Feeding body and soul: Finnish missionaries and famine relief in German South West Africa at the beginning of the 20th century

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Summary

This article discusses the secular and religious meaning of the relief work by Finnish Christian missionaries in Ovamboland in the former South West Africa at the beginning of the twentieth century. Ovamboland regularly suffered crop failures and food scarcity, therefore, famine relief became an established part of the missionaries' everyday work. This article discloses the concrete policies of distributing relief as well as the divine significance the missionaries attached to the hunger catastrophes. Even though the religious conviction was usually the most important signifier when the missionaries categorise the local people, famine relief was provided for both the baptized and unbaptized Ovambos. The missionaries also understood famines as good opportunities to gather people into the mission stations and preach the Christian gospel to them. Thus, they distributed both bodily food and spiritual food to the people.

Keywords: famine, mission, relief, German South West Africa, Ovamboland

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Introduction

The first days of December 1908 were very busy for the Finnish missionary Martti Rautanen, stationed in Ovamboland in what was then known as German South West Africa. He stopped his literary work several times during the day to go and give food to the hungry. Rautanen took flour from a sack and gave half a litre to everyone he considered needy.[1] A month earlier, an Ovambo man had told him about starved bodies that had been left in the bushes.[2] The situation seemed alarming.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, humanitarian work was a part of Christian missionary work, side by side with evangelization. Missionaries offered, for example, famine relief and medical care in their mission fields. In this article, I analyse Finnish missionaries' famine relief in Ovamboland, South West Africa, in the period from 1900 to 1910.

Although the first Evangelical Lutheran Finnish Missionary Society (FMS) workers arrived in Ovamboland in 1870, it was only in the first decade of the twentieth century that the work by Finnish missionaries finally started to stabilise.[3] Ovamboland is situated in the northern part of present-day Namibia. For a relatively short period, South West Africa had belonged to the German empire during the heyday of imperialism, that is, from the Conference of Berlin in 1884 until 1915, when German troops surrendered to South Africa. In practice, it was mainly the central regions that were under German control; Ovamboland was never practically colonized by the Germans.

The climate in Ovamboland is arid for most of the year and during the early missionary years crop failures on different scales were common. Moreover, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, increasing warfare and raiding economy made people vulnerable to hunger, and the elite power created insecurity.[4] Mostly the Ovambo lived on agriculture and life was harsh for both the ordinary people and the missionaries.[5] The majority of the Finnish missionaries worked in Ondonga, a kingdom in eastern Ovamboland. At the beginning of the 20th century, there were around 100,000 Ovambos, of whom around 20,000 Ovambos lived in Ondonga.[6] FMS was a relatively small organisation and their only other mission field was in China,

[1] Martti Rautanen to mission director Joos. Mustakallio 4.12.1908. NAF AFMS 279.
[2] Martti Rautanen to Mustakallio 5.11.1908. NAF AFMS 279.
[3] Work in Southern Africa had serious problems, especially in the 1890s. Few Ovambos had converted to Christianity and there were serious health problems among the Finnish missionaries. FMS work was criticised in Finnish newspapers.
[4] McKittrick 2002: 26-46, 70-74.
[5] Miettinen 2005: 35-37.
[6] Siiskonen 1990: 42-44.

where their work started in 1902. In South West Africa, there were eight Finnish missionaries in 1900, but by 1910, the number had risen to twenty-three.[7]

Philanthropy has been a part of Christianity for centuries. Philanthropic practices also had an expression in missionary work during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the nineteenth century, missionaries were often the only permanent actor who offered relief and medical care in the colonised regions. As Jalagin, Okkenhaug & Småberg have noted, mission work frequently transformed into relief during crises. Christian-based relief work was motivated by the teachings of the Bible and old philanthropic traditions.[8] Apart from crises, relief work was a part of the missionaries' every-day work.

As famine relief has a long history reaching far,[9] both famines and humanitarian relief work have been studied during the last few years in the field of history. At the present time, the early twentieth century missions are sometimes understood as an early form of humanitarianism; furthermore, activists in the nineteenth century humanitarian campaigns, especially in abolitionism, were often active evangelicals.[10] Scholars have analysed mainly large relief campaigns, especially concerning famines in China and India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In addition, abolitionism and individual actors, such as Scandinavian women missionaries working among Armenian refugees during and after the Armenian genocide, have been studied.[11] Scholars have stated that missionaries were noteworthy actors in the aforementioned relief efforts.[12] Although, missionaries' role in large campaigns and also the medical care offered by the Christian missionaries have been noted, studies on every-day poor relief, however, are still lacking.

Accordingly, I want to analyse how the missionaries themselves saw their famine relief work. I argue that the Finnish missionaries tried to feed both the bodies and souls of the local people. In this article, I analyse how the religious and bodily aspects of the missionaries' relief work intertwined. The central questions are: How did the Finnish missionaries help the local people? What reasons did they give for their actions?

