

**September 2021**

## **The Swiss mission between avant-garde and paternalism**

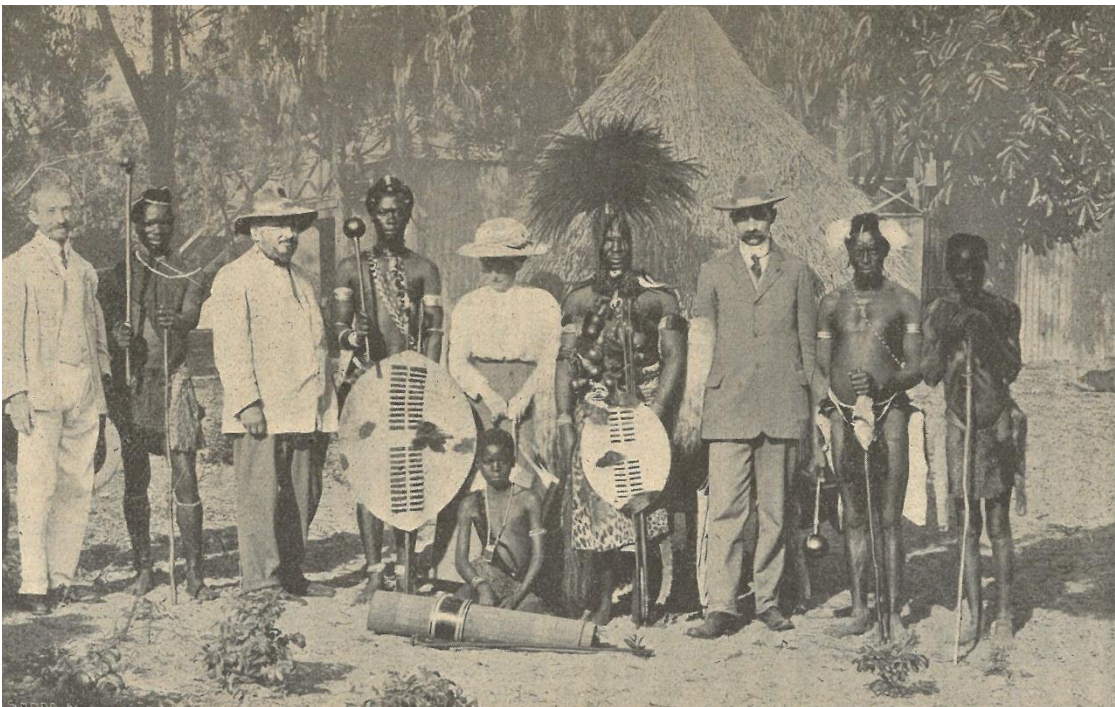
### **Pastor Nicolas Monnier**

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*The DM Association is committed to a world of peace, justice and respect for our earth. Its members are the Protestant churches of French-speaking Switzerland and the French-speaking churches of German-speaking Switzerland. DM works in partnership with churches and institutions, bilaterally or through networks, in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, the Indian Ocean and Switzerland in three areas: agroecology, education and theology. Gender, governance and intercultural issues are integral parts of its engagements. Cooperation through the exchange of people, support for projects and joint learning are at the heart of its actions, under the sign of reciprocity.*

### **Input**

To introduce my remarks, I will present a picture taken in 1912 on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Swiss mission in South Africa. More precisely, this photo was taken on the mission station of Matoutouène, which is located south of the current capital of Mozambique, Maputo.



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This picture sums up, in my opinion, the relationship between the representatives of the mission and the delegation led by, and I quote, the "diviner Hokosa and his suite" at the Matoutouène station. On the Swiss side, from left to right, we have Rev Edmond Bonnard, President of the Mission Council; Rev Arthur Grandjean, General Secretary of the Mission based in Lausanne and a former missionary in Mozambique; Mrs Bonnard and Rev William Benoît, missionary in Matoutouène.

