

Johann Ludwig Krapf

A pre-colonial European missionary in Islamic Mombasa.

Research Paper Islam in Africa

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1. Introduction

What were the attitudes of Christian missionaries about Islam and Muslim communities in Africa during the pre-colonial period in Mombasa?

There is not to find a topic more controversial than to talk about religion and its role in history. Recently the famous British writer Karen Armstrong wrote a history of fundamentalism. "Fundamentalism is an encircled faith and it pictures itself as if it is necessary to fight in order to survive in a hostile world."¹

During the nineteenth century many British, Dutch, French and American missionaries went to the "dark" Africa, to bring the message of light and salvation. Later in the century, Western culture spread rapidly and within a few decades after the 1870's the continent was part of the European empires.² Together with the exploration of geography, languages and economics, the colonial enterprise was launched.

At the same time in East Africa the spread of Islam was strong through the influence of the Busaidi Sultanate of Zanzibar. Its commercial empire, centered on Zanzibar stretched from the Persian Gulf to Mozambique. The culture of Swahili people at the East African coastal regions blended with the culture of Arab Muslim traders and created a special kind of Islamic culture.³

The missionaries had an ambivalent relation with the colonial enterprise and took a role that they did not have in mind when they left their European mission seminaries. On the one hand they propagated the kingdom of heaven and the message of salvation in Jesus Christ, the son of God. On the other hand they served the advance of the empires of European kings and queens. They created maps, dictionaries, established relationships with local rulers,

¹ Karen Armstrong, *The battle for God* (New York 2000, consulted dutch translation by Kloos, Lachmann and Witteveen 2005) p. 365

² More information about the colonial enterprise in Robert Gildea, *Barricades and Borders: Europe 1800-1914* (Oxford 2003).

³ Levtzion and Pouwels, *verder invullen*

mediated and interpreted alliances and perhaps most important, they published their heroic stories in Europe and created in this way fascination for the African adventure.⁴

Together with the British David Livingstone, the German Johann Ludwig Krapf was one of the pioneer missionaries in Africa. In 1837 he went to the ‘dark’ continent to preach the gospel. Effectively they both converted only a few people to Christ. But shocked as they were when they observed the abuses of African society, they pressed for social reform. Slavery turned out to be the most important obstacle for a peaceful relation between Muslims and Christians. The missionary vision and strategies of Krapf led to greater knowledge of the African society, culture and religion. But he failed to find a solution for the problem of slavery from within the culture of Islam. Krapf struggled to find an attitude towards the reality of pre-colonial East Africa and became unintentionally an instrument for the later colonial development.

2. Missions in the nineteenth century context.

The British missionary movement shared its roots with the abolition movement. In 1807 British parliament abolished the slave trade in British ships and harbors. It lasted a few decades until slavery had effectively disappeared in all British dominions.⁵ Key figures in the abolition movement were evangelicals like John Wesley (1703-1791) and William Wilberforce (1759-1833). Later evangelicals like the famous C.H. Spurgeon encouraged young people to go to the mission fields.⁶ The missionary enterprise was a matter of Catholic mission orders, Evangelical Protestants and independent African Christians. From 1500

⁴ Krapf reports that he interpreted for the Ethiopian king Sahela Selassie and the British representative; “The king, too, had said to me from the very commencement: “You know the customs of my country and of your own; you must advise me in my dealings with Major Harris, that I may not offend him and Queen Victoria of England.” J. Lewis Krapf, *Travels and Missionary labours in East Africa* (London 1860, second edition with a new introduction by R.C. Bridges) 30

More about David Livingstone in Tim Jeal, *Livingstone* (London 1973).

⁵ Clemens Gütl in his introduction to Krapf, *Memoir on the Slave trade* (Vienna 2002) 19.

