The Deeds of Hungarian Missionaries

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Africa´s past and present are undoubtedly linked to European explorers and colonizers in the 18th and predominantly 19th centuries. They aimed to explore unknown territories and promote the "enlightenment" of the local populations found there. The Catholic and Protestant churches also joined in on the "Race for Africa". In the terminology of the age, they wanted to provide "civilizational support" to "indigenous" people who lagged behind according to their worldviews.[1] Today we can see that these relations were often one-sided and did not serve the local people´s real needs. They often manifested themselves as a destructive Western force that pushed cultures, ancient beliefs, and worldviews into the background and disrespected others´ freedoms and traditions.[2] Nonetheless, many missionaries were selfless and benevolent priests and pastors who had commendable achievements. In the following section, we give a brief introduction to the Hungarian aspects of Christian missions in Africa, which were in line with the latter, value-creating approach that respects other people´s dignity.

The universal mission in Africa was the goal of spreading Christianity very early on, harking back to the first centuries.[3] The church thought it was their duty to communicate their mission to the world, so they wanted to make their teachings and ideas about the world available to everyone. It had a scriptural purpose, using terminology based on monotheism to introduce Christian principles to pagan peoples. Nevertheless, the mission´s spiritual dimension stemmed from a sincere sense of purpose that still defines its character. I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish (Romans 1:14), said the Apostle Paul about the genuinely devoted and selfless missionary work. All this appeared in a new spiritual trend in the churches the 19th century linked to the colonisers´ aspirations. It became a vital program point of the European Protestant missionaries, as well as the Jesuits (Society of Jesus).[4] In the Catholic Church, the idea of going on missions on distant continents became popular mostly among the monks.[5]

The life and fate of remote missionaries became such a popular topic around the beginning of the 20th century in Hungary that many monthly newspapers, booklets and educational publications frequently included stories and reports this issue.[6] A lively, information-rich "Africanist" atmosphere was created in Hungarian society at that time, connected, of course, with Western aspirations. Interestingly, today the overall awareness and media coverage on African issues – in terms of the sheer number and types of publications – lag far behind the period between 1850 and 1950.

One of the first such papers was the illustrated monthly magazine known as the Kath. *Hitterjesztés Lapjai* (The Magazine of Catholic Missionaries), published by István Nogely in 1881. This Catholic magazine was inspired by the Africanist László Magyar's letters and articles published in the Pesti Napló and Magyar Hírlap between 1852 and 1854. Its objective was to introduce Africa to a broader audience. In addition to the "*Lapok*", starting in 1885 a magazine called the *Képes Missió-Könyvtár* (Illustrated Missions' Library) was, and it was filled with rich, insightful content. It covered other regions besides Africa. Nogely also launched a new series of books titled *Afrikai élet* (African Life) in 1891, but eventually, it only had one volume.

In 1908, a new, independent Hungarian newspaper was published by the Kláver Szent Péter Társulat (Claver St. Peter´s Society). *Visszhang Afrikából* (Echo from Africa), which exclusively covered African missions from a Hungarian perspective, reported on Christian movements in sub-Saharan Africa with illustrated articles. Its objective was to show the Hungarian audience what life looked like in Africa. After 1919, the magazine was published under the title *Afrikai Visszhang* (African Echo) until 1943.

Its "successor", the *Félhold szerelmesei* (Lovers of the Crescent Moon) edited by Franciscan Mór Majsai, only had one issue in 1934. This magazine illustrated the Franciscan missions in Africa with maps and detailed natural, geographical, and ethnographic descriptions, but it was soon discontinued.

