

**Intersections of Gender and Race in the Missionary  
Correspondence of Deaconess Anneliese Dörfer,  
East and South Africa, 1936-1967**

*Lize Kriel\**

**Introduction**

In this article<sup>1</sup> I trace the way Sister Anneliese Dörfer, a German deaconess, recorded and reported on (and of course, in the process also participated in) constructions of gender and race during her over thirty-year long interaction with Africans in the service of the Berlin Mission Society, first in British East Africa (1936-1940) and, after the Second World War, in the then-Transvaal, South Africa. In her reportage on her construction of Africans, from which I shall try to make deductions about the kind or relationships that were possible between white women and black Christians in colonial Africa, I shall be heavily reliant on the inevitable project of Dörfer constructing her own identity in the mirror of her expected audiences in Germany.

By making trans-racial interaction involving women the focus of my study, I myself also have to admit to the further inevitability of participating in, at the peril of reifying, the construction of gender and racial categories. While a strong case could be made that the interweaving of material on self-identity and how others perceive such a self should be avoided, I would argue that it is in the very entanglement of these constructions that we should look for answers to which kinds of trans-racial contact was imaginable under the particular circumstances. Dörfer's assessment of racial categories and her efforts to transcend them, must be seen as part of her personal project of finding her own identity in a male-dominated mission society in which she was claiming higher

---

\* Lize Kriel teaches African and European cultural history in the Department of Historical and Heritage Studies at the University of Pretoria. The issue of German deaconesses in the Transvaal was discussed in more depth in an article published in a special issue of *Comparativ. Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung*, 17, 5/6, 2007, edited by Adam Jones.

1. This research was made possible through a generous research grant from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. A previous version of this paper was presented at an international conference entitled "Empires and Boundaries: Rethinking Race, Class and Gender", hosted by the Institute for African and Asian Studies, Humboldt University, Berlin, in September 2006.

status-roles for herself. In this study I hope, by scrutinizing some “moments” in the historical processing (attempts at making, but also changing, denying and unmaking) of race in Dörfer’s correspondence, to illustrate something of the power of these constructions, which always collude with assumptions about gender, and are being perpetuated into our own time and beyond.

### **The role of religion: cultural contact and a European audience**

By searching for trans-racial interaction in colonial Africa in a Christian Protestant missionary setting, I follow the clue from Deborah Gaitskell<sup>2</sup> that religion was one of the few forces that brought at least some women together across a growing racial divide during the twentieth century. While Gaitskell studied mostly English missionary women’s encounters in urban areas, the focus of German deaconess Anneliese Dörfer was restricted to subsistence-farming communities in rural Africa. These were, however, rarely the audiences of the Dörfer correspondence I used as sources for this article.<sup>3</sup> Dörfer was almost always addressing a German audience. Whether she was writing a private letter to a supervisor in Berlin, or a report to a semi-private prayer group, or a contribution to a Christian women’s newsletter in Germany, or an article to one of the Berlin Mission Society’s magazines, she was fashioning her observations according to the horizons of expectation of these implicit readers. During the course of her career in Africa, the political settings of her audiences changed: from Nazi-ruled Germany to both East and West Germany during the Cold War years. At various stages in her career, Dörfer was more and less “in tune” with these changing and divergent audiences at home. What Dörfer was trying to convey in her correspondence about her interaction with “the other” in Africa, was thus

- 
2. D. Gaitskell, “Female Faith and the Politics of the Personal: Five Mission Encounters in Twentieth-Century South Africa”, *Feminist Review*, 56, 2000, p 88.
  3. The personal files and the station files of the Berlin Mission Society, are held in the Church Archives Centre in Kreuzberg, Berlin. The periodicals of the Mission Society can be accessed in Berlin, at the library of the Berlin Mission Society in Friedrichshain as well. I also consulted the correspondence and the newsletters in the private archive of the Deaconesses’ Mother House Salem-Lichtenrade, to which Dörfer was affiliated. Thanks are due to the archivists in the Church Archives Centre in Kreuzberg, as well as the librarians of the Berlin Mission Society in Friedrichshain for their kind assistance during my repeated sojourns in Berlin. Special thanks also to Sister Anneliese Pfötenhauer of the Deaconesses’ Mother House Salem-Lichtenrade in Bad Gandersheim, Germany. Nora Toma and Klaudia Ringelmann kindly assisted with many of the English translations of the German extracts quoted in this article.

a construction of self-identity in the light of how she believed she was perceived by the Africans “abroad”, as much as by the German readers “at home”. Throughout her long career, expectations from both sides changed, as did her expectations of herself.

### **Intersections of gender and race in the colonial world: the agency of women and Africans**

In the colonial period, which should include South Africa right into the apartheid era, hierarchies seem to have been constructed in such ways that white women who had made a conscious decision to build working relationships, or friendships, with black women and men, required a realization of the restrictions associated with their gender, as well as the privileges conjoined to their whiteness. By transgressing some and embracing others of the “rules” imposed by colonial society and the state, white women could broaden their playing fields to a significant extent, but there were also limitations to their agency.

In her recent stock-taking of the state of research on gender and empire, Angela Woollacott concluded that it is “in quotidian life under colonial regimes” that “the intersection of gender and race”<sup>4</sup> can best be observed. Deaconess Anneliese Dörfer’s correspondence from Africa to Germany lends itself to such an investigation. She had a knack for painstakingly analysing that which most male observers at the time would probably find too unremarkable to report on. My “idealized” aim is then to “harvest” as much as possible from the Dörfer texts about the possibilities of and the limitations to trans-racial and trans-national interaction within the British colonial world from the 1930s to the 1960s. The challenge will be to find whether Dörfer, in raising her own voice, also created space for other voices to be represented in the mission archives. She was, after all, regardless of the way in which Aili Marie Tripp advocates for the diversity of this category (“varied in their interests, the way they saw their own roles, their view of empire, and in the assumptions they made about the societies they lived in”), still, a colonial woman, with a “dual and contradictory”<sup>5</sup> identity. It is thus a matter of *finding* the grain of Dörfer’s correspondence before trying to read against it. I had to contend with the extent to which the nature of the written sources, the colonial context and indeed Dörfer’s own presence, were placing limits on African agency. One inevitably has to mull a lot

---

4. A. Woollacott, *Gender and Empire* (Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2006), p 147.

5. A.M. Tripp, “Women’s Mobilization in Uganda: Nonracial Ideologies in European-African-Asian Encounters, 1945-1962”, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 34, 3, 2001, p 543.

over Dörfer's written frustration with the limitations to her own agency before anything about the probable significance of her trans-racial interaction for African men and women involved, can be imagined. This is perhaps also an argument against an overestimation of African agency and writing missionaries too much into the margins of missionary encounters.<sup>6</sup>

### **Anneliese Dörfer and the institutions she worked for**

For all practical purposes, during her service in the "mission field" in Africa, Dörfer had been "seconded" to the Berlin Mission Society by her Deaconesses' Mother House, Salem-Lichtenrade. Originating in the nineteenth century, the Mother Houses offered pious single women from a Protestant background the opportunity of a professional career (mostly in social work, health work and education) in the name of the Lutheran Church and in the service of the communities that the sisters were placed in.<sup>7</sup> Having been six years old when her father died and the youngest of four children,<sup>8</sup> joining a Deaconesses' House might have been a way for Dörfer to secure a career and an income for herself without the need to marry. She came from a family involved in the health sector in various ways: her father and at least one of her brothers were doctors,<sup>9</sup> and her sister, with whom she maintained close contact throughout her life, was married to a pharmacist.<sup>10</sup> She was 28 and already qualified as a nurse when her Mother House started negotiating with the Berlin Mission

- 
6. My thanks go to Tolly Bradford, University of Alberta, whose conversations nourished these thoughts.
  7. L. Stempin, "Das Diakonissen-Mutterhaus Salem-Lichtenrade", in A. Pfötenhauer & G. Freytag (eds.), *Zeit aus Gottes Hand. 100 Jahre Schwesternschaft des Diakonissen-Mutterhauses Salem-Lichtenrade* (Diakonissen-Verein Salem-Lichtenrade, Bad Gandersheim, 2006), pp 24-28. Young childless widows and women who had never been married were allowed to become deaconesses. It was, however, permissible to leave the profession and the Mother House to get married, should such a prospect arise.
  8. Dörfer was born on 30 January 1906. Her two brothers were both born in 1891 and her sister in 1893. Kirchliches Archivzentrum Berlin, Archives of the Berliner Missionsgesellschaft (hereafter KAB: BMW) 3028, 1936-1981: Medical questionnaires completed upon entering the Berlin Mission Society, 1934.
  9. Dörfer's correspondence does not reveal information about the career of her second brother, but she indicates that the one who was a doctor, had specialised in eye care. KAB: BMW 3028, 1936-1981: Medical questionnaires completed upon entering the Berlin Mission Society, January 1934.
  10. The Dörfer files in the Church Mission Archives in Berlin contain several letters from Mrs Hilde Frauenberger, written on letterheads of her husband's pharmacy.

