

Evangelization, Visual Technologies, and Indigenous Responses: The South American Missionary Society in the Paraguayan Chaco

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At the end of the 1880s the British South American Missionary Society (hereafter SAMS) established its first missionary station in the Paraguayan Chaco, on the shore opposite the city of Villa Concepción, on the Chaco bank of the Paraguay River.¹ After a somewhat difficult beginning, these missionaries started moving west, entering the territory inhabited by the Enxet,² an indigenous people usually referred to as the Lengua or Lengua-Maskoy,³ who inhabit an area bounded to the east by the Paraguay River, to the south and north by the Rio Montelindo and Riacho San Carlos, and stretching 200 kilometers to the west. The Anglican Church, the successor to SAMS, is still active in the Paraguayan Chaco, and its area of influence there is known as the Anglican Zone. Nowadays the Enxet are employed in small and large ranch communities, although hunting, gathering, and fishing are still important for their subsistence and they obtain some cash from the sale of skins and wild honey. Before 1980 the only area specifically reserved for the Indians was the 14.4 square miles (3,739 hectares) of the SAMS mission station of Makthlawaiya, although in recent years the Anglican Church of Paraguay has been instrumental in purchasing land for Indian settlement.⁴

The Anglican missionaries, as was customary in missionary societies at the end of the nineteenth century, carefully documented their activities in the Chaco by means of letters, reports, drawings, maps, photographs, and other graphic forms, many of them published in the society's monthly magazine.⁵ The images published by SAMS—except for some lithographs and lantern slides made of works of pictorial art—came from photographic images and were also used for lectures and services held by this society in the British Isles. Most of these photographs represented the natural environment of the Chaco, the indigenous peoples who inhabited it, and the development of the missionary stations. As is commonly noted, the photographs included in the missionary literature were meant to elicit support, both financial and broadly political. Propaganda, though, was not the only purpose missionaries had in using visual images. Together with the subscriptions to the *South American Missionary Magazine*, the society offered for sale photographic albums and postcards portraying the Indians and the life and development of the mission.⁶ Moreover, during the magic-lantern lectures held by SAMS, a contribution to the missionary cause was requested. In addition, since the first years of the society's activity in Paraguay, visual images and devices, mainly the magic lantern, occupied a key place both in propagating the Gospel and as a particularly effective vehicle for the spread of Western ideology and culture.

Scholars have commonly emphasized the role of visual

media, especially photographs, in missionary proselytization and mission society publicity.⁷ Similarly, my analysis of the use of visual technologies by the Anglican missionaries who served in the Paraguayan Chaco at the end of the nineteenth century aims at demonstrating how SAMS missionaries made use of visual technologies for evangelization purposes, particularly emphasizing the responses of the Enxet to the images that the missionaries put before their eyes. It is hoped that this approach can help clarify the relationships established between missionaries and indigenous peoples within the process of evangelization in the Paraguayan Chaco.

Evangelization and Visual Resources

In September 1888 missionary superintendent Adolfo Henriksen and his two assistants, B. O. Bartlett and J. C. Robins, began the construction of the first SAMS missionary station in Paraguay. The place chosen for building this station was a little inlet called Riacho Fernández,⁸ thirty miles north of Villa Concepción on the Chaco bank of the Paraguay River. During the first years, among other obstacles, they found it difficult to attract the Enxet to the mission. This situation made establishing successful communication with them a major concern for the missionaries. The Enxet



language was quite unknown at that time, and the missionaries had no access to written information about it. In a letter dated March 2, 1889, Henriksen attached a list of seventy words of "our Indian language" and asked whether any linguistic student could "give me a hint, or find any similarity with other languages or dialects of the South American aborigines."⁹ In such a context, the missionaries did not hesitate to call for additional resources beyond those locally available, such as modern audio and visual technologies, to see whether these could enable them to overcome the obstacles to communication posed by people possessing a totally different language, culture, and religion. Henriksen commented about the response of the Enxet to the new technologies, "Often during their midday rest they come to the front of the tent, and we show them pictures, and give them a tune on the