Mátyás Pál, a priest from the Archdiocese of Kalocsa, joined the European mission in the 1920s. In 1925, he created the illustrated magazine *Katolikus Világmisszió* (Catholic World Mission), which focused on Africa and was published quarterly until 1938. Mátyás also supported the

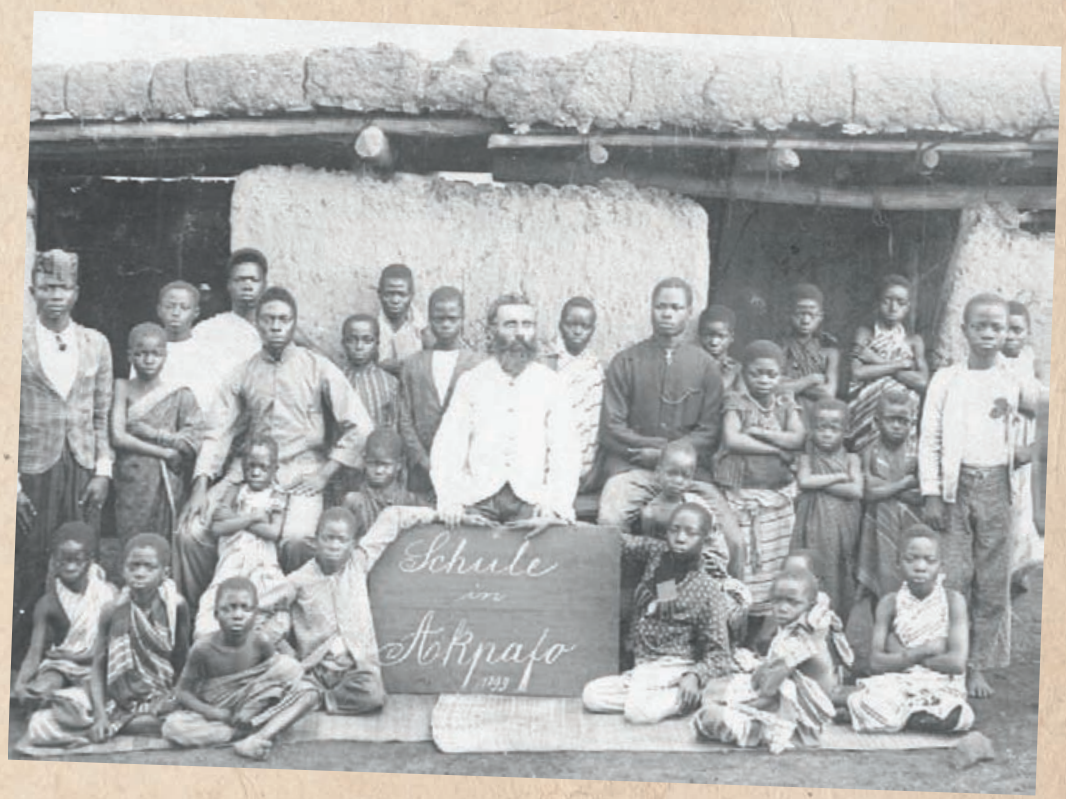
African and Asian expeditions from his income. He also published a series of other works: *Magyar Missziós Füzetek* (Hungarian Mission Booklets) and *Afrika kiáltott* (Africa Calls). After his death, his beatification process started, but it was interrupted for unknown reasons. The Pál Mátyás Mission Center was established and operated until 1960.

The Hungarian Reformed Foreign Mission (and its divisions, the Hungarian Reformed Evangelical Missionary Association, the Reformed Women´s Missionary Committee, and the Hungarian Reformed Foreign Missionary Association) had an active international community too.[7] The *Missziói Füzetek* (Missionary Booklets) reported on Hungarian protestant missions from the 1920s, and in the1930s the magazine was renamed to *Új Missziói Füzetek* (New Missionary Booklets). They published the magazine until the 1950s when the Foreign Missions Service of the Universal Reformed Convention took over foreign missions.

The *Ferences Világmissziók* (Franciscan World Missions) series was published between 1941 and 1944, though it contained very little African content. The focus was primarily on Hungarian and international Franciscan missions in Asia, with a focus on China.

