Book Reviews


This book presents a survey of the contribution of the missionaries to the scientific anthropological insights, medical practices and knowledge of Africa. Patrick Harries and David Maxwell start with a thorough introduction, which is followed by nine chapters written by well-known authors who each describe an aspect of the missionary presence within the framework of the academic developments taking place in the British colonial territories in particular in Southern Africa. The editors begin with establishing that the earliest missionaries belonged to the unskilled classes of European society. ‘They were selected from the dregs of the people’ (p. 1) and were devoid of both social-cultural and spiritual insights. Around the middle of the 19th century, however, missionaries were sent to Africa, who no longer could be regarded as cranks but to the contrary as representatives of Victorian values. Persons who exerted profound influence on the missionary movement to Africa were, to begin with, David Livingstone with his interest for the world of plants and animals of the continent, the wounds caused by slavery and at his time still existing slavery system in Africa. He also was of the opinion that commerce and evangelisation could go hand in hand to take Africa away from the misery in which is lived at the time. Johann Krapf, who feared that the gospel would be dominated by commerce in this approach, also attracted many followers. The third important missionary was the charismatic ascetic François Coillard, who inspired many to expect a new bright future for Africa by their witnesses and services. In the meantime many Protestant and Roman Catholic missionaries collected data and objects of the African flora and zoology that are still stowed away in mission archives for later research.

Patrick Harries writes a separate chapter containing an historical sketch of the interest Africa aroused among discoverers and other travellers coming from Europe. With the approval of the Pope and under Portuguese authority the first Roman Catholic missionaries searched for an African ally against the Muslims. In the end they arrived in Congo via Ethiopia. There they got involved in the slave trade to Latin America. 1622 was a turning point because of the foundation of the Vatican missionary order called ‘Propaganda Fide’, for since then not only Portuguese but also Spanish and Italian priests entered the continent. They had a more independent attitude towards the colonial authorities and started to combine the propagation of the gospel with medical care and rural development. In this period the Protestants started their missionary activities in Africa as well. First the Moravian brethren arrived in South-Africa to be followed by other Protestant missionary societies in
other regions of the continent. These activities were also combined with medical care and the introduction of the production of sugar, maize, bananas, coffee and cocoa, which were cultivated in botanic gardens. In Ghana the cultivation of cocoa continued to be done by the local population, which stimulated the growth of ‘indigenous rural capitalism’ (p. 62).

The other chapters deal with the study of languages, anthropological research and medical care in particular the care of lepers. The missions found new ground in these areas, although these activities primarily served the propagation of the gospel. The study of languages was conducted to propagate the message of the Bible in the local languages and to introduce younger people into the details of this message. The Basel Mission recruited African Christians from Jamaica and former enslaved from the USA to participate in this work (p. 76). After a long period of research the well-known missionary Johann Gotlieb Christaller discovered the mystery of the melodic sounds of certain tone languages, including Twi. In the field of the medical sciences the missionaries not only used the newest European medicines to combat tropical diseases, but also in some cases indigenous means for curing these illnesses. They often used vegetable extracts and performed surgeries to accompanyment of drums and dance rituals. They treated mysterious African diseases, including pneumonia and tuberculosis that hit many mine workers in South-Africa. They frequently used the roasted head and skeleton of a scorpion to cure the bites of these animals and of other reptiles.

Another important missionary theme is the phenomenon of African objects and fetishes, which are regarded as obstacles to the progress of the acceptance of the gospel by the population. Some of them were burned, but others were exhibited in European museums. Anthropologists and ethnologists often used them for defining the essence of African traditional religion. In later times the missionaries adopted the insight that it was wrong to consider these objects as entities belonging to the world of black magic; now they opted for the view that these things could be used as medicines against diseases which lethally threatened the people. The American missionaries R.H. Nassau and H. Trills used this approach when they were working among the Fang in Gabon in the beginning of the 20th century. Their aim was to search for a scientific explanation of African religious practices through the lens of Christian evangelisation (p. 132). The Anglican missionary G.Th. Basden even got official recognition for his research of the habits of the Ibo, which in his opinion were very similar to a Jewish heritage, which possibly would originate from the ‘lost tribes of Israel’ (p. 147). However, he did not discuss his data with trained anthropologists. Therefore he had a good reputation only among African researchers. W.E.P. Burton, a missionary of Pentecostal background, underwent a similar development in Belgian Congo. David Maxwell relates that in the beginning he combated African views on God and the use of fetishes and images of ancestors, but subsequently was impressed by the intrinsic value of these objects. His study of the indigenous language, the meaning of proverbs and folklore taught him to adopt a more nuanced attitude towards these images. Not the white missionary, but his indigenous assistant could judge these images more adequately, for partly they blend with the Christian message and partly they undermine it. However, Burton never underpinned his observations with references, neither did he clarify them for an audience of anthropologists, but his notes are retained in mission archives and deserve renewed attention.