As famine was a frequent visitor in the region, it was also a frequent subject in missionaries' letters to the society's mission director, Jooseppi Mustakallio, in Finland. These letters are the main primary source of this article, along with other written material including FMS's journal Suomen Lähetyssanomia, minutes of the missionaries' meeting in Ovamboland, and the

[7] See annual reports 1900 and 1910. In addition to those missionaries in the field, there were also a few missionaries who were on vacation in Finland. If those are also included, there were twelve missionaries in 1900 and 29 in 1910. The majority of the male missionaries were married, so the actual number of the Finns in the mission field was actually higher.
[8] Jalagin, Okkenhaug, Småberg 2015: 285-288.
[9] Leading famine scholar Cormac Ó Gráda notes that first documents of the famine relief come from ancient Egypt. Ó Gráda 2009: 196-198.
[10] Barnett 2011: 64-75; Jalagin, Okkenhaug & Småberg 2015: 285-288.
[11] See for example Brewis 2010; Barnett 2011; Tyrrell 2010; Okkenhaug 2011; Småberg 2015; Frost 2017.
[12] Li 1987: 416-422; Brewis 2010; Tyrrell 2010.

FMS's annual reports.[13] These sources are characterised by the missionaries' effort to convince the director how they should use their time and salaries in appropriate ways. Some of the texts were published in Lähetyssanomia, which was read by missionary society's supporters. As has been noted, the main purpose of different kind of published texts was to ensure continuous funding and to legitimise the missionary endeavour.[14] Although the mission journals never contained any criticism of the missions, letters between missionaries and the mission director often revealed disagreements. At the same time, the geographical distance made it impossible for the FMS's board to supervise all the missionaries' practices. At the turn of the century, a letter between Finland and Ovamboland took about two months to arrive, meaning that acute problems could hardly be solved through correspondence.

Relief work was a constant element in Finnish missionaries' work and it was a shared approach inside the work community of Finnish missionaries in Ovamboland. The element of continuity is also clear because the most vulnerable groups, that is the poorest and the marginalised people of the region, faced food scarcity almost annually. The more serious the scarcity the greater the number of needy people, especially if the situation culminated in a famine. When studying this period of 1900-1910 it is possible to take into consideration both 'normal years' and the famine in 1908-1909. At the beginning of the century, the Finnish mission in Ondonga was in a stable phase for the first time. On the larger scale, this was a period when social work started to play an increasing role in foreign missions. Thus, this period is the meaningful object of this study where the focus is on humanitarian work as an every-day practice.

Food scarcity and famines in Ovamboland

Due to the climate and aridity in Ovamboland, crops failed occasionally. Water was a permanent problem, however, local people's lives were mostly based on agriculture and cattle raising.[15] Elite power and raiding economy created instability that led to the impoverishment among the masses.[16] The Finnish missionaries cultivated vegetables in the gardens of the mission stations but they were also dependent on the food they bought from South West or South Africa. Trade had been a notable part of the missionaries' activities since the 1870s, because it was necessary for purchasing supplies, so in that respect it was a common activity.[17] While the missionaries could turn to God's support and prayer, the local people had their own traditions. According to Hermann Tönjes, a German missionary who published his book on Ovambo culture and people in 1911, the Ovambo thanked their spirits 'most important of all, for having sent the life-giving rains' in an annual festival after the harvest known as oshipe.[18]

[13] Private primary sources are omitted because the chosen primary sources describe well the practical every-day work and general aspects of the famines.
[14] Johnston 2003: 6-7, 32; Jensz & Acke 2013: 369-371.
[15] Siiskonen 1990: 35-41; Miettinen 2005: 35-40.
[16] McKittrick 2002: 70-74; Miettinen 2005: 68-70.
[17] Siiskonen 1990: 128-131.
[18] Tönjes 1990 (1911): 180-181.

According to the Finnish missionaries, after their arrival, parts of Ovamboland faced famines on different scales for instance in 1878, 1889, 1901, 1908–1909, 1914–1916 and 1929–1930. The famine of 1914–1916 was the worst in living memory in Ovamboland and it became to be called The Great Famine. In local oral tradition the 1908–1909 famine was called as the small famine, okandjala, in relation to the more disastrous famines that followed.[19] In their letters, the missionaries wrote generally about 'famines' and they hardly had any actual criteria to distinguish famines from scarcity.[20] Nevertheless, they naturally recognised 'famines' as having different scales. Food shortages, even if they were sometimes called famines, were always most grave situations for the poorest of the region.

In the late nineteenth century, famine relief started to be institutionalised especially in Europe and in parts of Asia.[21] However, that was hardly the case in South West Africa. In the late 1870s, the Finnish missionaries had already begun to feed and care for the hungry.[22] In contrast to this, in some cases, the missionaries had to rely on the charity of local kings during their first years in Ovamboland; some missionaries had to buy and also take flour offered for free by the local king Najuma in 1872.[23] Later missionaries occasionally bought millet from the king.[24] These cases demonstrate the interdependence between the local population and the Finnish missionaries.