Society about the possibility of sending her to Africa.<sup>11</sup> At that point it was indicated that Dörfer had for years desired to become involved in mission work.<sup>12</sup> She received additional medical and religious training organised by the Mission Society and by October 1936 she was ready to be sent out to Africa.<sup>13</sup> Considering the tightening grip in Nazi society of the 1930s on efforts to support dissident causes within Germany, joining a mission society abroad might have seemed to Dörfer an adventurous, but relatively safe opportunity to interact with an “other” she would not have been allowed to encounter at home. Working in Africa would also relieve her of what she might have experienced as a routinized and gender-specific regimen in her Mother House in Berlin. Although the career of deaconess liberated women in Germany to remain unmarried and financially secure, they still subjected themselves to the restriction of clearly-demarcated feminine domains. Deaconesses were nurses, not doctors, and teachers, not pastors. The colonies might just have provided somewhat more scope for improvisation.

The Berlin Mission Society had been sending missionaries to Africa and China since the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> By the 1930s, their activities in Africa were focused on South Africa and the German colony in East Africa. After the First World War, the colonial administration of the latter was taken over by the British, and the German

- 
11. KAB: BMW 3028, 1936-1981: Pastor Brandenburg, Diakonissen-Mutterhaus Salem – Missionsdirektor Knak, 19 März 1934.
  12. KAB: BMW 3028, 1936-1981: two letters of recommendation to Missionsdirektor Knak, undated, but probably written between Christmas 1933 and February 1934.
  13. KAB: BMW 3028, 1936-1981: Missionsdirektor Knak – Prof Dr Schäfer, Städtisches Krankenhaus, 8 September 1934; Abreise von Schwester Annelise Doerfer (Knak), 13 Oktober 1936.
  14. The first mission stations in the Cape Colony were established in the 1830s, in the Transvaal in the 1860s and in East Africa, in the Germans’ own colony, in the 1890s. For a thorough, though “in-house” history of the Berlin Mission Society in the twentieth century, see H. Lehmann, *Zur Zeit und zur Unzeit. Geschichte der Berliner Mission 1918-1972* I-II (Berliner Missionswerk, Berlin, 1989). The mission in East Africa is covered in volumes I and II and the society’s work in South Africa in the second half of volume II. For the history of the Berlin Mission Society in the Transvaal in the twentieth century, see D.W. van der Merwe, “Die Berlynse Sendinggenootskap en Kerkstigting in Transvaal, 1904-1962”, *Argiefjaarboek vir Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedenis*, 50, II (Die Staatsdrukker, Pretoria, 1987). A history of the Berlin missionaries in East Africa was written by K. Fiedler, *Christianity and African Culture. Conservative German Protestant Missionaries in Tanzania, 1900-1940* (E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1996).

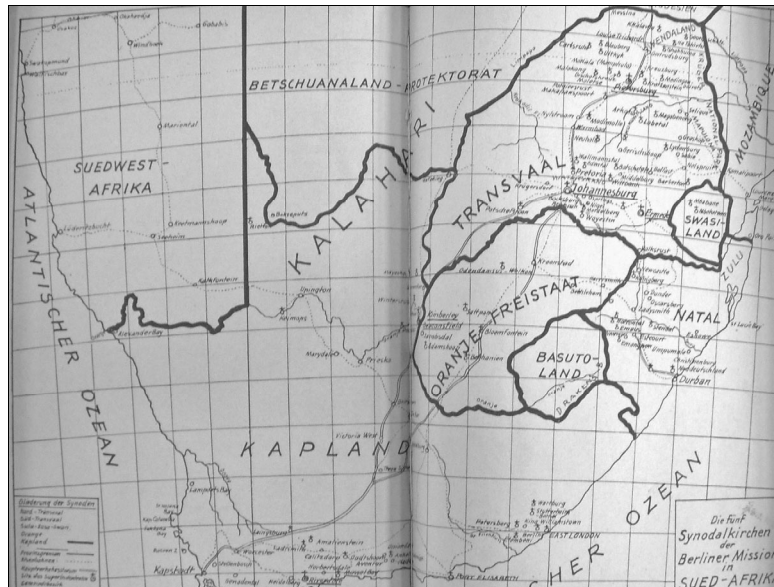




**Figure 2: Anneliese Dörfer in Kondeland, Tanganyika, circa 1936-1937.  
Source: Photo album in the Archives of the Deaconesses' Mother House  
Salem-Lichtenrade, Bad Gandersheim, Germany.**

Russian invasion of East Prussia, she fled to Lübeck, from where she returned to East Berlin, by then under Russian occupation.<sup>17</sup> After working for several years at the Mission Society's headquarters in the Russian sector of the city, she realized that her dream of returning to East Africa would not materialize. She accepted a posting to South Africa in 1952.<sup>18</sup>

- 
17. KAB: BMW 3028, 1936-1981: Pastor Walter Braun – Schwester Anneliese Dörfer, 20 September 1946; Pastor Walter Braun – Frau Oberin Julie Neumann, 7 November 1946.
  18. KAB: BMW 3028, 1936-1981: Vertrag zwischen der Berliner Missionsgesellschaft einerseits und dem Vorstand des Diakonissenmutterhauses Salem, Berlin-Lichtenrade, andererseits, 1 Januar 1947; Schatzmeister, Berliner Mission – Frau Oberin Julie Neumann, 10 März 1947; Komiteesitzung, 12 April 1949.



**Figure 3: A sketch map of the mission stations of the Berlin Mission Society in South Africa at the time of Anneliese Dörfer's arrival in the Transvaal. This was published in 1953 in the first issue of the Society's new magazine, *Der Ruf*.**

Dörfer was in her mid-forties when she arrived in apartheid Transvaal (see **Figure 4**). Because her nursing qualification was not recognized in South Africa, she was only able to practice her healing skills in an unofficial capacity, and without any access to medical supplies.<sup>19</sup> She nevertheless embraced her official new position as a missionary to African women and children – but this was a very new idea to the established patriarchal Berlin Missionary fraternity in South Africa.<sup>20</sup> She was affiliated to various Berlin Mission stations in the northern parts of the Transvaal Province (renamed Limpopo in the 1990s) until 1967,<sup>21</sup> when she retired and returned to Germany. Dörfer was her Mother House's only missionary ever to have worked for the

19. KAB: BMW 1/5547, 1936-1969: Blauberg Tägebücher, Bd. 5, Jahresbericht 1953, A. Brunke, Blauberg, Januar 1954; KAB: BMW 10904: W. Leue – M. Jäckel, 24 Juni 1953.
20. For a more in-depth discussion, see L. Kriel, "A Space Too Vast and Silent? German Deaconesses and the Patriarchy of the Berlin Mission in Apartheid Transvaal", *Comparativ. Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und Vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung*, 5/6, 17, 2007, pp 55-75.
21. Blauberg (Hananwa), Medingen (Lobedu), Gertrudsburg (Venda) and Kreuzburg (Lobedu).