⁶ In London, sometimes in concert building the Exeter Hall he preached for audiences of more than 10,000 people from 1852 till 1891. C.H. Spurgeon *Sermons for young people* dutch translation by W. de Graaf (de Banier Utrecht, without year) 34. See www.spurgeon.org .

onwards Catholic missionaries were involved in the European explorations. The British missionary and colonial story in East Africa is a protestant story, for the very reason that Britain was protestant, although also Catholics played a decisive role in the Christian history of present day Kenya; The Roman Catholic mission was founded in 1862 as the prefecture of Zanzibar.

The idea of protestant missions to the heathens came only 300 years after the Reformation after 1800. The eighteenth century witnessed the emergence of the Pietistic movement on the continent and its Anglo-Saxon counterpart; the Evangelical Awakening. The preaching in this movement stressed the idea of the invisible church and the necessity of personal salvation through an individual experience of conversion.⁷ (...) Protestant missions began with the arrival of Johann Krapf of the CMS (Church Missionary Society founded 1799 by the Evangelical movement in the Church of England *authors note*) at Mombasa in 1844, followed by Rebmann the discoverer of Mount Kilimanjaro.”⁸

Of all protestant missionaries, David Livingstone was perhaps most influential. From 1840 until his death in 1873 he journeyed through the southern part of the ‘dark’ continent. His famous explorations had a purpose: “to open the country for Gods glory”.⁹ His vision was not only the conversion of individuals to Christ, but also a change in social and economic structures of society.

In his vision the introduction of commerce and the incorporation in the British economic system should serve the cause of abolition of the African slave trade. The blessings of civilization would benefit the ‘negro family’ as the commercial isolation of African people should be broken. So he encouraged traders to stay at mission stations. He promoted emigration to Africa and envisioned a renewal of the African society that was in some vague

⁷ Hugh Goddard *A history of Christian-Muslim relations* (Chicago 2000) p. 123

Boer 90.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ J.H. Boer *Missionary Messengers of Liberation in a Colonial Context: A Case Study of the Sudan United Mission* (Amsterdam 1979) 94.

way to reflect the basic characteristics of Protestant Britain.¹⁰ The protestant missionary creed became Christianity, commerce and civilization.

Eventually he had his way, with consequences he could not foresee when his heart was buried in Africa. In an era of laissez-faire philosophy the European governments did not immediately intend to occupy the African states.

3. The empire of Sultan Said Sayd and the spread of Swahili Islam in East Africa.

Seyyid Said bin Sultan, reigned from 1806-1856. He sped up the economic development of Zanzibar and foremost by commerce the Arab influence created an East African empire. He encouraged European and American traders.¹¹ The British navy effectively controlled the Indian Ocean and the trade routes. They guaranteed a stable and safe climate to encourage trade; the pax Britannica. A second reason, the British prominent British subjects from Asia in the Zanzibar economy, made English influence in the Zanzibar supreme.

4. Mombasa Kenya in the nineteenth century.

Today Mombasa is the second large city in Kenya, one of the biggest harbors at the East African coast and also an attractive place for tourists.

For centuries the city has been a trading center and living place for immigrants from countries of the Middle East and the Indian sub-continent. European presence became early when in 1597 Portugese Catholic friars landed at Mombasa and founded fort Jesus, today still a tourist attraction.¹² In 1698 the Portuguese gave way to the Omani Sultanate. Eventually the city came under the rule of the Mazru`i dynasty until 1826, when the British established a

¹⁰ Ibidem 97.

¹¹ Krapf, *Travels* Introduction by Bridges 17.

¹² A. J. Temu gives an approach of the history of missions in Kenya from an African point of view in *British Protestant Missions* (London 1972) 6.

protectorate again under Omani rule. In 1837 it was annexed by Zanzibar, and in 1840 it was occupied by soldiers of the Busaidi Sultan.¹³

