

PIONEER CONVERTS IN EAST AFRICA, 1848-1862

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Having read in the previous article the prognosis of the Christian church in Africa for the 21st century, it is astonishing to be reminded by Professor Watson Omulokoli of the struggles experienced in winning the first few Christian converts in East Africa. It was on 24th November 1850, just 150 years ago, that the first Christian convert of Johann Ludwig Krapf, the pioneer missionary in East Africa, was baptised. John Mringe, a cripple whose body was wasting away with some type of cancer in his bones, was baptised just weeks before his own death. But from that first-fruit has come a glorious harvest to the praise of God.

In this article Omulokoli has performed a real service by engaging in original research, employing primary sources that are difficult to find on the East African scene because they are primary and rare.

The earliest Christian converts in East Africa embraced the Christian faith in the years 1849-1862. The net result was that from a time when there were no indigenous Christians in the region in

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the 1840's, the situation changed so that by mid-1860s, there was a nucleus of converts who had been duly initiated and forged into an existing Christian community.

This stage was reached as one of the key achievements of the pioneer missionary endeavours in East Africa by three German Lutherans, who served under the auspices of the Church Missionary Society (CMS),¹ an Anglican Church missionary agency from Britain. The three served in East Africa for varying lengths of time from 1844 to 1875. The first, Johann Ludwig Krapf initiated the work in 1844 and left the region in 1853. The second, Johann Rebmann was in the field in the years 1846-1875, in a prolonged tenure which was characterised by much patience and persistence. The third, James Erhardt was in East Africa for the brief period of 1849-1855, teaming up with Krapf and Rebmann in the efforts which they had embarked upon earlier. Through their conjoined endeavours, they registered various accomplishments in their missionary thrust. The establishment, over a prolonged period of time, of a nucleus of Christians who had embraced Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord, was one of the outstanding achievements of the missionary labours of these three German Lutherans.

Hopeful Prospects in the First Convert

In the early years, the prospects of success did not seem to be bright. When reviewing the year 1847, Krapf was disappointed with the people's response to their missionary efforts. He came to the conclusion that it was only through Godly patience that they would be able to experience encouraging results. This was the spirit behind the words he wrote then to the effect that,

We will seek comfort in the promise that His Word, wherever it is preached, shall never come back empty; and so we look forward with

¹ Eugene Stock, *History of the Church Missionary Society: Its Environment, Its Men and Its Work*, Vol. I (London: Church Missionary Society, 1899), 68. Formed on 12th April, 1799 by Evangelicals within the Church of England, but with most of the early missionary recruits from like-minded Pietistic seminaries in Berlin and Basle, Germany.

courage and confidence to continue in the new year the work which we have begun, casting the bread of life upon the waters, hoping still to find it again after many days!²

Little did Krapf realise when he wrote these words that the first signs of hope were around the corner. From the beginning, the CMS missionaries had preached the message of salvation in Jesus Christ. For a long time, their message did not seem to meet with any positive individual response. At last, in May, 1848, Krapf made contact with one person who showed keen personal interest in the message of salvation in Jesus Christ which the missionaries were preaching.³ This man, Mringe, was a cripple or a person with physical disability, and whose body was wasting away with some type of cancer of the bones.

Although Krapf viewed this contact with Mringe with cautious optimism he was nonetheless encouraged that he had established a personal relationship with one who could turn out to be the pioneer follower of Jesus Christ in East Africa. Looking at the present situation with anticipation for the future, he explained,

I sometimes think that there will soon be a change among these people, though I am so often disappointed in this anticipation for I seem but to sow the seed upon stony places; yet have I joy in hope, hope in believing, and work on with trust; fervent in spirit, serving the Lord to the best of my ability, and patiently waiting His own time for the blessing!⁴

Once Krapf made contact with Mringe, the two established rapport which they went on to cultivate as they met frequently in subsequent days. Mringe became consistent in visiting Krapf and discussing spiritual issues with him. In turn, Krapf took a keen interest in Mringe and even tried to assist him materially in order

² [John] Lewis Krapf for Johann Ludwig Krapf, *Travels, Researches, and Missionary Labours*. Second Edition with a New Introduction by Roy C. Bridges (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1968), 86.

³ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 195.

to help improve his physical and social well-being. In keeping with their constant contact, Krapf mentions Mringe often in his writings in this period. In one instance on 27th November, 1848, Krapf wrote, 'I read and prayed with Mringe, who seems to be under the influence of God's preparing grace'.⁵ With the passage of time, Mringe also became intimate with Rebmann. This acquaintanceship proved to be valuable and was strengthened in the period of 12th July to 1st November, 1848, when Krapf was away in Usambara. It was now Rebmann who maintained contact with Mringe and who tried to assist him in his Christian faith. As Mringe grew and matured in his Christian commitment others around him were encouraged in their search and wanted to follow in his footsteps.

In this early period of Mringe's interest in Christian matters, one of his neighbours, Ndune or Abbe Munga seemed to be responsive to Christian teaching. Although he was not as consistent and persistent as Mringe, and wavered after a while, his very interest indicated that there was potential for more converts in the near future. Indeed, this very point was made to Mringe by the community elders and leaders of the area. In the first instance, they allowed Mringe to embrace Christianity, if that was his desire and choice. Secondly, they indicated that what the Wanyika (Mjikenda people) were waiting for was for pioneers who would lead the way in following Jesus Christ. As soon as this barrier was broken by a nucleus, many more people would follow that lead and commit themselves to Jesus Christ. At that time, Krapf went on to urge Mringe and his friend Ndune or Abbe Munga to take up the challenge by becoming the envisaged vanguard,⁶ "since it were a great honour to them in heaven to be the first fruits, and adopting the way of Jesus Christ".⁷

As it turned out, while Ndune or Abbe Munga seemed to have slowed down in his commitment, Mringe maintained his determination to follow Jesus Christ, and in the process became the

⁵ *Church Missionary Gleaner*, n.s. 1 (1850-1851), 113.

⁶ Krapf, *Travels, Researches, and Missionary Labours*, 203.

⁷ *Church Missionary Gleaner*, n.s. 1 (1850-1851), 114.

beacon that could guide others who were ready to embrace the Christian faith. His example may have given the missionaries a flicker of hope that all was not in vain, and that others would follow his example in the near future. As Krapf reported on the situation at the end of 1849.

After my return from Ukambani I continued for a few weeks, as formerly, my daily wanderings among the Wanyika in the neighbourhood of Rabai, preaching the Gospel, and bidding all to the feast prepared, even the kingdom of Heaven scattering the seed, not disheartened though so little had fallen upon good ground, and in Mringe alone has sprung up with a promise of bearing fruit an hundred-fold, hopeful and trustful to the end.⁸

Baptism and Death of Mringe

Mringe had become the symbol of success and hope in the work of the CMS in East Africa. Then, while Krapf was away in Europe in 1850, this lone convert became ill and eventually died, but after being baptised by Rebmann. The facts are that he was baptised on 24th November, 1850, and died on 3rd December. Prior to his baptism, Rebmann and Erhardt discussed his case and agreed that, because it was clear that he was likely to die, and since he was sure about his Christian conviction and profession, arrangements should be made for him to be baptised. With that agreed upon, the day for his baptism was fixed as Sunday, 24th November, with John or Johannesi as his baptismal name.

First, Rebmann prepared him by going through the content of the Baptismal Service with him twice. Secondly, the step which Mringe was taking in becoming a Christian was explained and emphasised to his mother, since he was living with her. On the day of baptism, the ceremony was not held indoors but rather outside Mringe's hut in the open in order to enable others in the community to witness the occasion. Regarding the service itself and the significance of the event, Rebmann wrote,

⁸ Krapf, *Travels, Researches, and Missionary Labours*, 208.

