

Transnational Spaces and Biographies. The Missionary Benedictines in East Africa

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Intending to combine missionary activity, and monastical monkhood, the Swiss Father Andreas Amrhein, in 1884, founded the Missionary Benedictines. Herewith, he followed the example of the medieval Benedictine order. Only little later, a mother house for the rapidly growing community region was established in Upper Bavaria, and with it even the first German mission house. The monastery village was called St. Ottilien. From here, Christian belief should be spread beginning in East Africa. In spite of his great enthusiasm for African cultures, the founder himself would never visit any mission territory. However, right from the start his order was a translocally, transregionally and transnationally orientated organisation.

The Archabbey St. Ottilien has always been and still is cross-linked by its members and subsidiaries, as well as by the practical organisation of its global activities. The manifold clerical, political, and social contacts have never been limited to Bavaria and Germany, but reached out early beyond local, regional and (nation-)state boundaries. Many monks from Switzerland found their way into the monasteries of the Missionary Benedictines. Not least therefore Switzerland was also chosen, when the Great War required an administrative and financial centre in a neutral country. While all German citizens were expelled from East Africa after the British victory, the Swiss monks played an important role for the persistence of the missionary work in the next years. Likewise the missionaries sent from Europe to the United States during the economic depression of the 1920s in order to collect donations contributed to this.

Actually, missionaries rank among the first Europeans travelling to Africa and establishing more or less permanent ties between the continents. “In the course of time, both have changed: the European missionaries themselves and the Africans that should be proselytised“ (Andreas Eckert). From the multi-sided exchange of persons, ideas and goods caused by European religious engagements in Africa, connections and networks linking numerous places, various regions and nations in the whole world have emerged. These contacts of varying continuity and intensity had considerable effects on the involved persons’ concepts of identity and life. So, the manifold interdependences of the missionary orders and its members, did not only produce impacts on the application areas, but also retroactions on the home parishes, abbeys, regions and countries of the missionaries. The proposed paper aims to trace transnational spaces and biographies that have emerged from the Benedictine mission in East Africa between the 1920s and 1960s.