

Legitimation Strategies in the Encounters between Missionary and Indigenous Christianity

*Examining German Hermannsburg Mission's Narratives on the
Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (1924–1927)*

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Conventional Western historiography of Christianity still tends to underestimate the role of non-European Churches, treating indigenous Christian communities in India, Ethiopia or the Middle East only peripherally, if at all. Although the Western Christendom had to (re-)discover these ancient Churches, encountering them during its missionary expansion since the 16th century, the narratives resulted from these encounters until now had received very little attention. These narratives have shaped the image of indigenous Christianity in the West and still continue to exercise a certain influence at various levels. Let us have a look at a rather recent episode which took place in a north German town Hermannsburg. On October 12th, 1999 one could observe there a festive gathering of hundreds of people coming from all over the globe to celebrate together. The reason was the 150th anniversary of the German Hermannsburg Mission, founded by Louis Harms in the middle of the nineteenth century.¹ In the middle of the event was a symbolic act in which representatives of all the cooperating Churches fixed a candle near their countries on a large globe, quoting Isaiah 9:1 – »The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light«. The President of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (founded in 1959 with encouragement of the Lutheran and Presbyterian Missionary Societies), put a candle at the place of Ethiopia.²

¹ About the history of the German Hermannsburg Mission, see: Martin Tamcke, *Die Missionsanstalt Hermannsburg in Deutschland bis 1959*, in: Ernst-August Lüdemann (Hrsg.), *Vision: Gemeinde weltweit. 150 Jahre Hermannsburger Mission und Ev.-luth. Missionswerk in Niedersachsen, Hermannsburg 2000*, 33–101; Georg Gremels (Hrsg.), *Eschatologie und Gemeindeaufbau. Hermannsburger Missionsgeschichte im Umfeld lutherischer Erweckung, Hermannsburg 2004*; Gunther Schendel, *Die Missionsanstalt Hermannsburg und der Nationalsozialismus, Münster/Hamburg/Berlin/London 2009*.

² Cf. Ernst-August Lüdemann, *Preface*, in: Ernst Bauerochse, *A Vision finds Ful-*

»The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light« – the missionary pathos of this message is clear. But this statement becomes rather problematic when it refers to a country with a Christian tradition which counts over sixteen centuries and is made by a representative of a Mission Agency that appeared in the region only in 1927, as it was in the case of the Hermannsburg Mission in Ethiopia. What is then the place of the indigenous Christian community – the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church – in the missionary narrative?³

As the only existing pre-colonial Christian community of Sub-Saharan Africa, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church presented a challenge for the Western missionaries coming to the country. As John Spencer Trimingham had noticed: »Missions face here [in Ethiopia] one of the most difficult problems in all Africa where, confronted by an ancient deep-rooted Christian Church, they have to adapt their policies to the fact of its existence and prestige«. ⁴ The German Hermannsburg Mission also was confronted with the challenge of the necessity to elaborate its policy and address the fact of »existence and prestige« of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. To present Ethiopia as a new mission field to friends and donors of the Mission Agency, the first necessity was to find a legitimation strategy of a missionary

fillment. Hermannsburg Mission in Ethiopia, Münster/Hamburg/Berlin/London 2008, 6.

³ What we mean by indigenous Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church is that it is the only church that has been for centuries developed in the context of Sub-Saharan African culture. About Ethiopian Orthodox Church as an African Church cf. Archbishop Yesehaq, *The Ethiopian Tewahedo Church: An Integrally African Church*, New York 1997. It is important to underline that this status is also widely recognized within the African Christianity. For example famous Kenyan-born theologian and Anglican priest John Mbiti stresses that the Ethiopian Church managed to acquire a uniquely African expression and became »truly African« in the sense that these features have evolved over many centuries and reflect a background that has not been imposed from outside. In Ethiopia »[...] Christianity is rightly »African«, indigenous and traditional, with its roots deeply established in the history and traditions of those who profess it there«. John Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, Oxford: 1990, 225. Also in the movement of Ethiopianism, Ethiopia became a symbol not only of Africa's political and cultural, but also religious independence from colonial hegemony. Cf. Erhard Kamphausen, *Äthiopien als Symbol kirchlicher und politischer Unabhängigkeit*, in: Klaus Koschorke (Hrsg.), *Transkontinentale Beziehungen in der Geschichte des außereuropäischen Christentums*, Wiesbaden: 2002; Fikru Negash Gebrekidan, *Bond without Blood: A History of Ethiopian and New World Black Relations, 1896–1991*, Trenton 2004.