Apart from during these particular famines, missionaries used to help the poorest Ovambos every year. The poorest of the regions were unable to support themselves, even in normal years. The poor were accustomed to come to the mission stations to ask for help. Naturally, asking for help was most convenient for those who were interested in the mission and perhaps even Christianity, and/or for those who lived near the mission stations; in comparison, many were suspicious or spurned missionaries, in which case relying on missionaries was impossible or at least embarrassing.[25]

Historian Meredith McKittrick has also pointed out that earlier the poor of Ovambo might have been trying to strengthen their relationship with kings or other nobles for 'defensive measures', but after the arrival of the missionaries, the missionaries could play a similar role; they became the ones with whom the common people needed to form relationships.[26] Missionaries gave the poor food supplies or items people could use when bartering for food somewhere else. That kind of action was reported annually, only the quantity varied.[27] As missionary August Pettinen wrote in his letter to mission director in 1900, both converted

[19] McKittrick 2002: 137; Miettinen 2005: 39-40.
[20] Writing in Finnish, the missionaries wrote about 'nälänhätä', which literally translates as 'hunger crises' but which also means the same as 'famine'. They used also a word 'nälkä', meaning 'hunger'. Words 'nälänhätä' and 'nälkä' seemed to be used as synonyms. See also Voutilainen 2017: 40-42.
[21] Brewis 2010: 890-895.
[22] McKittrick 2002: 108.
[23] Peltola 1958: 52; Peltola 1994: 70.
[24] August Pettinen to Mustakallio 1.12.1900, 31.12.1900 and 26.2.1901. NAF AFMS 287.
[25] McKittrick 2002: 137-138.
[26] McKittrick 2002: 136-137.
[27] See for example the annual reports in 1890, 1891, 1894, 1898A, 1898B, 1901, 1902, 1903, 1905, and 1907. In addition, missionaries' letters to the mission director reveal the food scarcity as being serious in 1910.

local Christians and those who were uninterested in the religion, were used to trusting in the missionaries' aid.[28]

The missionaries' main strategy was to purchase grain and other supplies before or during the famine in order to distribute them to the poor when needed. In normal years trade was possible because yields could differ greatly between districts as little as fifty to a hundred kilometres from each other. However, sometimes the situation became worse. In 1908 there was almost no food to buy, so the usual survival strategy was impossible to implement. Missionaries tried to buy as much grain as possible from nearby areas outside Ondonga, but also those regions had also suffered from crop failures. Month by month, the situation became worse when the missionaries' stocks of food started to dwindle.[29] Missionary Aksel Glad wrote in late October to mission director Mustakallio:

> *Now it is a real famine, not just a hunger that the people of Ondonga complain of every year. Some people have even starved to death here. One man told me that he had seen a body of a young man surrounded by crows. He had starved to death and he, the narrator said, wasn't the only one. Most of the people are emaciated by hunger. Every day people come to moan their hunger at Onajena station, too.*[30]

One of the motives for reporting the seriousness of the situation to the mission director was to ask for funds. In October 1908, just before the harvest, missionaries had already noticed that the hunger would be worse than before, as Glad wrote in the beginning of the above quotation. It was a common feature in the missionaries' letters to base their knowledge on their own experiences as well as on hearsay. The missionaries did not witness everything they wrote about, and local people were important as informants. Moreover, the informants had their own agendas, when they decided what to tell and how to portray their information.[31] In the case of famines, giving missionaries information considering the misery in the region might have had several meanings, for instance, it could be proof of the seriousness of the situation or the impossibility of buying food from other regions. Such information could justify the local peoples' begging. This kind of information could also justify missionaries giving material aid. On the other hand, missionaries also needed information to estimate their own action.

Missions had to begin to justify their work in social terms, instead of religious or civilizing motives, in the interwar period. Before this interwar period, humanitarian work was already a part of the missions, and evangelical movements played a major role also in humanitarian campaigns, like the anti-slavery movements. This kind of activity was motivated by the ideals of Christian philanthropy.[32] In Ovamboland, even though the main purpose of the mission was to persuade people to convert to Christianity, the missionaries used their time in various

[28] Pettinen to Mustakallio 12.3.1900. NAF AFMS 287.
[29] Annual report 1908; Aksel Glad to Mustakallio 23.5.1908; August Hänninen to Mustakallio 16.6.1908; Anna Glad to Mustakallio 1.6.1908. NAF AFMS 290.
[30] Aksel Glad to Mustakallio 28.10.1908. NAF AFMS 290. All translations from primary sources by the author.
[31] McKittrick 2003: 222.
[32] Barnett 2011: 57-73; Jalagin, Okkenhaug, Småberg 2015: 285-288.

practical activities, like medical aid and housebuilding. Poor relief also played a considerable role in every-day work in the lives of the Finnish missionaries.[33] In general, famine became a humanitarian concern in the late nineteenth century mainly because of the more advanced communication systems and European colonization which made it possible to read eye-witness stories and news from disaster areas around the world.[34] Finnish audiences also had an opportunity to read about the experiences of famine in a far-away corner of Africa.[35] In that regard, Finnish missionaries' poor relief and the accounts they published about it were part of the zeitgeist.

Means of surviving

Traditional Ovambo food included few ingredients. *Oshifima*,[36] a porridge made out of omahangu, a millet plant, was the main dish, and the cultivation of omahangu was their staple crop. In addition, the Ovambo cultivated and ate sorghum, beans, and melons. Occasionally, meat was eaten with porridge.[37] Local people had a range of methods to survive when crops failed. People could try to obtain food from other regions, in which case close relationships between the different communities and regions helped. The Ovambo could also, for example, rely on their own stores, which functioned well if there was only one crop failure year in a row, or they could beg for alms, or move (temporarily or permanently), or eat 'famine foods'.[38] The most common custom was to eat some parts of trees and other plants.[39] According to the missionaries, during the famine years, people ate anything that was softer than wood. That included, for example, grass and roots of palm trees, but even tree trunks were eaten.[40] In addition to the abovementioned methods, people could also ask missionaries for help. The missionaries had sources of wealth that differed from the local population; therefore they were not so dependent on the local crops.[41]