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Ariston,¹⁰ which has become their great favourite. We have even heard them whistle one or two bars of some of the hymn tunes. We are also hopeful of learning their language by this way of intercourse, and have already got hold of several words."¹¹

After only one year of hard work, Henriksen died of pleurisy on September 23, 1889. He was replaced by Wilfrid Barbrooke Grubb,¹² who worked virtually alone for some years. Grubb changed both the direction of the missionary effort (away from the river and toward the indigenous settlements lying to the west) and the methodology of work. Trying to adapt themselves both to the seasonal movements of the Enxet and to the harsh Chaco environment, the missionaries' response was to build a series of mission buildings—like links in a chain—from the Paraguay River westward into the Chaco. Thus, slowly but steadily, the SAMS missionaries continued advancing to the inner Chaco. In those years they were the only white people who traveled through that territory unarmed and alone.¹³

Despite this progress, there was still much to do in a spiritual sense. The missionaries devoted a lot of time to translation and to linguistic training, but still they struggled to bridge the social and relational distances between themselves and the Enxet. Again, pictures were found to be valuable tools for evangelization of the Enxet, as we can read in the following report written by Richard Hunt toward the end of 1894:



South American Missionary Magazine 34 (September 1900): 210, original caption

Women's dance at a feast, Chaco

Advancement has been made with the language, but it has been slow, hard work, for the people are slow to grasp ideas, and at times not too willing to communicate,¹⁴ so that they have had to be taken when in the humour. Translation has begun in texts, the Lord's Prayer, the Commandments, Scripture stories, and a few chapters in the "Peep o' Day."¹⁵ So far they are all imperfect, for I cannot get them to understand that I want them to put my rough work into proper grammatical form. If I could only get them to repeat it to me as they repeat it to one another I should be able to get on quicker, but if they can put a sentence in Lengua, Spanish, and English they will do so, and a fine mess it is when produced. Scripture pictures, either plain or coloured, would be a great help, as they enable one to introduce a subject where it would otherwise be difficult.¹⁶

After the last sentence, a footnote by the magazine editor informed readers that the requested images had already been sent to Paraguay. From this moment onward, references to the use of images for evangelization purposes appear frequently, mainly emphasizing their value in attracting the attention of indigenous audiences. According to missionary testimonies the Enxet liked to look at illustrated religious books and would listen carefully to the explanations offered to them. "Some nights it was very wet and miserable in the toldo [a native dwelling],¹⁷ and the whole crowd of them would gather into our room. . . . It afforded an opportunity of exhibiting some pictures and explaining to them the general narrative of the representation. They listened with

great attention to Mr. Grubb's short explanation and brief application of such pictures of the Prodigal Son, Good Samaritan, Raising of Widow's Son, Philippian Jailor, &c. Pictures of all kind they are delighted to gaze at. They will turn over the leaves of old picture books repeatedly."¹⁸

By the mid-1890s these "old picture books" had been set aside in favor of the magic lantern, which had made its appearance on the mission field. This device is the antecedent of the modern slide projector. Its basic principle—the transmission of light across an image and onto a screen—was developed toward the middle of the seventeenth century, and its invention is attributed to the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher.¹⁹ Since then, and for more than two centuries—up to the emergence of the cinema toward the turn of the twentieth century—the magic lantern was one of the most popular devices used in mass entertainment.

Back in England at the beginning of the 1890s, the proponents of abstinence from alcoholic beverages and other initiatives of social reform began to capitalize on the potential of conferences featuring magic lanterns to attract large audiences.²⁰ Just like English Protestant missionaries then serving in Australia, so the missionaries of SAMS "readily adopted any means that might help them reach their audience, making liberal use of the lantern and photography to further their aims, to entertain and educate, and to illustrate the advantages

of Western civilisation and Christianity."²¹

The first use of the magic lantern in the Paraguayan Chaco evangelization was vividly recorded by Richard Hunt:

It was at this time [1895] that Grubb took out a lantern and slides. It was a great event, and marked a new stage in teaching.

