

## **Johannes Rebmann, 1820-1876** **A Servant of God in Africa**

Steven Paas

Mr. Mayor, members of the Board of the Rebmann Foundation, ladies and gentlemen!

Let me first explain what motivated a Dutchman like me to take a profound interest in the life and work of Johannes Rebmann and to write a biography on him.

-Was I a distant relative of the Rebmann family, or one of its branches, Draack, Graser, Haag, Jamecsny, Knoblauch, Maisch, Rösler, Schrade, Zipfel, etc.?

-Was I somehow related to Gerlingen and Korntal, or to Württemberg?

-Did I have a special relationship to the places Rabai and Kisuludini, near Mombasa in Kenya, where Rebmann lived and worked for 29 years?

-Was I a researcher of the history of geographical discoveries in Africa, wanting to know more about Rebmann, who was the first European to see Mount

Kilimanjaro?

-Was I fascinated by Johann Ludwig Krapf, that famous son of Derendingen, who had gone to Africa 9 years before Rebmann, and to Mombasa 2 years before Rebmann?

No, perhaps I am disappointing some of you, but none of these possible motivations played a role in my mind at first. Only gradually they became interesting, as by-products of my research of Johannes Rebmann himself.

As a Christian, a theologian and a church historian the German Reformation of Martin Luther had deeply influenced me. Of its aftermath in the German Pietismus started by Spener, I was well aware, but its Württemberg branch had never attracted my specific attention. Much later I saw the connection with Rebmann, and thanks to the vast knowledge and the library of my friend Rob Kool, 18th and 19th century Württemberg spiritual awakenings were drawn nearer to my consciousness. Also Pastor Rolf Scheffbuch has provided significant support. Consequently, I was able to understand more of what had influenced Rebmann, and what made him go to Africa.

I first stumbled on Rebmann when I lived in Africa myself. It was in Malawi, more than 2000 km from the place where Rebmann was. In the city of Zomba I taught future Pfarrer and served the local Church as a minister.

Although English is the official language in Malawi, most communication is in the local language, Chichewa, also named Chinyanja. When starting to learn that language I noticed that no Dictionary was available. Lexicographical work in the past had produced several collections of vocabulary from and into English. However, somehow all attempts to create a permanent dictionary at the required scholarly and practical levels, had failed. God has given me the opportunity and the strength to change that undesirable situation. In a process of research from 1997, together with a team of some of my students and other contributors, we managed to produce a series of separate English-Chichewa and Chichewa-English Dictionaries. In 2009 the two files were joined together, and a combined first edition was published. In 2010 it was followed by the second edition. The process of additions and corrections is going on. In 2012 we hope to publish the third edition of the book. Since May last year the Chichewa Dictionary can also be consulted online.

It took some time before I discovered that my lexicographical activity had closely connected me to a 19th century German missionary in present-day Kenya, Johannes Rebmann. Whereas, in 2010, I produced the latest edition of the printed Chichewa Dictionary, he definitely was almost the first one to do such a thing, more than 150 years ago. He compiled his lexicon in the period 1854-1860. Eventually it was edited by his colleague

Krapf, and was printed in 1877, one year after his death, a book of 184 pages Chichewa-English vocabulary. Before Rebmann a Portuguese army officer, Antonio C.P. Gamitto, who travelled from Tete in Mozambique to Lake Malawi in the years 1831 and 1832, had made a list of Portuguese-Chichewa vocabulary, which was added as an appendix to his diary published in 1854, which was published in an English translation in 1960. Anyway, this earlier Portuguese lexicographical activity cannot take away from Johannes Rebmann the title, ‘an early father of Chichewa lexicography’.

You can see that his book does not bear the name Chichewa, it is called Dictionary of the Kিনিassa Language. This requires some explanation. Let us first look at the prefixes ‘chi’ and ‘ki’. Both mean ‘language of’, that is language of the Chewa people and language of the Niassa people. The word ‘Niassa’ is a Swahili form of the much better known word Nyanja. It means ‘lake’ and refers to the Lake of present-day Malawi. Hence, Kিনিassa and Chinyanja are two names for the same language, spoken by the people living near Lake Malawi. In a later stage, President Kamuzu Banda of Malawi, ruling from 1964 to 1994, replaced the name Chinyanja by the name of his own local dialect, Chichewa. Subsequently, the language became universally known as Chichewa. The difference of names for the same language has caused a lot of confusion. It may also offer some explanation of the fact

that for a long time the world has not realised that Rebmann's Kinyasa dictionary takes first place in the history Chichewa dictionaries.

