The Legacy of Johann Ludwig Krapf

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The legacy of Johann Ludwig Krapf, first Protestant missionary to East Africa, has long been a matter of discussion. His first posting was to Ethiopia, but the mission was forced to leave before it was properly established. In Mombasa and its hinterland he and his companions made only a tiny handful of converts, the mission he established became a backwater, and his grand missionary strategy proved a nonstarter. This lack of apparent success gave the Church Missionary Society (CMS) pause for thought: "It was natural that some discouragement should be felt at the result so far of the large designs formed for the evangelization of Africa; but after the most anxious and careful review of all the circumstances of the Mission, the Committee felt that the disappointments hitherto met with must be regarded rather as a trial of their faith than as an indication of God's will that the enterprise should be abandoned."[2]

The evaluation of Krapf's work has continued to exercise historians. "These...sad and other-worldly men achieved no great evangelistic success among the scattered and socially incoherent Wanyika tribesmen," wrote Roland Oliver; but he added, "Krapf and Rebmann, if they were somewhat impractical, had vision, tenacity and boundless courage."[3] C. P. Groves, in his pioneering, if now superseded, Planting of Christianity in Africa, ends his account of Krapf's work on a negative note;[4] and Krapf is barely mentioned in Adrian Hastings' monumental Church in Africa, 1450-1950.[5] However, the major study by Roy Bridges, which forms the introduction to the Cass reprint of Travels, Researches, and Missionary Labours During an Eighteen Years' Residence in Eastern Africa, discusses Krapf's legacy at length and concludes that, in spite of all, "Krapf was a remarkable pioneer, a good man, and a notable figure in the history of nineteenth century Africa."[6] Trained as he was by the Basel Mission, Krapf himself may have been unsurprised that he and his colleagues made only slow progress. Basel missionaries in West Africa found their work equally slow at first; the emphasis was on faithfulness rather than on spectacular results.[7]

Krapf was one of a number of Lutherans trained at the Basel Missionary Institute who worked for the CMS in the early part of the nineteenth century. Born in 1810, near Tübingen in largely Protestant Württemberg, he was
immersed in Pietism. In *Travels, Researches, and Missionary Labours in East Africa* he tells us little about his family except that his father was a comfortably-off farmer and that he was one of four children. He seems to have been an overserious child; he suffered a six-month-long illness following a severe beating for a fault he did not commit, and reported, 'Left to myself my thoughts dwelt much upon eternity; and the reading of the Bible and devotional books became my delight.'[8] He might never have gone beyond elementary schooling, but as the result of a chance encounter by his sister, he was sent to the Österbergschule in Tübingen, where he received an education that prepared him for university.[9]

At school he quickly caught up with his contemporaries and then outstripped them, soaking up languages like blotting paper. He learned Latin and Greek and made a start on French and Italian; when he decided to go to the Basel Missionary Institute, he prepared himself by learning Hebrew and before long had "read the greater portion of the Old Testament in the original."[10] He spent from May 1827 to May 1829 at Basel but then came to doubt his missionary call, and he returned to Tübingen to spend the next five years studying theology.[11] He was ordained in the autumn of 1834. After less than a year's not altogether happy parish experience, he met Peter Fjellstedt, a Basel-trained Swedish missionary, who rekindled his missionary call and encouraged him to offer to the CMS.[12] He returned to Basel, where, in 1836, he met Dandeson Coates, lay secretary of CMS, and was accepted by that society. When assigned to Ethiopia, he set to work to study "Aethiopic," properly known as Ge'ez, the archaic language of the church, and Amharic, the modern speech of the Christian Amhara people, besides studying some Arabic. He also read the *History of Ethiopia* by the great seventeenth-century German scholar Hiob Ludolf.[13]