The people living there were Wanyika, known today as Mijikenda, as well as many other tribes. The relatively small city numbered Omani and Hadhrami Arabs, free Swahili of mixed African and Asian descent, African slaves and freedmen of diverse origin, many of whom were in the process of being absorbed into the Swahili community, and Indians, who were divided into Hindu and Muslim communities.¹⁴ The Arab population of Mombasa consisted in 1848 about 220-30 persons (40 families).¹⁵ In 1837 the reigning Mazru`i dynasty was replaced by the Busaidi Sultanate of Zanzibar.¹⁶ However, in spite of their relative small number, Arabs had the better jobs, owned most of the land and most of the commerce and were by far most influential. Of the 28 mosques in the city constructed or renewed in Mombasa during Busaidi times, twelve were built or restored by Arabs and ten by Swahili.¹⁷ During the Busaidi Sultanate the Shafi'ite Sunni Islam started to dominate other forms of Islam, like the sect of Ibadhi. At the same time the Arab population was under Swahili influence. Different groups of Muslims and non-Muslims for example celebrated *Siku ya Mwaka* or the first day of the solar year, derived from Swahili tradition, with a procession, dances and bathing in the sea.¹⁸ Mombasa was part of the trade network of Zanzibar where different local people and overseas traders operated. Ivory, copal and coconuts were transported to Great Britain, India and Arabia. Grain was imported from the Pemba region and exported to Arabia.¹⁹ Clothes, firearms and wire went from India and the West to the

¹³ Berg, *Mombasa under the Busaidi Sultanate*.

¹⁴ Fred James Berg, *Mombasa under the Busaidi Sultanate: The city and its hinterlands in the nineteenth century* Ph. D thesis (Wisconsin 1971)

¹⁵ Ibidem 152.

¹⁶ Ibidem 44.

¹⁷ Berg and Walter, "Mosques, Population, and Urban Development in Mombasa," *Hadith I: Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the Historical Association of Kenya* (Nairobi 1968) cited in Berg, *Mombasa under the Busaidi Sultanate* 154.

¹⁸ Berg, *Mombasa under the Busaidi Sultanate*, 167.

¹⁹ Ibidem 197.

African market. Zanzibar had a large slave market.²⁰ The great achievement of the Busaidi dynasty was to maintain a good relationship with Great Britain and by making international trade their key to success in East Africa. Mombasa remained in the shadow of Zanzibar, and its trading volumes were only average compared to other cities in the region like Pemba and Pangani. Nevertheless it was estimated that its population tripled after 1840.²¹ People of Mombasa engaged in the caravans to the interior to obtain ivory, but beside that also rhinoceros horns, bees wax and occasional parties of slaves.

5. The war against slavery.

Slavery in the African society was part of normal life. Almost every group contributed to the persistence of this social system. Besides the exported slaves to the Middle East, slaves in the region of Mombasa were employed in many positions; as domestic slaves, soldiers, craftsmen and women as concubines. The majority of slaves worked and lived on farms and plantations.²² Mombasa imported slaves from its harbor, and only occasionally from its hinterland.²³ Kilwa, about 300 miles southwards dominated the slave trade and obtained slaves from the Lake Nyasa region. Berg estimated, based on a few sources, that in 1839 50,000 slaves were imported at Zanzibar. Already declining, perhaps due to the British treaties, in 1859 there were 19,000 slaves at the Zanzibar Market, 15,000 from Kilwa.²⁴ Of an estimated 168,000 people living between Tanga and the Lamu archipelago in 1887, there were

²⁰ Ibidem 200.

²¹ Ibidem 205.

²² Berg, *Mombasa under the Busaidi Sultanate* 167-182

Fred Morton, *Children of Ham Freed slaves and fugitive Slaves on the Kenya Coast, 1873 to 1907.*

²³ Berg, *Mombasa under the Busaidi Sultanate* 242-249.

