

Mission and Colonialism in the Time of Berlin Mission Society in Tanganyika 1891 - 1945: A Tanzanian Perspective

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Introduction

This paper presents the role of the Berlin Mission Society (BMS/Berlin I) in sending missionaries and evangelising ethnic groups in the Southern Highlands and East and Coastal parts of Tanganyika from 1891 to 1945.¹ This presentation will be essential to tackle the riddle of the coincident beginning of BMS in Tanganyika with the consolidation of German colonial rule in 1891. The paper will also appraise the development of mission work managed by BMS in the two colonial contexts of the German colonial rule and British mandate. Lastly, the study will reflect on the effect of the story of BMS in Tanganyika on the establishment of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Colonisation and the Roots of Lutheran Mission in East Africa 1844 - 1891

It is inevitable to discuss four aspects before establishing BMS in Deutsch-Ostafrika (DOA) in 1891. First, in 1832 Zanzibar became a territory of Sultanate of Oman, Seyyid Said.² Despite Germany not having colonial control of Zanzibar, the Sultan recognised them as trade partners in 1844.³ These developments led the united Germany to secure Zanzibar as its protectorate from 1875 until 1884⁴

Second, in 1867, a German merchant, Heinrich, married Princess Salima bin Said as a social factor.⁶ The mercantile and social interactions helped a hospitable welcome of the first German missionary, Ludwig Johann Krapf, by the Sultan in 1844.⁷ The same year the Sultan of Zanzibar established the German trade post as described above. The Church Mission Society from Britain sent Ludwig with a Lutheran-Reformed background as their missionary

¹ Christoph Sehmsdorf, *100 Jahren Evangeliumverkündigung in Südtanzania 1891-1991* (Berlin: Ökumenisch-Missionarisches Zentrum - Berliner Missionsgesellschaft, 1991), pp. 7-60.

² W. H. Ingrams, *Zanzibar: Its History and Its People* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1967), p. 162.

³ Gideon S. Were & Derek A. Wilson, *East Africa through a Thousand Years: A History of the Years A.D 1000 to the Present Day* (London: Evans Brothers Ltd, 1972), p. 124.

⁴ Majida Hamilton, *Mission im Kolonialen Umfeld: Deutsche protestantische Missionsgesellschaften in Deutsch-Ostafrika* (Göttingen: Universtätsverlag, 2009), p. 41.

⁵ W. H. Ingrams, p. 166.

⁶ Peter Vogenbeck, *Di geschichte der Prinessin au Zanzibar* (<https://petervogenbeck.de>), pp. 1-2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 40. Cf. Gideon S. Were & Derek A. Wilson, p. 149.

to East Africa.⁸ Later, CMS sent other German missionaries, Johannes Rebmann in 1846 and Johann Jakob Erhardt in 1849, who joined Krapf's expeditions.⁹ These expeditions made a foundation for German mission and colonialism in DOA.

Thirdly, the story above shows German political activities in East Africa began long before the Berlin Conference in 1884.¹⁰ Like other imperial nations, Germany looked for colonies to have political control of commercial activities in Africa. However, German aspirations for imperial expansions in Africa came later, after the unification of Germany in 1871.¹¹ Fourthly, Berlin Conference in 1885 declared Tanganyika a protectorate of Germany. The society for colonisation of Tanganyika (*Deutsch-Ostafrika Gessellschaft*, DOAG) saw the need to engage missionaries in their plan.¹² At this time, nationalism in Germany had grown, and it penetrated mission societies, and some directly supported the DOA colonisation agenda.¹³ Some missionaries were suspicious of whether it was right to bring the good news in areas where people were exploited, dehumanised, and enslaved through colonialism.¹⁴

Because of this, DOAG established two mission societies that directly helped the colonial interests of DOAG. The first was the Evangelical Lutheran Mission for East Africa, founded by Pastor Ittameier from Bavaria in 1886.¹⁵ When its work in Mombasa ceased few weeks after its establishment, Pastor Ludwig Diestelkamp and Carl Peters founded the Berlin Mission Society (known as Berlin III) in 1886.¹⁶ However, the Berlin III engaged more in chaplains for German emigrants than in mission.¹⁷ After Germany declared Tanganyika its entire colony in 1891, many old Protestant Mission Societies began working in Tanganyika.¹⁸

The Engagement of Berlin I in East Africa 1891 - 1945

The BMS started in 1824 to evangelise the heathens in South Africa.¹⁹ The BMS delayed advancing to East Africa until 1891. However, BMS was aware of the activities of Berlin III in East Africa in 1886.²⁰ BMS hesitated to support the German imperial discourse because of

⁸ Jonathan Hildebrandt, *History of the Church in Africa: A Survey* (Achimota, Ghana: African Christian Press, 1987), p. 122.