**Vision in Ethiopia**

Krapf's first posting was to Ethiopia, where he worked from 1837 to 1842, when he was forced to return to Cairo. Here he made his first long overland journey, and armed already with some knowledge of Ge'ez and Amharic, he set out to master the Cushitic speech of the Oromo people (whom he knew as the Galla), the dominant people throughout much of central and southern Ethiopia. His first publications date
from this period, with translations of the Gospels of John and Matthew into Oromo, as well as a first grammar and vocabulary. In 1842 his pioneering linguistic achievements were recognized when he was awarded an honorary doctorate at Tübingen University. He became obsessed with the idea that the Oromo, whom he described as "the most intellectual people of Eastern Africa,"[14] were the key to the evangelization of the continent, and when driven out of Ethiopia, he determined to reach them via Mombasa. The *Journals of the Rev. Messers Isenberg and Krapf, Missionaries of the Church Missionary Society* was published in 1843. It consists of edited extracts from Krapf's journals with much shorter additions from Isenberg's letters, and although not in the first rank of writings on Ethiopia, it contains valuable information about the theological controversies that were raging in the Ethiopian church at that date, as well as about the people and politics, and the land itself and its geography.

The *Journals* also records a whole series of conversations in which Krapf appeared to do little but win debating points about religion. Yet in fact he got on well with the king and with his visitors, many of them priests and debtera (men and boys skilled in singing the liturgy), who visited him again and again. He taught a small group of men and boys gathered round him, reading the Scriptures with them and teaching them "universal history" and geography. He seems to have been accepted as another kind of religious teacher with his circle of disciples. It is impossible to understand why people continued to visit and talk with him unless these visits were more cordial and less one-sided than his diary suggests. Probably his visitors enjoyed theological debate, and there was plainly more to the conversations than he records; his extensive knowledge of Ethiopian religious literature and customs was the result of these and other conversations.

Krapf's pietism, with its emphasis on individual conversion and personal religious experience, made it virtually impossible for him to understand or appreciate Ethiopian Christianity, which was bound up with ethnic identity rather than being a matter of personal belief. He compared it with medieval European Christian practice and belief and thought it stood in equal need of reformation. He could not understand why people preferred the Scriptures in Ge’ez, the ancient church language, which they could not comprehend, to the Amharic translation, in which, as a good Lutheran, and believing in the importance for salvation of the Scriptures in a people’s own tongue, he tried to interest them.[15] But he did recognize that the only way to get people to accept the Amharic translation was to print it together with the Ge’ez,
preferably arranged in parallel columns, and he worked to persuade the Bible Society to accept the need for this for many years.[16] That no amount of reading Romans with Ethiopian priests would bring them to see salvation through Lutheran eyes was something else he could not understand. He did, however, come to question his initial outright rejection of the practice of fasting, which played such a large part in Ethiopian Christian practice, though there is no evidence that he actually joined them in fasting.[17] Ethiopian church music sounded cacophonous to his ears, and he lacked any appreciation of their liturgy.

The Mombasa Years

Having experienced the imperviousness of the Ethiopian Orthodox Christians to his Protestant and Pietist interpretations of Scripture, and their unreadiness for a reformation, he turned to the Oromo, convinced that they were the key to the conversion of Africa. When his position became intolerable in Ethiopia because of political machinations, he made his way down the East Coast of Africa to Zanzibar and then across to Mombasa, in order to try to reach the Oromo by another route. Yet oddly he stayed in and around Mombasa for years, not seeming to realize that his inland journeys would not take him anywhere near the Oromo, who lived far to the north. The idea that they would be the key to the evangelization of Africa proved to be pure fantasy.

For the next eleven years, 1844-1855, Krapf worked in the coastal area of modern Kenya, first in Mombasa, where his wife, Rosina, and her newborn child both died, and then at Rabai, on a ridge a few miles inland. Of all the missionaries sent out to work with him, only Johannes Rebmann, who joined him in 1846, and who outstayed him by many years, remained for any length of time. It was not long before Krapf was engaged in language study, working first on Kiswahili (he quickly recognized its debt to Arabic), and then on Kinika (Kirabai), the language of the people now known as the Mijikenda. Vocabularies of other East African languages, including Maasai, followed. However, it was Rebmann's translation into Kiswahili that was eventually printed by the British and Foreign Bible Society, even if it was Krapf's orthography that was adopted and Krapf who saw it through the press.[18] Both missionaries became widely known, not for their missionary work or for their work in translating the Bible but for their journeys into the interior, the
maps which they published showing great inland lakes of which they had been told, speculations about the source of the Nile, and their sightings of the snow-covered peaks of Mounts Kilimanjaro and Kenya. British geographers who had never been near Africa argued fiercely about their findings, and these writings whetted the appetites of geographers and travelers and encouraged exploration of the interior. Krapf's *Reisen in Ost-Afrika* in two volumes was published in Stuttgart in 1858, and the shorter one-volume English edition, *Travels and Researches*, two years later. Both this and the earlier *Journals* were of sufficient importance to scholarship to be reprinted in the 1960s, as was his Swahili dictionary.

