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A table of contents for the *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_ajet-02.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ajet-02.php)

# J. L. KRAPF

## A Personal Portrait in Memory of His Entry to East Africa. In 1844

*Carl-Erik Sahlberg*

*The instruments used by God throughout church history to advance his Kingdom have been diverse and varied. None of them fit into the same mold, except their common devotion and obedience to Jesus Christ. This article reflects on one of those pioneers whose devoted life contributed to the opening of East Africa to the Christian gospel. We would do well to count the cost of bringing the gospel to Africa and remember that the same measure of devotion is required of the Church today if every "tribe, tongue and nation" in the world today is to have the same privilege as we have had through pioneers such as Johann Ludwig Krapf.*

On the 7th of January in 1844, one hundred fifty three years ago, Johann Ludwing Krapf, together with his wife, Rosine, landed at Zanzibar after a hard sea voyage from Pangani. This marked the beginning of the modern missionary endeavour in East Africa and must therefore be honoured and remembered.

J.L. Krapf was a child of the Wurttemberg pietism in Germany, born in Derendingen on the 11th of January in 1810. After studies at the Basel Mission school, he was ordained in the Lutheran Church of Wurtemberg and worked as a pastor for a short time. After a sermon about the near-end of this world, his fellow pastors rebuked him for his "improper enthusiasm". He then resigned from his newly started career as a pastor. At the time of this life crisis he met the Swedish missionary, Peter Fjellstedt, who had been working for the Church

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Missionary Society (CMS) in South India, but now because of health problems lived and worked in Asia Minor with translation work. Fjellstedt asked the young Krapf to join him. That contact between them quickened Krapf's dormant interest in foreign missions. Krapf was approved by the CMS and was sent to Ethiopia in 1838 to replace a missionary who had recently died.

In Ethiopia Krapf was literally taken by a vision to reach the Oromo people (also called the Gallas) with the gospel. Krapf designated the Oromos as "the Germans of Africa" and thought, that if the gospel could reach them, it could reach the whole African continent. It may be that Fjellstedt had given him that vision, but this may be wrong. Krapf also had an idea of finding a big, mighty river, that would go through most of the African continent. Not so wrongly guessed, when one thinks of the Nile.

With his vision to reach the Gallas, Krapf came in 1838 to the kingdom of Shewa (or Showa or Shoa), close to present day Addis Ababa. Here he learned Amharic and had been earlier introduced to the Arabic language on his way from Cairo by an African.

His stay in Shewa was accompanied by many disappointments. The political disorder in the kingdom made every missionary attempt dangerous. Krapf also met suspicions from the people and the king. "Perhaps he was a disguised spy or colonizer?" Finally, the situation became too threatening for him and he left Ethiopia in 1842 and went to Cairo.

Now Rosine Dietrich enters the scene of J.L. Krapf. She came from Basel. Johann and Rosine had probably met when he studied theology there in the 1830's. They kept contact during his stay in Shewa. In 1839 Rosine bid farewell to her parents in Basel, when both she and the parents knew that it could be a farewell for the whole life. Fraulein Dietrich became Mrs. Krapf in Cairo in 1842. Rosine Krapf represents in her person all those many missionary wives, who rather anonymously and without chapters in mission histories, had to serve in the shadows of their famous husbands. But only God knows, how valuable their ministry was in the evangelistic, medical, charitable and educational field. The Krapf couple lived in Cairo and Aden, but never one day, I think, forgetting the vision to reach the Oromos one day. During these years on the Arabian peninsula their Arabic became almost fluent.

From Aden it was easy to cast their eyes at Zanzibar. Why? Because the island outside the East African mainland during the 19th century became the economical centre of the area, "the metropolis of East Africa". Zanzibar became a part of the Oman kingdom and in 1832 the Sultan moved there and made it the capital of his empire. The basis of its economy was the slave trade. About

25,000 slaves passed every year through the island. Most of them were taken from the south of the river Pangani on the mainland.