His baptism... took place, all in the Kinyika language, in the presence of his mother, Abbe Gunja, the Chief and one of the Elders, one of our servants, and a few other Wanyika... He was called Johannesi. Thus the first soul of the thousands and millions of this part of Africa has been translated from the reign of Satan into the Kingdom of Christ, the pledge of the full harvest for which our faith has still to wait, and our love to labour. The Lord's name be praised, who allows even the least and most unworthy of His servants to lead souls to Him, who alone is our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption.⁹

Following his baptism on 24th November, his health continued to deteriorate, culminating in his death on 3rd December. By the time he died, the conversion and baptism of Mringe were accomplished facts. Whatever else happened, it was now a fact of history that a beginning had been made in the conversion of individuals in East Africa. There is a sense also in which the conversion and death of Mringe had their own significance as pointers to the future of Christianity in the region. When his wife and daughter died and were buried at the beginning of his missionary endeavours, Krapf had explained that since 'the victories of the Church are gained by stepping over the graves of her members', the 'lonely missionary grave' of his family signified the beginnings of Christian efforts in East Africa.¹⁰ Later Krapf had written about his hopes for a breakthrough in the conversion of individuals in the region. As he puts it,

Meanwhile, I often prayed fervently for the preservation of my life in Africa, at least until one should be saved; for I was certain that if once a single stone of the spiritual temple were laid in any country, the Lord would bless the work, and continue the structure, by the conversion of those who were now sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to whom our missionary labours were but as the dawn of the day-star from on High.¹¹

⁹ *Church Missionary Gleaner*, n.s. 1 (1850-1851), 196.

¹⁰ Stock, *History of the CMS*, Vol. 1, 461-462.

¹¹ Krapf, *Travels, Researches, and Missionary Labours*, 157.

Worthy Successor in Abbe Gunja

Mringe had distinguished himself as the first convert in vast Africa. Of the people on whom Mringe's example had a profound impact the most immediate clear response came from one of his nearby neighbours, Abbe Gunja. Before he went on furlough to Europe in April, 1850, Krapf had already made acquaintance with him because of their common association with Mringe.¹² Commenting on Abbe Gunja's introduction to the Christian faith, Rebmann wrote on 21st September, 1850, 'By means of the poor cripple Mringe, another more respectable Mnyika was induced to listen to the Gospel, and to open his heart for its reception'.¹³ In contrast to Mringe, who had been subjected to a low social status in his immediate social environment, Abbe Gunja was a family man who was held in high esteem in his community.¹⁴ Underscoring Mringe's role and instrumentality in bringing Abbe Gunja into the Christian fold, Krapf wrote of him, 'He is useful among Wanyika and Wakarnba people. One of the former, a man of some respectability, has applied for instruction'.¹⁵

When Mringe died, it was obvious that Abbe Gunja replaced and succeeded him as the leading convert of the mission, although he had yet to be baptised.¹⁶ His devotion to Jesus Christ as well as to the mission was notable. As he maintained his instruction under Rebmann's care, his faith deepened to such an extent that it was noted that he had 'given gratifying proofs of a renewed heart'.¹⁷

Growth in a Period of Interruption

Because of unsettled and unstable conditions which resulted from the death of Sultan Seyyid Said in October, 1856, Rebmann and his wife left the mission station for Zanzibar towards the end of that

¹² *Ibid.*, 211.

¹³ *Church Missionary Gleaner*, n.s. 1 (1850-1851), 176.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Church Missionary Record*, 22, no. 1 (January 1851), 11.

¹⁶ Stock, *History of the CMS*, vol. 2, 133.

¹⁷ Krapf, *Travels, Researches, and Missionary Labours*, 221.

year. He visited it briefly in November 1858, but did not effectively return to re-occupy it until the early part of 1859.¹⁸ When Rebmann retreated from the station to Zanzibar at the end of 1856, the unbaptised covert, Abbe Gunja, accompanied him there. It seems as if, together with Abbe Gunja, a friend of his, Mua Muamba, who had strong interest in the Christian faith, also went with Rebmann. In April 1858, Abbe Gunja and Mua Muamba returned to the mission station. Abbe Gunja found the community in and around Rabai eagerly longing for the return of Rebmann and the missionary team. Eventually, when Rebmann visited the area on November 22-24, 1858, he met with an enthusiastic welcome on one hand, and astounding results of Christian converts on the other hand. This fact was expressed in a report which stated, 'The Missionary left his station cast down and dispirited. He knew of but one covert, Abbe Gunja, and that one unbaptised. He returns, and finds six won to Christ, and a friendly spirit taking the place of enmity in the hearts of those who are yet untouched by the renewing grace of God'.¹⁹ Apart from Abbe Gunja and Mua Muamba the others in the total group who were recognised by name were Zuia and Dena.²⁰

