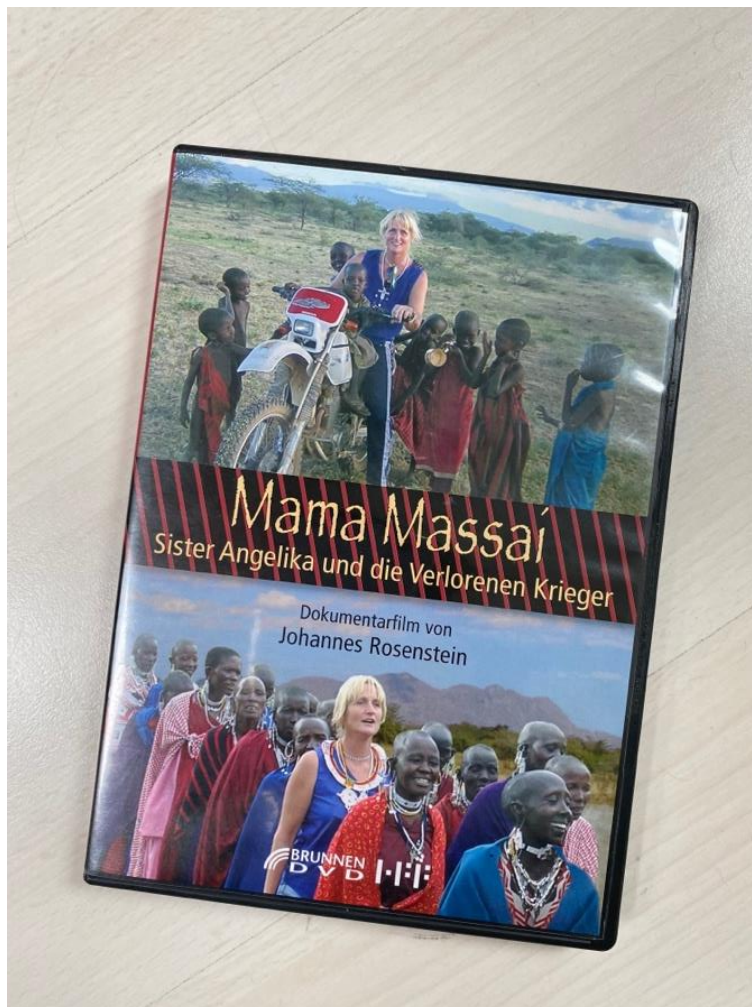


**Mama Massai: Sister Angelika und die verlorenen Krieger (2007),  
A missionary film that would be done differently today:  
a documentary film by Johannes Rosenstein**

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The livelihood of the Maasai people and their lands are threatened: climate change, government reprisals, and urbanization processes reduce the grazing land and thus the resources for their cattle herds. Angelika Wohlenberg-Kinsey, a Protestant missionary, tries to help them pursue their lives and traditions despite ever-changing circumstances. Even in the year 2022 she is still in charge of aid projects in the Steppe of Tanzania where the Maasai people live, supported by the German association “[Hilfe für die Massai e.V.](#)” (Help for the Maasai).



In the 68 minutes long documentary "Mama Massai: Sister Angelika and the Lost Warriors", which was released in 2007, a camera team accompanies Angelika Wohlenberg-Kinsey during her work. The director of the documentary is [Johannes Rosenstein](#), who is known today for his documentaries regarding topics of Religion and entanglements between Germany and Africa, especially in connection with humanitarian projects. The documentary was his final project at his Film academy where he learnt the art of directing and producing films. With a lot of luck, I was allowed to talk to him about this film in 2023. I am incorporating the results of this conversation into this review.

Several times over the course of a year, Rosenstein and his film team from the Munich Film Academy accompanied Angelika in Tanzania and visited her multi-sited aid projects in rural areas as well as the city. While the documentary is a film about missionary work in the early 2000s, it also attempts to combine the theme of missionary work in East Africa with a portrayal of the Maasai people and the difficulties they face.

Rosenstein grew up in Germany, England, Kenya and Tanzania. In his past, he actively engaged in humanitarian aid. That's why he also knew Angelika before he even decided to make the documentary his final project to graduate. Rosenstein studied film studies, political science and sociology at the Free University of Berlin before beginning his studies at the University of Television and Film Munich. The University in Munich usually has a small fund that students can use for their graduation projects.

The main protagonist Angelika, by training a midwife, who is the linchpin of this documentary, arrived in East Africa in the 1980s, lives and works mainly in the southern Steppe. Her primary residence is in Arusha, but she spends a lot of time traveling to the southern, as well as the northern steppe, to support aid projects. She also makes trips with a mobile hospital and provides medicine to the villages. In addition to aid work in the form of educational, health and women's projects, she does missionary work, which was the very motivation for her engagement in East Africa.

Angelika describes herself as a missionary of the Evangelical Church, who already felt the call to mission as a child. Thus, she sees herself as a "bridge to God and a better future" for the Masai.