Hitherto instruction had been given by means of pictures shown to little groups of people. Short informal religious services had been held in the house or near the village. Now came the novelty of the lantern; the young folks were curious and expectant, while the older people were dubious and fearful. On the first occasion the sheet was nicely stretched, the lantern in position, and the audience squatting on the ground in front waiting for something to happen. When the first picture appeared on the screen, they were startled and promptly covered their faces to ward off the impending calamity, for as they put it, "They were afraid of the little devil that lived in the black box and jumped out to the white blanket."

The pictures were exhibited frequently, so that the people could get accustomed to them. In this simple way the Bible stories were told to visitors.²²

Indigenous Response to Magic Lantern Services

By 1898 the magic lantern was regularly used in the Sunday service. Meanwhile, the missionaries were asking SAMS for a

new magic lantern and more slides to project. The Anglican missionaries quickly acknowledged the benefit of employing this visual technology in their evangelism, and they saw how helpful it was in communicating with the Enxet. The magic lantern allowed SAMS missionaries to focus the Enxets' attention during the description of the biblical pictures and helped—as they themselves recognized—both in “forming ideas” and in “remembering the lessons.”²³ Hartrick has noted that pictorial representations of the Scripture undoubtedly contributed to the success of these missions and attests to the widespread use of this technology by Protestant clergy.

A century ago magic lantern shows were widely used by English mission agencies, both in their overseas work and in lectures held at home.²⁴ For the Protestant missionaries, the rhetoric of salvation was easily combined with the image of a lamp projecting light in the darkness: the light of the truth of the Gospel, and the light of reason and European civilization on the seemingly complete darkness of “paganism” and “superstition.”²⁵ SAMS missionaries frequently referred to their own work in the



South American Missionary Magazine 29 (March 1895): 53

Mr. W. B. Grubb [standing], Mrs. Hay and baby,
Mr. Hay, and unnamed Enxet

Chaco in those terms. For example, J. C. Robins wrote, “I look forward, in faith, to the time when from among these people, who are now sitting in nature’s darkness, many shall come forth and be the living monuments of God’s power to uplift the heathen and bring them forth into the glorious light of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.”²⁶

The kind of images missionaries projected differed according to their audience, whether the missionaries were trying to catch the attention of English men and women or whether they were using them with an indigenous audience.²⁷ When the missionaries came back home, they held conferences on the work of the mission, seeking to gain support from philanthropists as well as to obtain political support for their projects. In these conferences most of the projections were slides made from photographs that were not very different from those published in the missionary magazine. Among these we can distinguish three major categories: one intended to depict the Chaco landscape and nature; a second group portraying the Enxet people, showing their material culture and their “manners and customs”; and a final set intended to demonstrate the spiritual improvements achieved by the mission (photographs of baptisms, communions, marriages, etc.), along with evidence of progress made in terms of civilization (photographs of buildings, bridges, roads, and other

mission construction projects). This third group includes several images aimed at showing the missionaries’ effort to “civilize” the Enxet by introducing them to various productive activities or “industrial work.”

The slides used in the lectures and religious services for the Enxet were, almost exclusively, reproductions of works of European artists representing several passages of the Holy Scriptures. Though the Enxet did not have a tradition of watching this kind of image, their attitude was not naive, for they could look at the pictures with a certain degree of criticism, as described by Richard Hunt:

The Indians are most critical, and really good pictures are a necessity. Accustomed as the Indians are to observe minute words [sic] and details of their surroundings, they criticise every picture in a way that an English audience would not. Might I advise that, if possible, each set of pictures be by the same artist? If they see Adam and Eve with fair hair in one picture and dark in the next, they wonder what caused it. They are not acquainted with hair-dressers’ concoctions. We have two pictures of St. Peter, wherein the details differ, and Mr. Grubb was once explaining these, and the Indians took great objection to it. Such fancy pictures as Christ rising from the dead with a banner are entirely misleading and objectionable.²⁸

On the one hand, according to the missionaries, the Enxet were sunk in “superstition” and “witchcraft,” believing that “demons” lived in the lantern. On the other, as this quotation reveals, they could look skeptically at the biblical lectures, distrusting the veracity of the images that, for example, represented Christ’s resurrection. For the projected images to support the missionaries’ preaching, the pictures had to be selected carefully, taking into account the ability of the indigenous eye to notice conflicting details. That is, the Enxet were not simply passive recipients of the images but were active participants. The success of the slide projections was in no way guaranteed in advance but depended to a great extent on the trust the Enxet had or did not have in them.

