

## **Mission:Reflexion – 200 Jahre Berliner Mission**

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### **Chapter 5: A Case of Mission Work in Tanzania (since 1887-1939) by Falres Ipyana Ilomo**

**In this work, Ilomo provides a critical analysis of the approach applied by the Berlin Missionaries and explains why the approach was contrary to the African traditional practices and beliefs. Furthermore, he reports on the remaining legacy of the missionary teaching and practices and the impact on the growth of the church to this day. He concludes with recommendations on how missionary teaching and practices should be conducted.**

Although this anniversary is being celebrated in Berlin (Germany), other parts of the world where Christianity was introduced by the Berlin Missionary Society have every reason to join in the celebrations, be it passively or actively. In 1887, when the Berlin Missionary Society introduced Christianity, Tanzania belonged to German East Africa and was therefore part of the German Empire. Today's Tanzania was then known as Tanganyika, Burundi and Rwanda.

(In the late 1880s to 1900s, the Berlin Mission focused only on what was then Tanganyika, where Christianity is still growing rapidly today. In the other two countries, Burundi and Rwanda, Christianity was also introduced during the German colonial period, but died with the introduction of the Belgian colony after the First World War, providing a favourable environment for the Roman Catholic Church to grow more rapidly.)

#### **Missionary Work in East Africa: The Relationship with the German Government**

Missionary work in East Africa was the result of the expansion of Protestant missions in the nineteenth century. Chronologically, , the “flag followed the Cross,” meaning that it

was the missionaries, not the colonialists, who explored the vast unknown areas of Central Africa and paved the way for trade and Christianity. In fact, it was the missionaries who invited the European powers to intervene in Africa.

When the German Missions began their work, it quickly became clear how closely they co-operated with the German Colonial Government. In 1913, for example, the German Kaiser made donations to support the missionary work in the respective German Colonies. Indeed, it seems to have been the intention of the Germans to spread cultural propaganda through social services which mission stations could offer: schools, health care services and other development projects. (The Berlin missionary Merensky, for example, worked as a mission inspector in Berlin after his return from South Africa to Germany in 1882. Over time, Merensky had close contact with Carl Peters, a colonial agent. Merensky even joined an organization founded by Carl Peters known as *Gesellschaft fuer deutsche Kolonisation*. On 27<sup>th</sup> 1885, this organization acquired a letter of protection from the German Emperor which marked the beginning of colonial imperialism in East Africa. Merensky was a key figure in this movement of colonial establishment in East Africa.)

### **Establishment of Christian Communities**

After their arrival in Tanzania and the start of missionary work, the Berlin Missionaries established Christian Communities, also known as Christian Settlements, Mission Estates or Christian Villages. The practice of establishing such communities was typical for the Berlin Mission and was implemented in three synods: the Synod of Uzaramo-Uluguru, the Synod of Konde and the Synod of Ubena- Uhehe. Out of the former three Synods of German East Africa, 14 Dioceses of Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania exist today. A letter to the German State Secretary in the Ministry of Law indicates that the aim of establishing the new congregations was to improve the welfare of the inhabitants by providing health services, jobs and accommodation for refugees, and not to fight the traditional existing congregations. They were also expected to ensure the maintenance of discipline among the residents of the community. The Berlin Mission Society emphasized that it had decided to establish such communities and laws based on its 80 years of experience in missionary in other parts of the world, e.g. in Southern

Africa. Therefore, they wanted a similar system for the newly established missionary work in the German Colony of East Africa in order to minimize social problems among the African inhabitants. In addition to the establishment of Christian communities, the Berlin Mission Society also formulated 20 rules (ordinances) known as *Platzordnung*. They adopted the practice of establishing Christian communities from the Moravian Church which introduced mission work in Tanzania at the same time as Berlin Missionaries. These were basic regulations for the establishment of Christian settlements in the German East African Colony. The aim of these rules was to create Christian communities that conformed to Christian ideals about individual and corporate behaviour.

### **Christian Faith and Social Services**

After starting the missionary work in Tanzania, the Berlin Missionaries first prepared the the locals for the preaching ministry. Since these candidates were illiterate, the missionaries invited them to the Mission center Thursdays. The following day, the preachers memorized the sermon and hymns. On Saturdays, they returned to their respective preaching station to preach on Sundays. Later on, the missionaries succeeded in teaching Africans to read and write. Therefore, the preachers no longer had to travel to the Mission stations every week to memorize sermons. Since the Africans could read and write, they were in charge of doing mission work to their fellow Africans while the Berlin missionaries remained to be the administrators.

