

FILM REVIEW

Le Malentendu Colonial (Colonial Misunderstanding). Produced and directed by Jean-Marie Teno. 73 minutes. Cameroon, 2004. VHS and DVD. In French, German, and English with English subtitles. Distributed by California Newsreel. \$195.00.

How does one explain the vastness and complexity of European colonialism in seventy-three minutes? One solution is to focus on Christian evangelism in two former German colonies, namely Southwest Africa (present-day Namibia) and Cameroon. This is exactly what producer/director Jean-Marie Teno does, although his primary emphasis is on Namibia. By taking this approach, he illustrates the salient role played by missionaries in the colonizing endeavor, or, more specifically, in supplanting indigenous cultures with European values and norms. This was inspired by the assumption of European “superiority” and the utter denial of any African civilization. Indeed, the so-called civilizing mission was predicated upon the belief that Europeans would bestow “civilization” on the “primitives” or “savages” of the African continent. Ultimately, according to Teno, this missionary paradigm morphed into the Western policies applied to “cure” African underdevelopment.

The video opens in Wuppertal, Germany, where the first Rhenish missionaries began their journey to bring the gospel to the peoples of Southwest Africa. Like many subsequent Europeans, they remained ignorant of local customs and beliefs. Consequently, they laid the ideological foundations of colonialism by introducing European education and culture. Later, missionaries would play an essential role in integrating Africa within the European-dominated global economy. By “civilizing” the autochthonous populations they created German Africans, and in so doing they contributed not only to expropriation of African land and resources, but also to the colonization of African minds. German missionaries also played a role in the defeat and eventual near-annihilation of the Herero, who had risen up in 1904 in response to the exploitative German colonial system.

Later, Namibian members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church established their own church. When Southwest Africa became a mandate of South Africa after World War I, the breakaway church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Namibia, became a leader in the struggle against discriminatory laws and subsequently against apartheid. Though originally dominated by Europeans and expected to conform to white values, the

indigenous population of Namibia was finally able to establish its own identity and overcome one of the legacies of European colonialism.

The strength of this film lies in its ability to take an extremely broad topic and simplify it. Moreover, it utilizes a wide variety of experts to add credibility and content. Thus, scholars on two continents from a variety of disciplines and professions help explain this historical phenomenon. However, this simplicity is often its greatest weakness; specifics are lost, especially with regard to the major assertions about the actions and implications of missionary activity. Instead of describing what the missionaries actually did and how, the viewer has to settle for generalities. Clear examples of how the missionaries turned the native populations into Europeans are missing; we merely are told that they did so. Details that are provided, though useful and important, are not always related to the main arguments. Essentially, a clear thesis is not always evident. Consequently, the film would require follow-up in order to clarify points that are either not fully addressed or would not be known to students and other nonexperts. Nonetheless, the film provides a helpful introduction to this complex phenomenon. Moreover, it makes the viewer aware that we need to know and understand the past in order to understand the policies and relationships of the present.

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