Final Considerations

Although the use of visual technologies was guided by the interests and expectations of SAMS missionaries and developed in what could be called an asymmetric power relationship between missionaries and Indians, we can see that more was involved than simple imposition of Anglican interests and passive Enxet reception. Here we do well to note the words of Ana Teruel, who has written about the Franciscan missionaries who were active in the Argentine Chaco during the nineteenth century. The relationship between these Roman Catholic missionaries and the Indians who were part of the mission settlements they established was complex and unsettled, despite the clearly subordinate position of the Indians because of their having been conquered. The Indians did not constitute a malleable mass, subject to the will of the missionaries, a fact that turned the mission field into an area of “negotiation,” “interaction,” or “conversation.”²⁹

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, we observe a period of great development of visual technologies, which was basically the development of photography in all its forms and possibilities. The magic lantern, one of the most popular of these visual tools, was adopted into missionary practice almost unquestioningly by Protestant missionaries seeking to spread Christianity and the principles of Western civilization to every corner of the world, including the Paraguayan Chaco. As

we have seen, these visual resources could be extremely effective in holding the attention of indigenous audiences, thus serving as communication tools of great use for purposes of evangelism.

However, objections made by the Enxet to what they were viewing allow us to identify ways they exercised an active role in the whole process of evangelization.³⁰

