

# Women Teaching Women: The Impact of Gender and Religion on Training Teachers in Colonial Africa

EILA HELANDER

*University of Helsinki*

## Abstract

Finnish women missionaries have made a major contribution to the training of women teachers in Ovamboland, the northern part of present Namibia. In this paper I examine how African women teachers perceive the impact of Finnish teachers on their career development and their role in society. Data was gathered in Namibia in 1999. Results reveal that missionary women have played a significant role in the process of creating a new social category, that of a career women in the Ovambo society. The example of missionary women has contributed to adopting the idea of building the nation as an essential part of being a teacher. In this process religious legitimization of new ideas and practices has played an important role.

*Keywords: Namibia, Ovambo, African women, education, nation building, missionaries, teacher training, gender*

In this paper the focus is on African women's perception and understanding of the influence of missionaries on their education and career development. Education has been an essential part of missionary activity in Africa. Missionaries opened the first formal schools both for boys and girls in most African countries. Christianity was a religion of the book. Education was regarded as instrumental in the enlightenment of the 'heathen', although humanitarian motives have also influenced the commencement of formal education. The nationalities and denominational affiliations of the missionaries caused missionaries' philosophies and policies regarding the nature of formal education to vary. The education systems that developed in Africa shared one common feature: they followed the European models of their respective colonial powers. In many countries, even though mission-based formal education was under the administration of colonial educational authorities, it nevertheless maintained a certain freedom in how to run the schools (Bray & Clarke & Stephens 1986).

In Africa, religion has been both in conflict and in concord with colonial governments, especially in the area of education. Colonial governments either assisted the missionaries or discouraged them in their operations, depending on to what extent the new religion supported their own policies. Consequently the relationship of religion and politics has been one of the major trends in research on education in Africa. The role of religion and gender in education is a less researched area.<sup>1</sup> The fact that the majority of missionaries have been women and that many of them have worked within education makes the combination of religion, gender and education an important topic. Here I will discuss the impact of the gender and religion of missionary teachers in the training of African female teachers in Ovamboland, what is presently the northern part of Namibia.

### **The Namibian Case**

Education has formed an essential part also of the work of Finnish missionaries in South-West Africa. Soon after having arrived in Ovamboland, the northern part of present-day Namibia in 1870, the missionary men saw the importance of founding schools to aid in the spread of Christianity. However, the male missionaries were not experienced teachers. School work first began in earnest at the beginning of the 20th century, after the arrival of single missionary women, the majority of whom were trained teachers. (Peltola 1994, 279–280; Kena 2000, 210–217.) The mission laid the foundation of the education system on which first the South African government and later independent Namibia continued to build.

In Namibia, the development of formal education has been a decisive factor on the road to modernity. Education has been the chief criterion for upward mobility. New knowledge has created new values and ideas, which in their turn have had an impact on the social order and have challenged the traditional power structures. Education has also been a channel for western democratic and political values, which became central in the fight for national independence. Consequently, during the colonial period teachers were recognized as a politically highly influential group. (Töttemeyer 1978, 172, 178–181.)

Finnish missionary women have played an important role in the establishment of formal education in Namibia. At a fairly early stage, missionary women started to pay attention to the post-primary training of girls and

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<sup>1</sup> This has been taken up in some mission histories which have focussed on local women e.g. Larsson 1991, and in studies on women missionaries e.g. Bowie & Kirkwood & Ardener 1993; Kena 2000; Okkenhaug 2002.

women. The first schools for girls were founded in 1924 in Oshigambo and Engela. Women have been involved in founding altogether nine girls' schools in northern Namibia. Over a period of almost 100 years, a total of over 100 trained Finnish women teachers have worked in the field of education in different tasks. They have taught at different levels, from primary schools to teacher training seminaries. They have worked as inspectors of schools and arranged further training for teachers. Their impact has been strengthened by the length of their service, as many of them worked in Namibia for 20–30 years, some for even longer periods. (Lehtonen 1999.)

In spite of shared religious values, in the early part of the 20th century, according to some of the men who were missionaries, too much education was not considered to be good for women. At the same time the need to have female teachers in children's schools grew. Johanna Kristof was the first woman who was accepted to be trained as a teacher in Ovamboland in 1925. By 1938, out of those 191 who had graduated from the primarily male teachers' seminary 11 were women. In 1944 a decision was made to separate the teachers' training for men and women. (Kena 2000, 240–242; Mpanda 1996.)