²⁴ Ibidem 341

David Livingstone witnessed the horrible slave traffic in the interior traveled to Zanzibar, where he became acquainted with some Arab traders. D. L. *Missionary travels and researches in South Africa : including a sketch of sixteen years' residence in the interior of Africa, and a journey from the Cape of Good Hope to Loanda on the West Coast; thence across the continent, down the river Zambesi, to the eastern ocean.* (London 1857 reprinted New York 1982).

about 40,000 slaves.²⁵ There was a strong race consciousness. Established clans created myths of Arab and Omani ancestry. Black Africans were seen as inferior, most of them were indeed enslaved. Even freeborn dark skinned Swahili people appeared to have posed as non-Africans.²⁶ According to Shari ‘a law masters were obliged to treat there slaves well. However, there was no effective control and it seems that abuses were not uncommon. Morton points out that there is no agreement to what extend slavery in Kenyan coastal society was as harsh as in the Caribbean in the same time.²⁷

In 1822, 1839 and 1847 Sultan Said paid for the protection of the British “informal empire” by signing treaties about limitations of slave trade, one of the most profitable sources of revenue.²⁸ Slavery continued with its horror and disorder. But finally his recommendations to England were taken by heart. In 1873 the Sultan of Zanzibar was forced to sign a treaty of abolishment.²⁹ The years after 1873 witnessed the emergence of freed slave colonies, modeled after the West-African colonies and the Bombay colony. Since the first treaties of limitation of the slave trade, Britain transported intercepted slaves at the Indian Ocean to Bombay. The idea was to create communities of freed slaves with a good Christian education. At the same time these people were prepared to bring the Christian message to Africa. So called ‘Bombay Africans’ became the missionaries of the slave colonies around Mombasa. In 1874 Sir Bartle Frere visited missionary Rebmann in Rabai and founded Freretown, a freed slave colony. Within a few years problems arose because the communities suffered from internal division and bad leadership.³⁰ Slaves received education and the communities attracted many runaway slaves. The European missionaries sometimes gained profit from these cheap laborers.

Without caution a slave rising was encouraged. No wonder the Arabs became increasingly

²⁵ Morton, *Children of Ham*, 1.

²⁶ Ibidem, 4.

²⁷ Ibidem 11.

²⁸ Bridges in Introduction to Krapf, *Travels and Missionary labours* 19.

²⁹ Gütl, *Memoir on the slave trade* 42.

³⁰ Temu, *British Protestant Missions* 13-21.

Roland Oliver, *The Missionary Factor in East Africa* (London 1970) 14.

hostile towards the English activities. In 1883 they attacked Freretown. The British concluded to occupation to cut off the way for Arab occupation and continued slavery and so the colonial era started.³¹ The East African Slave Markets were closed in 1873, but it was not until 1907 that slavery was abolished.³²

6. The missionary strategy and vision of Johann Ludwig Krapf.

In 1844 Christian missions to Kenya started when the German missionaries Johann Ludwig Krapf and from 1846 Johannes Rebman arrived in Mombasa.³³ They translated the New Testament in Swahili and were the first Europeans to journey into the interior. They published maps and reported the Mount Kenya en Kilimanjaro.³⁴

Initially the Christian Missionary Society (founded in 1799, later referred to as CMS) wanted Krapf to go to Asia, to plant Protestantism in the face of Muslim and Orthodox Christian opposition.³⁵ In 1837, trained in Basle mission seminary, he went to Ethiopia, without much success. He describes in his *Travels and Missionary Labours*: “My calling, in which through all perils I have been so mercifully preserved and upheld, enables me to set forth in their tru light the moral misery and degradation to which the heathen nations of East Africa have fallen, and to point out the various routes by which these benighted populations may be approached, and the means for their elevation to Christian truth and Christian civilization be conveyed to them.”³⁶

³¹ Bridges in *Introduction to Travels* 100.

³² Kahumbi N.Maina *Christian-Muslim relations in Kenya : an examination of issue of conflicts* (Birmingham 1995) 3.

³³ The legacy of Johann Ludwig Krapf, By: Pirouet, M. Louise, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, April 1, 1999, Vol. 23, Issue 2.

³⁴ Adrian Hastings *The Church in Africa 1450-1950* (Oxford 1994) 242.

³⁵ J. Lewis Krapf *Travels, Researches and Missionary Labours during an eighteen years' residence in Eastern Africa together with journeys to Jagga, Usambara, Ukambani, Shoa, Abessinia, and Khartum and a coasting voyage from Mombaz to Cape Delgado* (London, Second edition 1968 first published 1860) Introduction by R. C. Bridges 9.