The entire hierarchy of the mission's organs is concentrated in this photo: the president of the Council, the secretary general and the missionary.

On the side of the delegation led by the "Hokoza diviner" it is good to remember that this group of people is in no way linked to the mission and that, on the contrary, it represents forces to be fought.

What can we say about this? Two things: the principle of equality and the evolutionary view

### **I) The principle of equality**

**1st observation:** all adults without exception are on the same horizontal line. Men, women, Swiss representatives of the mission, missionaries, diviner and their auxiliaries. There is no hierarchy.

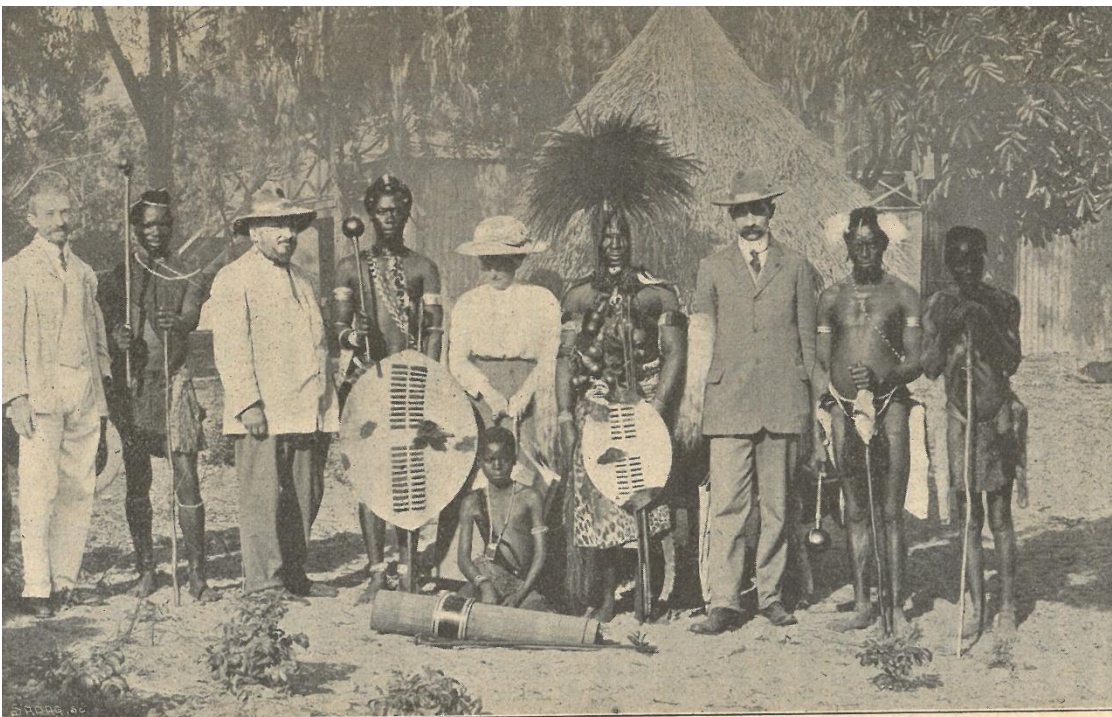
**2nd observation:** there is a systematic alternation of "white" and "black" which reinforces the principle of equality even more.

**Conclusion:** the principle of equality between human beings is clearly established. For the missionaries, this principle is based on the equality of all people before the Word of God.

I do not see any trace of racism in this, on the contrary. In the colonial context of the time, I would even say that such a representation of things is quite avant-garde.

### **II) However, in addition to this principle of equality, there is also an uncompromising evolutionary vision**

So, if I now add the legend to this photo, what do we read?



Représentants de l'ancien et du nouvel ordre de choses.

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"Representatives of the old and new order of things»

The order of things ... perhaps we could translate this as 'civilisation'. In other words, a second characteristic appears in this picture: the fact that Western civilisation will inevitably, fatally, eventually supplant this African civilisation.

