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Central European Missionaries in Sudan: Geopolitics and Alternative Colonialism in Mid-Nineteenth Century Africa

HELGE WENDT

Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Boltzmannstraße 22, 14195 Berlin, Germany. Email:
hwendt@mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de

The article gives an example of how actors and processes should be differentiated from each other in an imperial context that concerns both a European and a non-European region. Some of the 'Austrian' missionaries who worked in the Catholic mission in southern Sudan were of Slavic or Italian origin. Their double identity shaped the way they conceived their pastoral work. Nevertheless, these missionaries were not the only group of people who were engaged in this Austrian colonial endeavour in mid-nineteenth century Sudan.

European history is not confined to the European continent. In recent years, an increasing number of studies have revealed that European histories and the colonial history of European states in non-European regions of the world are equally part of the European past. This development in historiography requires a subtle and close identification of the actors and processes in both European and colonial territories. The history of a Catholic mission enterprise in southern Sudan permits/facilitates the linking of East African history with the history of the Austrian Empire in this sense. Some of the missionaries involved in this enterprise had a double identity that had an impact on the plans and proselytisation work in southern Sudan. In order to gain knowledge about the relationship between the European–Austrian situation and the conditions in the upper Nile region, several layers of imperialism in the Austrian Empire, in Europe and in Africa have to be differentiated.

The imperial dimension of the Catholic mission in the southern Sudan region involves the missionaries working among the Dinka and other peoples of the upper White Nile, starting from 1847 until their very violent expulsion during the Mahdist Wars, which began in 1881.¹ Furthermore, this mission is related to some enterprises involving private and public Austrian individuals and societies who intended to make the southern parts of Sudan an Austrian colonial dominion. They sought to defend trade interests and considered the Habsburg monarchy to be in competition with the

British and French colonial interests in this region.² The main thesis of this article is that the Austrian Catholic mission starting in 1846 was intrinsically linked with some imperial structures of the Central European Austrian Empire and with some colonial fantasies of Africa. In 1846, Pope Gregory XVI approved a mission enterprise that departed from Trieste one year later. The Polish Jesuit and rector of the Collegio Urbano, Maksymilian Stanisław Ryłło, who was

supposed to become the first apostle Vicar of Central Africa, headed the group. Some other missionaries were the Italo-Austrian Angelo Vinco and the Slovenian-Austrian (Dr) Ignacij Knoblehar. Many studies insist upon the spiritual character of this mission enterprise – an aspect I do not want to explore in any depth.³ Maksymilian Ryłło died at Khartoum in 1848. Ignacij Knoblehar, who passed away ten years later, succeeded him. Two other important missionaries who later led the enterprise were the German-Austrian Johann C. Mitterutzner and the Italian Daniele Comboni from Verona (although for some years he also had been an Austrian subject).

The first imperial layer of this history is that this mission enterprise, backed by the Propaganda Fide at Rome, involved several missionaries of Slovenian, Polish and Italian ‘ethnic’ origin. We know from Jesuit mission history that a good number of missionaries from the so-called German provinces were of Polish and Czech origin.⁴ Often their names were ‘Germanised’ and it was claimed that these individuals were Austrians.⁵ This act of imperial conduct was considered in more detail by historiography.⁶ The ‘sub pluribus unum’ may have softened the colonial habitus behind such labelling, as it took the edge off the historical asymmetries inside the Danubian monarchy.⁷ Nevertheless, the national identity of people such as Knoblehar⁸ and other fellow missionaries was important in a time period of emerging national movements inside the Austrian Empire.⁹ It is to be assumed that these historical actors directly or indirectly carried their experience of national

submission to an imperial identity to the African mission field.¹⁰ I will return to this point and the hierarchical order of the nations in the Austrian Empire later, when it comes to analysing the writings of Knoblehar about African tribes and individuals in the mission framework. We find there a strange mix of political nationalism, strongly Papally influenced Catholicism as a way to evade Austrian boundaries and, thirdly, inner-Austrian Catholic solidarity when it comes to funding the mission project.¹¹ The history of the Austro-Slavic-Italian mission¹² in southern Sudan is part of the internal imperial histories of the Austrian Empire, as the mission did not exclusively depend only on the organisation of the Propaganda Fide but, furthermore, on funding from Austrian public and private institutions.