Berlin Mission Society.<sup>22</sup> Because of the complicated conditions in Berlin after the Second World War, the Mother House had relocated to Bad Gandersheim near Hanover in West Germany during the Cold War years.<sup>23</sup> Dörfer thus spent her retirement, up to her death in 1981, far from her native and beloved East Berlin. Although her health had significantly depleted by the time she moved into the retirement facility in Bad Gandersheim,<sup>24</sup> she stayed in contact with members of her former congregations in Africa, as well as officials and fellow former workers of the Mission Society in both West and East Berlin.



**Figure 4: Anneliese Dörfer with two (probably Lobedu) children in the Transvaal, probably at Medingen Mission Station.  
From: Cover page of *Der Ruf* 5, September/October 1957.**

- 
22. The Mother House Salem-Lichtenrade had, however, also supported other mission societies – and it continues to do so. Personal information: Sister Anneliese Pfotenhauer, Archivist, Diakonissenmutterhaus Salem-Lichtenrade, Bad Gandersheim, Germany, November 2006.
  23. 1959 to 1960 – Pfotenhauer & Freytag (eds.), *Zeit aus gottes Hand*, pp 75-76.
  24. KAB: BMW 3030, 1954-1968: Komiteesitzung vom 18 April 1967.

### Remarks about colour in Dörfer's early correspondence: wanting to become black

In her early letters written from Tanganyika, East Africa, back home to Germany (where Hitler had just recently come to power), deaconess Anneliese Dörfer, in a display of solidarity with the people of Africa, communicated a strong will to become black – as well as a serious conviction that, through the Christian faith, this was indeed possible. Moreover, in defiance of the fact that “going native” invariably implied sexual degradation for white male missionaries in similar colonial settings,<sup>25</sup> Dörfer, as a single woman who had dedicated her whole life to service in the church, transcended “becoming black” into a respectable, wholly spiritual affair. On 2 April 1937 she wrote from Itete, East Africa, to Berlin: “I really love the ‘Negroes’. I believe with time I shall also become one.”<sup>26</sup>

When it came to trans-racial interaction, it seems that it was possible for single white female religious workers to desire and say things which white society would not have permitted their male counterparts. The extract cited below is from a report Dörfer had written to her Mother House by the end of 1938. The Berlin Mission Society and Dörfer's Mother House had a standing agreement that any correspondence received from Dörfer by the one, should also be passed on to the other.<sup>27</sup> While the Mother House was generally discreet in their interpretation of this arrangement as far as Dörfer's most personal communication was concerned, there was clearly no reservation about passing this one on to the Mission House. The report containing the statement was even published in a missionary magazine, *Der Missionsfreund*, in July 1939. In this Dörfer elaborated on what she understood under the term “Negro”, thereby providing insight into the

- 
25. In *Capturing the Soul. The Vhavenda and the Missionaries, 1870-1900* (Protea Book House, Pretoria, 2005), p 99, Alan Kirkaldy explains as follows: “In this world-view, which became the dominant one as imperialism and the colonisation of Africa gained momentum, ‘going native’ was the ‘ultimate atrocity’ that the traveller, settler or missionary could commit. It represented the betrayal of the ideals of civilisation that he was supposedly bringing from Europe and the triumph of the darkness of Africa over the light of Europe.”
26. “Die Neger habe ich richtig lieb. Ich glaube, mit der Zeit werde ich auch einer.” KAB: BMW 3029, 1934-1953: A. Dörfer, Itete – Berlin, 2 April 1937.
27. KAB: BMW 3028, 1936-1981: Vertrag zwischen der Berliner Missionsgesellschaft, Berlin No 18, Georgenkirchstr. 70, einerseits und dem Vorstand des Diakonissen-mutterhauses Salem, Berlin-Lichtenrade, Hohenzollernstr. 15, andererseits, 1. Januar 1947.

implications of such references to colour at the time – and the ways she was challenging it:

I believe, if I should return to Germany in six years' time, I would have fully taken over the ways of the Negroes and you will not recognize me any more at all. This should not come as a surprise, because when one only mingles with black people, only hears and speaks their language, one certainly becomes black. I often envy them their skin colour, which is just like clothing. They do not need to be burdened with clothes in this weather. They are already clothed, even if they walk around completely naked.<sup>28</sup>

However, as one reads more of Dörfer's letters, one very soon notices ambivalences in her inclination to "change colour". The slippage becomes particularly apparent when, on occasion, she also "whitened" black people – or at least claimed that colour (blackness) could become invisible in religious worship. Of course she also had to keep her German readers' assumptions, preconceptions and apprehensions in mind when making statements about race. The following extract is also from amongst her very first letters sent from East Africa back to her Mother House:

I have seen many beautiful and interesting things on my journey, but the most beautiful are the Christian congregations. Here the racial differentiation falls away, one does not see the black person any more, one feels connected to him through the love of Christ.<sup>29</sup>

### **Dörfer's indisputable whiteness in the eyes of colonial authorities**

Was it however possible for a European in a colonial setting of the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, or 1960s to become one of the Africans? It seems not: in the view of colonial (and later apartheid) officialdom, "being African"

28. *"Ich glaube, wenn ich nach 6 Jahren nach Deutschland zurückkehren sollte, dann habe ich völlig Negermanieren angenommen und Ihr nehmt mich gar nicht auf. Zu verwundern wäre es nicht, denn wenn man nur mit schwarzen Menschen umgeht, nur ihre Sprache hört und spricht, wird man sicher schwarz. Manchmal beneide ich sie um ihre Hautfarbe, die wie ein Kleid ist. Sie brauchen in dieser Hitze sich nicht mit Kleiderballast abzugeben. Sie sind eben angezogen, wenn sie auch völlig nackt herumlaufen."* KAB: BMW 3028, 1936-1981: Ein Tagwerk für den Heiland – das ist der Mühe wert! Aus dem Erleben und der Arbeit der Diakonisse Annelise Dörfer, Missionsschwester in Itete / Ostafrika (Auszüge aus Briefen). Zusammengestellt Ende des Jahres 1938 (published in: *Der Missions-Freund*, 7, 91, Juli 1939).
29. *"Viel Schönes, viel Interessantes, habe ich auf meiner Reise gesehen, aber das Schönste sind die Christengemeinden. Hier fällt der Rassenunterschied weg, man sieht nicht mehr den Schwarzen Menschen, man fühlt sich durch die Liebe Christi mit ihm verbunden."* KAB: BMW 3029, 1934-1953: Der erste Gruß aus Afrika von unsere Schwester Annelise!

was too strongly associated with “being black” and “being European” with “being white”. None of the secular authorities Dörfer encountered during her missionary career was convinced that she had successfully transformed into “blackness”. In 1940 she was identified as German by the British Administration in East Africa and deported with the other white employees of the Berlin Mission Society.<sup>30</sup> In South Africa of the 1950s and 1960s, she would not escape the imposition of apartheid – either on the petty or the grand scale.<sup>31</sup> Again, her whiteness, although entitling her to most of the privileges attached to this categorization in apartheid society, was further specified with a nationality label. Because she was from East Germany, she was visited repeatedly by South African police officials on suspicion of being a communist.<sup>32</sup> In 1956 she was refused the renewal of a residence permit which up to that point still allowed her to stay (as a single white woman) on the Blauberg mission station within the Hananwa people’s “tribal land”.<sup>33</sup>