A teachers' training seminary for women was opened at Okahao in 1947 and named Ongandjera Training School after the surrounding Ovambo community. It was in operation until 1970, at which time the government took over the teachers' training. During those years, 21 Finnish and 18 African women teachers taught at the seminary and close to 500 women graduated from the teacher training seminary at Okahao. (Mpanda 1996; Lehtonen 1999, 177–180.)

For a long time, the professions of teaching and nursing were the only available professions for women in Ovamboland. The training of women to be teachers has especially changed the traditional social structure and created a new social category of a financially independent career woman. In today's Namibia, women play a major role in the field of education. By the early 1970s, mainly women were being trained as teachers. In present-day Namibia, two-thirds of the first level teachers and almost half of the second level teachers are women. (Unesco Statistical Yearbook 1999, II-89, II-129; Töttemeyer 1978, 173.) The profession of teacher is becoming a female occupation.

### **Research Questions and Data**

Changes in a woman's position in society are preceded by changes in values, attitudes and practices. Such changes may cause conflicts or varying

degrees of resistance. In the Namibian case, religion has played a major role in legitimizing these changes. One may ask to what extent and how did the Finnish missionary teachers use religion in their efforts to bring changes into the lives of African women? My hypothesis is that in this process it is the combination of the gender of the missionary and her religion rather than religion alone that played a significant role in introducing African women to the teaching profession.

In this paper I will examine what aspects in the missionaries' ways of teaching empowered the African women to become pathfinders, to embark on a new status and role in society, and to develop skills and a social awareness which can be perceived as having contributed to sustainable development in the country. The analysis is based on in depth interviews of five Namibian teachers (WT1–WT5) gathered during a fieldwork period in northern Namibia in spring 1999. All the interviewees attended the women teachers' seminary at Okahao during the period 1947–1967. All also functioned as teachers and two of them also taught at the seminary. Even though the focus was on the experiences of the African teachers, I also interviewed one Finnish teacher (FT1) who taught at the seminary for several years for background information.

## Results

Missionary women played a crucial role in encouraging girls to become teachers. The interviews revealed that missionary women made special efforts to recruit candidates for teacher training. They also prepared their students for the entrance exams. When the seminary for women was to start at Okahao, special training in Afrikaans was given at many girls' schools, including the school at Engela, to those girls who had expressed interest in becoming teachers. Such encouragement was perceived as being important, especially at a time when girls were to embark on a career and a consequent public social position and role which among the Africans had belonged almost exclusively to men. Women were having to behave in a non-traditional way, as related by one of the interviewees who was among the first students who started their studies at the Ongandjera Training School in 1947.

Hilma Ranttila said that women would also be accepted at Oniipa (the entrance exam took place in Oniipa for the newly established women's seminary). I made up my mind to go to Oniipa. I had a boyfriend, but I collected all the gifts I had received from him and sent them back. I have never regretted my decision. (WT2)

One reason why men, and even some missionary women, had hesitated to train women to become teachers was that after getting married they would leave their work. The cost-benefit ratio seemed unfavourable to the missionary agency. Consequently, special efforts were made to train Ovambo women to start to value the work of a teacher or nurse as a vocation after the example of the unmarried women who were missionaries (Kena 2000, 244).

The all-female training seems to have made a difference in that women were able to advance in their studies without having to face competition from the male students, which seems to have occurred in mixed training situations.

After the teachers' seminary at Okahao I received additional teacher training. We were two women and seven men. It was difficult in that all the time one of the boys asked what kind of marks the girls got on the exams. It was difficult for them that we did well. Our teacher (a man) told the boys to study as well as the girls. (WT1)

In a gender-divided society, gendered education created a tension-free learning space. The primarily all-female learning environment made it possible for women to study without having to waste energy justifying their right to education and their success in it.

In the girls' schools and later in the seminary, girls were taught mainly by teachers who were unmarried women. Becoming a student at the seminary also meant making a decision on one's sexual life. In order to get a favourable cost-benefit ratio, the mission agency bound the graduates to serve the church with the consequence that those entering the seminary were not allowed to marry for five years. The fact that their teachers were women was an important aspect for the female students.