The second aspect of imperial history is international politics, which, in the middle of the nineteenth century, always had imperial implications. The Propaganda Fide and the Jesuits supported the Austro-Slavic-Italian mission initiative against the French Lazarists, who already had a mission house in Khartoum. In 1848, the year of the beginning of the mission enterprise, some revolts agitated several cities of the monarchy. Furthermore, in the Italian territories under Austrian dominion, the Five Days of Milan challenged Franz Joseph of Austria, a revolt that General Radetzky

eventually put an end to. In the same year, the Italian national revolutionary republican movement (Risorgimento) challenged pontifical power in Rome.¹³

At the same time in Africa, Egypt also was going through a period of political instability. Egypt had obtained a certain degree of independence from the Ottoman Empire since Mehmet Ali Pasha and Ibrāhīm Pasha had governed the Nile-Provinces and conquered the Sudan in the early 1820s. For the Catholic missionaries, Egypt was important as they needed the Pasha's permission to establish a mission station, and they had to pass through Egypt on their voyage to Sudan. When the political situation in the Egypt–Sudan region became unstable, the new Pasha refused the missionaries entrance into his territory. Furthermore, the French Catholic Lazarists intended to boycott the Austro-Italian enterprise.

In terms of colonial competition, the Austrian Emperor insisted upon his status of being the protector of Catholics in Egypt and Sudan against French interventions.¹⁴ This inter-imperial struggle which, in comparison with French-British competition in this region in later decades, was of rather secondary importance, is nevertheless related to some forces in Austrian politics intending to persuade the Austrian Emperor to undertake a colonial enterprise in the southern Sudan region.¹⁵

Because, officially, this Austrian colonial movement was much less offensive compared with those of the British or the French,¹⁶ diplomatic relations between Vienna, the Sublime Porte and Cairo/Alexandria were rather benign to an Austrian mission enterprise.¹⁷ Ryflo even obtained an audience with Ibrāhīm Pasha, proving the good relationships between the two monarchies. The mission project was challenged by a serious setback when Ryflo passed away during the voyage. As his successor, Knoblehar was appointed the new leader of the mission party. His efforts

could benefit from the establishment of an Austrian Vice-Consulate at Khartoum and from a high ranked nobleman who engaged into an association called the *Marienverein* (Society of St. Mary), which politically intervened in the mission's favour and funded the project (Ref. 14, p. 267).

Various geopolitical and geo-commercial initiatives emerged in Vienna, pleading for a serious colonial engagement of Austria on the eastern coast of Africa, in Ethiopia, Abyssinia and Sudan.¹⁸ Gritsch (Ref. 14, p. 410) underlines how commercial interests and political intentions merged when the installation of a Consul in Khartoum was agreed on in 1846 (Ref. 1, p. 5). In this very same context, Médard points to the connections between Austrian–Sudanese trade relations and the Austro-Catholic missionaries who in an earlier period engaged in commerce in order to gain the support of Europeans living in that region and of Bari chiefs and headmen.¹⁹ Ships navigated the Nile under the flag of the Danubian monarchy because the Sultan had granted them free passage. Most commercial enterprises of different European countries changed colours in order to obtain Austrian protection in this period, and to reach towns and trading posts farther south. This situation was helpful to the missionaries from the Austrian monarchy. As a part of the imperial competition with other imperial forces, when the intermingling of very different interests – such as commerce, territorial access and mission – was rather frequent in order to expand positions, the behaviour of the missionaries also shows the entanglement of political,

commercial and religious processes. Only in the second half of the 1850s did the mission priests distance themselves from the trade in ivory and other goods. At this time, they obtained the support of chief Basilio Ladu Lutweri, one of the first to be baptised in the mission of Gondokoro, as Médard (Ref. 19, 46) noted.