In most cases the relief food given to the Ovambo was 'local food', such as millet but sometimes missionaries also bought rice as relief food.[42] In general, the missionaries

[33] McKittrick 2002: 100-101. Annual reports 1901: 7-8; 1903: 7-12; 1904: 9-11, 15-17.
[34] Vernon 2007: 17-19, 21-26.
[35] Food shortages and famines in other regions, for example in India, were also highlighted in the late nineteenth-century. For example: SL 12/1877, 4/1878, 5/1878. In journals other than Lähetyssanomia, famine was a common subject, too.
[36] Herman Tönjes uses the form 'osifima' in his German text but that has changed into 'oshifima' in the English translation of his book; Albin Savola uses the word 'osisima' in his Finnish text.
[37] Savola 1924: 134-138, 149-151; McKittrick 2002: 136. See also a description by Finnish missionary August Pettinen, published in the Finnish newspaper Suomalainen in 30 October 1890.
[38] See for example Eirola 1992: 240; Nyholm 2008: 17-21. Similar methods took place also in Angola, on the other side of the northern border of Ovamboland. Dias 1981: 355-357.
[39] Different methods were common worldwide where famines were common. See for example Dias 1981: 355; Ó Gráda 2009: 69-89; Brewis 2010: 890. In Finland, bark bread ('pettuleipä') was a common famine food.
[40] Savola 1924: 155; Pettinen to Mustakallio 26.2.1901. See also Suoma Terho to Mustakallio 29.1.1910 and Hänninen to Mustakallio 2.11.1911. NAF AFMS 287, 293.
[41] McKittrick 2002: 101.
[42] For example, Pettinen to Mustakallio 25.1.1902; Maria Vehanen to Mustakallio 21.2.1909; Selma Santalahti to Mustakallio 23.6.1911. The missionaries' diet included mainly meat and rice. See for example Oskari Grönlund to Mustakallio 11.11.1902. NAF AFMS 287, 290, 293.

themselves bought the food they distributed, but in 1908 they received relief food from the German administration for the first time. In May 1908, a German military officer Victor Franke visited Ovamboland with plans to write contracts of co-operation with local Ovambo kings.[43] Missionary Martti Rautanen,[44] who was fluent in both German and the local Oshindonga language as well as being familiar with Ovambo culture and kings, was Franke's guide and interpreter during his visit. Franke and Rautanen spent two weeks together travelling around Ovamboland.[45] Later that same year, Rautanen wrote and asked if Franke could make a request to the German administration. The request from Martti Rautanen was for the Germans to help the Ovambo by sending food.[46] That was the first time in Ovamboland that food aid was requested and received. The Germans sent flour, rice and preserved vegetable, but in some cases the quality of relief food was criticised; for example, the preserved vegetables were outdated, and the missionaries wrote that many Ovambos would have rather eaten omahangus than rice.[47]

Receiving emergency food from the Germans was vital, but simultaneously it created new problems. The Finns had to transport the food from the town of Outjo to Ovamboland, meaning a long and especially slow journey with the missionaries' ox wagons.[48] Regardless, the missionaries welcomed the decision of the Germans to help,[49] even though the Germans acted from selfish rather than humanitarian motives; from their point of view, it was an opportunity to strengthen their influence in Ovamboland, as historian Martti Eirola has analysed.[50] In the period of high imperialism, colonizers were commonly blamed for the famines, but in the case of Ovamboland blaming the government for the famine would have been illogical since the region was only indiscriminately colonised.[51] This made the situation in Ovamboland different from many parts of India or Ireland suffering from food scarcity and hunger in the nineteenth-century.

[43] The main reason for the Germans' sudden interest in Ovamboland, which had never had any significant assets such as gold or diamonds, was chiefly due to their desire to integrate Ovamboland more closely into Deutsch Süd-West Africa in order to keep the Portuguese on the right side of the northern border of the area. The Herero and Nama uprisings and the war which culminated in the Herero genocide in 1904–1907 also had an effect. Eirola 1992: 222; Oermann 1999: 93-102, 220-233.

[44] Rautanen had arrived in Ovamboland in 1870 and was respected by his colleagues and the Ovambo. He was the director of the field work in Ovamboland.

[45] Eirola 1992: 222-225. Franke's visit was well recognised in accounts in missionaries' letters and annual reports: Annual Report 1908, 6-12. Minutes of missionaries' meetings 11.2.1908 and 31.3.1908. NAF AFMS 767. Hänninen to Mustakallio 25.5.1908, Kalle Koivu to Mustakallio 20.5.1908, Emil Liljeblad to Mustakallio 30.3.1908, Reinhold Rautanen to Mustakallio 25.5.1908, Heikki Saari to Mustakallio 22.4.1908, NAF AFMS 290. Rautanen to Mustakallio 18.3.1908, 22.4.1908 and 1.6.1908. NAF AFMS 279.

[46] Rautanen to Mustakallio 11.10.1908. NAF AFMS 279.

[47] Hannu Haahti to Mustakallio 10.11.1911; Eemi Nenye: Liian myöhään luvattu. SL 12/1909.

[48] On problems with transportation, see Rautanen to Mustakallio 4.12.1908 and 2.1.1909. NAF AFMS 279. Maria Vehanen to Mustakallio 21.2.1909. NAF AFMS 290.