⁴ John Spencer Trimingham, *The Christian Church and Missions in Ethiopia (including Eritrea and the Somalilands)*, London: 1950, iii.

work in a country with its own indigenous Christian community. In this article, I would like to analyse the legitimation strategies of the German Hermannsburg Mission prior to the actual beginning of the missionary work at the end of 1927. It is, thus, not a contribution to the already extensive historiography of the work of the Hermannsburg mission in Ethiopia,⁵ but an attempt to illuminate a heretofore neglected aspect of this missionary enterprise.

The first Protestant missionaries began to arrive in Ethiopia from the 1820's (sent by the Church Missionary Society based in London), and the Hermannsburg Mission could use the experiences and narratives of those missionaries in its representation of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The essence of the first description of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church found in the publications of the Hermannsburg Mission is the exact reexamination of this legacy. Since 1924 some individual publications about Ethiopia appeared in the main magazine of the Mission – *Hermannsbürger Missionsblatt*. Here we find an image of Ethiopia as, on the one hand, the oldest Christian Empire worldwide, a land which has more churches than any other country in the world, and on the other hand totally isolated country which is »in its reality as good as totally alien.«⁶ Especially interesting is the first description of the Ethiopian Church pub-

⁵ On the history of the Hermannsburg Mission in Ethiopia see first of all: Georg Haccius, *Hannoversche Missionsgeschichte*, Bd.2, Hermannsburg: 1907, 1–274; Georg Haccius, *Die erste Aussendung und die Gallaversuche*, Hermannsburg: 1927; Hartwig Harms, *Concerned for the Unreached – Life and Work of Louis Harms, Founder of the Hermannsburg Mission*, Addis Ababa/Hermannsburg 1999; Hermann Bahlburg, *Anfänge der Hermannsbürger Gallamission: Rückblick*, Hermannsburg: 1949; Hermann Bahlburg, *Aufbruch in der Heimat zum Gallaland*, Hermannsburg 1949; Ernst Bauerochse, *Ihr Ziel war das Oromoland: Anfänge der Hermannsbürger Missionsarbeit in Äthiopien*, Münster/Hamburg/Berlin/London 2006; Hermann Domianus (Ed.), *75th Anniversary of German Hermannsburg Mission (GHM) in Ethiopia*, Hermannsburg/Addis Ababa 2003; Johannes Launhardt, *Evangelicals in Addis Ababa (1919–1991): With Special Reference to the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus and the Addis Ababa Synod*, Münster/Hamburg/Berlin/London 2005; Reinhard Müller (Hrsg.), *Der Auftrag geht weiter*, Hermannsburg 1979, 137–178; Gustav Arén, *Envoys of the Gospel in Ethiopia: In the Steps of the Evangelical Pioneers: 1898–1936*, Stockholm 1999, 497–528.

⁶ Cf. »Ein Land, welches uns wohl dem Namen nach bekannt ist als das älteste christliche Reich der Erde, uns aber nach seiner Wirklichkeit so gut wie völlig fremd ist. Nicht nur, daß sich seine Gebirge wie ungeheure Mauern schützend um dasselbe legen, auch die hartnäckigen Weigerungen seiner jeweiligen Herrscher, Europäern den Zutritt zu gestatten, haben es bis in unsere Zeit zu einem verschlossenen Lande gemacht«. Winfried Wickert, *Auf Missionspfaden in Abessinien I*, *Hermannsbürger Missionsblatt [HMB]*, 9 (1924), 125.

lished in the *Hermannsburger Missionsblatt* in 1924: »Islam didn't manage to invade there. Abyssinia remained Christian. But Christianity had remained old. Since the council in Chalcedon in 451 no more fruitful thoughts were accepted, the surrounding world of Mohammedans as well as Oriental inclination, to get caught by the old, caused the total isolation of this Christian Church, what ultimately had to lead and actually lead to torpor and death.«⁷