Several imperial layers are furthermore depicted by a report written in 1857 by Friedrich Wilhelm Freiherr von Reden and published by the Austrian Geographical Society. The German-Prussian von Reden reported to the Geographical Society in Vienna that thanks to the missionaries the Austrian flag could be placed only three degrees north of the Equator. Another imperialistic aspect Reden mentioned is the metallic ship, equipped with two cannons, that Knoblehar bought in order to reach the White Nile from Cairo. Otherwise, this voyage of some 4000 km had to rely either on local sailing boat shipping or on caravanning. Von Reden, a Protestant from Hannover, praised the Catholic mission enterprise for starting with Christianisation, a civilising process among the Sudanese population: 'The Austrian flag has gained influence there; under this umbrella Christendom and civilization will slowly but certainly develop, if the mother country supports powerfully her sons in the distant Orient'.²⁰

Furthermore, von Reden, in his report to the Geographical Society of Vienna, underlined the importance of this mission for the Society: he suggested offering the Marienverein zur Beförderung der Katholischen Mission in Central-Afrika,²¹ who mainly funded the mission, the option that they (the Geographical Society) would carry out some scientific work that would support the efforts of the missionaries. Also as part of the scientific mission, he suggested the founding of a Nubian Museum as part of the ethnographical collections of the Imperial Geographical Society.⁸ The scientific imperial layer becomes more evident, as Knoblehar, who at this time became an honorary member of the Austrian Geographical Society,²² himself collected *ethnographica* and sent it to Europe. Today, some 200 objects from this collection are preserved in Bratislava and some 60 more in Vienna. To collect and furnish European collections with exotic material was typical imperial conduct.²³

The imperial aspect of the mission was further strengthened by its accompanying scientific pursuits. On Knoblehar's first voyage, two scientists were part of the group on the journey from Cairo to Khartoum: the still very young, but later famous Johann Wilhelm Baron von Müller (1824–1866) and Alfred Brehm. Both did ornithological and zoological studies along the Nile (Ref. 14, p. 270). Brehm met the missionaries and mission workers in Cairo, and in particular Ryłło and Knoblehar made a very good impression on him, in spite of the fact that Ryłło was a Jesuit:

The mission's soul was Ignaz Knoblecher from Laibach. Later I had the opportunity to admire this individual. He was as loveable as he was erudite; [...]. He knew very well some rare languages and was well-versed in some other sciences [...] he kept as well a very excellent scientific and very accurate diary.²⁴

In 1850, the Baron von Müller became Austria's Consul-General at Khartoum, an appointment that conflicted with the mission's opposition to the slave trade. Müller, who published his African experience with the *Journal of the Royal Geographical*

Society of London (1850), as well with the Austrian Academy of Science, endorsed the slave trade from the territories of the southern Sudan to the Egyptian north. He was removed from his official post one year later, after he had suggested to the Austrian government that it found a penal colony in southern Sudan (Ref. 16, p. 37–38). Müller returned to Austria.²⁵ Another ornithologist and friend of Müller, Theodor von Heuglin, became his successor as Austrian consul at Khartoum in 1852.²⁶ Another imperial character of this mission enterprise appears in Knoblehar's account of the voyage on the White Nile, which was first published in Slovenian (1850) and then one year later in German. Knoblehar writes that he ascended Mount Logvek (Ref. 3, p. 26; Ref. 8, p. 46), next to the White Nile and some 25 km south of the main mission station at Gondokoro, south of the town of Juba, which was only founded in 1922.²⁷ From the mountain top, he could consider the whole landscape. In the words of Deng Akol Ruay, Knoblehar's impressions were:

They reached Gondokoro on January 9th, 1850. Knoblecher made a brief visit to Rejaf where he climbed a small mountain to obtain a better view of the surrounding country. From the summit, he saw the undulating plain occupied by isolated homes and villages. Knoblecher was greatly impressed by so much natural beauty and by the good-natured Negroes, and consequently he decided to build a church there. (Ref. 3, p. 26)

This imperial panorama reminds the reader of scenes that Mary-Louise Pratt called in her *Imperial Eyes* 'the monarch-of-all-I-survey scene',²⁸ when British adventurers such as Richard Burton or David Livingstone climbed a mountain in order to gain an all-encompassing overview. This is a core motive of many accounts of this imperial explorative genre and a key scene of taking possession of territories that then lay at the explorer's feet.

Analyzing Victorian discovery rhetoric, I have found it useful to identify three conventional means which create qualitative and quantitative value for the explorer's achievement. [...] First, and most obvious the landscape is *aestheticized*. [...] Second, *density of meaning* in the passage is sought. The landscape is represented as extremely rich in material and semantic substance. [...] The third strategy at work [is] the relation of *mastery* predicated between the seer and the seen. (Ref. 28, p. 204, emphasis in original)

Although the missionary enterprise did not aim at territorial domination (except for the ownership of a plot of land on which to build a mission station), Knoblehar's observations were by no means innocent. Looking down from this mountain, the missionary observed a lovely landscape, with nice villages and houses. This impression might be translated from colonial-mission language as a peaceful situation but with still rather dispersed settlements troubling the formation of a more concentrated mission settlement. Nevertheless, the accessible terrains were considered a sphere of influence and the topological circumspection aimed at consolidating the dispersed settlements in pursuit of a visible and lasting mission effect.

Mission enterprises aimed to merge into native societies, to detect their weak points and groups of people and to attract them by some sorts of privilege. One of these privileges was education at the newly established schools. Furthermore, young

men and women were remunerated for their work and services in a country where money became a matter of rank and status, due to colonial influence. Another privilege was to assemble all people interested in the new Christian faith in one settlement. This could end the situation of dispersion and the threat of losing converts sliding back to their pagan ways of life. Knoblehar, on the top of the Logvek-mountain, thus, rendered understandable in the eyes of his readership the mission's imperial task that was part of the enterprise he was leading.

Finally, the imperial character of the mission work itself and the treatment of the Africans are part of the multi-layered imperial history of Austrian engagement in southern Sudan. Knoblehar, who it is said the natives named Abuna Suleiman in Arabic (Ref. 1, p. 13), depicted at length the children who were staying with him. In a report written in 1855 to the Cardinal and head of the Propaganda Fide Giacomo Filippo Franzoni, Knoblehar gave not only insights into local daily life and tasks. He also revealed his vision of how the mission enterprise should evolve:

These poor boys and girls of between five to fifteen years of age are now instructed in the principia of the Holy Faith. Furthermore, they are occupied in how to maintain a house, how to garden and to take care of the small livestock of the station with some other work according to their young age. They stay in their present residence until the right moment will be found to return them to their native land, where they won't fail to bring the precious seed of faith to their families, who will not hesitate to receive it.²⁹

The imperial character is firstly a very paternalistic one. It was the European missionaries teaching young Africans from different regions some Catholic doctrines and some work ethics. More than the work alone, the missionaries considered this teaching to be healthy regarding the children's moral conduct. In addition to the 'seed of faith' that they could bring to their families, another grain was planted that was related to the personalities of the Slavic-Austrian missionaries: this was an embryonic national identity that Knoblehar and his colleagues intended to develop within the group of pupils they lived with in Gondoroko.