It was in fact Rebmann, not Krapf, who first sighted a snow-capped mountain on his second inland journey in April to June 1848. The following year Krapf made his first long inland journey when he reached Ukambani, sighting both Kilimanjaro and Kenya. The journey to Ukambani was particularly difficult because he had to traverse the almost waterless thorn scrub that stretches some two hundred miles inland from the coast behind Rabai. He was entirely dependent on the goodwill of those whose land he traversed, and he was not always welcome. A second journey to Ukambani followed in 1851, from which Krapf had to turn back because of the hostility of the Kamba. The missionaries had had no more success earlier in locating a mission in Usambara further to the south. In spite of these setbacks Krapf remained determined that the correct missionary strategy was to establish a chain of mission stations at fifty-mile intervals to link East Africa with the already established missions in West Africa, but in this he did not have the support of Rebmann or of Johann Erhardt, also Basel-trained missionaries. They both became discouraged by the lack of response of the coastal peoples. But Krapf stuck to this idea doggedly. In 1863 he was still convinced that the CMS would soon reach the Oromo via Rabai, and the same year he was thinking in terms of a chain of missions from Jerusalem to Abyssinia.

In September 1853 Krapf left Rabai for reasons of health for the last time and spent a year in England before revisiting Ethiopia, at the request of Bishop Samuel Gobat of Jerusalem, to assess the possibilities for reestablishing mission work there, before finally settling back in Germany at Kornthal, a
center of Pietism, which became his home for the rest of his life. He married again in 1856, his second wife being Charlotte Pelargus, the eldest daughter of a city councilor of Stuttgart; they had one daughter, Johanna. Charlotte Krapf died in 1868, and the following year Krapf was married for the third time, to Nanette Schmidt von Cannstadt, who had been his housekeeper. Their marriage lasted until Krapf's own death in 1881.[19]

**A New Phase of Missionary Activity**

The move back to Germany marked the beginning of a new phase of Krapf's missionary activity, not his retirement from it. He became an adviser to others on mission work in eastern Africa, making several further visits to Africa in this connection, of which the 1853 visit to Ethiopia in connection with Bishop Gobat's mission was the first. In the years that followed he did what he could to raise support in Germany for this mission. The most significant of his African visits was that to East Africa in 1862 to help Thomas Wakefield of the United Methodist Free Church to found a mission there. He chose a site for the mission at Ribe, not far from Rabai, and it was both men's hope that this mission would be a stepping stone to the Oromo. Indeed, Methodist missionaries did make contact with some of the more southerly migrant Oromo, but this was not the breakthrough that had been hoped for.[20] The Methodist Church in Kenya dates back to this pioneer mission. Roy Bridges has pointed out that Krapf's influence in Germany was greater than in Britain. Several Lutheran missions that took up work in East Africa, including the Bavarian Evangelical Lutheran Mission founded in response to his death, owed something to the inspiration of his life and work.[21] These later missions were to work under colonial rule, which broke open the self-containment of precolonial societies that had proved such a barrier to Krapf and his companions.

A final visit to Ethiopia took place in 1867-68, when Krapf accompanied the expedition led by Sir Robert Napier, which ended in the battle of Magdala. Krapf was forbidden to engage in evangelism, though it was accepted that he might discuss religion with the Ethiopians if they raised the subject. Presumably he agreed to go with the expedition because he could not resist the opportunity of seeing Ethiopia once again, but he had to be invalided back to Germany after only three months.[22]

