

MISSION HISTORY

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Sources of information

Kirchliches Archivzentrum (Mariannenplatz, Kreuzberg, Berlin); Berlin Mission Society Library, Berlin; Heese Collection, University of South Africa; Missions-Berichte (Africana Collection, University of Pretoria); Cory Library Manuscripts Collection; William Cullen Library Microfilm Collection (Wesleyan Sources); Dutch Reformed Church Archives and the archives of the Mission Suisse Romande (French speaking Swiss Mission) in Lausanne, Switzerland.

The Kirchliches Archivzentrum has the station diaries of the mission stations in the area, letters from the missionaries to the Mission Society, the personnel files of the missionaries and so on. These are currently being micro-filmed. The Berlin Mission Library has all published sources on the Society and its work. Especially important are the Missions-Berichte, the published version of mission reports. There are also a number of tractates which discuss mission journeys to the Limpopo River, various personalities from the area, and the history of its mission stations. All of these sources are in German. Translations will eventually be available to researchers in electronic format. The Berlin Mission Society Library also has an extensive collection of theses on the history of the mission and its work. These are in English, German and Afrikaans.

The cultural region we are dealing with is much wider than the geographical area and stretches into Mozambique and Zimbabwe and down into Botswana. We must remember these areas and groups are constructions resulting from political processes and ideologies.

Summary statistics

Christianity was first introduced into the Soutpansberg area by Africans, rather than white missionaries. The individuals were converted to Christianity while working as migrant labourers in Natal and the Cape Colony during the 1860s. While some abandoned their new faith, others managed to retain it. To varying degrees, the latter group blended Christianity with aspects of African Religion.

Missionaries entered the area from the late 1860s. With their arrival, and their commitment to enforcing what they saw as conformity to doctrinally pure Christianity, new tensions were introduced. Those local Christians who transformed their religious beliefs to meet the local context faced censure or excommunication. In addition, with the presence of the new representatives of the Christian God, they suffered a diminution in status - they were now the assistants and interpreters (both cultural and linguistic) of the representatives, rather than the representa-

tives themselves. While some were able to handle this transformation and retain their faith, others were not. Similarly, some of those who had managed to achieve power in local structures were not able to accept the subservient position to the missionaries which adherence to their brand of Christianity would have entailed. They either abandoned Christianity completely or formed their own blending of religious beliefs which, they hoped, would enable them to navigate in the local situation in which they found themselves. Christianity may mean different things to different people. It is possible that some previously converted Christians managed to live out a private religious life which successfully achieved a blending of Christianity and African religious beliefs. Similarly, it is likely that a number of those converted by the missionaries and their assistants managed to achieve this. However, at this stage, with the power of Mission Christianity and the power of African Religion challenging each other directly for supremacy, it was impossible to do this publicly. Looking at the situation rather cynically, because of the prevalence of malaria in the area, while the wages of "sin" may have been death, both for the first Native Assistants and some missionaries, the price of serving God was the same.

The relationship of the missionaries with the environment was a dynamic one and varied over time, depending on the perceived level of hardship and danger that they faced, with the fluctuating fortunes of missionary endeavour, and with their changing relationships with local rulers and their people. At times, they revelled in its beauty and splendour; comparing its natural features, bird and animal life to those of beauty spots in Germany. At other times, they felt threatened by its darkness and impenetrability, its serpents and devouring beasts, and the hidden menace of "fever". In addition to their use of texts and photographs, when "reality" was either not as "dark" or as "light" as the missionaries wished it to be, they called etchings into service to capture the moods and emotions that they wished to engender in the readers of their reports.

Hostile as it sometimes was to them, the missionaries saw the inhabitants of the area as being concealed and nurtured by the environment. For example, they wrote of "the dark forests of Bawendaland and the dark hearts of the heathen Bawenda", saw their mission stations as "God's gardens in the heathen wilderness" and portrayed themselves as "pioneers of culture" in the area. However, in order to make converts — (re-)fashioning them as Christians and as colonial subjects — they had to draw the local people out of the environment and understand them. In their terms, only by first understanding local ways could they hope to transform them.

This is one of the main reasons why the history of the missionary endeavour in the Soutpansberg is so important. Not only were they the first people to write down detailed accounts of what they saw and experienced in the Soutpansberg and its surrounds but they made strenuous efforts to find out as much as they could about local beliefs and practices, medicines and diseases. They provide a detailed account of cultural interaction between Germans, Vhavenda, Bahananwa, Tsonga-Shangaan, British and Boers. Yes, their accounts were filtered through nineteenth century, male, European, missionary, minds. They are nevertheless a rich treasure trove of information about the people, and the environment, during the late nineteenth century and onwards. Added to this, the missionaries were the first to bring Western education and hospital services to the indigenous people of the area and the first to produce a Tshivenda orthography.

Major studies and publications

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**Recommendations for priority studies
required to fill any gaps identified**

Much more work needs to be done on the twentieth century mission history of the area, as well as the activities of the other mission societies. English translations of primary sources, as well as research results, need to be produced.

“Hot spots” of particular importance

Beuster/Maungani; Tshakhuma; Georgholtz, Blauberg, Makgabeng mission stations and Elim Hospital and Bochum Hospital. Cemeteries at all stations and Klaas Koen’s grave at Luvhimbi are also very worthy of preservation.



Wood cut: Gründler (1897)