This kind of subtle and subversive strategy, which was quite common in many missions around the world, took a long time to germinate and bear fruit. But only in a few colonial contexts, such as the Flemish in the Belgian Congo or the Irish in British India, were missionaries who were themselves from a national minority struggling for more autonomy in their home countries. Thus, the missionaries aimed to foster their pupils' qualification and develop their talents in order for them to become independent members of an autonomous Catholic church organisation in Africa. Nevertheless, Knoblehar knew that this would be a long process. First, he had to convince his superiors at the Propaganda Fide that the spreading of the Catholic faith required cultural brokers, translators and assistants. These assistants had the task of communicating the Christian faith to the Africans, translating the gospel, songs and liturgical texts into the vernacular languages. With loyal conduct, they were promised a privileged position within the so-called mission society and greater independence from the white hierarchies of the mission's church organisation. Knoblehar wrote in an extended report to the Propaganda Fide, entitled

'Relazione della missione dell'Africa Centrale', that he expected that the cultural boundaries between different ethnic and language groups of southern Sudan on one side and Europeans on the other would advance the formation of national societies.³⁰

In order to pursue this goal, it was important that the candidates for bearing this responsibility were recruited at a quite early age. Missionary politics therefore also encompassed a very controversial aspect, namely the buying of young African slaves from Arabic slaveholders, who were subsequently sent to Italy and Austria in order to live for some years in monasteries. Once they had learned the Catholic doctrine and ways of living, which was the plan that Daniele Comboni continued after Kno-blehar's death, they should return to Africa and disseminate Catholicism among their people. For this purpose, the missionaries received money collected in Europe –mostly in Vienna by the Marienverein and by another Catholic association in Cologne (Ref. 19, p. 42).

The young men or boys the missionaries had elected to become responsible people in an 'African' church organisation had to complete a long course of study (curri-culum), if they were expected to occupy one of the higher ranks available to an African as catechists or teachers, for instance. The status of an elected person committed the young man to live within a heavily regulated structure. The missionaries ordered and controlled the apprentice's behaviour, clothing and life. More than any other member of the mission society, he had to suspend personal contacts with his former non-Christian environment or had to reduce these relations to exclusively missionary purposes.³¹

The assistant-apprentice had numerous duties and tasks: he reduced the deficits the missionaries had regarding linguistic capacities and local customs. The young men could help in establishing social relations and took care of the missionary's house-hold. In the house-community the missionary had the possibility of controlling the assistant and teaching him. Over the years, a mutually fruitful relation could arise that was subject to serious setbacks, for example if a missionary died or was moved to another mission station. In these situations, the boy's attachment to the mission was put at risk and either his career as a catechist or even his living as a Christian came to an abrupt end.³²

The aim was to establish a native clergy in Africa who shared equally the morality and severity and worked with the same zeal as the European priests were supposed to labour. One strategy to teach young Africans this behaviour was to send them to Europe. Missionaries, priests and laymen in Europe believed that only in Europe, where the spirit of centuries-old Christianity reigned, could young converts be free from all the perils of a heathen environment. Only in Europe, they thought, they could learn and experience Christian living and its doctrines.³³

On the mission field these candidates had a twofold position. On the one hand, they were pupils and subordinated to the missionary. On the other hand, they were often in charge of a certain task, they taught younger pupils or organised communal work.³⁴ Missionaries, such as Ignacij Kno-blehar, included accounts about these assistant-apprentices in their official reports sent to Europe. Kno-blehar often wrote to

the associations that supported the Sudan mission financially. He included these accounts in order to show the advancement he and his colleagues had made on the mission field. He could assure the benefactors that the investments had born first fruits and further funding was founded on good hopes of a successful future for the enterprise (Ref. 31, pp. 392v–393v).

The Catholic mission in Southern Sudan among the Bari and Dinka, shouldered by Austrian subjects of Slovenian, Polish or Italian ethnicity, was – despite its peace-fulness – an imperial enterprise. It is an example of how to bring imperial histories closer to each other in Europe and outside it. By defining imperial layers of the history of the Austrian-Slavic-Italian mission in Southern Sudan, we can bridge the gap that we find in new global history – that is between the European expanding powers on the one side and the conquered non-European territories on the other side. Commonly, colonial and imperial history plays a role in non-European parts of the world, and reflects Europe only when it comes to identifying ‘imperial culture’ in the imperial states in Europe. What we should bear in mind is that most of the European states, which were more or less active in colonial-imperial expansion in Africa and Asia, were also internally and externally expanding states in Europe, and established regimes similar to colonial rule. Furthermore, the relationship between a mission station, individuals on the mission field – be they missionaries or converts – and benefactors in Europe is still an understudied field of imperial history. This article, therefore, argues for considering imperial layers of a common European–non-European colonial history and taking into account those actors who were themselves protagonists in both imperial enterprises.