- 
30. It was inevitable that the war between Germany and Britain would result in the internment and possible deportation of German subjects from British colonial territory. Marcia Wright explains how the possibility for any special treatment to the missionaries of the Berlin Missionary Society was undone by one of their own members: in 1939, Missionary Fritz Depersdorf took up the leadership of the Nazi Party in Dar es Salaam – against the orders of his superintendent. This caused the Society, together with all German missionaries in the British Territory, irreparable damage. By 1940, all German missionaries had been removed from the Southern Highlands and fifty years’ work in East Africa was brought to an end. See: M. Wright, *German Missions in Tanganyika, 1891-1941. Lutherans and Moravians in the Southern Highlands* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1971), pp 183-208.
31. When arriving in South Africa, Dörfer commented on the urban markers of “Petty Apartheid”: the “Whites Only” notices on park benches and entrances to public buildings, like post offices. Of far greater repercussion to the African Lutheran congregations on the rural Berlin Mission stations, was the fact that many of them were ear-marked for forced removal to the newly-created “homelands”, because the mission stations were situated, like “black spots”, amidst predominantly “white”-owned land. See A. Schultze “*In Gottes Namen Hütten Bauen.*” *Kirchlicher Landbesitz in Südafrika: die Berliner Mission und die Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche Südafrikas zwischen 1834 und 2005* (Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart, 2005), pp 168-170.
32. KAB: BMW 3030, 1954-1968: A. Dörfer – E. Taap, Berlin, 11 Januar 1956. Such accusations of being communist were also commented on by Hans Häselbarth, like Dörfer, a Berlin Mission employee who criticised apartheid. See: H. Häselbarth, *Lebenszeichen aus Afrika. Erfahrungen in Briefen* (Kaiser, München, 1978), pp 21-22.
33. Van der Merwe, “Die Berlynse Sendinggenootskap”, p 151.

### Africans too affirmed Dörfer's whiteness

It was, however, not as if Dörfer was perceived as black by the African communities amongst whom she worked either – neither in her pre-war East African, nor her post-war South African experience. When, for example, the Mission Society allowed her to acquire a donkey as riding animal for going from village to village on her medical rounds, she reported as follows in a letter of 6 August 1937 to her supervisor in Berlin:

The blacks were happy with me. They told me they were so sad, that I always had to go by foot – after all almost no European does that!<sup>34</sup>

The following extract, from a selection of her letters that was published in the magazine *Der Missionsfreund* in Berlin in 1939, also illustrates Dörfer's coming to terms with being allocated the role of the European by the very people she was trying to emulate in their African ways. The Nyakyusa of Kondeland amongst whom Dörfer was working, seem to have insisted on her accepting her difference, and the elevated status that entailed:

The Wanyakyusas are very hospitable, when we are travelling we are regularly offered sour milk, one sits down with the blacks and is given a calabash container, which is filled to the brim with sour milk. First the Europeans drink, this is what the custom requires, then one passes the container to the indigene, he drinks the rest.<sup>35</sup>

It is unlikely that Anneliese Dörfer even approached the South African phase of her career with the same expectations about the possibility, not to mention desirability, of “becoming black” as she had in the 1930s. As with several other foreign church denominations in the climate of growing African nationalism after the Second World War, the Berlin Mission Society too, at last, was moving in the direction of transferring

- 
34. “*Herzlichen Dank für Ihren beiden Briefe , den Esel habe ich diese Woche erhalten, ein wunderschönes Tier. Mit mir haben sich die Schwarzen gefreut. Sie sagten wir waren so traurig, dass du immer zu Fuß gehen musstest, das tut doch sonst kein Europäer!*” KAB: BMW 3029, 1934-1953: A. Dörfer, Itete – W. Braun, Missionshaus, Berlin, 6 August 1937 (private correspondence).
35. “*Die Wanyakyusas sind sehr gastfreundlich, unterwegs bekommen wir oft saure Milch gereicht, man setzt sich mit zu den Schwarzen und bekommt eine Kürbisflasche, die bis oben ein gefüllt ist mit saurer Milch. Zuerst trinken die Europäer, so erfordert es die Sitte, dann reicht man die Flasche dem Eingeborenen, er trinkt den Rest aus.*” KAB: BMW 3028, 1936-1981: Aus dem Erleben und der Arbeit der Diakonisse Annelise Dörfer, Missionsschwester in Itete / Ostafrika (Auszüge aus Briefen), Zusammengestellt Ende des Jahres 1938 (published in: *Der Missions-Freund*, 7, 91, Juli 1939).

the church they had been trying to establish in South Africa since the previous century, to indigenous control.<sup>36</sup> As put so aptly by Deborah Gaitskell with reference to Hannah Stanton, an English Anglican woman missionary from the same period, Dörfer's assignment in South Africa too, was to "facilitate her own redundancy"<sup>37</sup> – as European, for the sake of the Africans. The missionary institutions these women were working for (whether Anglican as in the case of Stanton, or Lutheran as in the case of Dörfer), clearly categorized them as Europeans, and did not consider making them "pass" as Africans. Nor did African nationalism seem to have left space for such interpretations (as a response to racist European imperialism, it was inevitable that African nationalism in these years would also have been racialised in itself).

### **If not black, then what?**

Substituting her initial enthusiasm about becoming black, Dörfer in later letters introduced herself to her German readers as having been made – by the Africans – into a sister, a mother, a doctor and eventually, some years later in South Africa when she was indeed a few years older, a male elder. Ironically, while such transcending of roles (and the elevation in status they implied for Dörfer) was unlikely to have been afforded her in German society at the particular times in her career, they marked, to Dörfer, a sense of belonging and acceptance amongst the respective African communities with which she engaged.

One could argue that identities such as sister and mother apportioned to or appropriated by Dörfer might be sought in what Jeff Guy in a different context referred to as "the kinship terminology of African society, which is extended into the realm of personal deference and political loyalty".<sup>38</sup> Also, to have thought of Dörfer as a healer did not necessarily exact the black people she encountered to transcend acceptable gender categorizations in their own society. Amongst the Africans of the northern Transvaal (now Limpopo Province), it was not strange at all to assign medicinal and healing propensities to women. In pre-colonial Hananwa and Lobedu society, the power of healing was strongly associated with the female realm. Dörfer was in fact not the first white woman to be trusted as a healer by the Hananwa. Helene Franz, the wife of missionary Robert Franz, was a qualified nurse who became famous throughout the region for her ability to treat leprosy amongst

36. H. Lehmann, *Zur Zeit* III, p 822.

37. D. Gaitskell, "Female Faith", pp 68-91.

38. J. Guy, *The View Across the River. Harriet Colenso and the Zulu Struggle against Imperialism* (David Philip, Cape Town, 2001), p 417.

Africans during the first decades of the twentieth century.<sup>39</sup> She was also honoured by the Hananwa with a praise name.<sup>40</sup>

I would nevertheless be reluctant to explain the way Africans made sense of Dörfer's presence amongst them and the roles she played solely with reference to aspects inherent in the cultures of these respective communities harkening back to pre-colonial times. By the time Dörfer had arrived among the Nyakyusa in the 1930s, and the Hananwa and the Lobedu in the 1950s and 1960s, these communities had had a fair share of exposure not only to German missionary families, but also to various other colonial presences which could have been observed and had to have been made sense of in a mixture of autochthonous and newly-appropriated metaphors. Forces of continuity and discontinuity were at play. People categorised Dörfer using references they felt comfortable with at that particular point in time. It is also likely that she was never just one thing to any African community or all the same things to all members of such a community at any given moment, but generally, there indeed seems to have been a greater willingness among African Christians to accept a white woman as one of their own than there was in white colonial officialdom to allow a white woman such alliances with Africans.

In the examples that follow, it has to be kept in mind that the phrases that will be cited, were translated by Dörfer herself, the first one from Kiswahili and the second from Sepedi. They thus reflect at least as much her own appropriation of these titles as they do the African act of endowing her with them. Through her reportage Dörfer was of course also contributing to a process of renegotiating European perceptions of Africans.