In the area of social services, the Berlin missionaries played a great role by teaching Africans how to build modern houses, produce building materials, practice modern farming and also introduce foreign crops and fruits that are still grown today. Furthermore, the missionaries introduced formal system of education; reading, writing and arithmetic. The missionaries were not in favor of higher education since their intention was to provide mass education to enable Africans to read the Bible. However, the development of higher education was only driven forward by their African successors after the Second World War.

### **Critical Analysis of the Berlin Missionaries Doctrine and Approach**

Since the Berlin missionaries emerged from the revivalist movement in Europe, they also influenced Africans. Through this revival movement, the missionaries not only believed in exclusive eschatology, but also in the imminent coming of Jesus Christ. The faith of the

newly converted Christians could therefore be maintained. The missionaries chose a man and a woman to supervise community members who committed ethical sins. Once the overseers discovered the offenders, they reported to the missionary who registered them and imposed a fine or corporal punishment. In case of a second offence, the offender's family was expelled from the Christian community to the former pagan community. At the same time, the harvest in the Christian community was destroyed and the house was demolished. Moreover, the family was considered non-Christian during the deportation. This practice of deportation caused the perpetrator to feel ashamed when returning back to the former pagan community.

Furthermore, the missionaries teaching about eschatological expectation was not only legalistic but also threatening in terms of sermons and hymns. The kind of eschatology introduced by Berlin Missionaries was contrary to the African world view which promotes unity, reconciliation and the universal home coming of family members, both the dead and the living ones. In fact, even after being converted to Christianity, even after their conversion to Christianity, Africans became adherents of their traditional religion, as Christian eschatology could not offer them assurance of salvation. Conversion to Christianity was therefore carried out additionally, but was not a complete replacement for the local faith.

### **Action against cultural practices**

The Berlin Missionaries introduced a very hostile church discipline against church member. The Church discipline was not only introduced against committing sins, but was also against engaging in traditional practices. In European societies, monogamy was prevalent, while most of the Semitic and Bantu Societies in Africa were polygamous. Although this system was a cultural practice, the missionaries regarded the system of polygamy as contradictory to Christian doctrine. From the African perspective, polygamy was a way of life that symbolized prestige, similar to the Western system of prestige in terms of materialism.

When the Berlin Missionaries in 1880s introduced Christianity to East Africa, almost ninety percent of the population was polygamous while the remaining part was

monogamous due to poverty. The Berlin Missionaries condemned the system of polygamy and considered it a sinful practice before God. For example, when an African polygamist with 10 wives and 100 children believed in Jesus Christ and was ready to be converted Christian, he was obliged to remain with a single wife and abandon the rest of his nine wives with their children. The new system of marriage introduced by missionaries was not only brutal but also violated human rights and Christian doctrine. The system separated women from their beloved husband and turned them into poor, single and socially isolated mothers. Their children were cut off from their father's love and care. From a Christian point of view, the basis of conversion to Christianity is the faith in Jesus Christ. However, from Missionaries point of view cultural practice, abandoning African practice and adopting Western culture, was the basis for baptism. This practice of Berlin missionaries made the work more difficult and led to the poor, orphans and immigrants to accept Christianity due to the difficult social situation they faced but not believing in Jesus Christ as their saviour.

As stated, before the establishment of Christian communities and introduction of 20 rules to be followed, were mostly about prohibiting and punishing inhabitants against cultural practices. Such practices including singing and dances, providing informal education to the young people after reaching puberty stage. In connection to that, alcohol consumption was also forbidden and punishable among the inhabitants of Christian communities. The plants (bamboo plants) in the Southern part of Tanzania from which alcohol was made were supposed to be cut off; in Dar es Salaam the Christians were to cut off all coconut trees from which the indigenous made local beer. In African practice, alcohol was considered anormal drink at celebrations, when working in fields and domestic drink for adults of which also united the community members. Therefore, forbidding alcohol consumption had negative social, cultural and religious implications.