³⁶ Krapf, *Missionary Travels and Labours*, xlv.

He did not intend to bring the East African region under European influence: “Ob die Europäer Afrika in besitz nemen oder nicht, daran liegt mir wenig oder nichts”³⁷

In Cairo he saw the slave markets for the first time and had his first impression of the Arabic world. When CMS gave up the Ethiopian mission he sailed to the Sultan of Zanzibar in 1844. After a short visit to the area around Mombasa, he settled in Rabai, a small village a few miles from Mombasa. From 1846 he became accompanied by some other Basle missionaries, the most important Johann Rebmann, who became his successor at Rabai till 1875. In Ethiopia he had desperately tried to find out the remnants of the Christian Church. He thought that it would be best to reach the Galla (Oromo) tribes in the interior of Africa. In his thinking they were the key to the Christianization of Africa.

He started to work among the Nyaka tribesmen and made voyages to other tribes. Constantly he was looking for new ways to preach the gospel.³⁸ From the early start, Krapf was aware of the political sensitivities and the British interests. He rejected the idea, suggested by the American consul R.P. Waters, of converting the Muslims of Zanzibar.³⁹ He envisaged exploratory journeys to the interior and eventually he wanted to establish a chain of mission stations in the country.⁴⁰

In his mission theology “Sklaverei, Hunger Katastrophen oder kriegerische auseinandersetzungen war ein Gerichte Gottes über Afrika, weil sie nach dem Heil in Christus sehnsuchtig machen”.⁴¹ His idea was that God had a plan for the whole world, were finally every tribe would be led to Christianity. The missionary played an important role in the plans of God and it was necessary to be in a hurry. The eschatological concept of a thousand years empire from the New Testament book of Apocalypse was important to the Pietistic movement. Satan, the beast from the abyss, would be released for a short period in the end of

³⁷ Gütl, *Memoir on the slave trade* 29.

³⁸ Krapf, *Missionary Travels and Labours* 15.

³⁹ *Ibidem* 18.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem* 27.

⁴¹ Gütl, *introduction to Krapf, Memoir on the Slave trade* 25.

times. This should be the beginning of an era of horror and the church needed to fulfill the job of evangelization as soon as possible. In his own words: “Ostafrika so schnell als möglich zu evangelisieren, ehe das Thier aus dem Abgrund aufsteigt, unter dessen Wüthen die Mission in einen Stillstand greuten wird.”⁴² He did not only wish to win the race against the spread of Islam, he was also afraid of the influence of the Catholics. Since the time of the Reformation Catholics and their pope were suspected of representing the Antichrist.⁴³ His thinking shows a strange blend of extremism and the empathizing ability to do the job of an anthropologist.⁴⁴

Krapf was not only critical towards African society, he also wanted the European world to become more purified and spiritual.

Richards points out that Krapf was quite clumsy in promoting the interests of his own scheme of exploring the interior. He had to cooperate with Captain Atkins Hamerton, appointed British consul at Zanzibar. Hamerton pursued a moderate attitude to Sultan Said.⁴⁵ However Krapf established contacts with the independent ruler of Usumbara without consulting Hamerton. He was offered to establish a mission station in the area, but for his lack of political sense, the Sultan cut off the road for Christian missions by sending soldiers.⁴⁶

In his memoir on the Slave trade he argues that the British pressure to limit the ocean slave trade leads to a deterioration of the situation in East Africa. Because of a declining demand of slaves, people who were never engaged in slavery start to invest in buying people. He tells about a habit among young Galla man to cut of the penis of an enemy to prove themselves marriageable. Now the prices of slaves were declining, Galla people purchased a slave for this horrible goal.

⁴² Letter from Krapf in 1858. , cited in Gütl, 25.

⁴³ Ibidem.

⁴⁴ See also Clemens Gütl, *Johann Ludwig Krapf “Do’ Missionar vo’ Deradenga” zwischen pietistischem Ideal und afrikanischer Realität* (Wien 2001) 53-58.