The first example of some blurring of gender and generational roles dates from the interim in Dörfer's African career, while she was still in Germany, assisting in post-war relief work and the local missionizing activities of the Berlin Mission Society from its headquarters in East Berlin. In February 1948, Anyingisye Mwankupili, one of the members of the Nyakyusa congregation Dörfer had been attached to in Kondeland in Tanganyika until 1940, responded to a letter he had received from Dörfer. He wrote affectionately back to Germany. According to Dörfer's translation, the letter was addressed as follows: "To you, my mother, my

---

39. L. Zöllner & J.A. Heese, *The Berlin Missionaries in South Africa and their Descendants* (Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, 1984), p 85.

40. Many thanks to Annemie Joubert, Northern Sotho specialist at the Humboldt University in Berlin, for this information – also see forthcoming footnotes for her advice on Northern Sotho/Sepedi grammar.

doctor sister Anneliese Dörfer.”<sup>41</sup> Mwankupili’s attachment to Dörfer thus stretched well beyond her actual years of service in his community. By the time Dörfer had left Kondeland, none of the German female medical workers could aspire to the status of “doctor”. That was an exclusively male domain. It is possible that Mwankupili may in the mean time have encountered woman doctors. Regardless, what the usage of this title for Dörfer implies, is an elevation of status. It stands for and is used by Dörfer as an indicator of appreciation and respect. The reference to Dörfer as “mother” should be seen in the same light. The fact that she had no children of her own was transcended by the fact that she played a motherly role through her religious duties.

The next example hails from Dörfer’s South African years, from the time she was officiating as replacement missionary at the Blaubeerg station amongst the Hananwa. The following is an extract from one of her letters (dated 29 March 1956) intended for circulation amongst close friends of the mission in East Berlin:

I am greeted by:  
 Re a lotsa [sic]<sup>42</sup>, Makgalabje [sic]<sup>43</sup>! – We subjugate ourselves, old man  
 O kae, Mogananwa? –Where are you, Mogananwa?  
 So you see, what I am: An old man, amongst the Bagananwa a  
 Mogananwa.  
 In the first place I work with the sick; it is difficult because the acquiring  
 of medication is almost impossible due to enormous transport difficulties.  
 Prior to the treatment I gather them (the sick) for a devotion. I seat  
 myself amongst them, hang up a huge biblical picture in front of us and  
 tell them about the Lord Jesus. In the beginning I got foolish replies  
 because I asked questions in a foolish way. For example: “Do you know  
 the Lord Jesus?” “No, where should we know him from? Is he your  
 husband?” When I tried to explain with the picture, who the Lord Jesus  
 is, they said, because he has so many long cloths wrapped around him:  
 “Oh, it is a woman?” until they beamingly establish: “So, yes he has a  
 beard.”<sup>44</sup>

- 
41. “*Zu Dir, meine Mutter, mein [sic]Arzt Schwester Anneliese Doerfer.*” KAB: BMW 3028, 1936-1981: Anyingisye Mwankupili, Itete, Tanganyika – A. Dörfer, Berlin, Februar 1848, übersetzt von Kiswahili (uncirculated).
42. It should be *lotsha* – *lotsa* means “to be happy”.
43. It should probably have read *mokgalabje*. The word *makgalabje* would have been a class 6 noun, which is hardly ever used for human beings. Had this been the word the Hananwa used, it might not have been as flattering as Dörfer had wished to believe.
44. “*Mich grüßen sie:*  
*Re a lotsa, Makgalabje! – Wir unterwerfen uns, alter Mann*  
*O kae, Mogananwa? – Wo bist du, Mogananwa?*  
*So sehen Sie, was ich bin: ein alter Mann, unter den Bagananwa ein*  
*Mogananwa.*”



To some extent Dörfer's reportage alludes to the Hananwa's confusion, based on their previous observations of white missionaries in the area (who, without exception, were white men accompanied by their white wives), about the out-of-the-ordinary gender role she had appropriated. Mark the supposition that she ought to have had a husband. It may also be that Dörfer wanted to see this form of address as approval of the hitherto male-reserved roles she had claimed for herself: the Hananwa had become acquainted with the male role of missionary-preacher during their decades-long encounter with the Berlin Mission Society, while the male role of the public performer of stories had its roots more strongly in the societal arrangements of Northern-Sotho speakers dating from pre-colonial times.<sup>45</sup> It is, however, also quite possible that the Hananwa in the 1950s merely used the male form of address to indicate that Dörfer was a figure of some importance in their community, or to grant her some status.<sup>46</sup>

### **Women's work for women – a patronizing paradigm?**

This reversal, allocation and appropriation of age and gender roles prompts one to look deeper into the kind of trans-racial relationships that were formed between this single white woman from Germany and the Africans with whom she engaged in her long missionary career. When measured against the historical trajectory of successive approaches to trans-national mission work in the twentieth century, the Berlin Mission Society's assignment for Dörfer in Africa continually seems to be somewhat behind the times. Scholars studying women missionaries in

---

*In der Hauptsache tue ich Krankenarbeit; sie ist schwierig, weil die Beschaffung von Medikamenten wegen großer Transportschwierigkeiten fast unmöglich ist. Vor der Behandlung halte ich ihnen eine Andacht. Ich setze mich unter sie, hänge ein großes biblisches Bild vor uns auf und erzähle ihnen von Herrn Jesus. Am Anfang bekam ich oft törichte Antworten, weil ich töricht gefragt habe. Z.B. 'Kennt ihr den Herrn Jesus?' 'Nein, woher sollen wir ihn kennen? Ist er dein Mann?' Wenn ich dann an Hand des Bildes erklären wollte, wer der Herr Jesus ist, sagten sie, weil er so viele lange Tücher umgebunden hätte. 'Ach, es ist eine Frau?', bis sie dann strahlend feststellen: 'So, ja er hat einen Bart'."*

KAB: BMW 3029, 1934-1953: A. Dörfer – Berlin, 29 März 1956 (Nur für die Hand des geschlossenen Mitarbeiterkreises und zur Verlesung in kirchlichen Veranstaltungen, nicht zum Vertrieb in den Gemeinden!).

45. I. Hofmeyr, *We Spend our Years as a Tale that is Told. Oral Historical Narrative in an African Chieftdom* (Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 1995), p 9.
46. Personal information: A. Joubert, Humboldt University Berlin, July 2007.

the twentieth century,<sup>47</sup> agree that the so-called “women’s work for women” approach actually belonged to the beginning of the twentieth century: according to Dana Robert, it “was the first significant gender-linked mission theory. Behind it lay middle-class western assumptions that western women needed to help liberate their sisters around the world by reaching them in their homes, teaching them to read, and providing medical care for their bodies.”<sup>48</sup> And yet “women’s work for women” was the precise strategy the Berlin Mission Society envisaged for their female employees in the 1930s – and even still after the Second World War, when it had long since been abandoned by most other mission societies during the inter-war years.<sup>49</sup>

Mission historian Ruth Crompton Brouwer argues that relationships between European missionaries and indigenous Christians that could to any degree aspire to the category of friendships, actually only became possible after the patronizing “women’s work for women” paradigm had been abandoned.<sup>50</sup> Does this then rule out the possibility for any of Dörfer’s interactions with the Africans she so earnestly tried to emulate, to be considered as friendships? In the peculiar German/British East African and German/South African missionizing environments Dörfer found herself, I wish to argue that her sustained relationships with missionized men and women might well be considered friendships – in both the pre-War and post-War period.

### **Solidarity between a white woman and black Christians**

Of course the “women’s work for women” paradigm was a reflection of Western women’s frustrations with patriarchy experienced “at home”. However, through the very act of missionizing, these patriarchal patterns had in the meantime also been introduced to Christian communities within Africa. In Tanganyika, as well as in South Africa, Dörfer experienced the Berlin Mission Society’s internal hierarchies as extremely overbearing, not only towards African converts, but also towards German women in the employment of the Society itself. This did result in occasional displays of solidarity between white women and black Christians. Dörfer’s correspondence to Berlin abounds with

- 
47. D.L. Robert (ed), *Gospel Bearers, Gender Barriers, Missionary Women in the Twentieth Century* (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 2002); R.C. Brouwer, *Modern Women Modernising Men. The Changing Missions of Three Professional Women in Asia and Africa, 1902-1069* (UBC Press, Vancouver, 2002).
48. Robert (ed), *Gospel Bearers*, p. 7.
49. Lehmann, *Zur Zeit* III, pp 828-829.
50. Brouwer, *Modern Women Modernising Men*, pp 3-5.

examples of her identifying with the missionized and presenting their case in ways that seemed hard for Dörfer's male colleagues to comprehend.

