

Johannes Rebmann, 1820-1876, In spiritual and linguistic perspectives

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There are good reasons for studying the life and work of Johannes Rebmann. He was a 19th-century German Christian, who was trained to be a missionary in Switzerland, and joined an English Mission, which sent him to Muslim-ruled East Africa. There he stayed for 29 years, before returning home blind and sick, soon to die. Although these uncommon facts sound interesting enough they do not offer the final motivation of my interest in him. Rebmann in the first place was a faithful servant of God, who used his gifts for the extension of the Kingdom. Let us look at him from a spiritual and from a linguistic perspective.

Spiritual Perspective

Undoubtedly father Johann and mother Anna Rebmann in Gerlingen, Württemberg, had no idea that God had destined their little Johannes to spend more than half of his life as a missionary in faraway Africa. Yet being shaped by

the 19th-century *Awakening Movement*, in the line of German Pietism and the Reformation, they believed that God has a plan with every life. Like any Christian their son was called to be a witness of Jesus Christ and his Kingdom. But where and how, they would not have realised. East Africa was his destination.

Young Johannes was to give a different witness of Christ to the Africans than the Portuguese had done when they subjugated East Africa by military power, symbolised by the establishment in 1528 of Fort Jesus, still proudly towering over the Isle of Mombasa off the East African coast. His witness of Jesus Christ also differed from Muslim ideas on Prophet Isa that were spread by the imams of the Sultan of Oman and Muscat who had ruled the African East coast, including Zanzibar, and since 1837 Mombasa, for almost three hundred years.¹ Mombasa in the north and Kilwa in the south were the two garrison towns of the long stretched-out territory belonging to the Sultanate on the main shores. Each had a governor (*mangi*), customs officers, and a guard (*beluch*).²

Ten years before Johannes Rebmann's birth, in Derendingen near Tübingen Johann Ludwig Krapf was born. He was to develop a far-reaching plan of counteracting the ever continuing penetration of Islam in Africa, by a chain of mission stations from the Indian

¹ At Rebmann's arrival the Sultan was Sayyid Said, who ruled from 1804 to 1856. In 1837 he asked the assistance of Shaikh Isa Bin Tarif in conquering the town of Mombasa. Fort Jesus was renamed Fort of Isa, after the victorious Shaikh.

² Cf. John Hanning Speke, *Journal*, January 1857.

Ocean at Mombas to the Atlantic Ocean in the West. In a way Krapf enveloped the life of Johannes Rebmann. He was there in 1846, when Rebmann arrived in Africa. He stayed there together with him during seven years of their lives. They kept contact even after Krapf had left Africa and they had been separated by a great distance. When Johannes Rebmann, in 1875 by the end of his life, came home to Württemberg, Krapf was there to assist him. Both got deeply involved in the Swahili world of the coastal regions of present-day Kenya and Tanzania.

However, the vision of both pertained to more than those regions. Krapf's main focus was the Galla of Abyssinia. Rebmann felt called to pave the way for missionaries to the people of central Africa, where at that time a large interior lake was supposed to be. Like many contemporaries Rebmann and Krapf were touched by the enthusiasm of David Livingstone, born in 1812, who travelled to the interior of Africa, opening it up to 'Christianity and commerce', hoping to heal the 'open wound' of slavery and slave-traffick, and to find the enigmatic sources of the Nile.³

At a time when Africans were in the shackles of slavery, traditional religions and Islam, Rebmann believed in God's plan for Africa. God's plan, not only for the Swahili, Nika, and Jaggá people of Mombasa and its opposite mainland, among whom he worked, but also for

the people of Lake Nyasa, more than 2000 kilometres from his Mombasa area. Rebmann never visited the land of the Nyasa people, present-day Malawi. He only had vague ideas about its location and extent. He and his colleague Ludwig Krapf and so many other explorers of his time had to wait for the discoveries of David Livingstone before they could adjust their dreams about one huge interior lake being the source of the Nile, to the reality of a chain of smaller ones, ending in the lakes of Malawi. However, his deficient knowledge and the enormous geographical distance did not prevent God from using Rebmann in the process of preparations for reaching out the Gospel to the people of Lake Nyasa. Rebmann was convinced that God had promised to use him as an instrument for initiating Christianity on the eastern coast and in the interior of Africa. By the end of his work in Africa, when he had become practically blind, he continued to believe in God's faithfulness. 'God ist getreu' (*God is faithful*), that he wanted to proclaim at all places (*'an allen Orten'*).⁴

Linguistic perspective

Rebmann was not only a faithful witness of Christ, but he was also a gifted linguist. Together with Krapf he made the Swahili and Nika languages available in writing. This affected a language that is probably the largest in Sub-

³ cf. William Desborough Cooley, William Desborough Cooley, *Claudius Ptolemy And The Nile: Or An Inquiry Into That Geographer's Real Merits And Speculative Errors* (1854).

⁴ Rebmann in Kisuludini in a poem sent to his relatives in Gerlingen, 20 August 1874: 'Gott ist getreu./ Sein Herz, Sein Vaterherz/ verläßt die Seinen nie/ Gott ist getreu./ Im Wohlsein und im Schmerz/ erfreut und trägt er sie./ Ich bin ein blinder Mann geworden./ doch sage ich an allen Orten: Gott ist getreu.'

Saharan Africa. Reading and writing Swahili had enormous positive consequences for the communication of the Word of God and for multifaceted development of the Swahili speaking peoples.