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B. Sundkler and C. Steed (2000) *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); D. McEwan (1987) *A Catholic Sudan. Dream, Mission, Reality* (Rome: Stabilimento Tip. Julia).
3. D.D. Akol Ruay (1994) *The Politics of Two Sudans. The South and the North, 1821–196* (Upsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet), p. 25.
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5. Cf. M. Zach (1985) *Österreicher im Sudan 1820 bis 1914* (Wien: Afro. Pub), p. 54. ‘der Österreicher Ignaz Knoblecher’. The same formulation is in: M. Zach (1986) Die Entwicklung Khartums bis zum Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts im Spiegel der österreichischen Reiseliteratur. In: *Wiener Ethnohistorische Blätter* 29, pp. 39–66.
B. Sundkler and C. Steed (2000) *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 108–109 clearly name Ryłło Polish and Knoblecher Slovene. Nevertheless, both names are written in the Germanised form.
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11. This point is still difficult to formulate and to frame with historiography, as often 'Catholicism' is understood to be a unique and homogeneous entity. Never-theless, C. Weber (1988) Papsttum und Adel im 19. Jahrhundert. *Les noblesses européennes au XIXe siècle. Actes du colloque de Rome, 21-23 novembre 1985* (Rome: École Française de Rome), pp. 607–657 has shown on a European scale how Catholicism in the fields of political and social organisation was heterogeneous. This should be taken into account when studying Catholicism in the Austrian monarchy and on the mission field.
12. After my recent and more detailed investigation, I consider this term more appropriate than 'Austro-Italian mission' which I used in my book H. Wendt (2011) *Die missionarische Gesellschaft. Mikrostrukturen einer kolonialen Globalisierung* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag).
13. Cf. R.J. Goldstein (1983) *Political Repression in 19th Century Europe* (London: Croom Helm).
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15. D. McEwan (1987) *A Catholic Sudan. Dream, Mission, Reality* (Rome: Stabilimento Tip. Julia), There were several initiatives to urge the monarchy to engage into a colonial enterprise in East Africa, notably in Abyssinia, Ethiopia and Darfur; Cf. M.H. Zach (2002) Ignaz Pallme. Ein unbekannter Kolonial-lentwurf für Nordostafrika aus dem Jahr 1851. In: W. Sauer (Ed.), *k. u. k. kolonial. Habsburgmonarchie und europäische Herrschaft in Afrika* (Wien: Böhlau), pp. 79–110. P.C. Winther (2003) *Anglo-European Science and the Rhetoric of Empire. Malaria, Opium, and British Rule in India, 1756–1895* (Lanham: Lexington Books).
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31. Knoblecher, Relazione della missione dell'Africa Centrale, Wien, November 1850. APF SC Africa Centrale Etiopia Arabia 5, pp. 392v–393v.
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33. Knoblecher to Giacomo Filippo Fransoni, Khartoum, 15 October 1855. APF SC Africa Centrale Etiopia Arabia 5, p. 980.

34. Knoblechter to Giacomo Filippo Fransoni, Khartoum, 23 November 1852. APF SC Africa Centrale
Etiopia Arabia 5, pp. 538v–539.

About the Author

Helge Wendt is a Research Scholar at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin. He published his thesis with Franz Steiner *Die missionarische Gesellschaft* (2011). He is co-editor of several volumes and articles, dealing with history of science, cultural and colonial histories. In his current book project, he studies the global history of knowledge of black coal (from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century).