In 1939 a married missionary in Kondeland, East Africa, called "K." for the sake of the argument, had an affair with one of the other German deaconesses ("M."). After the whole situation was resolved (in Germany, with K. announcing his divorce and him subsequently being relieved of his duties in East Africa), Dörfer wrote to Berlin on 9 June 1939. Not only did she communicate her own take on the affair as a marginalized woman observer. She also reported the anger, frustration and eventual (perceived) triumph she observed amongst the African Christians. It is remarkable that Dörfer finds the courage to raise her objections – which she was not brave enough to convey in person to the inspector of the Society while on visit in East Africa – in written form by sending a letter to Berlin afterwards. Perhaps even more remarkable, is that the Mission Society in Berlin only found out, through this very same letter written by Dörfer, that the congregation in Africa had perceived *their* thus far ignored correspondence with Berlin, as the reason for the removal of the adulterous missionary!

Now, after two and a half years in this country, I have learnt to know the indigenous people a little, ~~perhaps~~ I got to know them faster, because in the loneliness of Itete I live much more closely together with them than would otherwise have been the case ...

...

You [Inspector Braun, while in Tanganyika to investigate the rumours] visited me only once with a serious face, because I'd had an attack of Malaria, and therefore I did not dare at all to open my mouth. With your departure I could briefly tell you a little, but I noticed that you had complete faith in the both of them [K. and M.]

...

Was it possible, that the voices of the Congregation were really not heard in Berlin? Today it is after all an accomplished fact – that which was averted then. Missionary [K.] was cut off from the Mission. The Congregation stood against him, they walked away to Tandala, they wrote letters and the congregation of Matema made other congregations resistant. The ~~Christians said~~, heathens said, you Christians are liars because you say, one should marry only one wife, ... the Christians said, if [K.] were an indigene, then no one would have listened when he preached, but we fear the European. It is the general view amongst the indigenes here, that the only reason why [K.] does not return, is because the Congregation had written a letter to the fathers in Berlin.<sup>51</sup>

---

51. *“Sie besuchten mich zwar einmal mit strengem Gesicht, weil ich mir eine Malaria geleistet hatte, da wagte ich schon gar nicht den Mund aufzumachen.*

Dörfer was making it clear that she, as well as the African Christians, were learning from the “fathers in Berlin” about the power of the written word, and they were taking it just as seriously as these patriarchal figures had taught them to!

### **Dörfer as mediator between black women and white men**

On other occasions, where white missionary patriarchy was also absorbed by the male members of African congregations, a white woman like Dörfer could mediate between black Christian women and the male hierarchies of the mission church with far greater legitimacy than male representatives from either race. After all, intimidated by this same patriarchy herself, she observed things differently when it came to the needs of female African Christians. What Dörfer herself was not realizing at the time, was that the feelings of inferiority amongst the Nyakyusa women (which she was blaming on “African culture”) in all probability actually resulted from a selective mix of established male views that were retained and hardened, and Western colonial prejudices that were newly appropriated by the converted Nyakyusa men. One example: also still in Tanganyika, Dörfer realized that the Christian women in the Berlin Mission Church’s congregation did not sing. In one

---

*Beim Abschied konnte ich Ihnen wohl kurz einiges sagen, aber ich merkte, Sie hatten restloses Vertrauen zu den Beiden.*

...

*Jetzt, nachdem ich zweiundeinhalb Jahr im Lande bin, habe ich die Eingeborenen ein wenig kennen gelernt, vielleicht schneller kennen gelernt, weil ich mit ihnen durch die Einsamkeit von Itete viel enger zusammenlebe, als es sonst vielleicht der Fall wäre, ...*

...

*War es möglich, das wirklich die Stimmen der Gemeinden in Berlin nicht gehört wurden? Es ist heute doch geschehen, was damals zurückgedrängt wurde. Missionar Koenig ist aus der Mission ausgeschieden. Die Gemeinde stand gegen ihn, sie sind nach Tandala gelaufen, sie haben Briefe geschrieben und die Gemeinde von Matema hat andere Gemeinden aufsässig gemacht. Die Christen sagten, Heiden sagten, ihr Christen seid Lügner den ihr sagt, man soll nur eine Frau heiraten, aber Mwakyusa hat zwei Frauen. Genommen, ihr Christen predigt Liebe, warum schlägt denn dann der Missionar seine Frau vor uns Schwarzen, die Christen sagten, wäre Makyusa ein Eingeborener so würde kein Mensch hören wenn er predigt, so aber fürchten wir den Europäer. Es besteht hier unter den Eingeborenen allgemein die Ansicht, dass K. nur darum nicht wieder kommt, weil die Gemeinde an die Väter von Berlin einen Brief geschrieben hat.”*

KAB: BMW 3028, 1936-1981: A. Dörfer, Itete – Missionsinspektor W. Braun, Missionshaus Berlin, 9 Juni 1939 (Privat Korrespondenz).

of her letters coming from a collection compiled by her Mother House up until December 1938, she reported:

I asked Seleka [one of the African woman elders]: “Tell me, why don’t you sing?” she said: “We can’t!” – It is almost hopeless. They are so convinced of their own stupidity that they do not try to learn at all. I told them: “Well, come twice a week. We shall sing together.” Since only very, very few have hymn books, I sat by the typewriter and typed hymns on copy paper and bound them in cardboard. “So, now you can come”. In the evenings we sit together on the veranda and sing as loud as we possibly can, they must hear it deep into the countryside ...<sup>52</sup>

### **Women’s work in communities of women**

Another reason why the Berlin Mission Society’s separation of gender spheres happened to continue “working” for Dörfer, particularly in South Africa in the 1950s and 1960s, was the legacy of decades of migrant labour: the rural northern part of apartheid South Africa which Dörfer had found herself in, was itself characterized by gendered segregation. Thousands of African women and children were left behind in the “tribal” areas of the Venda, the Hananwa and the Lobedu, while the majority of men went to work in the urban sectors. Outdated as the segregated gender spheres for missionary work may have become by 1950, it was not an altogether hopeless strategy under such conditions. The Hananwa and Lobedu congregations of the Berlin Mission Church in the then Northern Transvaal, were indeed micro-worlds in which African women, children and elders constituted the communities in need.

In the rather different cases that Crompton Brouwer studied, the deduction was made that friendships between white missionary women and missionized Africans (particularly men) had become possible in the twentieth century because of education as the equalizing factor between

---

52. *“Ich fragte Seleka: “Sag mal, warum singt ihr nicht?” sie sagte: “Wir können es nicht”. – Es ist beinahe hoffnungslos. Sie sind so überzeugt von ihrer Dummheit, dass sie gar nicht versuchen zu lernen. Ich sagte ihnen: “es ist gut, komm zweimal in der Woche. Wir wollen zusammen singen”. Da ja nur ganz, ganz wenige Liederbücher haben, so habe ich mich an die Maschine gesetzt und habe Lieder mit Durchschlägen abgetippt, sie in feste Pappenbände gebunden. “So, nun könnt ihr kommen”. Abends sitzen wir zusammen auf der Veranda und singen so laut wie wir nur können, sie sollen es weit ins Land hören...”*

KAB: BMW 3028, 1936-1981: Das Los der Afrikanischen Frau, Aus dem Erleben und der Arbeit der diakonisse Annelise Doerfer Missionschwester in Itete / Ostafrika (Auszüge aus Briefen), Zusammengestellt Ende des Jahres 1938.

these different parties.<sup>53</sup> Here I wish to argue for a reappraisal of the way we use the concept “educated”. Certainly it should refer to the acquisition of skills appropriate for particular environments and purposes, and not as a tacit substitute for “Europeanised”, “Westernised” or “becoming white”. As Anneliese Dörfer had learnt already soon after her arrival in Tanganyika, in localized power relations, the most influential women were sometimes only semi-literate:

On the first of April (1937) Missionary [K.] and Sister [M.] will leave me and then I shall be all alone. – Several days ago, I was quite afraid, and Seleka– Seleka is an old faithful [African] deaconess – came through my door and said: “I want to stay with you and I want to help you, also to learn [our] language; we shall be steadfast like a mountain!”<sup>54</sup>

In South Africa too, Dörfer’s access to African communities depended strongly on her abiding by the ways of the leading Christian women in the respective African congregations. Two examples follow below. They are both from a contribution by Dörfer in the June 1957 issue of *Glaubensgrüße*, the newsletter of her Deaconesses’ Mother House.

