

Ludwig von Rohden on German Missionaries in Borneo and Southwestern Africa: Excerpts from *History of the Rhenish Missionary Society* (1857)

Abstract

Ludwig von Rohden (1817–1889) was an inspector and instructor in the educational institution of the Rhenish Missionary Society [*Rheinische Missions-Gesellschaft*] in Barmen. Established in 1828 in the Prussian Rhineland, the organization was among the earliest Protestant revivalist missionary societies in the German lands. Society members initially focused their efforts on the Inner Mission, that is, in Germany itself. It did not take long, however, for them to turn their attention to overseas missionary work. These passages, taken from Rohden's *History of the Rhenish Missionary Society* [*Geschichte der Rheinischen Missions-Gesellschaft*], describe the advent of the organization's international work in the period 1838 to 1847. The Society, as these passages show, was forced to seek out opportunities for cooperation with other colonial powers, since no German states had colonies of their own at that time. In the case discussed here, the Society had to cooperate with the British in southern Africa (in the land of the Nama in present-day Namibia) and with the Dutch on the island of Borneo in the Dutch East Indies. The importance of learning indigenous languages, cooperating with indigenous leaders, and working with indigenous converts who could serve as multipliers to evangelize further converts emerge as clear themes in these passages. Particularly significant in the case of Borneo was the early development of humanitarian fundraising strategies that aimed to establish a sense of personal connection and empathy between benefactors back in Europe and the recipients of aid overseas. In this instance, fundraising appeals connected donors with the specific persons who had been bought out of slavery through those donations. The formerly enslaved persons could then become potential converts. Also noteworthy are Rohden's remarks on the role of women missionaries as both wives and helpers in the enterprise of evangelizing indigenous populations.

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But in 1838 the Rhenish Society did not just have stations on the African Cape alone. To be sure, it had been forced to give up its mission in North America. It had lost four pupils there. Nies died, Heyer had quit in an inglorious manner, Mühlhäuser was reassigned to the German congregations, and Nollau likewise returned to the Germans in North America after a short service in the heathen mission. In Borneo, however, only the first attempts had been made. At first, it cost the brothers there much effort and sweat to gain a knowledge of the Malay and Dayak languages, without which they could not begin to do their work among the heathens. There, too, one perished: Krüsmann. Of the three others, Barnstein, Becker and Hupperts, the last dared to leave the coastal town of Banyermassing and penetrate further into the interior and to settle among the Dayaks in the swamplands of Pulopetak, along with his dear friend Berger of the Tranquebar Mission. Two German girls were sent out for him and our missionary Barnstein from here to help the brothers as housewives. Becker and Hupperts chose wives themselves from among the local European families, for it soon became clear that the climate and way of life in those parts of the East Indies do not permit men to remain long in an unmarried state. Just now the brothers in Borneo have earnestly requested quick and sizable reinforcements, for doors are being opened to them everywhere, but their small numbers are by no means sufficient to venture any more extensive enterprises in the interior. And while the deputation was still engaged in consultations on the best

manner of meeting this request, we received a similar appeal from Africa that prompted still more difficult discussions.

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The Beginnings of the Mission in Namaqualand

The cry for help from our missionaries in Borneo led to the convocation of a General Assembly on April 30, 1839, at which it was decided that Hardeland and Himmelmann would be sent out to Borneo. With regard to the African mission, this assembly also resolved to send out the former pupil Andreas to Stellenbosch as a religion teacher and school assistant, and Budler as inspector of schools for the southern stations with the special task of training native boys as national assistants. Budler, however, should also be ordained if circumstances demanded it in the future, and employed as a mission preacher. When all seemed to have been organized, and Hardeland and Himmelmann, Budler and Andreas were ready to be sent out, a letter arrived from the old missionary Schmelen in Kommaggas. He urgently requested that an assistant missionary first be sent out for the poor heathens in the region (Bushmen, Namaqua, Damra), since he and his colleague Wimmer in Steinkopf were growing old and weak, and his society in London had explained to him through Dr. Philipp that they had left the western part of South Africa to our Rhenish Missionary Society. Moreover, a journal entry by Terlinden and a letter from Sister Hahn (both in Eben Ezer) conveyed something of the conversations that our brothers had with the captain of the Namaqua Jan Fredrik when he passed through Eben Ezer. This heathen chieftain had set out with a number of his men to seek a teacher (missionary) for his people. He considered the inhabitants of the station of Eben Ezer fortunate and lamented his misfortune at having to travel there with his men without Christian instruction.