The Sultan of Zanzibar controlled the coastal area on the mainland and therefore Krapf found it necessary to go through him to get permission to work among the Gallas. So for that reason he and Rosine took the boat from Pangani to Zanzibar and went ashore there on the 17th of January 1844, a little more than one hundred and fifty three years ago.

The next day he had the opportunity to meet Sultan Seyyid Said. In an audience forum Krapf told the Sultan, using his Arabic language, of his plans of reaching the Galla people and telling them about Christianity and "other useful things". The Sultan was a courteous and attentive listener, but warned Krapf of all the dangers in reaching the Galla people. He, however, assured Krapf of all his support and protection and wrote a personal letter of recommendation to the Arab governors of the coast: "This comes from Seyyid Said; greetings to all our subjects, friends and governors. This letter is written on behalf of Dr. Krapf, a good man who desires to convert the world to God". How would his fellow Muslim leaders in Teheran today react to such tolerance and support of Christian missions?

Krapf was happy and started his search for a base for his Galla mission. In March 1844 he went to Tanga and Mombasa, finding that Mombasa was "best suited for that purpose." On 15th of May he sailed to Mombasa. After only two months in Mombasa he lost his wife Rosine and their new born daughter, due to malaria. To his employer, the CMS in London, Krapf wrote these famous words:

Tell our friends at home that there is on the East African coast a lonely grave. This is a sign that you have commenced the struggle....As the victories of the Church are stepping over the graves...of her members, you may be more convinced, that the hour is at hand, when you are summoned to work upon the conversion of Africa from its Eastern shore.

Despite the loses of his family, Krapf decided to remain in East Africa and after some time made his base and home in Rabai, some nine miles inland and North of Mombasa among the Wanyika people. In June 1846 he was joined by a German fellow Christian, Johann Rebmann (1820-1876). In 1849 J.J. Erhardt and Johann Wagner also arrived, though Wagner unfortunately died the same year. Onwards we find these three single Germans in Rabai.

In 1986, during my missionary years in Tanzania, I had the privilege of seeing their home and their church, reminding me of these three "sad and other-worldly men" - to quote Roland Oliver in his excellent book, *The Missionary*

*factor in East Africa* (London, 1952). These men engaged in the first modern attempt of *Mission Dei* in the East African context.

Let us first of all state, standing there at their home in Rabai, that the direct evangelistic result was very meager. It was not until 1851 that the first convert was baptized. In 1859 there were only seven converts and when the British Consul at Zanzibar, Colonel Playfair, visited Rabai in 1864, he found only six baptized converts.

The reasons for the modest result were many. The hostility of the Arabs against Krapf was constant, especially once he became aware of and acted against the notorious slave trade. Generally it has also been said, that the broken and demoralized people among the mixed coastal population did not give a good precondition for a dynamic evangelization. Furthermore, it must be stated that the three missionaries - Krapf, Rebmann and Erhardt - did not very strongly stress the evangelistic work. They seem to have had no clear ambition to build up strong congregations, and their main time was used for journeys and translation work. But that does not at all mean that the Rabai impetus can be neglected. Its lasting contribution can especially be seen in three fields, which we may designate, "the three gifts of Rabai to East Africa".

## **1. THE FIRST GIFT OF RABAI: THE JOURNEYS.**

The journeys of Krapf and especially Rebmann made this area familiar to future missionaries and explorers.

- a. To Kasigau, 150 Kilometres inland from Rabai, on Oct. 16-27, 1847, Rebmann went alone, as Krapf was sick. This journey has been said to have marked the historic beginning of Europe's scramble into east and central Africa.
- b. To Kilimanjaro, on April 27-June 11, 1848, Rebmann went alone, as Krapf again was sick. Rebmann was here the first European to see Kilimanjaro and reported back to London about snow on that mighty mountain. But the unbelieving scientific world in the West laughed at him - "never-melting snow on a mountain at the Equator"!
- c. To Usambara mountains, July 1848, Krapf traveled alone. In his talks with king Kimweri in Vuga, Krapf presented his idea of establishing one mission station among the Usambara people. Out of these talks came, however, no lasting result. Erhardt made an attempt to stay here in 1853, but left after only three months.