Dörfer described Carolina Mofya as her “faithful companion”. In fact, Mofya became the gatekeeper that enabled Dörfer to continue visiting the people of the Blaumberg area after her expulsion from the mission station. As is revealed in the following quotation from an account about staying overnight in a Hananwa village on one of their travels, Mofya did not see herself as Dörfer’s subordinate:

.... My good Caroline slept with me, she in the fine bed, I on my stretcher. Early in the morning, at 5 o’clock, I was woken up by her. She sat up-straight in bed and called: “Sister, let us pray!” I could not wake up so quickly at all and was wondering why I was awoken so early

- 
53. Brouwer, *Modern Women Modernising Men*, p 23. In her reading of twentieth-century alliances between professional Canadian women and Asian and African Christians, she sets “high levels of education” as a prerequisite for people from different races to form friendships”.
54. “Am 1. April (1937) werden mich Missionar [K.] und Schwester [M.] verlassen und ich werde dann ganz allein sein. – Als mir vor einigen Tagen gar sehr Bange war, kam Seleka – Seleka ist eine alte treue Diakonisse – zur Tür herein und sagte: “Ich will bei dir bleiben und ich will dir helfen, auch beim Sprachlernen; wir wollen feststehen wie ein Berg!”  
KAB: BMW 3028, 1936-1981: Aus dem Erleben und der Arbeit der Diakonisse Annelise Dörfer, Missionsschwester in Itete / Ostafrika (Auszüge aus Briefen), Zusammengestellt Ende des Jahres 1938.

for prayer. However, when she repeated this the next morning, I realised that this had been her good habit.<sup>55</sup>

Also, when writing in the same article about “Pauline” from the mission station Gertrudsburg in Venda territory, Dörfer begins by referring to her in typical missionary paternalist style as “our good helper”, but then admits in the subsequent sentences that Pauline herself might well have seen it the other way around:

Here in Gertrudsburg we are overwhelmed by the sick. Can one send them away? Our Pauline is our good helper. She has been with Sister Anna [von Waldow, another German deaconess who had retired a short while before] for many years and would not want any other life any more. She is a widow with two children. I cannot actually say that she is very tidy, but she loves Jesus a lot, and tirelessly helps with the youth meetings, or gathers the women, to tell them about Jesus and to pray with them. For me the only impediment is that she speaks Tshivenda and I Sesotho [sic]. So our communication is only in English. ... with our Pauline we really have communion in faith and in prayer.<sup>56</sup>

---

55. *“Meine gute Karoline schlief mit mir zusammen, sie im schönen Bett, ich auf meinem Stretcher, Morgens früh um 5 Uhr wurde ich von ihr geweckt. Sie saß aufrecht im Bett und rief: “Sister, lass uns beten!” Ich konnte so schnell gar nicht wach werden und wunderte mich, warum ich so früh zum Gebet geweckt wurde. Doch als sich das die folgenden Tage wiederholte, merkte ich, das es ihre gute Gewohnheit war.”*

KAB: BMW 3029, 1934-1953: Aus der Juni-Nummer der “Glaubensgrüße aus dem Diakonissenmutterhaus Salem, Berlin-Lichtenrade: Ein Brief aus Afrika von Schwester Anneliese Doerfer (als sie die Nachricht von Heimgang der Oberin ihres Mutterhauses erhalten hatte).

56. *“Hier in Gertrudsburg kommt eine große Schar von Kranken. Kann man sie wegschicken? Unsere Pauline ist unsere gute Hilfe. Sie war viele Jahre bei Schwester Anna und wollte kein anderes Leben mehr haben. Sie ist Witwe und hat zwei Kinder. Kann kaum sagen, dass sie sehr ordentlich ist, aber sie hat Jesus sehr lieb und ist unermüdlich darin, bei den Jugendstunden zu helfen, Frauen zu sammeln, ihnen von Jesus zu sagen und mit ihnen zu beten. Für mich ist nur eine Hinderung, dass sie Tshivenda spricht und ich Sesotho. So geht unsere Verständigung nur in Englisch. Ja, wir sind hier zu dritt, nein zu viert, denn mit unserer Pauline haben wir wirklich Gemeinschaft im Glauben und im Gebet.”*

KAB: BMW 3029, 1934-1953, Aus der Juni-Nummer der “Glaubensgrüße aus dem Diakonissenmutterhaus Salem, Berlin-Lichtenrade: Ein Brief aus Afrika von Schwester Anneliese Doerfer (als sie die Nachricht von Heimgang der Oberin ihres Mutterhauses erhalten hatte).

### The white women and black men

Also in her relationships with men categorised other than white, did Anneliese Dörfer's ability to make friends *not* depend on the men having acquired a professional training equal or superior to her own. The situation in which each particular encounter was engendered, determined the balance of power, mutual respect and scope for mutual affection. Reference has already been made of the friendly correspondence between Dörfer and Anyingsye Mwankupili years after Dörfer's deportation from Tanganyika. In South Africa she turned to a marginalised "coloured" man to teach her how to drive once the Mission Society had finally agreed to buy her a car.<sup>57</sup> He had the skills she needed and she was willing to approach him to convey them to her. Certainly Dörfer's celibacy, outwardly marked by her black and white deaconess outfit (often confused in the rural Transvaal with that of a Catholic nun), must have removed for men like these their apprehension about possible appearances of impropriety. Also, when some of the Mission Stations of the Berlin Society were identified as "black spots" within areas designated as "white", and the inhabitants were threatened with forced removals, Dörfer drove the Christian men from the communities involved to Pretoria in her "kombi" to submit the petitions she had helped draw up. On 10 April 1966 she wrote to Jutta Zimmermann of the women's mission bureau in East Berlin:

We are facing the resettlement of Kreuzburg but what they have planned for our people of the mission is far worse than what awaits Botschabelo. They do not get houses but miserable corrugated iron huts, the land on which they are placed is so poor and small that they cannot plant the smallest thing, at the same time Africa is sooo big and has many huge countries that one could not even imagine in Germany, on which people could settle; they are punished by not getting any land they could cultivate because they live at the mission station and pay the mission for this. There is also no work which means they are at the mercy of starvation. "Is that not very Christian!!!!?????" Maybe you will now reply to that in a different way and talk about suffering, enduring, etc, etc. Please do not do that, dear Sister Zimmermann, you would not get anywhere. Well, we have drawn up a petition and I will take two men to

---

57. Dörfer wrote about this to the Missions' Inspector in Berlin on 9 April 1956: "... *da Sie nun aber doch so freundlich darnach fragen, so dies zur Erklärung. Ein Farbiger lernt mich nun das Fahren, Bob Whitehead, der Sohn von dem alten Engländer, der mit einer schwarzen Frau verheiratet ist.*" ("And since you ask about it so kindly, I'll explain: A coloured is now teaching me how to drive, Bob Whitehead, the son of the old Englishmen, who is married to a black woman.").  
KAB: BMW 3030, 1954-1968: A. Dörfer – Missionsinspektor, Berlin, 9 April 1956.