It really helped that we were taught by single women. When we came to the school we knew that we were not allowed to marry for five years. It was a difficult and heavy time. The example of the missionary women helped. Female students got strength for their lives. (WT2)

I was happy to be taught by women. I felt they could understand me like my mother, I could talk to them freely. (WT3)

Men cannot educate the girls, show them how to be women. Liina Mpanda collected the students and emphasized the importance of the local culture. She taught us how to be a woman, to become a mother: when you get married it is your responsibility to cook good food for your man, to put your kitchen in order, to take care of your children, to obey your husband, to listen to him and to be humble. (WT4)

The fact that the teaching staff consisted of both Finnish and African women teachers meant that the adopted new ideas and practices did not alienate the future teachers from the people among whom they were trained to work. The African teachers acted as mediators between the two cultures.

Out of those women who had received their teacher training before the founding of the seminary at Okahao, very few remained unmarried. When having to choose between a status boosting an independent but financially less secure career and the traditional and financially more secure status of a married woman, many opted for the latter. However, already in the 1940s, there were a few examples of married women who had continued to work as teachers after getting married (Miettinen 2005, 291–292). Thus, the seminary students had three models to choose from: married woman with teacher training, single teacher, and married professional woman working outside the home.

Missionary women also seem to have succeeded in conveying the possibility and the value of a single life after the study period to their African students. Contrary to the African custom, which emphasizes marriage as a norm and an obligation for every woman, a surprisingly high number of African women teachers seem to have remained unmarried (Mpanda 1996).<sup>2</sup> When some of the unmarried teachers trained at Okahao returned later to teach there, not only the foreign but also the African female teachers were examples of unmarried women who had become career women and dedicated their lives to their work.

The missionary women who were teachers were remembered as having been dedicated to their work. They were also perceived as strict teachers who demanded very much from their students. Strictness was not mentioned as a negative feature. All of the interviewees saw it as part and parcel of being a good teacher. Authoritative teaching attitudes followed the teaching culture the Finnish teachers had been exposed to in their own training. In many cases their long service in Africa meant that they had not been exposed to new, less authoritative approaches. Furthermore, due to the existing socio-cultural setting created by the apartheid government, they were able to continue transferring new information and practices in a rather authoritative way, as described in the quotation below.

Finnish teachers were strict like the apartheid government: they said do like this and that's what you had to do. People had got accustomed to the commanding nature of the government so it was easy to adjust to the strict discipline of the Finnish missionaries. (WT5)

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<sup>2</sup> This conclusion about the teachers' unmarried status is made on the basis of the legends on photographs of former students' class meetings. The legends also state the married names.

The interviewee continued to state that such an attitude would not have worked any more in independent Namibia.

Another feature that came up in the interviews was the importance of the example of the missionary teachers.

They did not only say do it like this. But their whole being was an example. They were faithful in their work. (WT2)

When they taught us they prepared everything, you understood it, you took it in your mind and were able to put it into practice. They were good models [of] what kind of a person is a good teacher. (WT4)

The missionary teachers became examples not only of personal commitment and teaching methods, but also in attitudes to work and life in general.

This Finnish teacher was my model. She could take challenges. She was confident in herself, you could not influence her. She did not try to please anybody. Her Oshindonga was not very good when she came to Okahao, but she spoke in spite of the weakness. (WT3)

Finns tried to do their best to do their job, to give a good example. We black people think that white people only command, but the Finns worked themselves. (WT4)

All interviewees emphasized that the central philosophy of their teacher training had been that of personal sacrifice for a good cause. The women's seminary at Okahao had had a rough beginning. Twenty-five girls passed the entrance examination, but the facilities available could not accommodate such a large number. They were, however, eager to learn and were willing to put up with very difficult conditions and to take part in the building of the school in order to be able to start their studies to become teachers. Because of such a spirit, all the accepted students were allowed to start their studies (Lehtonen 1999, 111, 117–118). This philosophy that one should not expect everything to be ready, but should be willing to sacrifice personal comfort and to work hard if it served a good cause seems to have been transferred to the following student generations as well. While the conditions in the seminary improved with time, the same kind of spirit was often needed in the schools in which the new graduates were sent to teach. In their teaching posts, many Okahao-trained teachers have, together with their students, had to start work and lessons at the school by making bricks in order to build the needed facilities.

The work of Finnish missionary women in the area of education and health services has been significant and has been seen as having contributed significantly to local development in Ovamboland (Notkola & Siiskonen 1996). The missionary example of the foreign women has also influenced the students. Like their teachers, many African women who were teachers were willing to go to work in remote places. The example of the missionaries also helped them to adjust to strange conditions and diets.