As a result of these magazines, and the adventurous atmosphere of the age, many Hungarian priests and pastors joined African missions. Ostensibly, the predominant presence of colonial powers had an influence on many church-based missions (for example, Hungarian Benedictines did not take part in any missions at all). In addition to the "zeitgeist", it is also true that in many cases the extremely stressful climatic, natural, and medical conditions led missions to be well-organized because many lost their lives or suffered martyrdom, so constant recruitment was needed. The Jesuit monks were at the forefront of this work, and travelling the world to spread their faith was their essential task. They also had a strong network of European recruiters. Among the Order´s Hungarian members, István Czimmermann (born in 1849) stands out as one of the most significant "Christian Africanists" of the era.[8] He joined the Portuguese Mission in South-East Africa in 1885, beginning his work in Mboroma (Zambia) where he soon distinguished himself with his talent and affection for Africans. He became head of the mission a year after his arrival. Because the school they founded had few local students, he bought and raised the slave children with his associates. Being personally involved in the mission´s success, he embarked on a European tour to recruit missionaries in 1889. He returned to Mboroma with eleven priests and eight nuns, along with László Menyhárth, a fellow Hungarian born

in Szarvas. Shortly afterwards, they moved to Mozambique and founded the community of Zumbo, which has remained active ever since.[9] Nonetheless, Czimmermann had many significant achievements during the Zambian mission: he learned several local languages, and he produced the first Nyungwe (Zambian) catechism (a question-and-answer based, clear, simple theological summary that was clear and simple) and a prayer book (according to some sources, it had references to the entire Bible). He replaced missing expressions in the local languages with Hungarian words, and the locals used these new words to express their faith. He even compiled a dictionary and a grammar guide, making him the pioneer of the written Nyungwe language. István Czimmermann died of poisoning in South Africa in 1894.



A school in Ghana established by missionaries

His partner, László Menyhárth, also became one of the key figures in the Zambezi mission, where in addition to his teaching and social work, he established the first meteorological station. Astronomer Gyula Fényi published his observations and scientific results in Hungary. Menyhárth was an active botanist as well: twenty plants he discovered are named after him. He also carried out soil experiments and, with his pioneering phytopathology studies, was able to develop several edible plants that required little work to mass-produce and withstand the climate of the Zambezi region well. In addition to the production of new plants, Menyhárth changed the locals´ production and farming habits, which had been inadequate for centuries, thus providing a solution to the food shortages in the region. Besides his pastoral ministry, his scientific work was also outstanding.[10] He made a climate map of the Mboroma region and an herb book of the Zambezi region based on seven years of observations. The latter, titled *Plantae Menyharthianae*, was published in 1906 in Vienna. He sent thousands of plants and seeds back to Europe for museums in Vienna and Budapest. Menyhárth had enrolled in a medical university in Budapest before he went on the missions, which illustrates his ambitious personality and determined mentality. In addition to spiritual guidance, he could also heal bodily ailments. In 1897, at the age of forty-eight, he died of malaria in Zumbo (Mozambique). Czimmermann and Menyhárth are among the most significant pioneering Africanists of the era.[11]

Born in 1856, Brother Jakab Longa also served in the Mboroma mission. He worked in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) as a helmsman, locksmith, breeder and gardener. From 1901 to 1910, he served as captain of a cargo ship called San Salvador, which carried goods for coastal missions. Along with Jakab Longa, Sándor Rodenbücher was also a handyman for the Mozambican mission. In 1910, after the Portuguese Revolution, they were both expelled from Mozambique. Later, after a European detour, they returned to Africa to build villages and temples, and to help locals in their everyday lives.

Among the early Hungarian missionaries, Count Péter Vay stands out. He spent almost two years in 1901 and 1902 in central and eastern Africa. Peter Vay, who later served in the Holy See's diplomatic service as a bishop, studied issues related to African refugees. Bishop Vay later pioneered in helping European and American refugees using his experiences in Africa.[12]

Christian and monastic missionary work steadily declined along with vanishing colonial powers in the African countries gaining independence. Their presence and work today are part of the local pastoral ministry in the church communities. Their educational and charity programs are filling in critical gaps across Africa. The mission´s concept has also changed: today we use it much more for medical and other humanitarian activities that Hungarian experts also participate in. For example, ophthalmologist Richárd Hardi has been running a hospital in the Democratic Republic of Congo since 1995 as a secular member of the Community of the Beatitudes.[13] Additionally, hundreds of Hungarian doctors, nurses and health care volunteers have worked for secular or church organizations in sub-Saharan Africa in recent decades to help vulnerable local populations. Their work and achievements symbolically represent Hungarian humanitarian efforts.