The deputation viewed these appeals and invitations as a sign from the Lord to enter the new field of work among the Namaqua. They did not doubt that they must immediately send a helper to dear Schmelen from among the brothers already designated for dispatch to South Africa. Since, however, they could scarcely hold another General Assembly for this purpose, but also could not unilaterally make such decisions, they chose the middle way and, as in former days, called a plenary meeting of the directors of the two societies in Wupperthal. On June 17, they gathered in the hall of the mission house. In a lengthy address, Leipoldt described the situation of the Namaqua mission, and then recommended on behalf of the deputation that one of the younger pupils, Kleinschmidt from Blasheim, be deputed to Kommaggas as an assistant to Missionary Schmelen, who, once he had learned the language and that of the Namaqua, could travel farther into the interior to Sitten Bethanien, where numerous other brothers would subsequently be sent from here. The assembly declared that it had long desired to approach the poor, abandoned Namaqua people and unanimously agreed to this plan, both as regards the suggested person and the manner in which the mission should be begun. This decision was then conveyed in writing to those societies that had not attended the meeting, and since no objections were raised, the necessary measures were taken. Kleinschmidt had to prepare himself in haste to take the examination that Hardeland and Himmelmann, Budler and Knudsen had to pass. In terms of education, Knudsen would have been far more suitable for Namaqualand than Kleinschmidt, for the former had already been at the mission house for three years and passed his ordination examination, while the latter had only attended instruction at the mission house for one year. But Knudsen was only 23 years old, whereas Kleinschmidt already 27 and appeared to possess more inner maturity for such a difficult calling. Knudsen's father had also requested that his son be sent to visit him in Norway one more time, and the deputation thought it should seize this opportunity for Knudsen perhaps to awaken more interest in the missionary cause in his homeland, and at the same time to wait there until he became stronger. And so Knudsen traveled to Norway for one year, and Kleinschmidt to South Africa along with Budler and Andreas. Himmelmann and Hardeland sailed with them on the same ship to the Cape and then on to Borneo.

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Reinforcements for the Mission in Borneo

Of the two brothers sent to Borneo in 1834, Heyer and Barnstein, the first returned without having seen Borneo, and of the three brothers sent out in 1836, Becker, Hupperts and Krüsmann, the last arrived ill in Borneo and died soon after arriving (p. 55). Then Hardeland und Himmelmann arrived in 1841 and, after just a few weeks, one of them, Himmelmann, was buried alongside Krüsmann (on his death, see *Barm. Miss.-Bl.* 1841, no. 22).

The remaining brothers separated; Hardeland remained with Barnstein in Banyermassing while Becker continued the mission among the so-called little Dayaks of Pulopetak with the Tranquebar missionary Berger, and Hupperts decided to try his luck with the great Dayaks of the Kahayan. At first, Hupperts had the most difficult post. Having witnessed terrible atrocities and faced the most severe personal perils, he sought to strew the seeds of God's Word in Kahayan. Soon, however, he had to return to Banyermassing and exchange positions with Hardeland, for his wife had died, and he could not have borne to stay on alone in that heathen Sodom. But Hardeland, too, had no success in Kahayan and was compelled to return. The brothers felt that such isolated attempts were of no use and thus sent an urgent request for reinforcements. The deputation was pleased by this appeal and hastened to respond. For that reason, at the General Assembly called for April 1842, they suggested sending the pupils van Höfen and Juffernbruch to Borneo (report on this General Assembly in *Barm. Miss.-Bl.* 1842, no. 11). The assembled delegates gave their consent. The two brothers were to be married before their departure, and the pupil Alheit, who was destined for the school in Tulbagh, was to travel with them as far as Cape Town, along with Fismer, who as an agriculturalist was to run the Wupperthal farm.

Juffernbruch and van Höfen had already been ordained and deputed, together with Fismer and Alheit, on the occasion of the Elberfeld Missionary Festival on June 1, 1842, when the news suddenly arrived of a law recently passed in Holland that made it all but impossible for foreigners to settle in the Dutch East Indies, namely, in Borneo. There was no time to lose. The ship that was to transport all the brothers and sisters, dropping some of them off in Cape Town and the others in Java, was supposed to sail at the end of June, and the contracts for their passage had already been completed. Petitions were sent to the minister for the colonies in The Hague, asking him to grant permission to Brothers and Sisters Juffernbruch and van Höfen to settle in Borneo, and to exempt them from a probationary year in Java. Influential persons were contacted to support this petition, and before the reply could arrive, the travel-ready brothers were sent to Holland. The candidate Hupe also arrived from Halle, who also wanted to go out to Borneo as a missionary to assist Berger of the Tranquebar Mission in Bethabara in Pulopetak. It had already been arranged that Hupe would travel with our brothers, and a place had been reserved for him on the ship. He was given a general letter of recommendation and was also sent to Holland to see what he could achieve there. Everything went much better than expected. The Lord guided the hearts of the powerful in Holland in such a way that all three missionaries, admittedly as the very last ones and only as an exception, were allowed to go to Borneo. The Dutch colonial minister had even recommended to the governor general of the East Indies to shorten the sojourn of *our* missionaries in Java as far as possible. As a consequence, Juffernbruch and van Höfen were able to travel straight from Batavia to Banyermassing, while Hupe, like Hardeland and Himmelmann before him, had first to absolve a probationary year in Java. When the brothers arrived in Java on November 23, 1842, they were happy to find Brother Becker, who had had a few textbooks in the Dayak language printed there and stayed until the middle of the following year.