A second major activity of these years was his work on languages and translation and the task of seeing translations of Scripture through the press, a topic that occupied so much of his later correspondence. His linguistic range was extraordinary, including two of the Semitic languages of Ethiopia (Amharic and Tigrinya), a Cushitic language (Oromo), Maasai, which is often
classified as Nilotic-Hamitic, and several Bantu languages. His observations on these and on the relationships and contrasts between them laid a basis for further ethnographic studies. Translations into Oromo, Kinika, Kiswahili, and Kikamba had appeared in the 1840s. In the next decade he compiled *A Vocabulary of Six East African Languages*, and a vocabulary of Maasai, as well as writing a preface to a Maasai vocabulary by his colleague Rebmann. The 1860s saw him editing Debtera Matteos's Gospel translations into Tigrinya. At the end of the decade came his own Oromo translations of Luke and John. Next came work on Amharic, with Abba Rukh's translation of the Old Testament, which Krapf saw through the press, a major undertaking, in part because a special font of type had to be cut for the printing of the Amharic syllabary. There followed Psalms, Genesis and Exodus, and the New Testament in Oromo, which Krapf worked on with an Oromo student, Rofso,[23] and at last in 1876 the parallel edition of the New Testament in Ge'ez and Amharic that he had advocated for so many years.

From 1859 onward there is a series of letters, covering almost twenty years, between him and the British and Foreign Bible Society, whose archive is now held by Cambridge University Library. Some ninety manuscript letters from Krapf covering the years 1826 to 1858 are held in the Basel Mission Archives, in addition to the huge collection of his writings in the CMS archives in Birmingham University.[24] The German *Reisen in Ost-Afrika ausgeführt in den Jahren 1837-55* is in two volumes and is considerably longer than the English-language *Travels and Researches*. There is, then, a vast collection of writings, his major legacy, which modern scholars continue to trawl through, for Krapf was a good observer at a time when there were few around, interested in every detail he could learn about the peoples of eastern Africa, their customs, and their countries.[25]

There is no modern biography of Krapf. In spite of the mass of writings that he left, the man remains rather remote. We can agree with Roland Oliver that he was "other-worldly" and "somewhat impractical," but that, on the other hand, he had "vision, tenacity and boundless courage," and that Bridges is right in concluding that he was a "remarkable pioneer, a good man, and a notable figure in the history of nineteenth century Africa." It is also apparent that he
was deeply imbued with the spirit of Pietism and had been molded by the
discipline and religious seriousness of the Basel Institute. His letters and
journals are full of religious comment that rises above mere platitude by
reason of the difficult and sometimes dangerous circumstances in which they
were written, even though expressed in somewhat clichéd terms. But the man
himself is difficult to discern; to some extent he is masked by his words rather
than revealed through them.
Whatever the success or otherwise of his work, the Anglican Church of the
Province of Kenya (CPK), which celebrated its first century and a half of
existence in 1994, looks back to him as its founder. In the volume produced to
mark this occasion, *Rabai to Mumias*, Krapf and Rebmann and their
companions occupy most of the first eleven pages of chapter 1. Photographs
of both men are included. That they were Lutherans rather than Anglicans is
barely mentioned. It is important to the CPK that these early missionaries did
not high-handedly condemn African customs without understanding them and
that their standard of living was simple and close to that of the people they
lived among, unlike later missionaries whose standard of living distanced
them from ordinary Africans.[26] For modern Kenyan Christians, Krapf was an
outstanding missionary pioneer.

Notes

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  Christianity at Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda, and Nairobi
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   Archives), Alan Jesson (Bible Society Archives, Cambridge Univ. Library),
   and Professor Roy Bridges for help in preparing this article.
3. Roland Oliver, *The Missionary Factor in East Africa* (London and New York:
   1994).


9. Krapf refers to this as the Anatolian School. The school was named after the Österberg, a hill east of Tübingen. This school taught Greek as well as Latin, hence the name was sometimes given as Anatolische Schule (Greek *en to anatole*, "in the east"). I am grateful to Dr. H. Ehmer of the archives of the Evangelische Landeskirche in Württemberg for elucidating this point for me.


15. Krapf to Coates, copied to BFBS, February 20, 1841, BSA, Foreign Correspondence Inwards 3.


19. Bächtold, 1966. Basel Archives. By this time Krapf seems to have lost touch with the CMS.


23. Krapf to Secretary of the BFBS, February 21, 1867, BSA, Editorial Correspondence Inwards 5.

24. Because his letters were sometimes copied by one society to the other, they may figure more than once.


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