Here the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is ascribed, so to say, a »zombie existence«. And this assertion is explained with the help of three main reasons, which can be found all over the missionary sources, and not only in the given quotation: firstly, the dogmatic problem is seen in the non-Chalcedonian Christology of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church; secondly, Ethiopian isolation from other Christian Churches because of its hard-to-reach geographical location and Islamization of the surrounding countries are described as problematic; and thirdly, the »inflexibility« or, in other words, Ethiopian faithfulness to its ancient traditions is responsible for its ascribed »torpor and death«. Let us have a closer look at this argumentation. First of all it is remarkable that the supposed death of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has been put here into a cause-effect relation with the 4th Ecumenical Council in Chalcedon, where the Ethiopian Church itself actually was not directly represented. It even did not take active part in the Christological controversies afterwards, but, following the Coptic Church, adopted the latter's rejection of the Council.

Such isolated image of the Ethiopian Church is not only represented in the missionary discourses, but also finds place in the Ethiopian Studies. The famous statement of Edward Gibbon – »Encompassed on all sides by the enemies of their religion, Ethiopians slept nearly a thousand years, forgetful of the world by whom they were forgotten«,⁸ has been the preface to many works on Ethiopia and still remains popular. Generally, geographical background was instrumental in explaining almost everything Ethiopian – its millennial independence and civilization, and also the uniqueness of its Church. But this geographical determinism ignores a

⁷ Cf. »Dem Islam gelang es nicht hier einzudringen. Abessinien blieb christlich. Aber sein Christentum ist alt geblieben. Seit dem Konzil von Chalcedon im Jahre 451 sind keine befruchtenden Gedanken mehr aufgenommen, die umliegende Mohammedanerwelt sowohl wie die morgenländische Neigung, am Alten hängen zu bleiben, führten eine völlige Vereinsamung dieser christlichen Kirche herbei, eine Vereinsamung, die schließlich zur Erstarrung und Tod führen mußte und geführt hat«. *Ibid.*, 127.

⁸ Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, New York 1910, 176.

number of historical events that defy explanation within its terms of reference – numerous historical and archeological evidences of close bounds with different (also Christian) civilizations throughout its history.

The idea of an »Oriental inclination, to get caught by the old« is not new in the Western discourse, but until the nineteenth century this image was rather romanticized. Ethiopia was seen as a place belonging to what Hegel called »un-historical history«, which was supported by a narrative of Ethiopia being a »Biblical land« where nothing changes since centuries. A positive appraisal of the Ethiopian traditionalism (be it real or imaginary) has changed to its condemnation only in the course of the nineteenth century. And it might be also connected with the fact that since that time the Protestant missionaries interested in »reformation« of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (e. g. Samuel Gobat and Charles Isenberg) started to produce narratives blaming »traditionalism« of the Orthodox Church.⁹

These main assumptions which can be found in many missionary sources caused the later deputy director of the Hermannsburg Mission Winfried Wickert,¹⁰ to come to the following conclusion: »Truly, a Christian Church, of which not more than the name left. And therefore it is very natural that people who undertook a mission work in Abyssinia, could be in doubt as to who really was the object of their work, the Falashas or the Christians, or rather both of them«. ¹¹ This statement completely reveals the understanding of the missionary attitude towards the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church.

⁹ Cf. Samuel Gobat, *Journal of a Three Years' Residence in Abyssinia, in Furtherance of the Objects of the Church Missionary Society*, London 1834; Charles William Isenberg, Johann Ludwig Krapf, *Journals of the Rev. Messrs. Isenberg and Krapf, missionaries of the Church Missionary Society, detailing their proceedings in the kingdom of Shoa, and journeys in other parts of Abyssinia, in the years 1839, 1840, 1841, and 1842*, London 1843.

¹⁰ About Winfried Wickert, see: Martin Tamcke, Wickert, Winfried, in: *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon*, Bd. XII, Herzberg 1995, 1046–1047; Martin Tamcke, *Die Missionsanstalt Hermannsburg in Deutschland bis 1959*, in: Ernst-August Lüdemann (Hrsg.), *Vision: Gemeinde weltweit. 150 Jahre Hermannsburger Mission und Ev.-luth. Missionswerk in Niedersachsen, Hermannsburg 2000*, 82–90; Gunther Schendel, *Die Missionsanstalt Hermannsburg und der Nationalsozialismus*, Münster/Hamburg/Berlin/London 2009, 51–54; Winfried Wickert, *Männer und Zeiten: 50 Jahre Hermannsburger Missionsgeschichte – Ein Rückblick*, Erlangen/Hermannsburg 1987.

