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European Missiological Conference, April 3-6, 2013, Helsinki
Abstract

Finnish Missionary Society's work among the poor in South West Africa, c. 1900—1915

Caritative work has been considered as an integral part of Christian based social work. It was especially seen in home missions and in deaconess movement during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, also missionaries shared those values and different kinds of actions for helping indigenous people in missionary fields took place. Nevertheless, this phenomenon has got, at least until now, only minor interest.

In the wide field of history of missions the phenomenon of missionaries working among poor relief has not got much attention. At the same time, missionary work has been seen as an early phase of development aid without critical analyses. It is mainly medical mission or missionary work after World War II that has interested researchers. I am focusing on Finnish Missionary Society (FMS) and its work among poor relief in Ovamboland, South West Africa at the beginning of the twentieth century. My study is particularly focused on helping Ovambos who were suffering of the famine.

This presentation is based mainly on the archive material of FMS on the first decade of 20th century, including especially minutes of missionary meetings in Ovamboland as well as letters from these missionaries directed to FMS management in Finland.

My argument is that poor relief was an integral part of FMS's everyday missionary work in Ovamboland while it never got much attention in publicity. The main reason for providing help lies in missionaries Christian world views and how giving food for the hungry was also persuading Ovambos to come to the mission stations. However, it should be considered carefully not to make anachronistic arguments about its relationship to modern development aid.

It is important to consider social work of the FMS especially through the fact, that missionaries were working among different cultures and helping people who at that imperialistic time were seen as uncivilized and devalued. What made them help those Africans?

Panels where my presentation may fit:

- Mission, Aid and Development in Africa: Beyond the Western Paradigm for Social Transformation
- Faithbased NGOs and Economic Development