What linked Johannes Rebmann to the language of Lake Malawi? We should understand that he lived and worked in the Muslim-ruled Sultanate of Zanzibar, and in the context of slavery and the slave-trade. Only by the end of Rebmann's stay in Africa did the British manage to force the Zanzibar Sultanate to close its slave market. Day by day Rebmann and his wife Emma Tyler were confronted with the presence of men and women who were owned by their slave masters. Many belonged to the age-old phenomenon of internal African slavery. Prisoners taken in wars with nearby tribes lost their freedom, and were used as workers, wives or soldiers. Most slaves were captured in the African interior, at the end of long-distance trade lines. For centuries Africans had been sold into slavery to the East African coast, and from there to the Arab-dominated world, the Persian Gulf and India, often as domestic servants, concubines, and plantation workers. Many of these slaves were people from present-day Malawi. One of them was Salimini, who was captured in his home village Mphande, near Ntchisi, approximately 1844. He was transported through Lake Malawi to the coastal island Ibo, and from there to Zanzibar, where he was sold to a slave-owner in Mombasa. There Salimini and Rebmann providentially met. For years he assisted

Rebmann as an informant for the Kinyasa Dictionary. Salimini personified the phenomenon of slavery, which was a very important aspect of the difficult context of 19th-century mission work in Africa.

Rebmann's language work was not at all limited to the language of the distant people of Lake Malawi. His main linguistic effort was directed at the languages of East Africa. In the coastal regions that was the Swahili language, spoken by an ethnic mixture of Arabs and Africans, the Swahili-Arabs, and their African allies. Today this is perhaps the largest language of Africa, spoken in Tanzania, parts of Kenya and Uganda, and Zanzibar and other islands off the African coast. When Rebmann arrived in Mombasa in 1846, Johann Ludwig Krapf had been there already for two years. He had started translating English words into Swahili, a strange method for starting to reduce an unknown language to writing. The first-ever Swahili Dictionary, of 1882, bears Krapf's name. However, after he left Africa in 1853, it was Rebmann who for 23 more years collected Swahili vocabulary and translated it into English. On his return to Europe, in 1875, he brought his collection with him to Korntal. Because he had become blind and soon died, Krapf worked on his manuscripts and must also have used them. Another important language was spoken by the Nika people, today they are called the Mijikenda. They lived at a distance from the coast, sometimes beyond the Muslim-Arab ruled

zone of the Sultanate. Rebmann produced a Dictionary in their language. It was edited by a colleague Thomas Sparshott, and published in 1887, more than ten years after Rebmann's death. Moreover, Rebmann worked on the translation of portions of the Bible in the Nika and Swahili languages.

Rebmann was not in the first place a language expert or a discoverer. He considered himself to be called as a messenger of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. All other activities, the compiling of dictionaries, the making of translations, the building of houses, the journeys to unknown regions and mountains, were instrumental to this one objective, leading people to Christ, to be saved. For this reason he was trained by the Basler Mission, and for this reason the Church Missionary Society (CMS) of the Evangelical branch of the Anglican Church had sent him to East Africa.

All these years in East Africa Rebmann was motivated by Christ's *Great Commission*, given in *Matthew 28: 19, 20*: 'Go, and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you'. This challenging instruction by the Lord is followed by some encouraging and comforting words: 'And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age'.

Both the missionary command and the addition of comfort by the Saviour were very important to Rebmann. For most of the time he was alone on his remote post, in very primitive circumstances, suffering under many difficulties. Then the Jesus' call, and the comforting presence of the Lord would strengthen and encourage him to continue. Let us look at some of the problems he experienced.

***Being far from home.*** In his *Briefe* we can notice how much Rebmann loved his relatives at home and his native village Gerlingen. However, at 19 he left for Basel, at 24 for London, and at 26 for Africa. He never went on furlough to Europe. He had to live without his beloved ones for most of his life.

***Being increasingly visually handicapped.*** In general Rebmann was a healthy and strong man, physically and mentally. That is one of the reasons why he could endure in a very hot climate under harsh conditions for such a long time. However, he was more and more troubled by decreasing eyesight, which became a very serious problem by the end of his stay in Africa.

