

Fidon Mwombeki on mission and colonialism

An interview with the former UEM Secretary General



Mr. Mwombeki, colonialists and missionaries are often mentioned in the same breath in Germany. Is this justified in your view?

Simply said, no. Although I think I was saying this many times in Germany, speaking as an African, especially even now working with African churches, not only the UEM related, but more. Therefore, I have chapters from countries with different histories of colonialism, French, English and others, not only churches, but even communities. No, there was a big difference between colonialists and missionaries. There are many things you can see, for example, where the people stay, all colonialists live in cities where they had their administration, but most missionaries didn't stay in citizens. They went into the villages wherever they could find acceptance. And when they reached there, they built stations to live there.

They didn't teach their home language, but they learned the language of the local people. So the German or English or whoever missionaries didn't teach people German. They learned the native language, whether it's Kihaya or whichever. They even tried to formulate the alphabet and make it written because all of it was not written. So if you see how much investment and time and energy and money they spent to understand the cultures, to understand the language of the people and live with them, go into their homes, eat with them it's because they had passion in their hearts. They saw these fellow human beings created in the image of God. And these missionaries loved these people.

There were no missionaries in general, who grabbed land and owned it. They didn't. If they had any plantation or anything, it did not belong to them, it belonged to the churches which they founded. Those are some of the differences. And some even chose to be buried there where they had lived and worked because they felt they are just the same with these people. But the colonialists went and left and we have never invited them back.

But even at the end of colonialism, even during the *Zeitgeist* of independence, the missionaries were always invited until today. They are welcomed, they were invited, they stayed with them and they lived where the people are. So that is better and different. They had no material ambitions, but they had the genuine concern of developing the people.

That's why mission stations, even in the times of war or independence, were exempted to be attacked by the local people because they knew these are not the same. We are not fighting these ones. And if you go and see the graves, how we respect the graves where they are buried, until today, even if they won't be respected in their own countries. It's because of the gratefulness. You don't respect the grave of someone who oppressed you, you don't even want to see it. But when it comes to the graves of missionaries you will see it in all over the place that we see a very big distinction between the goals of colonialists and the goals of missionaries.

Something else which I have come to realize that is true, colonialism helped missionaries with the protection by the colonial administration and things like this. Like we know today that if certain visitors or even church people, when they go to a certain country, they go to the embassy of their home country to identify themselves. And maybe if there is a consular need, this was provided by the colonial administration.

But we have to remember that it was not always the same. For example, most active missionaries did not come from the colonial countries. It was not an automatic thing that if it's German colony,



then you have German missions or if it's a Dutch colony, then you have Dutch missions. You might have more. But there are so many places where these missionaries went to where they really had no colonial support and their country was never a colonial country. We think of all these Scandinavian countries which have never colonized anyone. But if you think of their contribution to mission in Africa and all over the world, it's just unfair.

When we are talking about the colonial history, how many countries are we actually talking about? We are talking about a handful of countries like France, Great Britain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and Germany. That's it. But the missionaries came from many other countries with absolutely zero colonial connections. They just went because they felt the need to share the gospel like it was shared to Europe before. So you can't say all mission is just linked to colonialism. Also, to blame the whole of Europe and the European Union for this, although it was only seven countries that actually actively colonized, is not logical to me. So that's why I think to mention the combination in the same breath is not fair.

What can we as an international mission learn from colonial history?

We must learn that there are many things we don't recognize during our lifetime, because also we are part of our time and we live in the time with its context and history and realities which may later be criticized for even though we didn't actually have had any negative intention. So there are things which we think are good to do today, maybe for the people, but we don't see everything. And I will not be surprised that some years after we are finished, people will never understand how we were thinking. This can even happen during our own lifetime. And later you realize, how did they come to us? You didn't really have any bad intention, but that is the reality of our time and later it's going to be totally criticized.

The second thing is that values and attitudes keep changing, and the connection or the meeting of people influence all. I believe that not everything, which people have to change is bad. I see some of these criticisms we make against missions, even against colonialists, which were cultures of people but were changed and now they are criticized. I'm not totally sure that those changes were only negative.

Let me give you an example. There are places where they practice cannibalism. It was only the intervention of external people in terms of missionaries or even colonial powers which put an end to the practice. It was the culture of the people. Yes, but that culture was evil because it did not respect the image of God and the dignity of every person. Now the culture doesn't necessarily justify the act if it's not good. We have to have values which are Christians, which are based on our understanding of God. And sometimes it's good to actually put some things to the stop because they're just not right. I'm thinking of all the issues dealing with gender based violence that cannot be called "this is our culture", and then it's justified. Let's be attentive, let's be careful, but let us not shy away from addressing things which we believe sincerely are not correct just because we are afraid of being named.

So, that is what I would say as missions we must learn that let us not shy away from criticizing things which are not right just because then we are outsiders or let us not be afraid of thinking what we believe is right just because we might be criticized.

Does the colonial past burden the relationship between the churches in Africa and in Germany even today?

I would say yes. Because the condition of colonialism is not over, not only in the church. The history of colonialism is still with us, especially the impacts.

I'm totally "impressed" by the super colonizers who I think are the French. They did their colonialism "very well" by totally brainwashing people and dominating them in all spheres of life, whether it's politics, commerce, finances, international relations, anything. France still rules its former colonies. I'm saying this very loudly these days, and I'm raising questions. I'm challenging our partners in Europe to raise this at the EU and to question the role of France in Africa, where we have all these specific problems only in francophone countries. And when you go there, you see how much they see France as heaven, and how civilization means being French, dressing like a French, eating like a French and drinking the French wine and Evian water from France and everything like that.

It's not only the community, but also for the church. So I would say that the past is there because we are the same people. If you go to a certain place where the relationship between the former colony and the countries is high, like the British and Kenya, you can see the connections which are still there, not only in the churches but also in churches as part of the wider society because the church is part of the society. The mentality is the same and the thinking is just there.

So they're not colonialists, but the same kind of imperialism by American influencers in the churches, particularly in the modern churches in Africa. The relationship between American and African churches is so high. But at the same time, there are still the relationships with the mission organizations like the UEM with its German past. Why are the relationships with the former German colonies stronger? These relationships are still there, not only with the churches, but the past is more present in the churches than in the rest of society.

And why? I don't know. I think because as I said earlier, the relationship between churches was different from the relationship with the colonial state. Therefore, when the state relationship ended, the relationship with the churches stayed and has never been broken until today, and people like it. But the mentality, the thinking is still there.

But I think there is also another side, which I think is not good. I mentioned this just now, namely because of the identification with colonialism and mission. There is a high sensitivity, especially on the part of the churches in the North, because they don't want to be identified with colonialism. Therefore, they are very reserved and cautious with their partners in the global South, and they let them get away with things that they normally would not accept among themselves, because they are afraid of being called imperialists or colonialists. This is not honest communication, but communication of fear. And this is a consequence of the colonial history that strains the relationship between the churches in the North and their partners in the global South.

The interview was held by Martina Pauly, April 2022.