilization has made only meager inroads into the customs of the natives, and these, having been made, don't necessitate the giving up of practices of ancestral significance. It might happen in almost any village, and at any time of the year, these celebrations so characteristic of African culture. We happened to come across one early (4:30 a.m.) on this date. For several miles we had been hearing drums in the distance. Boom, boom, boom in fast almost machine-like rhythm. Our thoughts

were wondering, was it a death, celebration tribal dance, we didn't know. Our six weeks stay in the Congo hadn't given us any light on such matters.

Suddenly we came upon the village. A witch doctor, with bells ringing, slinked off the road into the grass as we approached, going through his ritual filled, self-centered ceremony. Nearby, before one of the huts the dance was going on to the tune of weird chant-like music, in exact time to the beat of the drums. There, around the smoke of a smoldering fire, we saw, what to us had been limited to storybooks before this, the unadulterated dance of this backward culture. (p. 23)

In a similar vein, Janzen writes in December of 1957:

In the course of time the missionaries from Kamayala have set up schools and churches in the area, and although they are small, and few and far between, they present an influence on the people. But they've got such a long way to come, that even after having small schools in their midst they seem impossibly primitive. We saw village elders and chiefs sitting around a fire, smoking the common pipe, discussing their palavers and concerns, while their many wives took care of the work. Little children gazed at us as if we were gods or something, and many of them stark naked, fairly gaped at the sights before them. The people of the area are so lazy that it matters little to them if their children go to school, and if they do go, it matters little what they learn. (p. 28)

By May of the following year (1958) the tone has changed. Graber writes:

(On a bike trip) Our hut for the night has red dirt walls and floors, a beautiful grass roof. It is about 7 ft. wide, 15 ft. long and 10 ft. high in the center. It is cool and comfortable here. There is just enough room for our two cots and with two windows for ventilation; it should be pretty fair sleeping.

Not only does Congo have its beautiful scenery, but in its own mystical way, the people are also very beautiful. Their lives have a certain simplicity to them. Simple dress, food, huts. No concern about Sputnik, the recession, cost of living, etc. Things that do affect them they seem to take in stride. With no autos, no roads, no radios or TVs, no doctors or hospitals they seem strangely at ease. (p. 43)

In June of 1958 Janzen writes:

Our overseer here, Abele Shangangula, the kapita, as he's called, is building a new house. It's the first African permanent house on the station, but it's really going to be large. The dimensions are a whopping 36x24 feet, really something beside the small mud and grass bungalows most of

the Africans live in.

... As in other things, the Africans are coming along in home construction too. This kapita is one of the most energetic fellows around. He can effectively boss dozens of workmen, keep track of their wages, hand out supplies and rations, and still have time to sit down for a conversation with whoever may come along. He's highly intelligent, speaks most of the native languages of this part of Congo, French, a good bit of English, and has intuition. (p. 57)

This same overseer was the key figure in assisting Janzen in his learning about Chokwe history, religion, and social organization. He took Janzen around to surrounding villages to interview elders about their knowledge of history and religion.

Accounts of two other activities demonstrate how much the ideas of the two volunteers shifted after a year or so. After being sent to another CIM mission station (Nyanga) in April of 1959, Graber writes in June:

As you know, I have been boarding with missionary families for the last two month and have been paying 50 francs a day for this privilege. Having made the complete rounds here at Nyanga I decided to try boarding out at an African's house. I asked a young fellow, a mechanic, if I could board at his house for one week. He accepted readily for the rate of 15 francs per day. "And what time so we eat tomorrow?" I asked. "Oh, seven o'clock." (p. 151)

When Graber showed up the next morning at 7:00 AM for breakfast, he was told: No, we eat at 7:00 in the evening. Sometimes we eat only once a day. A week later Graber writes:

Well, my little experiment of eating African style lasted a total of four days. To sum it up, I would say, It's the nuts!! They really tried their best to please me. One day I asked them if they ever ate meat with their musa. The next evening, next to my musa, was a very small helping of red-looking meat.

I stuck it out in the village as long as I could, but decided for reasons of personal welfare, I would be better to get back into the missionary routine. In the four days I ate in the village, I had six meals and lost a total of 8 pounds. What really convinced me to call a halt to the experiment was the morning I got up and was so dizzy I could hardly brush my teeth. (p. 155)

Janzen fared somewhat better in Mukedi station when he followed Graber's example in July, 1959. He writes:

... now it's 9:00 o'clock in the evening. I've been running around for the past 10 hours, and am waiting for the mail to come in tonight yet. This week I'm eating in an African household, trying to see just how they live. It's most inter-

esting to see several dishes covered before oneself, wondering what will be inside – caterpillars, musa, grasshoppers, canned sardines, fruit salad, or palm nuts ...tonight I had caterpillars, ate perhaps 30 of the juicy things with musa. Yet as terrible as this stuff tastes, it's satisfying. I haven't felt as filled all year as I feel this week. (p. 156)

The second activity showing a shift in tone in both Graber and Janzen was the project each one pursued in their spare time. Janzen has a chapter in the book entitled *Aspects of the Chokwe Tribe*, a summary of the information he was able to glean from his interviews with village elders. As Janzen explained in a January (1959) letter:

I've also been working at the "culture of the Bachoke." On the latter project, field trips out to villages have been the most interesting. Abele, the overseer here, is invaluable and knows old chiefs and young sages in all the villages around that are of the "old school" and can tell of old days. The early religion, primarily, is my current focus. (p. 83)

Thanks to the Kamayala overseer who took him around, Janzen learned about the Chokwe takeover of that area in the 19th century, about Chokwe concepts of the maintenance of *hamba* shrines venerating ancestors, about the use of *wanga* (sorcery), and about their social organization. He mentions that he would like the time and resources to pursue this type of research seriously at some point.

Graber wrote a separate chapter on the music of the Chokwe, complete with numerous lyrics in Kichokwe, Kituba, and English. As Graber says, "I chose to study the music of the Bachoke, because I love music, I love the stories music tells, I love the insights it gives one into a society or culture." (p. 127) He also provides context for some of the songs he presents.

This book provides detailed accounts from the viewpoint of young American men of life among the whites on the mission stations of the CIM in Congo before independence. They displayed great respect, resourcefulness, and responsibility in their work. The text and photos also portray the gradual appreciation they gained for local social and cultural practices despite the stereotypes they had absorbed at home. Their experiences served as windows to a new world for them both.

FULL DISCLOSURE

John Janzen and I have been friends and colleagues for several decades and remain in touch. I have never had any contact with Larry Graber. I taught in a secondary school (Nyanga) established on a CIM mission station from 1966-68 and thus know some of the missionaries with whom John and Larry worked. I conducted research in Katanga and Bandundu provinces on Chokwe knowledge and practices related to illness and treatment for a PhD in anthropology, including two years in the Kahemba and Kamayala area. I became fluent in Kichokwe and worked as an apprentice to Chokwe traditional healers.