⁹ Gideon S. Were & Derek A. Wilson, p. 149.

¹⁰ Robert W. July, pp. 263-286.

¹¹ Wolfgang Petter, p. 42.

¹² Robert W. July, pp. 271-273.

¹³ Majida Hamilton, p. 54.

¹⁴ Majida Hamilton, pp. 55-62.

¹⁵ Gerhard Basier, "Mission Und Kolonialismus im Preußen der Wilheminschen Ära," in: *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* (Vol. 5, No. 2, 1992), pp. 242-243. Majida Hamilton, pp. 66-67.

¹⁶ Anne Perras, *Carl Peters and German Imperialism 1856 - 1918: A Political Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 82-83.

¹⁷ Majida Hamilton, p. 69.

¹⁸ On a detailed account of the beginnings of Moravian Mission Society (Herrenhütter), Berlin Mission Society (Berlin I), and Leipzig Mission, see Majida Hamilton, pp. 73-88.

¹⁹ Gunther Pakendorf, "A Brief History of Berlin Mission Society in South Africa," in: *History Compass* (Vol. 9, No. 2, 2011), p. 107, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-0542.2009.00624.x>. Cf. Gerhard Basier, p. 242

²⁰ Majida Hamilton, p. 78. Here Hamilton explains the presence of the prominent missiologists of the time, Gustav Warneck and the director of Berlin I Hermann Theodor Wangemann, at the inauguration ceremony of Berlin III in 1886.

its purpose to engage only in evangelising the heathens.²¹ However, despite BMS's stern position against direct involvement in the German colonial plan, it finally reached a consensus with the German colonial government to begin its work far from colonial headquarters in Dar es Salaam.²²

BMS decided to send its first crew to DOA in mid-1891. The Merensky Expedition team to DOA began in Natal, South Africa, on 28th June 1891.²³ It reached *Nyakyusaland* on 25th September 1891.²⁴ It continued to Ipagika hill (*Wangemannhöh*), at the city of Mwakatungila, on the feet of Livingstone Mountains at Lake Nyasa on 2nd October 1891,²⁵ and started the work on 6th October 1891.²⁶

Reports show that after exploration of the area and people of the Southern Highlands,²⁷ BMS missionaries established the following mission stations: These explorations enabled Berlin I to establish the first mission stations in the explored areas as follows: Ipagika - Wangemannhöh, in 1891, Manow in 1892, Mwakaleli in 1893, Ikombe in 1893, Bulongwa in 1895 Tandala in 1897, Kidugala in 1898, Mufindi in 1898, Emmaberg in 1898, Itete in 1899, Lupembe in 1899, Muhanga/Pommern in 1899/1912, and Yakobi in 1899. They further established Magoye in 1900, Ilembula in 1900, Milo in 1902, Brandt in 1908, Matema in 1909, Lwamate in 1913 and Kingori in 1913.²⁸ In 1903 BMS also took the stations from Berlin III, Dar es Salaam in 1887, Kissarawe in 1892 and Maneromango in 1895.²⁹ The BMS also added BMS Morogoro, which Schlesien Lutheran Congregation established in 1913.³⁰

BMS faced resistance from the chiefs who feared the loss of their cultural identity and power.³¹ They respected the local leaders and learnt their language quickly to understand the people.³² Missionaries introduced modern medicine in replacement of local treatments.³³ Generally, they also misconceived ancestral veneration by local people as superstition, and therefore they increased mistrust between them.³⁴ Later in 1911, they decided to use Swahili to combat Islam and allow Christians to participate in civil service since the language used

²¹ Gerhard Basier describes the purpose of BMS, as "die Gesellschaft zur Beförderung der evangelischen Mission unter den Heide," p. 242 See <https://www.berliner-missionswerk.de/english-information/berlin-mission/>.

²² Missions-Berichte, pp.

²³ Christoph Sehmsdorf, p. 14.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 16.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 16. Missions-Berichte, 1892, and Amon Mwakisunga, p. 14.

²⁶ Missions-Berichte, 1892, pp. 150-158.

²⁷ Missions-Berichte, 1892-1899.

²⁸ Amon Mwakisunga, p. 19. Cf. Christoph Sehmsdorf, pp. 15-24. See also Beneth S. Mwamuyinga, "Mchango wa KKKT Dayosisi ya Kusini Magharibi katika Maendeleo ya Jamii ya Eneo la Milima ya Uwanji 1900-2020" (Magoye, 2020, pp. 20-22.