The film begins with a parable: A story is told, vividly portrayed by children. It tells how the Maasai people received the grazing land and the cattle from God. Throughout the course of the documentary, faith in God is a constant theme. According to Angelika, the Maasai people's God is an "arbitrary God" who curses and punishes people, while faith in Jesus Christ would eliminate this fear of curses and punishment and give the Maasai people inner "freedom".

The "Maped Maasai Choir" also plays an important role in the documentary. This choir combines musical elements of Maasai songs with Christian lyrics. As the film progresses, a cassette tape is recorded with Angelika's help. The songs of the choir provide the musical background for the documentary.

Besides Angelika, other protagonists are introduced who are involved in the different projects. Their introduction follows along the narration of the documentary: There is Rita, who runs a boarding school for girls in Arusha, which was founded by Angelika. Maliaki, a representative of the NGO MAPED (Maasai pastoralists for education and development) who is involved in school projects and health education and who founded the choir whose cassette

is recorded during the film. Loserian, a Maasai man who met Angelika as a former sentry and now supports her in the mobile hospital with which she travels through the Steppe. And Ndeshi, who has a mother-daughter relationship with Angelika and oversees an elementary school in Malambo.

Language is sometimes a barrier in her missionary work and her capacity to help: While Angelika speaks English and Swahili, she can't speak Maasai. That is why she needs Maasai people who want to engage in the role of intermediaries in order to spread her concerns, for example when she wants to distribute or apply medicines in the Boma.

Various aspects of missionary aid work (school, health, and women's projects) are explained well in the film but are not embedded in a critical context. It is, however, true, that this is also not the film's aim: furthermore, one must bear in mind that this film was released in 2007.

According to the documentary, Maasai culture is portrayed as a static, never-changing entity that now needs to be transformed by the Christian faith. The Maasai carry both the burden of timelessness and archaism, they are an icon of "African-ness" (Galaty 2002). The Maasai people are the only people in Tanzania who still maintain their traditions, which causes problems because they do not respond properly to the changes around them caused by the state. For example, the Maasai people would not be able to farm because of their old beliefs. As a result, they do not have enough food. But they are reluctant to change existing traditions for fear of curses from their god as punishment. Women would also be treated badly by Maasai men - a cultural aspect that, following Angelika's argumentation, could gradually be changed if Maasai men changed their belief system.

In terms of imagery, the wideness of the Steppe is often highlighted. The individual Boma, the organized space in which the Maasai people live, are filmed in detail as well. People speak into the camera themselves when they are filmed, to narrate about their situation and their relationship to Angelika. Angelika's home in Arusha is also one place where filming takes place. Figuratively, the film follows its narrative structure: even when topics about the Maasai people are told, the documentary is essentially about them in the context of Angelika. Sister Angelika, as she is called, is the main character and the thread that holds the film together.

The documentary is essentially a missionary film, as Christian missionaries currently propagate a way of dealing with problems such as climate change, land displacement, and the mistreatment of women through changing and maintaining a strong belief in God. Christian mission is illustrated on the basis of Angelika and her faith: which is the motivation for whatever she does and what she is doing /for the Masai. Missionary work, its historical-colonial entanglements, and the resulting criticism about it, are addressed only briefly by Angelika herself. She deplores that her work with the Maasai would be considered racist in Germany, but the people criticizing her "haven't gone through twenty-three years of the frustration that I have gone through and so have many others" in humanitarian aid work. Why her work would be labeled as problematic as well as the mentioned frustrations she's gone through, is not elaborated. The documentary is much more concerned with demonstrating the aid that is given than commenting on the discourses around it. Another critical aspect is that statements such as "Wazungu, i.e. Whites, are more developed" and "Africans are like children" are left uncommented. The documentary can be seen as a testament to its time.

Open debate and critiques of White Saviorism and its close connection to Missionary work were taken up extensively around the time the film had been produced, as well as after that, for example, in works such as "White Savior Film: Content, Critics, and Consumption" by

Matthew W. Hughey (2014). As I watched the documentary in the year 2023, I would have liked Angelika to be more self-reflective about her missionary projects in terms of privilege and historical continuities. The missionary still tours German religious communities to collect donations for her organization: She still does humanitarian aid work, builds and facilitates schools and helps giving medical aid to Maasai communities for which she needs the money.

Watching the documentary may be interesting for those scholars who wish to inform themselves about German missionary and aid work in Tanzania, and the way it was portrayed in the early 2000s.

When asked if Johannes Rosenstein would make the documentary the way he did when he was about to graduate from film school, he answered firmly: "No, I wouldn't do it the way I did it back then. A lot has changed regarding documentaries like these." At the end of our conversation, he points out that one day he would like to see a global film culture in which the Maasai people would come to Germany to make a documentary about German people, instead of German filmmakers doing documentaries about them. He is still in contact with Angelika.

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