



History for today

eep piety and the unconditional conviction of the rightness of their actions arising from it were integral parts of the pietist missionary movement. This also applies to predecessor societies of the UEM.

However, the radicalism with which the mission was set in motion was expressed in very different ways in the thoughts and actions of its representatives. The attitude towards achieving the missionary goal could range from condoning violence by the colonial powers to their strict rejection in the conviction that only in appreciative dialogue from person to person could the missionary cause be realized.

In this way some notes and images from the past reflect the theme of the General Assembly of UEM 2022.

"Radicalism and Faith": "Being salt of the world: Acting together in resisting violence and extremism towards peace, justice and reconciliation"

Controleur Welsink was here just now, they have burned 60 beautiful villages, the enemies have all fled from the soldiers into the woods with their belongings, and have not been seen for six weeks [...]. Oh, God, I wish that God's word would finally be brought to the poor Aceh people through these war disturbances, but now they have only received blood and powder from us Europeans, no wonder when they attack us like tigers.

Missionary Pilgram in a letter of 25.11.1887 commenting the measures of Dutch colonial troops against uprisings of the Batak people on Sumatra; see Archives and Museum Foundation (AMS), RMG 1.941.

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I have talked a lot here with the missionary Eich about the Herero question. Eich is absolutely on the side of the Hereros. [...] The Hereros, he says, are quiet, but they are being taken advantage of worse and worse by the white traders, whose numbers are growing from year to year. It seems to me that the trader problem is not as simple as it appears from the point of view of the unconditional Herero friendship of the Rhenish Mission. The missionaries would prefer to have no whites at all in Hereroland [...].

Paul Rohrbach – active as "imperially commissioned settlement commissioner" in German Southwest from 1903 to 1906; see: "Aus Südwest-Afrikas schweren Tagen."

The natives on the mountains and islands all around were seized with shudder and horror when the cannons thundered. [...] How small the otherwise proud and high-spirited Papuans became. How often have I warned them and told them: 'You'll go so far that a warship will land on your head! [...] Now they folded up like pocket knives and swore loyalty and obedience to me. Before, they had no time to hear God's word on Sunday mornings; now they have time.

Missionary Gustaf Bergmann, November 1897 commenting the results of a so called Vergeltungsaktion (retaliation) against the population of Bilibili Island, Papua Newguinea; see Berichte der Rheinischen Missionsgesellschaft, 11/1897.

We could not and would not start a missionary work leaning on bayonets.

Missionary Ernst Johanssen commenting his conviction that the offer of military cover for their mission approach to Usambara, Tanzania by the colonial police administration in Tanga would not be helpful for the undertaking; see: Ernst Johanssen, Führung und Erfahrung in 40jährigem Missionsdienst, Band 1, Bethel 1931, p. 50.

As far as we missionaries were concerned, we would never have initiated the punishment [...]. This would also not have been in the sense of the two murdered missionaries. But because, in addition to them, an official of the plantation station in Hatzfeldthafen [...] had also been murdered [...], the state authority considered itself obligated to provide satisfaction to the relatives of the murdered by punishing the enemy villages.

Missionary Georg Kunze commenting in a report 1891 a so called Strafexpedition of German colonial troops in the aftermath of the murder of two Rhenish missionaries by local Papuans at the Northern Coast of Papua Newguinea; see AMS, RMG 2.141.

The policy prevailing here in the country had to lead to a catastrophe. The Germans came into the country with friendship and protection treaties, which [...] were hardly intended as trade treaties. These treaties were also understood by the Hereros only as friendship treaties, not at all as an abandonment of their national and economic independence. But they were later taught a completely different lesson. The German element soon became strong and stronger; the treaties of protection turned into a strict German regiment. The Germans became the masters of the country. Against this the strong national pride of the Herero had to revolt.

Letter from Missionary August Elger to the honored deputation of the Rhenish Mission Society, to Mr. Inspektor P. Spiecker in February 1904; see: AMS, RMG 1.651.

Changes and fears cause resistance. This is true everywhere in the world and can also be said for the situation of the Yali. In those years, all the Papuan peoples of the highlands were facing changes that were inevitable: Mission and church, government, military, Islam, traders, transmigrants, explorers, tourists. Sooner or later, the highland peoples had to adapt to an expanded horizon of life, had to accept change.

See: Siegfried Zöllner, "Wie war das damals überhaupt?", in: "Identität in der Krise. Fragen an Mission und Kirchen in West Papua", 2012.

We cannot make a blanket condemnation of the missionary activities of the past, but must fundamentally evaluate each individual and his or her actions.

Volker Martin Dally, General Secretary of the UEM, in: "Wir haben es von Euch gelernt!", Zeitzeichen 7/2022.

As an African who works with more than the UEM churches in Africa today, and with experience from countries with very different colonial histories, French, English and others, and not just church-related, I say: No, there was a big difference between the missionaries and the colonizers.

Dr. Fidon Mwombeki, General Secretary of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC); Interview with UEM, April 2022

Without mission, we would still be killing each other, practicing cannibalism, worshipping evil spirits in trees and the graves of our ancestors, and going to the medicine man when sick. [...] It must also be said that mission history is not free of imperialist and colonialist thinking and actions. The arrogance of Europeans who, because of the assumption of white supremacy, considered non-white indigenous people as second-class people and demonized traditional customs, art and dress as "primitive". To this day, many Batak Christians perceive our traditions and ancient religions as pagan and try to eradicate them from the world.

Dr. Andar Parlindungan, Head of the department Training & Empowerment of UEM in his speech on the occasion of the opening of the special exhibition "Zwischen den Welten unterwegs - Reisewege der Mission" at the Museum auf der Hardt of Archives and Museum Foundation of the UEM, 17.02.2022

Just a few examples show how diverse and multi-perspective the historical sources are. The holdings in our archives are the common property of all 39 members of the UEM. Much has not yet been explored, although researchers from all over the world have been working intensively on the holdings for decades. What we know and what we keep finding is that the past of the UEM and its mission must be considered in a differentiated way and in all its facets. Making this possible remains our task as the Archives and Museum Foundation of the UEM. The examination of its past, which the UEM ensures for all member churches through its foundation, is important, unique and serves as a model for all European mission societies.

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www.amsdervem.de