Baptism of Father and Son

Since the baptism of Mringe in 1850, no one else had been baptised. Now the prospects for more baptisms looked bright as Rebmann settled down again in the station in 1859. Just then, however, an incident took place which brought deep sorrow and great disappointment to Rebmann, but also awakened him. This was the sudden death of one of the converts, Mua Muamba, on 30th January, 1860. Rebmann went to his home to take him some medicine on that day, only to find that he had just passed away moments earlier. The encouraging thing in all this was the report which his wife gave about his instructions earlier, and his activities on the day of his death. Although he died prematurely in middle

¹⁸ *Proceedings of the CMS (1860-1861)*, 56-57.

¹⁹ *Church Missionary Record*, n.s. 4, no. 7 (July 1859), 213-214.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 214-215.

age, he had already given firm instructions that upon his death, they should not engage in any offending traditional ceremonies since he was a Christian. Then, on the day of his death itself, "in the morning, he had, according to his custom, still knelt down by the side of his miserable bedstead for prayer'.²¹

From the point of view of Rebmann, sadness and sorrow over Mua Muamba's death was mixed with disappointment that although he was a convert, he had died before they baptised him. On the positive side, Rebmann was awakened to the need to begin preparing other converts for baptism, especially Abbe Gunja and his son, Nyondo. The baptism ceremony for the two took place on Pentecost Sunday, in May 1860, with the father taking on the name of Abraham and the sixteen year old son being named Isaac. As Rebmann narrated in his letter of 15th September 1860,

Having been warned by the unexpected death of Mua Muamba of the uncertainty of life, I felt That I could no longer defer the baptism of one, who, as far as his own personal preparation was concerned, might have been baptised years ago. I therefore fixed on the day of Pentecost, which was near, and had then the great privilege of receiving both father and son into the ark of the Church of Christ.²²

The baptism of Abraham Abbe Gunja and his son, Isaac Nyondo, was a very significant step in the life of the CMS in East Africa. This meant that now, for the first time since the baptism of Mringe ten years earlier, there was a body of baptised Christians in the Mission, in addition to other converts. In later years, Isaac Nyondo progressed to become Rebmann's personal attendant and confidant. Having baptised two of the converts, the four remaining converts, were considered baptismal candidates with whom Rebmann worked in this state for the rest of that year, 1860.

²¹ *Proceedings of the CMS (1860-1861)*, 57.

²² *Church Missionary Record*, n.s. 6, no. 2 (February 1861), 45.

Easter Sunday Baptism for Four

The turn for baptism of these four came on the Easter Sunday of the following year, 1861. On that particular Sunday, Rebmann expressed how clear to him it was with regard to these four that, 'I felt I must no longer withhold the means of grace with which, as a minister of Christ, I was entrusted'.²³ One of these, Dena, who was named Joseph had been close to Abbe Gunja at a very early stage, but had made slow progress. Two others, Mua Zuia who took on the name of David, and Lugo, who was named Jonathan, had been together through many problems. The fourth, Zuia, was a very respectful and congenial man who took on the name of Johannes or John. In the same process, Rebmann took the bold step of not limiting, these converts to baptism, but also went ahead and 'admitted them as communicants'.²⁴

Building on the Established Foundation

With the foundation having been laid, the building of the actual structure continued, slowly, but steadily and surely. Commendable progress was made not only in terms of numbers but also in the sphere of consistency and commitment to Christian ideals and demands. With regard to numbers Rebmann indicated that in June 1862, there was 'a further increase of about six or seven persons' as new inquirers enrolled to learn about the Christian faith. Among this fresh group was one, Marunga, who seemed to be on the whole 'more thoughtful than others, and as the principal and most intelligent man' in the community.²⁵ This was a gigantic leap forward from the days of Mringe, with his low social status. In the area of adherence to recurrent Christian practices, a high level of consistency and maturity had been achieved as the individual members of the Christian community flew their respective flags and carried their crosses voluntarily. As Rebmann remarked, 'They come to the station, more or less regularly, on Sundays, to which, under present circumstances when the people are scattered about at

