

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

In this presentation, I discuss Christian based social work done by Finnish Missionary Society (FMS) at the beginning of the 20th century in South West Africa. This topic is also attached to the relationship between mission and social work that have only recently come to the center of mission history studies. My study is based on archival sources of Finnish Missionary Society, meaning mainly minutes of missionary meetings in Africa, letters sent between Finland and Africa and their annual reports which were published.

FMS, whose work in Ovamboland, at the northern border of the present-day Namibia, started in 1870, fed starved local people already in the 1870s when a strong El Niño phenomenon caused famines world widely. Famines became a humanitarian concern in the 19th century, especially after serious famines in Ireland in the 1840s and in India and China in the 1870s. There was also serious famine in Finland at the end of the 1860s.

Here I am concentrating at the beginning of the 20th century when social work was not yet as significant or visible part of missions as what it became to be especially in the inter-war period. However, social work seems to be an integral part of everyday work for the FMS's missionaries. According to primary sources, they had two ways to help the poor. First was to give food supplies directly for the needy at mission stations. Missionaries bought grain, vegetables etc. and distributed those especially during famines but also in "normal" years, because there lived dozens poor people who could not manage alone.

Second way was to give local people items so that they could trade those for grain with people who were wealthier or living in other areas where crops were better. In general it can be said that Ovamboland was quite remote area where some locals lived in extreme poverty also during normal years. Some inhabitants of Ovamboland had domestic animals or some consumer goods they could trade but the poorest lacked everything that they could have bartered for food. Items used were most commonly imported beads, blankets and cloth, wire and tobacco. Furthermore, ivory, shell and metal ornaments as well as ammunitions and

firearms could have been possible barter items but in primary sources those are only rarely mentioned.

The year of 1908 was a year of serious famine but strategies to manage were different than before. In 1908, FMS happened to get food to Ovamboland after contacting the administration of German South West Africa. At that time, Germans were trying to establish their authority in the area. German military officer Viktor Franke visited Ovamboland at the beginning of the summer and FMS missionary Martti Rautanen was his guide and interpreter during that visit. Famine became only a few months after Franke's visit, so in a sense, it was a natural way for FMS's missionaries to ask Germans for help. Germans agreed and missionaries sent them oxen in exchange. It is known that Germans sent food supplies also in later years but missionaries were critical since they did not want to be in debt of gratitude for Germans.

Most of the time FMS's missionaries had to survive alone without German or other kind of support. However, money was an issue also for the missionaries since they had to buy food and exchange items by themselves, using their own salaries and they were debating with the board of FMS on this. Opinion of the FMS director was that aid should not be given for free: Society's director thought that aid should be free only for the poorest. Mainly, missionaries in the field agreed, but in practice it was difficult to demand payments or some items in exchange.

Among the Finnish missionaries there were different justifications for social work. Main reason was that it was their responsibility to help the poor. Often they referred to their conscience which demanded to action. They also referred to the Christianity and actions of the Christ who likewise was said to help the poor.

In reality these actions had also more practical reasons. By caring the poor and hungry missionaries drew locals to missionary stations. This was one major way to come into contact with Africans. When even hundreds or thousands of people came there during bad times missionaries took advantage on it and preached the gospel for gathered people. Historian Meredith McKittrick has written that "Missionaries had no qualms about using their medicines, consumer goods, and technological gimmicks to attract people, and they were expected to display and distribute these things." On missionaries' point of view it looked that more Africans converted after famines.

Missionaries wished that locals could take care of the poor themselves in the future. They referred to situation in Finland where parishes cared for their own poor. For missionaries, it

was about civilizing and educating Africans to act the way missionaries wanted. Seeing Africans incapable to care for themselves was typical of this time period when every kind of civilizing and colonializing action was justified as a "White man's burden".

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Social work has arrived at mission history only during a few last years. One of my main arguments is that social work and helping the poor was not on missionaries' agenda only during bad famines and catastrophes but it was also a part of their everyday work. At the same time it never got much attention in publicity: It didn't get large references in missionary magazines or their annual reports. One of the reasons could be that their supporters at home (Finland) wanted their money to be sent on evangelization and preaching, not on humanitarian actions. Poor relief seems to be something that missionaries did because they had to. At the same time, missionaries were convinced that these actions had positive effects. Active social work made locals come to missionary stations and it showed Christianity in practice. For missionaries, it was also a question on their own conscience.

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