Here, by way of example, is what the famous missionary and anthropologist H-A Junod wrote in 1898: "At last, having acquired a more intelligent knowledge of this child, this younger brother, Black, we will be better able to take him by the hand and guide him along the path of progress, where new circumstances are pushing him. The wretch! The sun of civilisation which so suddenly appeared in his

sky, dazzles and confuses him! He needs sympathetic voices to instruct him and warn him of the dangers of this civilisation whose defects and vices he too often seeks only to assimilate (...)

Black Brother, who dwells in the darkness of superstition and perdition, we have understood you and we will help you to rise on the path of light, truth and glorious freedom. (pp 8-9 in Les Ba-Ronga: étude ethnographique sur les indigènes de la Baie de Delagoa, Bull de la société neuchâteloise de Géographie, Neuchâtel)

This quotation provides us with the sources of the much-discussed paternalism of the missions, which in reality is one of the forms of expression of this evolutionism.

At that time, evolutionism was the dominant theory in scientific circles and the Western missions were also very much influenced by this world view. In the mission archives, examples of this evolutionism abound.

### **But can the missions be described as racist? It all depends on how you define the word.**

If racism means saying that these societies - in this case African - are not only destined to disappear in the name of evolutionary theories, but must disappear because they carry practices and values that are considered to belong to the dark world, then yes, there is a form of racism.

On the other hand, if racism is to say, for example, that the black person is, because of the colour of his skin, an intrinsically inferior being, then I affirm that, on the contrary, the missionaries, in the name of the Gospel, were in the vanguard with an egalitarian vision and without distinction of origin.

A remark in passing: this evolutionism remains very prevalent in our society and conditions our relationship with other perceptions of the world. Take, for example, the whole developmentalist approach, which will be dominant from the 1960s onwards and will also very much influence the world of missions: such an approach is in fact nothing more than the continuation of evolutionary theories. And we are only just emerging, including missions, from this developmentalist vision.

### **How can we overcome certain stereotypes? There are a few conditions for this:**

- 1) First of all, we must recognise that we are all conditioned by our environment... today as in the past. In this respect, we are no more immune today than we were in the past to ethnocentric visions that strongly condition our relationship with others. As far as Western civilisation is concerned, one of the main conditioning factors, whether conscious or not, is what I perceive as a feeling of superiority in relation to other cultures and civilisations.
- 2) To recognise that the Gospel, as such, does not belong to any particular culture; that the Gospel is not attached to any particular civilisation. This point is very important because it prevents anyone from arrogating to himself the correct interpretation of the Gospel. It is precisely this statement that gives the Gospel its universalist dimension.
- 3) To recognise that the Gospel offers anyone who is interested in it a critical perspective on the way in which its own culture views the relationship with the other.
- 4) To accept that the Gospel is a transformative and liberating force and that this applies to all cultures; all civilisations. In affirming this I recognise that cultures are not intangible blocks of granite but remain open to transformation.

### **At DM Dynamique dans l'Echange the fight against racism is played out on several levels:**

- Institutional Memory: Accepting to revisit history, with honesty but also humility. Example: the exhibition «Derrière les cases de la mission» which has just been held in Lausanne and Neuchâtel and which takes a critical look at the history of the swiss mission in southern Africa.
- Accept to be challenged by our partners on our past and present practices. Example: to have an attitude of openness and permanent dialogue in the framework of our collaboration programmes
- Accept to be challenged by the diversity of ways of understanding and living the Gospel in the world. For example, welcoming envoys from the South to Switzerland, but also entering into contact with Christian communities of migrant origin in Switzerland

- To return again and again to the biblical foundations which constantly question our practices by placing the human being at the centre of our action; in this sense all intercultural approaches to the Gospel are welcome. Example: DM, together with other partners, is launching a training course in intercultural theology this autumn