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Review: Hans-Martin Milk, *“...der im Sturm steht wie ein Kameldornbaum“*. *Die Evangelisten Namibias und ihre Geschichte*, Köln, Köppe, 2019.

Drawing from a wide range of German, Namibian and South African archival sources that have been supplemented with a large number of interviews, the author has explored the history of the indigenous evangelists of the Rhenish Mission Society (RMG). African evangelists played a crucial but often overlooked role in shaping the spiritual and social networks that transformed indigenous communities from the early nineteenth century.

The first missionaries struggled to gain a foothold in an alien natural and cultural environment. Depending on the logistical and social support of African followers, the emissaries of the London Missionary Society and their Wesleyan counterparts were often not aware that their African assistants performed more important tasks apart from interpreting their sermons or acting as guides to isolated settlements. When mission work took root among the Khoekhoe population of southern Namibia and later began to touch the Herero communities further north, African supporters were often the first heralds of the new religion at remote villages and cattle posts before the white strangers made an appearance. Their familiarity with the traditional culture and the local vernacular endowed them with a credibility that many of the European newcomers found difficult to acquire. Africans may have initially been more intrigued by the prospect of gaining access to the

economic connections that sprang up in the vicinity of the mission stations. African evangelists, however, even though they were consigned to the lower ranks of the mission hierarchy, were able to facilitate the indigenous encounter with European Christian concepts. The new social norms and values attached to the Christian teachings were difficult to convey to the members of traditional transhumant African societies, the European stigma on polygamy and the emphasis on a sedentary lifestyle being only two important examples. African assistants, who often operated independently in a fluid contact zone of social and religious acculturation, understood the obstacles to the cultural transformation propagated by the missionaries. Leading by example, they were able to negotiate social and cultural sensitivities in more convincing ways than the European missionaries.

The arrival of the Rhenish Mission Society in the 1840s saw the emergence of a growing number of mission stations which reflected the accelerating European economic penetration of the as yet independent Namibian societies. The annexation of the territory by Germany in 1884 and the ensuing consolidation of colonial power sharpened the social divide between the missionaries and their African assistants as the indigenous communities struggled with the deterioration of their economic structures and social status. African evangelists worked hard to establish and maintain the links between the missionaries and their dispersed followers by conducting prayer meetings and reporting back on the developments in their communities. The citation

in the title refers to the tenacity of these men – all evangelists were men – in withstanding any storm like the tough camel thorn tree. Many felt, however, that their endeavours were undervalued by their white superiors. Milk emphasises that the colonial context of mission work encouraged increasingly derogatory attitudes towards Africans. The pioneer of German missiology, Gustav Warneck, proclaimed the ideal of independent indigenous churches, but his assessment of the 'racial inferiority' of Africans projected this objective far into a vaguely defined future (p. 125). Well-meaning armchair scholars like Warneck provided potency to European ideas of racial difference even though the relations between the mission and the colonial society were not always without tensions. The hardening racism among white settlers in Namibia, who competed for economic resources with the indigenous population, reverberated with many a missionary comment on the intellectual 'backwardness' of their insufficiently remunerated evangelists. Working for the RMG was not an occupation that could sustain a decent living (pp. 130-132).

When the tensions between African communities and the German colonial administration finally erupted into a brutal war of annihilation (1904-1907), many evangelists found it difficult to navigate between their loyalty to the RMG and their allegiance to their own community (pp. 134-147). Some evangelists were swept up in the catastrophic flight of the Herero into the Omaheke. Others paid with their lives for their devotion to the mission when they were attacked by German soldiers

while trying to rescue dispersed survivors of the genocide. Many endured the horrific conditions as prisoners in the infamous camps or they faced a harsh exile in South Africa. In the aftermath of the war, settler racism targeted African Christians and evangelists because the unexpected armed resistance was seen as proof that the missionary project had failed to turn Africans into docile colonial subjects.

The author has carefully explored the struggle of African evangelists to become fully accepted members of the mission and the Protestant churches throughout the 20th century. In some instances, the evangelists' frustrated hopes of being ordained as pastors led to the founding of separatist movements and independent churches. After the First World War, the economic links between the mandate territory and South Africa provided proselytising activities with a new stimulus. The opening up of Ovamboland as a reservoir of migrant labour intensified the integration of Africans into an oppressive economic system that was now dominated by the South African state. These networks of seasonal workers travelling to mines, factories and farms in Namibia and South Africa were tapped into by wandering evangelists. The tin suitcase and the bible became the insignia of working-class evangelists whose worlds were transformed by the demands of an unforgiving labour contract system. When the South African state drew Namibians into the apartheid system after 1948, this generated various instances of protest and resistance from African church members, which inevitably were

portrayed by the apartheid government as the communist handiwork of the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO). A new generation that was theologically better educated and more politicized, developed into an important voice of African resistance to an oppressive regime. Two years before Namibia won its national independence in 1990, the Evangelical Lutheran Church terminated the status of evangelists in the church hierarchy and accepted their ordination as African pastors (p. 370).

This carefully researched study makes an important contribution to Namibian historiography by giving names and, where possible, faces to those Africans whose work changed the fabric of indigenous Namibian communities. A register at the end of the book lists the names of 701 evangelists whose fragmented biographies the author has extracted from primary and secondary sources. By accepting the difficult task of interweaving mission and church history with a biographical approach, the author has succeeded in bringing a hidden chapter in Namibian history to life.

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