CONFERENCE REPORT

THE BERLIN-CONGO CONFERENCE 1884:
THE PARTITION OF AFRICA AND IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN MISSION TODAY

BY

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From 11 to 15 September 2003, the Hirschluch Conference Centre near Berlin played host to the Third International Interdisciplinary Conference of the African Christian Diaspora in Europe. It followed earlier consultations in Leeds (UK) in 1997, Västerås (Sweden), Glay (France), Hamburg (Germany) in 1998, and Cambridge (UK) in 1999.¹ The Hirschluch Conference was organized by the Council of Christian Communities of an African Approach in Europe (CCCAAE), in conjunction with Humboldt University–Berlin, Rostock University and the Academy of Mission at Hamburg University. Besides serving as the current headquarters of the CCCAAE, Berlin is significant in having played host, barely one hundred and twenty years ago, to European imperial powers at a controversial forum where Africa was partitioned into artificial geographical domains of European influence, exploitation and expropriation.

Such a Conference at this anniversary’s eve was indeed strategic, and was partly aimed at stimulating sober reflection on the (un)intended consequences that enveloped Africa’s scramble and partition. The 1884 event was based on an ideology of supremacy with far-flung implications for humanity, human rights, social justice, politics, economics and Christian mission in an era of globalization. The Hirschluch Conference therefore examined the historical and socio-political consequences of the partition for Africa and the Diaspora, by highlighting issues of migration, gender, xenophobia, crime, war, genocide, natural/man-made disasters, HIV/AIDS and mission. It took a critical look at the political role played by Christian mission in the colonization of Africa,
as well as into the paradigm shift in contemporary mission locally and globally. It further explored the significance of diverse indigenous religious movements emanating from the two-thirds-world, especially in their struggle for survival and dignity, as well as their interaction with religious and secular European institutions. Through a critical evaluation of practical consequences of the aforementioned, the conference aimed at contributing to a new understanding of faith, to overcoming racial and cultural barriers, and to promoting intercultural and interreligious dialogue in a polarised world.

The conference drew over one hundred participants from Africa, Europe, Asia, North America, Latin America and the Caribbean, a remarkable gathering of scholars and researchers (historians, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, theologians and missiologists) on the one hand, and of religious leaders and practitioners on the other. The organizing committee (Afe Adogame, Andreas Feldtkeller, Roswith Gerloff, Klaus Hock and Andreas Heuser) ventured into a terrain where many academics fear to tread. Herein resides the significance of this Conference in that it bridged the fragile ‘divides’ of race, nationality, ethnicity, gender, language, religion, denomination and, most significantly, the gulf between the academic world and the world of religious practitioners. As scholars concerned with human behaviour, we must recognize that a face-to-face encounter between academics and practitioners may enable us to share our findings, analyses and interpretations of our data with informants and respondents—our object of study.

The Conference programme consisted of plenary and parallel group sessions in which an impressive number of papers were presented on a wide range of related topics located within the main conference subthemes: historical aspects; socio-political and gender aspects; and missiological aspects/practical consequences.

The first segment of the programme was devoted to historical aspects and took on wide-ranging topics concerning identity, the invention and evolution of the concept of Africa, integration policies and a thematic survey of the churches’ role in liberation struggles like those in Southern Africa. The cooperation among European missionaries in Africa prior to 1884 gave way to the compartmentalization of missions along denominational and national lines, with attendant rivalries. For mission societies, confessional and national identities became the crucial factors determining policies and loyalties. The negative consequences of denominationalism were identified by Olayemi Akinwumi as one of the carry-over effects of the partition, a legacy believed to have partly induced antipathy among many African churches until the present. Felix Mutombo-