[49] Rautanen to Mustakallio 4.12.1908. See also Rautanen to Mustakallio 2.1.1909 and 26.1.1909. NAF AFMS 279.

[50] Eirola 1992: 240-241. See also Reinhold Rautanen to Mustakallio 18.1.1911 and Kaarlo Petäjä to Mustakallio 11.9.1911. NAF AFMS 293.

[51] Vernon 2007: 42-49; Barnett 2011: 62-64; Twomey 2012: 258.

Providing relief

In 1909, there was an abundance of missionaries' letters about the famine in Suomen Lähetyssanomia.[52] In their letters, the missionaries described the practical situations of feeding the starving. Different concrete policies played the main part when missionaries tried to emphasise the organised ways in which they provided relief. Even though the situation must have often been quite chaotic, the missionary writings underlined their efforts to use organised means. Missionary Anna Glad especially, wrote in detail about their practices in her letter in November 1908, later published in Suomen Lähetyssanomia in March 1909. According to Glad's letter, at first the missionaries tried to write down the names of the receivers, but later they noticed this was impractical. Instead, missionaries organised people in lines and called them one by one.[53] Because the letters were published, Anna Glad's detailed descriptions can be understood as a method of convincing the readers how the missionaries' policies of giving care and aid was necessary and well organised. Glad explains how missionaries tried to both make ends meet while making morally acceptable decisions. Because the missionaries' stores were limited, the portions given were often small, but it was necessary first aid in situations where local people had few other options.

Who was entitled to receive the relief food? The most important measure was to categorise the Ovambo according to the state of their need and the missionaries tried to distinguish between the deserving from the less deserving poor.[54] Anna Glad wrote in a published letter: "When we couldn't tell the difference, if someone was in a need or not, we gave only a little. The idea was that someone in a real need comes even because of a little, but not the one who has also something else to eat."[55] Categorisation was a major theme in the missionary accounts concerning poor relief, and, in general, the question of identifying 'real need' has been relevant over the centuries.[56] It had previously been a central question for Martin Luther in the sixteenth century when he announced new methods for poor relief.[57] Whether aid makes the receivers lazy has also been a very heated question.[58] The Finnish missionaries' dilemmas were part of these old discussions about the problematic nature of distributing aid. Depicting the receivers of food relief as 'deserving' was a key element of justifying relief work for wider audiences.[59] The same kind of discussions also occurred in Finland, where large areas suffered from famines in the 1860s and at the beginning of the twentieth century.[60] This background presumably affected the missionaries, too.

[52] There was at least one letter concerning the famine in each of the issues 2/1909, 3/1909, 4/1909, 5/1909 and 6/1909.
[53] Anna Glad: Nälän keskellä II. SL 3/1909.
[54] Anna Glad: Nälän keskellä II. SL 3/1909. Selma Rainio to Mustakallio in 7.5.1909. NAF AFMS 290.
[55] Anna Glad: Nälän keskellä II. SL 3/1909.
[56] Ó Gráda 2009: 202; Voutilainen 2017: 90-93.
[57] Arffman 2008, passim.; Ó Gráda 2009: 202.
[58] Edgerton-Tarpley 2013: 140-141. In the case of mission in Ovamboland, see for example Pettinen to Mustakallio 4.3.1902. NAF AFMS 287.
[59] Brewis 2010: 912.
[60] Häkkinen & Forsberg 2015: 111.

Nevertheless, the documents should be analysed in relation to their context; the letters were meant for the director and/or the board of the FMS and their ultimate purpose was to justify the missionaries' activities. In their letters, the missionaries tried to explain why they used their time and salary to feed the poor, because finance was the main area of responsibility of the board. Since preaching the gospel was always the primary goal in missions, work that had also other objectives than directly increasing the number of converts needed to be justified. The long and sometimes colourful descriptions of local circumstances can be understood as an effort to describe the conditions of need that called for action, especially because members of the FMS board had never visited Ovamboland. However, the board usually refused to accept the missionaries' requests for reimbursement of expenses used in relief food and items.[61] Consequently, the missionaries had to use their salaries to buy relief food and other supplies meant for relief. This reveals that the board was hardly fully supportive of the missionaries' efforts to provide relief.

The missionaries often wondered if the recipients should pay the relief back in some manner. During the most intense periods of the famine they had to give food and items for free, because the Ovambo had practically nothing to give in exchange,[62] but sometimes food received was paid for in labour.[63] Public works of different kinds were a common practice worldwide,[64] but in Ovamboland those labours remained on a small scale at the beginning of the century. Asking for reimbursement from the Ovambos had an educational agenda. According to the missionaries' arguments, giving something for free was inappropriate, and the missionaries tried to instil new practices in Ovamboland, and seeking some form of recompense for relief food was one example.[65] Therefore, famine relief could be understood as a civilising mission.