- d. To Machame, in April 1849, Rebmann traveled alone, this time to the southwestern slopes of Kilimanjaro. It turned out to be a tragic experience when the Machame king, Mankinga, out of fear or in a mood of cheating, wheedled Rebmann of all his money and equipment, including his umbrella that had been his only shelter against the pouring rain. Afflicted by despair, fever, dysentery and the constant rain, Rebmann abandoned the hope of proceeding to Unyamwezi and returned to Rabai. On leaving Machame, Rebmann and his party was, according to Machame custom, spat upon to the accompaniment of the words "Go in peace". Rebmann never returned to Machame, quite understandably.
- e. To the Kamba tribe, in Nov-Dec. 1849, Krapf visited by himself. On this journey Krapf saw Mount Kenya, the second snow-capped mountain in East Africa. Krapf and Rebmann had, which often may be forgotten, a definite evangelistic goal with these journeys, namely to find that mighty river, which would lead up to central Africa and the Gallas.

Even if that goal was not achieved, these journeys had important results. First, they made everyone aware of the big slave trade with Kilwa Kivinge as the centre. Second, they encouraged explorers to come to East Africa. When the British explorers R. Burton and J.H. Speke arrived in Zanzibar in Dec. 1856, they had mostly been inspired by the map of the area, which Erhardt had published the same year. The journeys also made future missionaries acquainted with the routes that they could use in order to bring the gospel to the interior. In many aspects Krapf and his two friends prepared the way without being allowed themselves to walk further on that way.

## **2. THE SECOND GIFT OF RABAI: KRAPF'S DIARY, *REISEN IN OSTAFRIKA*.**

In 1858 Krapf published his diary, entitled *Reisen in Ostafrika*. The English translation was entitled, *Travels, Researches and Missionary Labour in East Africa* (1860). This big (and somewhat boring) book with over 500 pages inspired young Christians to take up the mantle of Krapf. For instance the early Methodist missionaries, Thomas Wakefield and Charles New, came to the Gallas in Kenya in the early 1860s, inspired by that book. This book also inspired pastor Karl Ittameier in Germany to found The Society for Evangelical-Lutheran Mission in East Africa, later transferred to the Leipzig Mission in 1892.

### 3. THE THIRD GIFT OF RABAI: THE TRANSLATIONS.

Almost directly after the death of his wife and child, Krapf devoted himself to the study of Kiswahili. In June 1846 he was ready to begin the translation of the New Testament. Within two years he had almost completed it. From Kiswahili the Bible translation work proceeded to vernacular languages. By 1848 he had translated the Gospel of Luke into Kinyika, the language spoken around Rabai. During a visit to London in 1850 he presented to the CMS a translation of the Gospels, the Book of Acts and Genesis in the Galla language.

In Rabai he furthermore prepared a Swahili grammar and arranged some four thousand words into a Swahili-English dictionary. Peter Falk in his survey, *The Growth of the Church in Africa* (Grand Rapids, 1979), describes Krapf as an energetic and excellent linguist. Both these good characteristics predestined him to be an energetic translator. The years at Rabai were really an intensive decade, filled with intensive linguistic work. When we read the Swahili Bible today of course we must acknowledge the energetic hands of J.L. Krapf.

Krapf suffered, as so many missionaries both before and after him, problems with his health. He had to leave Rabai in Oct. 1853 and go back to Germany, leaving Rebmann and Erhardt to continue the missionary work. He went home to Wurttemberg and settled down at Kornthal, the centre of the Wurttemberg pietism. From there he did all that he could do for his Oromo vision.