***The death of his wife.*** In 1851 Rebmann married to Emma Tyler, who had been the widow of a missionary in Cairo. They were together for 15 years until her death in 1866. Their only son Samuel had died before. Emma was his faithful companion and helper. Her death was an

tremendous blow to him.

***The death and departure of newcomers.*** The CMS tried to increase its number of missionaries in East Africa by sending new personnel. However, practically all newcomers either died or had to leave soon because of ill-health or inability to get used to the primitive circumstances.

***His problematic relationship with Krapf.*** Rebmann's place in history is more or less enveloped by the life of Krapf. One could also say, to an extent Krapf overwhelmed and absorbed him. Rebmann and Krapf were very different characters, the one patient and enduring, the other hasty and out for quick results. They also differed theologically and in missiological and linguistic method. That caused problems during their seven years together in the mission field. It also caused problems after Rebmann's return to Gerlingen and then to Korntal. At least part of Rebmann's work was put in the shade by Krapf's publications.

***Dangerous political situations.*** More than once Rebmann's life was threatened by offended African chiefs and Muslim rulers, by violence by competing Muslim rulers, or by invasions of Masai nomads.

***Resistance by the religions of African traditionalism and Islam.*** The power of witchcraft, sorcery and magic was very strong, and could only be broken by the power of the Holy Spirit. A very serious problem was caused by the dominance of Islam and the Muslim government of the Sultanate, and related to that the cruel reality of slavery and slave-trade.

Let me dwell a bit more on this specific problem. More than once Rebmann made critical remarks with regard the very existence of the mission field in the Mombasa. He tried to explain to the CMS secretaries in London that for the missionaries life was unsafe in Muslim-ruled East Africa. They lacked protection and their credibility was undermined. Because of this Rebmann suggested the temporary interruption of some sensitive activities in the mission field until the termination of the power of the Sultanate and the slave-trade by European countries.

Rebmann's misgivings with regard the chances and opportunities of the mission field in Rabai and Kisuludini were not caused by primitive living conditions, the harsh climate, the deaths of his wife and some colleagues, the quarrels with Krapf, the lack of fruits in terms of the number of converts, or the threats by invading Masai. In his letters to the CMS he had not suggested to entirely terminate the work, neither had he agreed to instructions to abandon the field and to come to Europe.

Rebmann suggested a temporary interruption of some outreach activities, and a concentration on linguistic preparations. He himself wanted to stay on his post until the main obstacle to mission would be taken away. In his view Christian mission was made almost impossible because the missionaries were dependent on the slave-trafficking Muslim government of the Zanzibar Sultanate, which through treaties had become an ally of Britain. In the observation of Africans the missionaries were on the side of Islam rule, slavery and slave-trade. That undermined their credibility and closed the hearts of Africans to the Gospel.

After 1854 Rebmann began to notice that people in Rabai/ Kisuludini slowly were beginning to be more receptive. The hopeful signs of a break-through were interrupted by a temporary stop of the work in the Mombasa area. An internal revolution in the Sultanate and the invasion of Masai robbers had made the situation too dangerous for the Rebmanns. In January 1858 they were forced to flee to Zanzibar, where they had to stay until the end of 1859. In his temporary refuge, Rebmann continued to treasure his expectations for the mission. He eagerly waited for signs of decisive improvement of the situation, kept in touch, and looked for ways to return.

By the end of the 1850s two important developments gave the Rebmanns new hope. First, British political resistance

against the Zanzibar slave-trade became more serious. Secondly, despite the temporary interruption of missionary activity, the Kisuludini/ Rabai mission field had begun to yield fruit.

Rebmann observed a positive change of the official British attitude towards slavery and slave-trade when he saw the determination and enthusiasm of the new consul Christopher P. Rigby, which was unknown to his predecessor. Rigby on his own accord forced the Indians in the Sultanate - who were formally British citizens, hence under British anti-slavery law - to set free their slaves.