### **Introduction of various Taxes**

The Berlin Missionaries introduced a land tax for all people living in Christian settlements, except the elderly and sick, since the land the Africans were living on belonged to the Berlin Mission Society. Additionally, the German colonial government imposed a head tax which was to be collected from the landlords. This responsibility placed the missionaries in the unenviable position of tax collectors. Other taxes were annual Church tax, baptism

charges and baptism Gawn charges. According to Christian settlement regulations, paying taxes and other charges was obligatory. Anybody unable to pay was expelled from the settlement. The exclusion of such a person had not only social, but also Christian-ethical consequences. As soon as a person was expelled from the settlement, they were automatically subject to ecclesiastical discipline.

### **Remaining Legacy: A Challenge for the Church in Tanzania**

As explained earlier, the establishment of Christian communities and the introduction of various rules that contradicted the African worldview and cultural practices meant that missionary work was not as successful as it should have been. We shall discuss whether the leadership style of the Church in Tanzania during the self-governance intends to correct the mistakes committed by the previous Berlin missionaries. Following a reflection on the achievements and failures of the Berlin missionaries, it is not a question of praising them or blaming them for mistakes in missionary work. Rather it is to see whether the modern Tanzanian Church has learnt a lesson from the past and is willing to improve the Church system. The Berlin missionary era is over, the remaining task for the Tanzanian Church and the Church in Africa is to find a new approach to mission in the modern multicultural society. Another task is to improve the Christian doctrine and reform various Church practices introduced by the former missionaries.

The modern and autonomous Tanzanian church from the 1940s onwards regarded all regulations from the missionary period as genuine church traditions that had to be adhered to. Furthermore, the teaching of the Word of God by missionaries was regarded as the only true one, to which no one should add or subtract anything. This practice is still predominant especially in the rural areas, while in urban areas there are some improvements. Today, we can blame the church system because the conditions are different from the past, many Christians as well as Pastors and Evangelists are educated. Therefore, they can read the word of God and understand it well. Moreover, the Church leaders, attend proper training at colleges and universities. In addition to that, the preachers have access to international contexts, therefore, there is no excuse for not having true knowledge about the Word of God.

The Church in Tanzania does not contextualize the Gospel into African culture. As a result, the Word of God has always remained alien to Africans. Therefore, outdated missionary teachings are still being adopted today. Since Christianity is not rooted in the culture of the people and African religion is seen as paganism and African cultural practices as sorcery and witchcraft, the church in Tanzania and in Africa as a whole is unable to engage in interfaith dialogue with African religion. As a consequence, the African church is still trying to proselytise Africans instead of engaging in genuine dialogue.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, it has become clear how Christianity in Tanzania has experienced both successes and various challenges through the Berlin missionaries. The challenges have enormously affected the growth of the Church as the approach did not consider African culture and values. On the other side, Christian teaching was not liberative in such a way that the Africans were not convicted to accept the new religion which was spread through Western culture. The result of this mission work was the eruption of many independent Churches that have incorporated African cultural practices and values. I am aware that one can defend oneself against these challenges by pointing to the rapid growth of the church in the South today, which has led to the centre of mission in the world shifting from the North to the South. It is true, this change of paradigm has taken place in the recent years. However, the fastest growth that is taking place now is only numerical but not in terms of theological potency. In fact, regarding the life of the church, we need both, numerical as well as theological potency in order to create a sustainable church.

Despite all the challenges, experience shows that the Word of God has survived until now, at the celebration of the 200th anniversary of Berlin Mission. The Word of God has continued to be preached all over the world. Therefore, we have all reasons to believe that the one who was and who is working in the mission of God (*missio Dei*) is God himself, human beings are only in the background not in the foreground.

**Falres Ilomo** was born at Tandala, one of the oldest Berlin Mission stations in Southern Tanzania and is an ordained Pastor of the ELCT. In 1995 to 2002 he took Master in Theology and Doctor of Theology in Missiology and Religions (*Missionswissenschaft*) at

*Agustana in Neuendettelsau -Germany; Since 2005 to today he is teaching and the Faculty Dean at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Iringa teaching: African Religion, African Christian Theology, Christianity and Other Faiths, Islam, Dogmatics and Philosophy. Since 2012, he has been a visiting Professor in European and USA universities. He is the author of several books and journal articles.*