Perhaps just as important is Rebmann's significance for the language of the people of Lake Nyasa. He was one of the first to reduce this language to writing, and the first to compile a dictionary of it into English. A proliferation of different names, differently spelled, for the same language has contributed to the relative obscurity of Rebmann's work. He called the language 'Kiniassa', hence his book is entitled, *Dictionary of the Kiniassa Language*. Others have known the language as e.g. Kinyassa, Kinyasa, Kinyanza, Kinyanja, Chinyanja, and Nyanja. After 1968 it became generally known as Chichewa, although the name Chinyanja is still in use, especially in Zambia and Mozambique. For a long time Rebmann's Kiniassa dictionary remained unnoticed for those who knew the language only by other names. However, the origin of the Kiniassa Dictionary, which was printed and published in 1877,⁵ shows that Rebmann is one of the earliest fathers of Chichewa lexicography. What enabled him to compile such a collection of vocabulary? Rebmann was familiar with the general structure of Bantu languages to which Chichewa belongs, but that on its own gives no access to Chichewa vocabulary. In his environment in

⁵ John Rebmman, *Dictionary of the Kiniassa Language*, edited by L. Krapf, Basel: St. Chrischona/ London: CMS, 1877 [John Rebmman is an anglicised version of his real name].

Mombasa and later in nearby Rabai and Kisuludini he needed an extra source of information, which was not naturally at hand. In the way things went we see how God breaks through natural limitations.

In this respect God used for a good purpose one of the biggest exploits of Satan in many centuries of African history, the phenomenon of slavery. From Africa's east coast the Swahili Arabs had penetrated into the interior, and with the help of tribes that they converted to Islam, they had dragged numerous Africans from their villages, killing those that they deemed not useful, to the coastal island of Zanzibar, where they were sold to slave-buyers in Muslim-ruled East Africa, the Arab world, Persia and India. From early 19th century also the people of Lake Nyasa had been targeted by Swahili-Arab slave traders and their Yao or Chewa helpers. From the 1840's the Jumbe dynasty had ruled over a Swahili-Arab kingdom at Nkhotakota. Also south and north of Nkhotakota slave-traders settled.⁶ Thousands of Chewa, Mang'anja and Tumbuka were cruelly captured, assembled and transported across the Lake, to the coast of the Indian Ocean, finally to places where the Sultans of Oman and Zanzibar had stretched their power. In Rebmann's time Mombasa, at almost 250 km from Zanzibar, belonged to the sultanate. Consequently, it was a place where slaves were used, also slaves originating from the regions of

⁶ Steven Paas, 'History of Islam in Malawi', in: Paas, *Beliefs and Practices of Muslims: The Religion of our Neighbours*, Good Messenger Publications, Zomba: 2006, pp. 125-133.

present-day Malawi.

In Rebmann's contact with these people the *Dictionary of the Kinyasa Language* was born. His informant was Salimini, a slave from central Malawi. Subsequently, this tool of communication could be used in the settlement of freed ex-slaves that was established in Mombasa about the time of Rebmann's return home. Also the first missionaries to Malawi used it. To them it was an instrument for mastering the language and spreading the Gospel, and indirectly for strengthening those religious and political influences from overseas that put a definite end to the shame and misery of slavery and slave-trade in East Africa.

Biography

Through Rebmann's spiritual and linguistic work and the impact it had on missionary workers in a large area of Africa, God allowed his Kingdom to progress. Of special interest is that Johannes Rebmann started the history of Chichewa lexicography.⁷ I am grateful that God gave an example in his servant Rebmann, enabling us to continue humbly where Rebmann and others began. With a team of resource persons and other helpers an up-to-date Chichewa Dictionary in ever improving editions has been made,⁸

⁷ Steven Paas, 'A History of Chichewa Lexicography', see: <http://www.chichewadictionary.org/chichewa-lexicography>

⁸ Steven Paas, *Dictionary/ Mtanthauziramawu: Chichewa/ Chinyanja - English and English - Chichewa/ Chinyanja*, 2nd edition, Blintyre/ Veenendaal: Foundation Heart for Malawi, 2010.

which since May 2010 has also been accessible online through the internet.⁹ I trust this sketch of the spiritual and linguistic aspects of Rebmann's life and work explains my conviction that we all can profit from taking away the veils of history that have hidden him.

Based on that conviction, soon I hope to publish a Rebmann biography,¹⁰ which may contribute to filling up the gap in the existing knowledge on him. It is meant as a scholarly presentation of the known facts and aspects of Rebmann's life and work. As such it is a monograph and a biography. This study taps not only the limited number of German literary sources, but also the more numerous Rebmann documents in English.

We trust the book will throw more light on the life and work of the missionary, his spiritual and linguistic significance, and his place in the pattern of 19th century relationships between Europe and Africa. *Chapter 1* is an introduction, surveying available literature. *Chapter 2* pictures the setting of German Pietism that fed Rebmann. *Chapters 3-8* describe the course of his life. *Chapters 9 and 10* focus on his work as a linguist, particularly as a lexicographer and translator. Two *Appendices* are related to these two chapters; they especially deal with Rebmann's Kinyasa Dictionary and its place in Chichewa lexicography. *Chapter 11* describes the various aspects of his work as a missionary, including methods and theology.

⁹ <http://translate.chichewadictionary.org>

¹⁰ Steven Paas, 'Johannes Rebmann, 1820-1876 - A Servant of God in Africa', unpublished manuscript.

Chapter 12 is an evaluation of Rebmann's significance for developments after him.

Finally, our presentation of Rebmann as a servant in God's Kingdom in 19th century Africa, does not hide that this biography still leaves a lot of blank spots and hazy clouds. May this study set a trend, and encourage others to discover more.