

Book Review

MIETTINEN Kari, 2005.

ON THE WAY TO WHITENESS: CHRISTIANIZATION, CONFLICT AND CHANGE IN COLONIAL OVAMBOLAND, 1910-1965.

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The tradition of research on African history is alive and well at the University of Joensuu. This is best exemplified by Kari Miettinen's doctoral dissertation on christianization in Ovamboland and the social conflicts and social changes caused by it. Miettinen also continues the tradition of Namibia studies in the history department of the University of Joensuu. Harri Siiskonen and Frieda-Nela Williams, who defended their theses in 1990 and 1991 respectively, did ground-breaking work in bringing the history of the Ovambo communities to light. Since that, two other theses – by Seppo Sivonen in 1995 and Jan Kuhanen in 2005 – have been completed in Joensuu dealing with African history, making it the most productive history department in this field in Finland. That is a great achievement for a University located in the periphery of the Finnish academic map and well worth the applause in itself.

There is no need to hold back praise for Miettinen's dissertation either in appraising this work. Miettinen writes with an eloquent style. Despite the seriousness of the subject matter, he also packs his work with a good sense of humour, but not dripping with sarcasm. The main ground covered in this book centers on the reasons of Ovambo conversion from 1910 to 1965. The second main theme concerns social consequences of christianization. The work is mainly based on Finnish missionary sources, which is a somewhat problematic factor, because the missionary documents have their limitations. However, Miettinen has overcome this problem by using documents of the Ovamboland colonial administration, which balance the views that rise from missionaries' documents. A limited use of oral information is also made, and as such, I do not see any reason why Miettinen should have relied more on oral sources, because Meredith McKittrick has already made an excellent study on a similar topic based primarily on a large number of interviews.

After the introduction, which presents a historiographical overview as well as the aims and sources of this research, Miettinen contextualizes his research by giving us a lengthy chapter on Ovamboland and Ovambo society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As this chapter is mainly based on secondary sources it adds a little that is new to our knowledge of the social

situation in Ovamboland. As these first two introductory chapters take up over 110 pages, or almost one third of the whole book, I would like to complain about their length. In this case, less would have been more, although it must be admitted that Miettinen synthesizes the current body of knowledge on the history of Ovambo neatly.

It takes quite a long time before Miettinen gets to the main points and arguments in this book, but when he does, the organization of the book operates smoothly. The remaining three chapters evolve thematically. Miettinen argues that the Finnish missionaries worked in Ovamboland in order to make the Ovambo into good, orthodox, and humble Lutherans. The Ovambo were expected to abandon all the customs which the missionaries regarded as contrary to their conception of proper Christianity. Because the missionaries were afraid of syncretism, it was evident that their approach became very intolerant towards African culture. Trust and respect were certainly lacking in the missionary-Ovambo relations. Miettinen tracks how the missionaries' attitude towards the Africans evolved over time, and shows that after the Second World War the missionaries became somewhat more open-minded, but overall, Miettinen concludes, their views bore witness to an unmistakable patronizing attitude.

The "hard matter" of the thesis is contained in the chapter about conversion, which begins by introducing different theories of conversion, although Miettinen does not adhere to any existing theory. This chapter discusses the statistical record of conversion. It shows that conversion to Christianity was a slow process in Ovamboland, because the missionaries were reluctant to make any compromises concerning the form of Christianity the Ovambo should adopt. Large-scale conversions did not begin until the early 1920s, and only by the early 1960s, approximately half of the Ovambo population had become Christian. Miettinen also examines the gender aspect of conversion, and shows that although women always made up the majority of those who converted in Ovamboland, up to the mid-1920s men were the majority among the Ovambo converts because a considerable proportion of the men were baptized while on labour contracts outside Ovamboland. Whatever the number of converts in different times, the missionaries were seldom happy with the standard of Christianity among the Ovambo, as shown by some of the more colourful expressions quoted by Miettinen (see p. 205). Therefore, there seems to have been no change of religious conviction in many cases.

Miettinen's discussion about the causes of conversion is also very good. Environmental causes have often been brought up when discussing the mass conversions of Africans, and it has been attested that famines often launched waves of conversion, as has been also argued in the case of Ovamboland and the "famine that swept the country" in 1915-16. Miettinen, however, argues that in the Ovambo case the emergence of colonial rule was the more probable cause, because the fear of a technologically superior colonial power spread over Ovamboland after the killing of King Mandume of Uukwanyama by the South Africans during a short war in 1917. Christianization, however, was a multi-

causal phenomenon, especially from about 1950 onwards. One of the reasons for a new wave of conversions was the Africanization of the missionary work.

Whatever the reasons of conversion, Miettinen is able to show that the religious change caused by the conversions was anything but total, and that people's reasons for converting were obviously not purely religious but often more practical and earthly. The most important consequence of christianization was the emergence of a new sub-group inside Ovambo society, namely the Christians. However, Miettinen concludes that we should not exaggerate the role of missionaries as agents of social change in Ovamboland. Firstly, they were not even aiming at social change per se, but they only wanted to establish a Lutheran community behaving in a Christian manner. Secondly, the social outcomes of their activities could be ambiguous, positive in one level but negative in another.

Kari Miettinen's work is a long-awaited reevaluation of the Finnish missionary work in Ovamboland. It complements and in many respects surpasses Matti Peltola's official history of the Finnish missionary work in Africa, which was published already in 1958. Miettinen also covers much of the same ground that has already been delved on by Tuula Varis in her Licentiate's thesis (University of Tampere, 1988). Varis, influenced by Foucault and preoccupied with a slightly different time period (1870-1925) than Miettinen, was far ahead of her time and never completed her PhD thesis. In fact, the reevaluation of the missionary work did not begin in Finland until the publication in 1997 of Teuvo Raiskio's book on missionary work among the bushmen. This led to a highly unusual public debate in the national media. It is a bit surprising that Miettinen's work has not caused any outcries so far. One of the reasons must be that the book is balanced and cautious in its conclusions. It is not a polemic masterpiece, but masterpiece nevertheless, and should be carefully read by all serious students of Christianity and social change in Africa.