I became a missionary. I went to teach in Omindamba. I wanted to take the challenge as my teachers did. When I considered going to Omindamba I remembered Meme Ulla, who eats what is offered. (WT3)

Their decision was not only religiously motivated. The new teachers wanted to work for the development of their nation.

Since the Ongandjera Training School was a boarding school, the teachers' example was not limited to teaching situations only. Teachers and students interacted in the classrooms during the day and in the evenings in various other activities. Not only the students but also the teachers lived long periods on the school premises and were able to leave the place only twice a year. Post arrived once a month. Their whole life was centred around the school (FT1). Interviewees remembered that discipline was also extended to the students' behaviour outside the classroom, to personal hygiene, and the care of clothing and the surroundings. Here the Finnish missionaries followed the old Finnish seminary tradition in which character training was part of the education process. During their studies, the African students went through a period of formation which also shaped their values, attitudes and practices. The influence of the example of the missionaries was strengthened because of the living situation in Okahao.

The significance of missionary women as role models for the women among whom they have worked has been discussed in many studies on missionary women. The importance of the model provided by single women has been recognized (Hiebert 1982, 459). As professional women who had economic independence outside marriage and family, missionary women introduced a new model for a woman in African society.<sup>3</sup> Religion legitimized for women a way and means to counteract the male dominance in Ovambo society. The fact that not only foreign teachers but also Africans were examples to imitate strengthened the impact of the missionary teachers.

The importance of modelling as a means of learning can be understood when we look at the learning situation in the cultural setting. In traditional

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<sup>3</sup> See also Kirkwood 1993, 31–41.



African culture, the transferring of traditions has been the main forum of informal education. Skills have been learned by observing and repeating set models. Girls learned from women. Consequently, it is understandable that in the formal education system gender modelling played a central role. Here the Christian religion, instead of tradition, legitimated the learning process and justified the learned practices.

Already in the 1920s, missionary women saw the significance of training girls and women not only for the church but also for the development of the society at large. Because women were to bring up the future Christian generations, it became important to educate women to be good wives, mothers and housekeepers. Fairly soon another educational goal was added: Ovambo women should also be educated to caring tasks outside the home, a kind of social motherhood (Kena 2000, 240–241).

These goals were also adopted in the female teachers' seminary. The syllabus followed the standards set by the government. Subjects like mother tongue, health instruction and home economics (Mpanda 1996, 57) can be perceived as having elements supporting the development of the nation. Missionaries emphasized the importance of developing the use of the mother tongue in teaching at all levels of education in order to secure a better understanding of the subjects taught and the right of each people to their own language. They also informed the government about the needs for further training for teachers (Lehtonen 1999, 186–188). However, more than the syllabus, it seems to have been the ethos of the school and the interaction with teachers which played a major role in promoting ideas of development. Throughout the training the missionary women emphasized their students' new identity and the related responsibilities the profession they were trained for would give to them, and what it meant to be a female teacher in the changing Ovambo society.

They taught us that you are here not only to become a teacher in the classroom, you are also to become a teacher in society through your behaviour. If you are going to be a good example in society, you have to be an example in the family, you have to be a model woman. (WT3)

We were taught not to think about our salary but to think about our nation. We got motivation to do something for our people. (WT4)

The teaching built up their self-esteem and empowered them to embark on a new role.

The way the social awareness was created in the future teachers echoes the emphases of the training the missionary teachers themselves had gone through. All Finnish teachers who had received their training before the 1950s had been taught to see the building and developing of the nation as being an essential part of the work of a teacher. They were to see themselves as 'the light of the nation' (cf. Kena 2000, 219). The fervour of the African women to serve their country has been strengthened by religious motivation as well. This, together with the strengthening of the students' understanding of themselves as professionals who have the know-how, has enabled the teachers graduating from the Okahao seminary to contribute towards a new identity for African women. They were made 'fit to fight' in the male dominated society. They were trained to see their profession as an avenue to work for a better society when facing multiple challenges and needs for development.

The question can also be asked whether modelling oneself upon the missionary teachers could have been a hindrance to local development. The African teaching style has been accused of being authoritarian and discouraging of innovative thinking, the latter being a key factor in the development of modern society (Datta 1984). Have the African teachers taken the strict authoritarian and disciplinary Finnish missionary style of teaching as an ideal without considering the changing of the times and teaching approaches or have they also changed with the times? On this question the data gathered did not throw any greater light. One cannot draw too far-reaching conclusions from the fact that the Okahao teachers see their training as superior to that provided by the government.