What is most important here in the context of religious missions and poor relief is the categorisation according to religious conviction. While a distinction between deserving and less deserving poor was relevant, missionaries less frequently categorised people by religion. Relief was given both to Ovambo Christians and non-Christians. In some documents, the missionaries make a distinction between these two groups but there are no suggestions that relief should be given only to the converted. The resolve to aid both Christians and non-Christian in the same manner was based on the Bible and Christian doctrines. The concept of 'brotherly love' and the story of the Good Samarian provided a model where no distinction between worthy recipients were made.[66] Consequently, the missionaries identified

[61] See for example Pettinen to Mustakallio 3.10.1905. NAF AFMS 288. Minutes of missionaries' meeting 25.10.1898, 25.7.1899. NAF AFMS 765. Mustakallio to Grönlund 13.8.1903; Mustakallio to Martti Rautanen 24.11.1905; Mustakallio to Björklund 16.10.1916. NAF AFMS 130, 132, 142. In some cases, missionaries declared that they rarely declared all their expenses in their invoices: Pettinen to Mustakallio 6.5.1901; Rautanen to Mustakallio 7.5.1901; Grönlund to Mustakallio 2.10.1906, 11.7.1908. NAF AFMS 279, 287, 290.
[62] Tuominen to Mustakallio 11.2.1904; Selma Santalahti to Mustakallio 25.6.1910. NAF AFMS 288, 293.
[63] Nenye to Mustakallio 13.9.1908; Hänninen to Mustakallio 16.5.1911. NAF AFMS 290, 293. Minutes of missionaries' meeting 25.10.1898. NAF AFMS 765.
[64] Dias 1981: 357; Ó Gráda 2009: 212-215; Brewis 2010: 894, 907-909; Sasson & Vernon 2015: 861-863. There were public works in Ovamboland during the famine in 1929–1930, see Nyholm 2008: 21.
[65] See for example Anna Voutilainen to Mustakallio 5.7.1905; Saari to Mustakallio 26.7.1905. NAF, AFMS 288.
[66] Bornstein & Redfield 2010: 10.

the beneficiaries of relief only on the basis of their need, instead of their religious conviction. This is significant, because in general missionaries are understood to see the world as a direct conflict between light and darkness, Christians and 'heathens',[67] and if an Ovambo was baptized this was usually the most significant factor when categorising local people. That creates an interesting contrast with a more general missionary writing tradition, because in the contexts of the famines the religious conviction was rarely a notable maker in the categorisations.

Famine – a divine punishment?

The question of whether someone has enough to eat is material and secular, but in the mission context it was also understood in a religious setting. Historically, famines were understood for centuries as a heavenly punishment and accordingly hunger was the fault of the individual. In consequence, victims of hunger received little sympathy before the nineteenth century when new explanations of hunger arose. Famines came to represent a failure of the government of a state or country instead of an individual.[68] However, in the mission project the distinction between religious and secular explanations was unclear, as was also the case in the Finnish missionaries' views on hunger. Thus, for the missionaries famine was still a divine punishment as well as a geographical phenomenon.

Notwithstanding their religious worldviews, Finnish missionaries recognised the climatic and economic reasons behind famines. In an article published in Suomen Lähetyssanomia in 1905, the missionary Albin Savola listed twelve secular factors that accounted for the famine, varying from rains and grasshoppers to the industrial development in Ovamboland.[69] However, in the missionaries' rhetoric famine almost always also had religious dimensions. The most common interpretation is articulated in a letter written by missionary Eemi Nenye in September 1908: "Perhaps this great famine is sent by God and it would have a good inner effect. God's word, spiritual nourishment, becomes more important to many".[70] In the missionaries' world view the Christian God was behind everything and missionaries were simply part of the divine plan. The idea of Providence is very central in an analysis of the mentality of the missionaries.[71] It meant to them that famines were sent by God, and although it was sometimes impossible for the missionaries to understand the meanings of God's actions they just had to accept their role in the larger scheme of things and fulfil their responsibilities. Thus, the Finnish missionaries wrote in a manner that was typical of the missionary discourse of the period.

While missionaries usually described the actual situation of distributing aid as quite organised, they often referred to their own exhaustion during food shortages. In 1901, when there was a food shortage in Ovamboland, the missionary August Pettinen wrote how he was

[67] Bosch 2011: 293-301; Mikaelsson 2011, passim.
[68] Vernon 2007: 42-47.
[69] Albin Savola: Mitkä ovat syyt Ondongassa yhä jatkuviin nälkävuosiin. SL 7/1905.
[70] Nenye to Mustakallio, 13.9.1908. NAF AFMS 290.
[71] Price 2008: 23; Mikaelsson 2011: 88.

depressed because of the constant need for haste, and oppressed by the future.[72] This kind of material was rarely published, whereas in their letters to the mission director the missionaries admitted their exhaustion.[73] In 1908–1909 the missionaries wrote in their letters that poor relief was "tiring and nervous" work that "demanded a lot of energy".[74] Probably the missionaries wanted to seek support and comfort. Oskari Tylväs wrote in his letter in 1909, how "I have nothing to give for the servants neither. I am about to cry. I am so depressed and it is hard to write anything."[75] It can be concluded, that while the missionaries tried to bring order into the situation, their state of mind was disordered, and they sought comfort in their religion.