⁴⁵ Bridges in *Introduction to Travels* 20.

⁴⁶ Bridges in *Introduction to Travels* 32.

It was his conviction that the slave-trade works “demoralizing and [...] the countries in which it takes place; it [checks] legitimate commerce and agricultural improvement and civilization in general. It promotes distrust and suspicion between neighbouring tribes and it creates a feeling of insecurity both of person and property...”⁴⁷ He argues that the Arabs are unwilling to do something to prevent the ongoing slave trade:

“I have an hundred times reasoned with Arabs and Suahilis on the slavery-subject, but they always declared, that slavery was a divine institution, that the wealth and person of the Infidels was given by the Almighty to the Prophet of Mecca, and that consequently their state and religion must fall to pieces with the abolition of slavery. Many Europeans themselves are so forgetful of their high priviledges and blessings as to pity the Muhamedan race at least for the downfall of its political existence, as if a nation which prolongs its rotten existence by living upon the blood of their oppressed fellow-men were not [ipso?] facto doomed to ruin and dismemberment from the body of mankind as if Divine Providence had not in history laid it down as the unmistakable and fearful axiom, “that every nation which feeds itself by oppression and crime, which refuses mercy to others, shall have no mercy but shall perish in its guilt.” The [op]position of the Arab government in Eastafrica deserves the serious attention and reflection of the Europeans, of the English in particular, as its inward rottenness and dissolution caused by numerous factions, and strives with the inland tribes will surely one of these days call for the aid of the English, who alone would be able to support and secure the tottering ruler of Mascat (*another name of the Sultan of Zanzibar authors note*) (...) Let him be and remain the friend and ally of England as he is called and desires to be but without the slave-trade, which is incompatible with the friendship and alliance of England, and can never honour Her in the sight of God and Men.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Krapf, *Memoir on the Slave trade*, edited by Gütl (Vienna 2002) 85.

⁴⁸ Gütl, *Memoir on the slave trade* 83.

Krapf had a good relationship with the Sultan, according to his Travels: “I took with me a letter of recommendation from Sultan Said-Said addressed to the governors of the coast, and couched in the following terms: --“This comes from Said-Said Sultan; greeting all our subjects, friends, and governors. This letter is written in behalf of Dr. Krapf, the German, a good man who wishes to convert the world to God. Behave well to him, and be everywhere serviceable to him.””⁴⁹

A man of incredible capacities, Krapf did a lot to bring civilization to Africa. But it cannot be denied that his concepts of civilization were imprinted by European nineteenth-century theories of racism and civilization with a strong notion of superiority. “Die Kinder Japhets sind einmal die Weltseele; es muss daher bei den Hamiten und Semiten entweder gehen oder brechen. Es bleibt daher den Eingeborenen nichts anders übrig, als sich der europäischen Kultur zu fügen, oder als Nation unterzugehen, wie man in Amerika bei den Indianern auf deutlichsten sehen kann”.⁵⁰

Krapf went to Germany for reasons of personal health in 1853, to promote the missionary cause. He published more than twenty dictionaries and translations of African languages, the most important was Swahili.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Krapf, *Travels and Missionary labours* 127.

⁵⁰ Letter from Krapf in 1858, cited in *Gütl, Memoir to the Slave trade* 26. Two typical nineteenth century concepts appear in this quote. The concept of “Weltseele” refers to the work of Hegel. Sem, Japhet and Ham were the children of Noah, some were favoured in history, others were cursed. The children of Japhet were the blessed Europeans, they carried the soul of the world.

⁵¹ Bridges in *Introduction to Travels* 48.

7. Conclusion

Johann Ludwig Krapf went to Africa to bring a message of freedom. He contributed much to the later development of African society. He paved the way for European missionaries. By all means he tried to change the practices he met. But his ideas of a superior civilization and his strong pietism sometimes blurred his ability to find solutions. He was not able to transform the Muslim slave society in East Africa. He became an instrument of the colonial development by promoting the English intervention. The inability to find a solution to the problem of slavery was the ultimate cause for European occupation of present day Kenya.