The other reason for renewing hope and changing missionary policy was the continuation -during their exile- of positive response from Africans in the Mombasa area. After making their definite comeback to Kisuludini in December 1859, the Rebmanns were happy to notice that during their absence the Holy Spirit had continued to work in the hearts of people who had received the seed of the Gospel. The crisis had softened the hearts of many and made them receptive to the Word of God. The first person to be baptised was an old friend of Rebmann and Krapf, a lame person called Mringe, who had received the Lord long before. He was renamed Johanesi. On the day of Pentecost 1860 other early converts were baptised, Gunja and his son Nyondo, who received the names Abraham (Abe) and Isaac. They had been willing pupils before

Rebmann's temporary absence, and without the presence of his teacher, Isaac Nyondo had prepared himself for baptism by reading the Nika translations of the Gospel of *Luke* and the *Heidelberg Catechism*.

After Rebmann's return from Zanzibar, largely unnoticed at home in England and Germany, among the Nika people of Rabai/Kisuludini a small congregation was taking shape. The members belonged to the very poor, barely able to cover their bodies. Rebmann reported that their huts were more miserable than those of surrounding Muslims, and that they were on their own unable to build a church or a small school. The Rebmanns joined deeds to words, by building houses, making clothes for the converts, and digging cisterns. To Rebmann these practical activities were an essential part of his mission. Working with mortar and bricks and spreading the Gospel belonged together. In the evenings he was often exhausted, and he would fall on his knees in prayer, 'Oh Lord thou alone knowest the whole history of my circumstances. Have mercy upon me. O have mercy upon me, and reveal Thy glory in the salvation of souls. I do all this because thou o Lord Jesus hast come down from heaven to save me. O help me, I am Thine.'<sup>1</sup>

At times the Church Missionary Society almost lost

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<sup>1</sup> Report by Rebmann (duplicated, by Sparshotts?) in Mombas to Committee, 27 February 1866.

interest in the East African mission field because of its very modest fruits. However, gradually new plans were developed. The tiny congregation at Rabai/ Kisuludini was enlarged by African ex-slaves, who had been trained in British schools in India, especially Bombay. After 1870 new plans were developed. In cooperation with the British government a settlement for liberated slaves was established at Mombasa. African slaves freed by British warships at sea, were assembled there and trained by missionary personnel of the CMS. The place was called Frere Town, after the British diplomat who started it.

By the time Frere Town was realised, Rebmann had become too exhausted to take an active part. In 1875 he left for Europe.

Johannes Rebmann's 29 years in Africa remind us of the Apostle Paul's vision of the mission field. He sowed the seed, Apollos watered it, and God made it grow.<sup>2</sup> The whole process of cultivation until harvest is God's work, although He employs men as ploughmen, sowers, planters, irrigators, harvesters. Ploughmen and sowers may not see the harvest, but they are as much used in the mission field as the harvesters. Rebmann, mainly sowed and also watered. Only after 1860 could he reap a modest harvest. A tiny Church had emerged. However, he trusted that

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. 3: 5-9.

others would build on his work. He paved the way for future missionaries in Africa to be Christ's instruments, to gather in the rich harvest of God's elect. Without the preparatory work by Rebmann, mission in East Africa would have taken a different course. He laid the foundations of mission on both sides of boundary that after 1885 would divide East Africa into spheres of English and German influence.

This is the primary significance of his life and work. During his lifetime the world did not see many results of what he performed. Today in the West church and mission have become an interest of a decreasing minority. Many would consider Rebmann as a somewhat tragic figure, who failed to succeed, a queer and 'worn out' hero for a lost cause, buried in his primitive remote outpost, far from the civilisation and culture that count. Others find a reason why they want to 'save' him. They point to what he did as a geographical explorer and a language researcher. His failure or insignificance as a missionary makes him greater ('um so größer') at the front of the expansion of scientific knowledge.<sup>3</sup> That may be so in the thoughts of quite a lot of secularised observers. In worldly eyes Rebmann's dictionaries would be wasted effort if they had not been useful to colonial administrations and economic or

educational development.

How should Johannes Rebmann be remembered by posterity, by us? I think he should live on in our memory as a son of Gerlingen and of the powerful tradition of Württemberg Pietism, who with all his weaknesses and limitations, as an ordinary human being but a saved sinner, was a faithful servant of God, and was used to be the founder of the Church in East Africa, and the pathfinder for mission in Central Africa.

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<sup>3</sup> Anonymous, 'Johannes Rebmann, Missionar in Ostafrika und Entdecker des Kilimandscharo', in: *Gerlingen: vom Dorf zur Stadt*, 1983, p.107.