The more serious the situation became, the more missionaries tried to trust in God. I would argue that referring to God as almighty was also a strategy for surviving harsh conditions. In numerous letters the missionaries refer to the idea that God tried to 'reach' people by hunger.[76] This meant that during a famine the Ovambo would come to the mission church and eventually be baptized. Missionary Aksel Glad wrote in his letter to the mission director in 1908: "Signs clearly indicate that God really loves this Ndonga people and wants to raise them up. That is proved by how He is now seeking them out through hunger!"[77] Kari Miettinen has analysed the waves of conversions, and argues that even though the missionaries used to believe that famines made people convert to Christianity, statistics actually show no support for the hypothesis, at least in the case of 1914–1916 famine; in addition, a case for a direct cause-effect linkage is difficult to argue credibly.[78] However, in the missionaries' letters they often maintain that after a famine the congregations would grow, especially because of the relief work – or at least so they hoped. In a missionaries' meeting in Ovamboland in February 1909, they pondered over the effects of the famine on missions. In the meeting, it was argued that according to their experience, numerous people come to hear God's word after receiving help from the missionaries. The missionaries expected the same to happen after the current distress.[79] In 1910, it seemed obvious that after the crisis was over most of the people who received aid from the missionaries did not visit the mission stations any more, but simultaneously the missionaries hoped that their philanthropic work would still be remembered after many years, as it was expressed for the supporters in the journal.[80] Accordingly, the missionaries used to see a silver lining in every situation, and famines were

[72] Pettinen to Mustakallio 26.2.1901. NAF AFMS 287.
[73] However, there are some references to missionaries' tiredness, see for example Lähetysalaltamme Afrikassa. SL 5/1909 and 6/1909. See also Johnston 2003: 6-7.
[74] Rautanen to Mustakallio 26.1.1909. NAF AFMS 279. Hilma Koivu to Mustakallio 28.1.1909; Maria Vehanen to Mustakallio 21.2.1909. NAF AFMS 290.
[75] Oskari Tylväs to Mustakallio 31.1.1909. NAF AFMS 290. Part of the letter was also published in SL 5/1909.
[76] Pettinen to Mustakallio 12.3.1900; Nenye to Sarkkila 28.4.1905; Pettinen to Mustakallio 20.3.1907; Hänninen to Mustakallio 11.9.1908; Maiju Länsiö to Mustakallio 15.3.1909. NAF AFMS 287, 288, 289, 290. Peltola 1994: 84-85.
[77] Aksel Glad to Mustakallio 28.10.1908. NAF AFMS 290.
[78] Miettinen 2005: 214.
[79] Minutes of missionaries' meeting 24.2.1909. NAF AFMS 767. See also Pettinen to Mustakallio 4.3.1902. NAF AFMS 287.
[80] Lähetysalaltamme Afrikassa. SL 10/1910.

also considered an opportunity to make contact with the locals. They would like to feed not only Ovambo bodies but their souls, too.

The connection between secular and divine aspects of hunger was strong in mission discourse. Missionaries reported that they preached in their services that the Ovambo should rely on the Christian God instead of the missionaries.[81] In numerous letters, the missionaries first described the circumstances and their own efforts, but then, at the end, turn to a religious tone, praying, asking for guidance and contemplating the divine meanings behind the famines. One way to understand the suffering was to see famines as God's plan. Whether missionaries were able to understand the meaning of the plan was scarcely relevant. Missionaries were certain that although God taxed their strength, He would never abandon them.[82] As August Hänninen put it in his letter, "often I come to think: why has God punished so severely? Still He knows the reason himself".[83] That kind of argumentation was a part of the discourse in which Finnish missionaries often combined secular famine and spiritual hunger, writing of how they wished God to turn bodily hunger into a spiritual hunger. As the missionary Eemi Nenye wrote in 1908, for missionaries it was sad if someone starved to death, but it was even sadder to know how many of the famine victims lost their possibility to have an afterlife.[84] Thus the bodily and spiritual aspects of hunger were constantly intertwined.

Famine relief as religious work

Although preaching was the most important working method in missions, providing relief took a considerable amount of time. Thus the Finnish missionaries often combined their religious motivations with secular working methods. The missionaries distributed not only relief food but combined that with a divine message. This method was practical for missionaries, as they had come solely to convert people: if they had to do something other than preaching and teaching, that work had to be combined with the message of Salvation. This was a common means in a mission world. The same idea of combining material aid with a spiritual message was essential for missionaries in different locales in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[85]

The Finnish missionaries practiced evangelisation at their hospital,[86] but it was also common to preach the gospel on the occasions when the missionaries distributed food to the hungry. In practice, the missionaries sang hymns, gave speeches and administered religious services when people gathered at the station. In times of famine, this was done daily. Local people were spoken to individually and together. After nurturing the people spiritually, they were

[81] Anna Pettinen to Mustakallio 1.2.1900. NAF AFMS 287.
[82] See for example Savola to Mustakallio 11.12.1896; Liljeblad to Mustakallio 2.5.1901; Saari to Mustakallio 9.8.1908; Reinhold Rautanen to Mustakallio 9.11.1908; Packalen to Mustakallio 3.11.1911. NAF AFMS 287, 290, 293.
[83] Hänninen to Mustakallio 28.1.1912. NAF, AFMS 294.
[84] Nenye to Mustakallio 29.1.1905 and 13.9.1908. NAF AFMS 288, 290. See also Anna Glad: Nälän keskellä II. SL 3/1909.
[85] See for example Li 1987: 417-419.
[86] Annual reports 1911 and 1913. Voutilainen to Mustakallio 20.1.1905. NAF AFMS 288.

given food. This kind of action was reported during the 1908–1909 famine and in 1911 when there was also a serious food scarcity.[87] These accounts depict gatherings where missionaries combined aid with religious aspects. It was a discursive method to combine secular and divine dimensions, but this combination was also a concrete dimension in the missionaries' everyday work. From the missionaries' point of view, a particular advantage was also that those who did not normally have a relationship with the missionaries came to the mission stations. These Ovambos could then meet the missionaries and hear their message for the first time as food was distributed together with the gospel. The missionaries knew this aspect and understood it as a benefit.[88] On the other hand, it was unclear how much the people understood or listened to the missionaries' speeches, although the missionaries spoke the local language. However, the missionaries assumed that this combination of feeding both the body and soul was practical and profitable, even though those receiving relief were 'forced' to listen and attend. The missionaries thought that this kind of 'forced' attendance could eventually lead to conversion.