²³ *Proceedings of the CMS (1861-1862)*, 56.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Church Missionary Record*, n.s. 6, no. 2 (February 1861), 45.

an inconvenient distance, and when the station, with its requisite buildings, is only now struggling into existence'.²⁶

These additions, conversions, and baptisms represented a tremendous accomplishment in the work of the CMS as well as for the cause of Jesus Christ in East Africa. On another level, the additions, conversions, and baptisms heralded a major breakthrough and the beginning of a new process, that of enrolling a community of Christians from the region in God's eternal register. It was now realistic to talk in concrete terms about the indigenisation of the Church, with all that this implied. Among other things, Krapf's dream of 'a black bishop and black clergy' was now an achievable goal.²⁷ Somehow, it was fitting that God allowed Krapf to witness and rejoice in the encouraging results which were now evident in the mission which he had founded. This took place in a first hand encounter which was afforded him when he visited Rabai in 1862 on his way to settle Methodist missionaries at nearby Ribe. In a jubilant mood, he wrote in his letter of 17th April 1862,

I afterwards made the acquaintance of these converts and boys, and especially of Abraham Abbe Gunja, whose eyes got luminous when he shook hands again with me, after so long an interval. Most of the converts I knew personally, especially the Mnyika Upanga, whom I have mentioned in the German edition of my book as the most hardened and unapproachable, sinner, for I often called upon him at Rabai Mpya in his sickness, and laboured to lead him to the Saviour of sinners, but to no effect. Witnessing all this, I could not but exclaim, 'What has God wrought in the country by the faith, patience, and perseverance of Mr. Rebmann, his humble servant !'²⁸

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 347.

²⁷ Krapf, *Travels, Researches, and Missionary Labours*, 135.

²⁸ *Church Missionary Record*, n.s. 7, no. 8 (August 1862), 238.

Summary and Conclusion

The three pioneer missionaries, Krapf, Rebmann, and Erhardt did not win large numbers of East Africans to the Christian faith.²⁹ All the same, through their indefatigable labours, a nucleus of indigenous converts embraced Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord. Three things seemed to be very clear in this early period. *First*, the people among whom the missionaries were working did not accept the Christian faith readily and with ease. *Secondly*, the missionaries themselves were careful and cautious, avoiding the temptation of trying to hurriedly initiate into the Christian faith those whose commitment to Jesus Christ was not clear. *Thirdly*, it was through the active Christian witness of the indigenous converts themselves that more of their number were won to salvation in Jesus Christ. Through this slow and steady approach, a nucleus of indigenous Christian converts emerged in the years 1848-1862.

From the beginning, these pioneer converts were not viewed in isolation, but rather, as the vanguard of many who would embrace Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord in the region in succeeding generations. It was with this in view, that in the initial stages, Krapf had envisaged a scenario in which 'once a single stone of the spiritual temple were laid in any country, the Lord would bless the work, and continue the structure'.³⁰

Similarly when he baptised Mringe, Rebmann saw this as but the first step in a long continuum. As he put it, 'Thus the first soul of the thousands and millions of this part of Africa has been translated from the reign of Satan into the Kingdom of Christ, the pledge of the full harvest for which our faith has still to wait and our love to

²⁹ Roland Oliver, *The Missionary Factor in East Africa* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1952), 6. Oliver has written, 'These three sad and other-worldly men achieved no great evangelistic success among the scattered and socially incoherent Wanyika tribesmen who were their neighbours at Rabai...But Krapf and Rebmann, if they were somewhat impractical, had vision, tenacity and boundless courage. They were filled with the assurance that others of their calling would follow them, and they regarded themselves from the first as the pioneers of a continental system'.

³⁰ Krapf, *Travels, Researches, and Missionary Labours*, 157.

labour'.³¹ There is now a thriving Church in East Africa with an innumerable number of Christians. Viewing it retrospectively, it is abundantly clear that the roots of this astounding phenomenon are to be found in Mringe and his colleagues – the pioneer Christian converts in East Africa.

³¹ *Church Missionary Gleaner*, n.s. 1 (1850-1851), 196.