²⁹ Berlin I took the work from Berlin III because of the poor results of the work of Berlin III that led to the talks on the takeover of Berlin I in 1903, Chediell E. Sendoro, *Miaka 125 ya Injili: Dayosisi ya Mashariki na Pwani ya Kanisa la Kinjili la Kilutheri Tanzania 1887-2012* (Dar es Salaam: Ndanda Mission Press), p. 21.

³⁰ Amon Mwakisunga, p. 20.

³¹ Ibid., p. 17-20

³² Missions-Berichte 1894, pp. 205-206.

³³ Missions-Berichte, Missions-Bericht 1893, 1891-1918.

³⁴ Faustin Leonard Mahali, *The Concept of Poverty in Luke from a Perspective of a Wanji of Tanzania* (Neuendettelsau: Erlanger Verlag, 2006), pp. 176-177.

was Swahili.³⁵ Lastly, the close relationship between missionaries and colonialists during the *Maji Maji* and World War I between 1914 and 1920 regarded missionaries as part of the colonial scheme.³⁶

In 1920, Pastor Priebusch ordained Martin Ganisya to take care of BMS work in Dar es Salaam short before Britain repatriated him.³⁷ In 1925 after coming back, they fully engaged local people in income-generating projects such as coffee plantations in Lupembe and Manow.³⁸ At this time, BMS also intensified the training of evangelists who later were ordained to be pastors. In the event of the departure of the BMS missionaries in 1939, local people chose Yohana Nyagawa to lead the Church.³⁹

Assessment of Mission and German Imperial Expansionism between 1891 and 1945

The undeniable fact is that German missionaries came to do mission work in German-East Africa when it became a German colony. The following observations show that missionaries participated in one way or another in the colonisation of East Africa.

It is clear from the narration that BMS had a clear purpose of evangelising the heathens. This goal justified the misconception that Africans were subaltern and hence violated the very message of the gospel itself, which puts all human beings as a creation of God. Therefore, conversion into Christianity was equivalent to acknowledging the superiority of Western civilisation. This situation denied missionaries the opportunity to learn more from African culture and contextualise the gospel.

From the discussion above, it would be inconsistent that BMS missionaries were free from colonisation thoughts. I view the hesitance of BMS to come to German-East Africa until 1891 as more based on security concerns. In 1885 German-East Africa was only a protectorate, and anything could happen with a volatile situation of Zanzibar-Tanganyika, which was under the influence of the Sultan and Britain.

Again, in colonialism, no one could empower local people with education that could lead to revolt. Therefore missionaries concentrated on education enabling local people to read the Bible and do some clerk jobs. However, the introduction of local people to the biblical world provided them with different views from the Bible since it also consists of liberating stories. Probably this is an essential contribution of missionaries to Africa. However, in the postcolonial era, I see that missiology has been more emphasised than biblical studies. Africans need more contextual biblical studies to sustain their Christianity.

African Churches, including ELCT, have ever since discussed the impact of missions entangled in colonialism. The emphasis of African Christian Theology was a project aimed to encounter such entanglements. The discussion today is probably not about missionaries and colonialism but on the failure of the local churches to contextualise worship and the message of the Bible. This discussion is proof missionaries did not contextualise Christianity enough.

³⁵ Missions-Berichte, 1911/1912, p. 92. Missions zu Leipzig, *Evangelisch-Lutherisches Missionsblatt*, Jahrgang 1911, pp. 487-490, 516-522.

³⁶ See Christoph Sehmsdorf, p..

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 48

³⁸ Samweli N. Kilimhana, pp. 24-25. Christoph Sehmsdorf, p. 49. Beneth Mwamuyinga, pp. 34-40.

³⁹ Samweli N. Kilimhana, p. 25. Christoph Sehmsdorf, p. 60.

The mushrooming independent and charismatic Pentecostal churches are profiting from this failure of missionaries and local Christians. They practice what we have termed as syncretism as if Christianity is purely free from culture.

In conclusion, I see the discussion in Europe about missionaries of the 19th and 20th century very anachronistic and loaded with guilty consciousness. This discussion does not put us all free from the trap of new forms of global imperialism in the name of science, free-market economy, democracy and human rights. These virtues have a long history in Europe. How can they be contextualised in other cultures? It remains a riddle because of different forms of political organisation. Some Western democracies still accept kingship for economic reasons, like kingdoms in the Arabic world. Therefore, we need to stand together in this world as sisters and brothers in Christ in discerning the signs of the times as a faith imperative, in equipping Christians with competencies and skills to become radical disciples in the context of the ongoing destruction of life and the whole creation.