Notes

1. SAMS was founded in 1844 as the Patagonian Missionary Society, changing its name in 1864. In 1995 it became the South American Mission Society. On February 1, 2010, it merged with the Church Missionary Society.
2. At the end of the nineteenth century the Enxet subsisted from their hunting, gathering, and fishing. They lived in flexible groups that normally varied in size between twenty and seventy people, near permanent or semipermanent water sources. These groups moved about the Chaco territory, depending on the variable availability of subsistence resources. See Stephen Kidd, "Land, Politics, and Benevolent Shamanism: The Enxet Indians in a Democratic Paraguay," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 27, no. 1 (1995): 43–75.
3. Since "Lengua" is understood by the Indians as a pejorative term that "symbolises their loss of dignity and worth and is contrasted with their aspiration to once more become Enxet, to be recognised as fully human" (ibid., p. 52), I refer to them as Enxet.
4. Ibid., pp. 44, 54, 53.
5. The *South American Missionary Magazine* (hereafter *SAMM*), which began publication in 1867, was the main source of information for this article. For several years, especially during the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, this magazine published long excerpts from missionaries' accounts and letters, which are a rich source of information. An excellent source of information about SAMS and much else is the Library of the South American Missionary Society, Great Britain (SAMS GB), located in the Medlock Room, Handsworth Parish Centre, Handsworth Road, Sheffield, U.K. It holds a large number of nineteenth-century works, including general descriptions of the countries, travelers' accounts, and missionaries' diaries. There is a small collection of works in Amerindian languages, mostly translations of parts of the Bible or the New Testament, and dictionaries in these languages, mainly compiled by missionaries. The geographic coverage reflects the areas in which SAMS has been active: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay. There are also photographic materials, minute books, diaries, and a full set of the society's magazine from its beginning in 1867. (In 1963 the name of the magazine became *Sent*; in 1975 it changed to *Share*.)
6. A 1902 announcement reads as follows: "The second series of South American Mission Scenes is now in the press. It contains about seventy photographs illustrating the people, buildings, and surroundings of our stations in South America. . . . The price of either the first or the second series is sixpence." In the same magazine "a packet of Twenty-five Picture Post Cards of South American Mission Scenes, all different" was also offered (*SAMM* 36 [1902]: 32).
7. See, for instance, Peter Pels, "Africa Christo! The Use of Photographs in Dutch Catholic Mission Propaganda, 1946–1960," *Critique of Anthropology* 9, no. 1 (1989): 33–47.
8. *SAMM* 22 (1888): 272.
9. *SAMM* 23 (1889): 107.
10. Henriksen probably refers here to the Ariston Organette, a cheap, hand-turned reed organ first introduced in Germany in 1876 that played interchangeable perforated cardboard discs. By 1890 the Ariston Company boasted that over 200,000 of these instruments and millions of record-discs had been distributed around the world. See Patrick Feaster, "Framing the Mechanical Voice: Generic Conventions of Early Phonograph Recording," *Folklore Forum* 32, nos. 1–2 (2001): 60.
11. *SAMM* 22 (1888): 270.
12. Grubb was an active missionary in the Paraguayan, Argentinean, and Bolivian Chaco from 1890 to 1921. For more information, see Richard Hunt, *The Livingstone of South America* (London: Seely Service, 1933).
13. On May 1, 1892, the Paraguayan government named Grubb "Comisario General del Chaco y Pacificador de los Indios (justice of the peace, or magistrate, for the Chaco, and conciliator of the Indian tribes)." See Wilfrid Barbrooke Grubb, *Among the Indians of the Paraguayan Chaco: A Story of Missionary Work in South America* (London: Charles Murray & Co., 1904), p. x.
14. The peoples' unwillingness to teach the missionaries their language may be understood as a barrier the people erected due to their suspicion of the missionaries, something the missionaries had to overcome before they could make any friendly advance. We must bear in mind that these missionaries were newly arrived in the Chaco and that the Indians may well not have considered them to be much different from other whites coming into their territory. Henry Grubb has stated, "As a rule the white man has come among the Indians as an exploiter, a conqueror, or a member of a dominant race, so it is little wonder that [the Indians] avoid any contact with the white visitor" (*The Land Between the Rivers* [London: United Society for Christian Literature, 1965], p. 14).
15. This phrase probably refers to *The Peep of Day*, a book written by Favell Lee Mortimer (1802–78) in 1836. According to Mortimer, this book was meant for the "many mothers at the present time who are seeking to bring their children to Christ" (*The Peep of Day; or, A Series of the earliest religious instruction the infant mind is capable of receiving* [New York: Taylor & Co., 1845], p. ix).
16. *SAMM* 29 (1895): 38–39.
17. "'Toldo' is the Spanish word for indigenous dwelling. The Enxet toldo was a lightweight wood structure open through its entire length, and usually at the sides as well, having a low roof of interlaced twigs. One of these houses will accommodate from forty to sixty people." Seymour Hawtrey, "The Lengua Indians of the Paraguayan Chaco," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 31 (1901): 284.
18. Ibid., p. 52. I could find no further references to the use of illustrated books in this magazine; a further analysis of the available sources may shed some light in this matter.
19. See Donald Simpson, "Missions and the Magic Lantern," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 21 (1997): 13–15.
20. Steve Humphries, *Victorian Britain Through the Magic Lantern* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1989).
21. Elizabeth Hartrick, "Consuming Illusions: The Magic Lantern in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand, 1850–1910" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Melbourne, Australian Centre, 2003).
22. Hunt, *The Livingstone of South America*, p. 125.
23. *SAMM* 34 (1900): 11.
24. Simpson, "Missions and the Magic Lantern."
25. John Peffer, "Snap of the Whip/Crossroads of Shame: Flogging, Photography, and the Representation of Atrocity in the Congo Reform Campaign," *Visual Anthropology Review* 24, no. 1 (2008): 55–77.
26. *SAMM* 23 (1889): 175.
27. Lantern services were held in the Chaco at least till the end of the 1920s in the monthly informal Sunday afternoon services, in which lantern slides and objects were used to illustrate and "bring more variety" (*SAMM* 62 [1928]: 34).
28. *SAMM* 32 (1898): 61–62.
29. Ana Teruel, *Misiones, economía y sociedad. La frontera chaqueña del Noroeste Argentino en el siglo XIX* (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 2005), p. 85.
30. I wish to thank Cora Wilkie (secretary of the Anglican Cathedral of San Juan Bautista, Buenos Aires) and Robert Lunt (resources officer, SAMS GB) for their assistance in gathering information for this article. I am also grateful to Paul Jenkins for helpful comments and suggestions.