¹¹ Cf. »In der Tat, eine christliche Kirche, von der nicht mehr übriggeblieben war als der Name. Und es ist sehr begreiflich, daß Männer, die eine Missionsarbeit in Abessinien unternahmen, in Zweifel sein konnten, wer eigentlich das Objekt ihrer Arbeit war, die Falashas oder die Christen oder nicht vielmehr beide«. Winfried Wickert, *Auf Missionspfaden in Abessinien III*, HMB, 10 (1924), 147.

Further descriptions of the Ethiopian Church can be found only since 1927 when the official decision to undertake the mission among the Oromo in Western Ethiopia was taken. In June 1927, the director Christoph Schomerus¹² presented in an article the future mission objectives and also mentioned about the Christianity which exists in Ethiopia since the fourth century onwards. In this description it is highlighted that although Ethiopia is a Christian Empire, and the oldest one in the world, »nevertheless Christianity is strongly permeated with Jewish, pagan and Muslim elements and shows little sign of the true life«. ¹³ Presenting the Church structures Schomerus also mentions that the *Abune*, the head of the Ethiopian Church, is being appointed by the Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria, and these two Churches are connected, »however, within the Coptic Christianity there is said to be more inner life than in the Ethiopian one«. ¹⁴ This representation of the Ethiopian Church can be to a large extent traced back to the views which were spread in the Protestant circles at least since the Church Missionary Society's publications about their work in the nineteenth century. What is new, is the discussion of the spread of the Orthodox Church among the Oromo: »Even today Christianity is the official state religion. Even the pagan tribes, which are numerous there, are by the name and according to the law considered to be Christians. Because they were proclaimed to be so by the Amhara, who conquered their territory. But they are neither baptized nor have they received any instruction in Christianity. While one finds many churches elsewhere in the country, there are no places of worship among these proclaimed Christians,

¹² About Christoph Schomerus, see: Martin Tamcke, Schomerus, Christoph Bernhard, in: Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon, Bd. IX, Herzberg 1995, 751–754; Martin Tamcke, Die Missionsanstalt Hermannsburg in Deutschland bis 1959, in: Ernst-August Lüdemann (Hrsg.), Vision: Gemeinde weltweit. 150 Jahre Hermannsburger Mission und Ev.-luth. Missionswerk in Niedersachsen, Hermannsburg 2000, 82–90; Christoph Schomerus, Die Mission – meine Freude, Erlangen/Hermannsburg 1987; Gunther Schendel, Die Missionsanstalt Hermannsburg und der Nationalsozialismus, Münster/Hamburg/Berlin/London 2009, 49–51.

¹³ »Doch ist das Christentum stark mit jüdischen, heidnischen und mohammedanischen Elementen durchsetzt und zeigt wenig Zeichen wahren Lebens«. Christoph Schomerus, Das Volk der Galla, HMB, 6 (1927), 91.

¹⁴ »Das Oberhaupt der abessinischen Kirche ist der Abuna von Gondar in Amhara, ein Kopte, der immer wieder aus der koptischen Kirche durch den Bischof von Alexandrien, der aber jetzt seinen Sitz in Kairo hat, ernannt wird. Die äthiopische Kirche hängt also mit der koptischen Kirche zusammen. Doch soll in dem koptischen Christentum mehr inneres Leben sein als in dem äthiopischen«. Ibid., 91–92.

to whom also a part of the Galla belongs. All these so called Christians have never even heard anything about Jesus«. ¹⁵