Pretoria, where Missionary Schultz will then go with them to the Government; but our Missionaries are so soft!<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

By the time Anneliese Dörfer was deported to Germany in 1940, she had turned anything but black. When sent out to South Africa in 1952, she probably no longer expected this to happen as she had with the exuberance of youth back in the 1930s. And yet, she was well aware that she was entering a country where race had been perpetuated into a legalistic discriminatory factor that seemed to be driving all the machinery of the white government. Those categorised as “non-white”, also the Christian communities, were suffering as a result. Throughout her years of service in South Africa she had sided with black Christians despite of the fact that trans-racial friendships were being disapproved of by the state (and to a large extent also by the local white German missionary establishment vying for respectability in white society).<sup>59</sup> There was no way the apartheid state would make a German woman with Dörfer’s looks pass as black. But by now Dörfer must have realized: a black European was not necessarily what Africans in a colonized state needed.

Through her East African experience she had learnt to claim matriarchal and masculine spaces in which she could foreground or downplay her whiteness, depending on the needs of the situation at hand.

- 
58. *“Wir stehen hier in Kreuzburg vor der Umsiedlung, was man mit unseren Leuten von der Mission Station vorhat, ist weitaus schlimmer als das was Botschabelo betrifft. Die bekommen keine Häuser sondern elende Blechhütten und das Land auf dem sie stehen, ist so arm und so klein, dass sie auch nicht das Geringste anpflanzen können, dabei ist Afrika sooo groß und weite Riesen-Länder von denen man sich in Deutschland gar keine Vorstellung machen kann, könnten bewohnt werden, aber da sie auf einer Mission Station wohnen und die Mission sich das von ihnen hat bezahlen lassen, dafür werden sie bestraft, dass man ihnen kein Land gibt, das sie bepflanzen können. Es gibt auch keine Arbeit es heißt also dem Hungertod preis gegeben sein. “Ist das nicht sehr Christlich!!!!???? Vielleicht werden Sie mir jetzt etwas ganz anders darauf antworten, vom Leiden, Aushalten usw, usw, Tun Sie es bitte nicht, liebe Schwester Zimmermann, es würde nicht ankommen. Nun wir haben ein Bittschreiben aufgesetzt und ich werde zwei Männer nach Pretoria bringen, Miss Schultz will dann mit ihnen zur Regierung gehen, aber unsere Miss. Sind ja so weich!!”*  
KAB: BMW 3030, 1954-1968: A. Dörfer – Frau Dr T. Zimmermann, Berlin, Ostern, 10 April 1966.
59. G. Pakendorf, “‘For there is no Power but of God.’ The Berlin Mission and the Challenges of Colonial South Africa”, *Missionalia*, 25, 3, 1997 (*electronic version*).

She had learnt to position herself so as to appeal for acceptance amongst African Christians, be invisible or appear harmless to colonial officials, insist on equal treatment by fellow (male) missionaries, and employ the leverage of international connections. The latter, in the last years of her service in South Africa, did indeed pay off in very material terms through German donations when black Lutheran communities were in dire straits after having been forcibly removed from former mission stations.<sup>60</sup> Anneliese Dörfer's correspondence shows a realization that, under the circumstances she was working in in Africa, it was not in becoming black, but by putting the privilege of whiteness at the disposal of African communities that trans-racial friendships had value for Christians categorised as black.

The unequal dimension to such friendships was not so much that she was a woman, or that she was a "better educated" woman than the black men and women in her congregations, but that she retained the power to depart. In the greater framework of the newly-established independent black Lutheran Church of the Transvaal,<sup>61</sup> it made sense that white co-workers from Germany should eventually go home, but black Lutherans in the rural Transvaal may have experienced it differently at the time, as the slight tones of resentment in their letters to Bad Gandersheim reveal.<sup>62</sup>

### Summary

This article traces the way Sister Anneliese Dörfer, a German deaconess, recorded and reported on constructions of gender and race during her thirty-year long interaction with Africans in the service of the Berlin Mission Society, first in British East Africa (1936-1940) and then in the northern Transvaal (now Limpopo Province), South Africa (1952-1967). Throughout this period, hierarchies seem to have been constructed in such ways that white women who wanted to build working relationships, or friendships, with black women and men, required a realization of the restrictions associated with their gender, as well as the privileges conjoined to their whiteness. By transgressing some and embracing others of the "rules" imposed by colonial society and the state, white women could broaden their playing fields to a significant extent. As has

- 
60. Diakonissenmutterhaus Salem-Lichtenrade, Bad Gandersheim: Schwesternrundbrief 6/67, Anneliese Dörfer, Bad Gandersheim, 23 Juni 1967, pp 1-2.
  61. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa, Transvaal, was constituted on 29 September 1962. Van der Merwe, "Die Berlynse Sendinggenootskap", p 142.
  62. KAB: BMW 3030, 1954-1968: "Naimann – A. Dörfer, circa 1967; C. Makwela – A. Dörfer, Bad Gandersheim, 14 August 1967.

been argued by Deborah Gaitskell, religion was the one field in particular in which the growing racial divides of the twentieth century could be overcome. Initially, in her early correspondence back to Germany, Dörfer expressed the desire to become as black as the members of her African congregations. She soon had to learn that “becoming black” was unimaginable not only to the colonial officials and her male missionary employers, but also to the African congregations she was trying to integrate into. Through the years the realization came that it was not by becoming black, but by putting the privilege of whiteness at the disposal of African communities, that trans-racial friendships had value for Christians categorised as black.

### **Opsomming**

#### **Kruispunte tussen Gender en Ras in die Sendingkorrespondensie van Diakones Anneliese Dörfer, Oos- en Suid-Afrika, 1936-1967**

Hierdie artikel ondersoek die wyses waarop suster Anneliese Dörfer, ’n Duitse diakones, gedurende haar dertig-jaarlang loopbaan in die Berlynse Sendinggenootskap, eers in Brits-Oos-Afrika (1936-1940) en daarna in noord-Transvaal (tans Limpopoprovinsie) (1952-1967) konstruksies van gender en ras waargeneem en weergegee het. Dit blyk dat hiërargieë regdeur hierdie periode sodanig gekonstrueer is, dat wit vroue wat werksverhoudinge, of vriendskappe, met swart mans en vroue wou bou, bewus moes wees van die beperkinge wat met hulle gender, sowel as die voorregte gepaardgaande met hulle “witheid” geassosieer is. Dit was wel vir wit vroue moontlik om hulle speelveld betekenisvol te verbreed deur hulle te verset teen sommige en neer te lê by ander van die “reëls” wat deur die koloniale samelewing en die staat afgedwing is. Soos Deborah Gaitskell aanvoer, was godsdiens by uitstek die een veld waar die groeiende rassekloof van die twintigste eeu oorbrug kon word. Aanvanklik, in haar vroeë korrespondensie terug Duitsland toe, het Dörfer die begeerte uitgespreek om so swart soos die lede van haar gemeentes in Afrika te word. Sy moes spoedig besef dat dit onvoorstelbaar was vir haar om swart te word – nie net vir die koloniale owerhede en haar manlike sendeling-werkgewers nie, maar ook vir die Afrika-gemeentes waarin sy probeer integreer het. Deur die jare het die gewaarwording gekom dat dit nie daarop aangekom het om swart te word nie, maar om die voorregte gepaardgaande met haar “witheid” tot die beskikking van Afrika-gemeenskappe te stel. Daardeur het vriendskappe oor rassegrense heen vir swart geklassifiseerde Christene waarde verkry.

**Key Words**

Anneliese Dörfer; Berlin Mission Society; deaconess; German Lutheran; missionaries; Tanganyika; trans-racial interaction; Transvaal; women's work.

**Sleutelwoorde**

Anneliese Dörfer; Berlynse Sendinggenootskap; diakones; Duits-Luthers; sendelinge; Tanganjika; trans-rasse-interaksie; Transvaal; vrouebediening.