Philanthropic activities have been an important part of a religious, Christian identity for centuries. Therefore, the explanations of missionaries' every-day relief work had religious features. On some occasions the missionaries refer to Jesus Christ and his actions in the New Testament, where it is related that Christ also fed and healed people. Missionary Albin Savola argued at a missionaries' meeting in 1905:

> *From the Christian point of view, if I had not helped them [poor Ovambos], I would have had their death by starvation on my conscience. Our Saviour helped destitute people not only spiritually but also physically. According to my understanding, alleviating physical distress is a responsibility of missions. This primitive people understand Christian service better than theoretical preaching.*[89]

Savola's explanation here as to why he had devoted a significant proportion of his salary to poor relief is also echoed in his letter that was published in Lähetyssanomia.[90] Certainly, this was also the explanation given to supporters and the mission director as to why offering poor relief could be understood as an essential part of the Christian mission. Relief work became to be understood as a practical expression of the mission. During their decades in Ovamboland, the missionaries had only accomplished some of their initial goals, and converting the Ovambos to Christianity was probably much harder than the missionaries had ever imagined.[91] At the beginning of the twentieth century, it was obvious that preaching and teaching alone would never create large congregations and that many other practical working methods were also needed. Meredith McKittrick suggests in her study that Finnish missionaries used, for example, medicines and consumer goods to attract ordinary people and they were expected to distribute these items.[92] According to primary sources, goods and

[87] Anna Glad: Nälän keskellä II. SL 3/1909; Petäjä to Mustakallio 29.1.1912. NAF AFMS 294.
[88] Pettinen to Mustakallio 4.3.1902. NAF AFMS 287; Anna Glad: Nälän keskellä II. SL 3/1909.
[89] Albin Savola in a missionaries' meeting. Minutes 17.1.1905. NAF AFMS 766.
[90] Alb. Savola: Katovuosi (Uulumbu). SL 5/1905.
[91] McKittrick 2002: 104.
[92] McKittrick 2002: 105.

also relief food were used to draw people to the mission stations where the missionaries could then get into contact with the Ovambo; thus, creating a mutually beneficial relationship.

Relief work was also able to meet the missionaries' religious needs in another way. Many missionaries described how helping the poor made them happy, even if the circumstances were discouraging. Eemi Nenye mentioned in January 1905, how he was willing to help all the hungry, if he just had enough food.[93] The same argument recurs throughout the primary sources.[94] Maria Vehanen wrote in her letter in 1909 how words failed her when she tries to describe how much helping gave her pleasure.[95] The missionaries devoted their lives to missionary work because of their religious vocation and also because especially during the hard times they could fulfil their vocation. The same kind of pattern of thought has been analysed, for example, among the deaconesses that worked as nurses during the Second World War in Finland.[96] In Ovamboland, famines offered an opportunity to realise their world views and calling in a concrete way. They could achieve their Christian ideas concerning brotherly love and philanthropy.

Conclusions

In this article, I have described how the Finnish missionaries made their philanthropic ideas concrete. Humanitarian work was a part of mission work in many regions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and it was also part of the Finnish missionaries' everyday work, too. In general, humanitarian relief was institutionalised in this period, but in Ovamboland the kind of institutionalised relief that started to be normalised in parts of India as well as in Europe, was a long away from being employed/applied/utilised in this area. According to the material I have presented in this paper, the Finnish missionaries' poor relief was the only stable form of poor relief in the region at the turn of the century. The relief the Finnish missionaries could offer was limited but it nevertheless helped to save lives. As the relief work was hardly institutionalised in Ovamboland, the Finnish missionaries merely reacted to acute crises and tried to act in a reasonable, morally acceptable way.

The religious and secular dimensions of the Finnish missionaries' work in Ovamboland are inseparable. On one hand, missionaries purchased food and gave it to the starving in order to keep people alive, while on the other hand missionaries understood the current circumstances as a part of God's plan. When the locals gathered at the mission stations to receive food or other items, they also had to listen to the missionaries' sermons and hymns. Helping the poor was also part of the Christian ideal. Consequently, it is difficult to separate secular and religious work in the missionaries' minds, and they were both intertwined in their everyday practical work. Even though famines were mainly understood as catastrophes, food scarcity and even famines were also attributed as being certain kinds of 'opportunities' for the

[93] Nenye to Mustakallio 29.1.1905. NAF AFMS 288.
[94] Pettinen to Mustakallio 26.1.1901; Maria Vehanen to Mustakallio in February 1901 [undated]; Maria Vehanen to Mustakallio 10.2.1904. NAF AFMS 287, 288.
[95] Maria Vehanen to Mustakallio 21.2.1909. NAF AFMS 290.
[96] Paaskoski 2017: 219-220.

mission: the circumstances created an opportunity to promote the Christian message and increase the Ovambos' interest in Christianity.

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