This statement has a crucial meaning for the whole endeavor of the Hermannsburg Mission in Ethiopia. The explanation of the need to begin the mission among the Oromo in Ethiopia which can be found in the publications of the Hermannsburg Mission were based generally on two main points: the first point is clearly articulated in the afore-cited passage – the Oromo people, although some were baptized, are just Christians by name, have not even a clear knowledge about Christianity and do not have any churches (what actually was not always the case). ¹⁶ But the key point in the legitimations strategy was different (and it was repeated in many descriptions of the new mission field) – the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was represented as not »really Christian« or not »Christian enough« and therefore it considered Ethiopia as a country which needs to (re-)receive the Gospel from the mouth of the missionaries. The logic behind this narrative is that the Ethiopian Church – as it supposedly has got »mixed with Jewish and pagan substance« – has itself to be evangelized. Especially strong was the emphasis on the »Jewishness« of the Ethiopian Church: »It is enough to visit an Abyssinian service just once in order to recognize this deep abasement. Even the church building itself testifies the Judaism that through and through coins the essence of the Abyssinian Church and to some extent has swallowed its Christian character. [...] One seems to be in a Jewish school.« ¹⁷ Another constitutive element of this legitimation

¹⁵ »Das Christentum ist auch heute die offizielle Staatsreligion. Auch die heidnischen Volksstämme, deren es noch viele gibt, gelten dem Namen und dem Gesetz nach als Christen. Denn sie sind von den Amhara, als diese das Land eroberten, als solche erklärt worden. Sie sind aber weder getauft, noch haben sie irgendwelchen Unterricht im Christentum erhalten. Während man sonst im Lande viele Kirchen findet, gibt es bei diesen zu Christen erklärten Heiden, zu denen auch ein Teil der Galla gehört, keine Gotteshäuser. Alle diese sogenannten Christen haben denn auch noch nie etwas von Jesus gehört«. Ibid., 92.

¹⁶ About the Orthodox mission among the Oromo, see: Donald Crummey/Negaso Gidada, The Introduction and Expansion of Orthodox Christianity in Qéléw Awraja, Western Wälläga, from about 1886 to 1941, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, X, 1 (1972), 103–112.

¹⁷ »Es bedarf nur eines Besuches in einem abessinischen Gottesdienste, um diesen tiefen Verfall zu erkennen. Schon das Kirchengebäude selbst bezeugt den Judentum, der sich dem abessinischen Kirchenwesen durch und durch einprägt und den christlichen Charakter zum Teil verschlungen hat. [...] Man meint in einer Judenschule zu sein«. Christoph Schomerus, *Abessinien und die Galla*, HMB, 10 (1927), 197. Concerning the pagan elements is following to find: »Aber nicht minder als vom Judentum ist das Volksleben von uraltem äthiopischen Heidentum überwuchert. Nicht allein, daß heidnische Magie und Zau-

strategy was the accentuation of Protestantism's supremacy over the Ethiopian Orthodoxy; a supremacy which justified even proselytism among the Orthodox Christians. As it was directly expressed by Mission's director Christoph Schomerus: »[...] the poverty and misery of the Abyssinian Church, however, is deep enough to attract on itself the eyes of the evangelical Christianity and become a field of work for their missionaries«. ¹⁸

Evidently, patterns of theology and piety of the Ethiopian Church were far from the ideals and sometimes even understanding of the European missionaries. But the missionary strategies of the legitimation (not only those of the Hermannsburg Mission, but also of other Protestant Mission Agencies) resulted not only in a radical rejection and criticism of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, but also in an attempt to redefine Christianity itself, in their missionary narratives, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was just excluded from this framework. This missionary approach resulted in the failure of some converts to the Protestant Churches in the West and the South of Ethiopia (regions which were incorporated to the Ethiopian Empire at the end of the nineteenth century and were predominantly non-Orthodox) to realize that the message brought by the missionaries had commonality with the Orthodox Church – the religion of the Ethiopian highlands. They thought, on the contrary, that it was an entirely different religion and did not see any connection between the Christianity existed in Ethiopia and the Christianity brought by the missionaries. ¹⁹

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berei, samt allem altäthiopischen Aberglauben und sogar noch altheidnischer Stern- und Schlangendienst im Schwange geht – das schlimmste die heidnische Unzucht, welche allen Ständen des Volkes eignet, und als ein Krebschaden an dem Mark des Volkes zehrt«. *Ibid.*, 198.

¹⁸ »[...] die Armut und das Elend der abessinischen Kirche ist allerdings tief genug, um die Augen der evangelischen Christenheit auf sich zu ziehen und ein Arbeitsfeld für ihre Missionare zu werden«. *Ibid.*, 197.

¹⁹ Cf. Brian Fargher, *The Origins of the New Churches Movements in Southern Ethiopia: 1927–1944*, Leiden 1996, 68.

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