In April 1855 he was back in Ethiopia, but military operations stopped him from visiting Shewa. He turned northwards and passing Khartoum he fell seriously ill and barely reached Cairo, from where he returned to Germany.

In 1861 he returned to Mombasa to help the Methodist, Charles New, to establish a mission at Ribe. Between the years 1870-1877 the "British and Foreign Bible Society" published the whole New Testament, Exodus and the Psalms in Oromo. It was said to be a translation of Krapf, even if some, for example, Gustav Aren in his dissertation, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia* (Stockholm, 1978), suggests that Krapf only checked a translation, one already made by a secretary of Emperor Teodoros.

Anyhow, we get the picture an aging missionary Krapf, still young and powerful in his spirit and still living in his vision to reach the Galla people. Throughout his ministry he apparently had the power to persuade more hesitant souls. He inspired and persuaded Ludwig Harms to found "the Hermanburg Mission", which sent the first missionaries in modern times to Ethiopia in 1854. In 1865-1866 he inspired the newly founded Swedish Evangelical Mission to

open a work in Kunama in Eritrea.

Visionaries may be persuasive, but they more often appear to be too impractical and up in the blue, at least to many dull analyzers! Krapf was both persuasive and "impractical". But perhaps before such a risky task of first proclaiming gospel in an unknown and hostile environment, God had to use an impractical dreamer and enthusiast like Krapf. Analytical people with calculators in their hands would never have gone! But Krapf dared, as he went from Derendingen in Germany to Rabai in East Africa. He lost his wife and daughter, but never lost his Galla vision, even if it was never quite fulfilled. Like Paul, he was hindered to go, where he himself wanted to go (Acts 16). But none can deprive Krapf of the honour of having been what Boniface was for Germany, Frumentius for Ethiopia and Crowther for Nigeria - the missionary pioneer.

It can be very tempting to analyze mission history by considering only external factors such as the enlarged world horizon through trade and explorations, the economic upheaval in Europe, the Pietistic revival and the various missionary organizations. But in the bottom, *de finis*, we also have to reckon with the human, individual factor. In this respect it is appropriate to say that there would be no Christian mission in East Africa without the missionary Johann Ludwig Krapf. God had to send someone, and a boy from Derendingen went although he had to return back home sick to Germany. There in Kornthal, among his fellow Pietists and with Rebmann, who had returned almost blind in 1875, Krapf died on the 26th of November in 1881.

For me personally it was almost like a holy moment, when I stood at his grave in Kornthal a few years ago, but I could also imagine, that Krapf at his death had asked his risen Lord: "Lord, why was I not allowed to fulfill the Galla vision You had put down in my heart? Why had I always to be a man of autumn - stopped in Tajuma in November 1842, leaving Rabai sick in October 1853 and finishing my earthly life in November 1881?" But I also dared to guess, that the Lord answered him: "Johann, you are not a man of autumn, but a man of spring, because you brought spring, you brought dawn to East Africa".

And at his grave I could add something: "Mr. Krapf, when you finished your earthly life in 1881, your lifework and your book, *Reisen in Ostafrika*, inspired one pastor Karl Ittameier from Germany to found a missionary organisation, which was transferred to the Leipzig Mission, which started work in Tanzania. His son Eduard Ittameier went to Nkoaranga, near Arusha. One of the children who heard him teach there was Amulikyo Isaki. After some years she joined Christianity. She was baptized in 1936. On the 9th of September 1955 her daughter Aliliyo Abanetho was baptized. On the 25th of May in 1974 Aliliyo's daughter Kasure was baptized and I met her personally, when I served



as a missionary in Tanzania in the 1980's."

"So, I can assure you, Mr. Krapf, that you have great grand children in Tanzania today!" And perhaps Krapf from his heaven answered: "Praise God!" or in his mother tongue, "Lob den Herrn!" or in Kiswahili, "Bwana asifiwe!"

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