Religion functioned as the main motivation and legitimation for educating African women to become teachers. Already in the 1920s missionary women emphasized that it was their Christian duty to make the Ovambo girls aware of the 'call for labourers' in the spreading of the gospel, the same call to which they themselves had responded. It was their task to teach the girls the 'glories of serving the Lord', which they believed would help the girls to dedicate themselves to the 'Lord's service' (Kena 2000, 244).

The central role of religion in promoting women's education contributed significantly to the Christianized local people's acceptance of the training of girls and women (Kena 2000, 244). Interviews revealed that parents, who were themselves educated, were favourable to the idea of their daughters pursuing education and becoming teachers. However, not all Christian parents viewed the emerging changes in the woman's position and role favourably. This was the case especially in the late 1940s. One interviewee

described how her mother did not like the fact that her daughter wanted to break away from the traditional role pattern of the African woman. Only when she realized that education did not make her daughter neglect her and that the daughter was not despised by the community did she accept her daughter's choice (WT2). Even here religion legitimated the emerging social changes.

Religion also played an important role in educating female teachers by legitimizing new ideas and practices.

All teaching and discussions were based on Christianity. (WT3)

Sylvi Kyllönen taught that as far as you obey God, your students can obey you. If there is no love in your heart for the children you shine as the moon, but a teacher whose heart is filled with love shines like the sun. (WT2)

Work ethics and success as a teacher were based on religion and one's religious commitment. Likewise, the students' self-confidence as future teachers was built up by binding them to religious work ethics.

They taught us that before you teach, you need to know that you are the teacher, you know the subject, and to feel guilt when you don't reach your goal. (WT4)

Religion was used to internalize the norms of an ideal teacher.

When we look at the impact of gender and religion on training female teachers in Africa, it is necessary to focus also on the structural and cultural aspects of the traditional society. The people among whom the Finnish missionaries worked in Ovamboland were traditionally matrilineal; the lineage follows the mother's clan, and the inheritance of property, the succession to chieftainship and the transmission of status pass through the females. The husband has limited legal and social rights over his children and wife (Tuupainen 1970). However, it is important to recognize that matrilineality does not mean the exclusion of the leadership of men. Traditional Ovambo society has been strongly male dominated. Men have the power of decision over the lives of girls and women. Also, public life has been dominated by men.

Although a pure type of such an extreme unilineal system is rare, the existing kinship system structures social relations and influences people's values, attitudes and practices. One may ask whether this has also contributed to the acceptance of the missionary women as teachers. Even

though they were foreigners with strange customs, being a woman may have been of an advantage when they started to work among the Ovambo. Furthermore, in a culture where women's and men's spheres were clearly separated, missionary women had a clear advantage when working with girls and women.

To what extent the efforts of missionary women to promote female education have been motivated by emancipatory views is a debated issue among researchers.<sup>4</sup> A plausible explanation seems to be that, especially in the early part of the 20th century, missionary women saw the plights and problems of the African women as being part of the 'pagan' influence, and therefore in promoting Christianity they saw themselves as working for the liberation of African women (Kena 2000, 184–187). However, it is important to notice that from the 1960s onward, an emerging, clearer emancipatory disposition can be detected among Finnish missionary women. Changes in the woman's position in Finland, increased social awareness among the missionaries and the growth of the Church in Ovamboland led missionary women to look at the situation of African women from more of an emancipatory perspective (Helander 2001).

## Conclusion

It can be concluded that the contribution of the missionary women in the area of teacher training does not consist only of the academic teaching of the required subjects. Both the gender and status of the missionary women have played a significant role in the process of creating a new social category, that of career women, in Ovambo society. The example of the teachers, together with the religious legitimization of the new lifestyle, whether single or married, empowered the women to embark on their new role in society. The example of missionary women has contributed to the adopting of the idea of the building of the nation as an essential part of being a teacher. The internalization of the new identity and the related norms have helped the African women to carry on their work in the predominantly male-dominated society. African women have responded actively to the social change brought about by Christianity. In this process, the religious legitimization of the new ideas and practices has played an important role.

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<sup>4</sup> For further discussion on mission feminism see e.g., Beaver 1980; Hill 1985; Hunter 1984; Tucker 1988; Okkenhaug 2003.

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