Juffernbruch and van Höfen embarked for Borneo at the beginning of 1843. The latter stayed for a time with Barnstein in Banyermassing and then established a station in Mentangei; Juffernbruch for his part joined forces with Hupperts and made another attempt among the great Dayaks in Kahayan, which, however, also proved unsuccessful. The Dayak mission was making no real progress. Then the brothers

conceived the idea of buying the freedom of slaves or pandelings (debtors who had become serfs when they could not pay their debts) and to keep them in their close vicinity under special supervision to see whether these hard hearts might not be softened by close contact and daily influence, so that the seed of God's Word might strike roots in them and grow. The deputation to whom this plan was first presented was of the opinion that such an attempt could be made but at the same time warned that the sums used to ransom them should not come from mission funds but rather must be covered by private contributions. A few members of the deputation immediately declared themselves prepared to donate notable sums for this purpose. An article by Becker und Hupperts, which contained an appeal to participate in this work of charity, was published in the *Barmer Missionsblatt* (1843, no. 7) and met with a great response, despite the fact that the deputation had made no bones about their misgivings regarding the matter and had declared from the outset that it was only an attempt that the Society as such, had nothing to do with. But friends of the mission from near and far were pleased by the opportunity to participate directly in missionary work. The individual donors decided upon the baptismal names of the pandelings who were to be bought out of slavery with their money, and they believed that this would keep them in constant living connection and active spiritual converse with the baptizand who had been won in this way. In this expectation, the donations grew from year to year, and from 1843–49 well over 2,500 talers were contributed to buy the freedom of pandelings. Later, Hardeland revived the collection in a far more extensive manner according to an even broader plan and facilitated many even richer donations. To be sure, many donors undeniably found their expectations disappointed, since by no means did all of those who were bought out of slavery find the Lord, and a direct connection between the friends and the individual baptizands arose only rarely or not at all, but these donations did not, therefore, remain unblessed. The first members of our Christian congregations among the Dayaks grew out of the circle of ransomed pandelings; specifically, the young native assistants gradually trained by our brothers largely belonged to this group.

Before it came to any great successes, however, the mission in Borneo would first experience many low points. For a time, it seemed as if our brothers found all doors closed to them. In Banyermassing, the laziness and disinterest that had hindered any thorough change from the outset continued. In Pulopetak the great mass of Dayaks were in a state of near rebellion and revolt against the missionaries, the wild Singa Radja had driven the missionaries from Kahayan for the fourth and fifth time, and the efforts in Mentangei and Patei also had to be abandoned once again; nowhere did the lavishly strewn seeds seem to fall on fertile ground. In 1845 the number of our workers dwindled as well. Hardeland had to leave the island and go to South Africa because of his weakened health and the enmity directed against his person in particular, and Juffernbruch because of his ailing wife. The loyal friend and collaborator of our brothers, Berger of the Tranquebar Mission at Bethabara station in Pulopetak, died; his colleague Hupe returned to Europe, and so of the 10 or 11 missionaries sent to Borneo only four remained. They were Barnstein at Banyermassing and Becker, Hupperts and van Höfen in Pulopetak. Before all of this terrible news reached Barmen, the deputation had already begun to consider whether this entire apparently hopeless mission should be abandoned, "Whether it was not God's will to direct the energies expended in Borneo elsewhere?" The view, however, was to persevere at least until the translation of the Bible into Dayak begun by Becker and Hardeland was completed. Meanwhile, it was agreed that the Borneo mission should be the subject of special intercessory prayers.

These prayers seemed to have some effect. The descriptions and reports by the widow of Missionary Berger, who came through Barmen in 1846, a few refreshing letters from Becker, accounts by several capable national assistants, contributions from abroad especially destined for Borneo, queries from Holland regarding a future Dutch colony, news of the government's favorable mood towards the Rhenish Mission and its willingness to allow new missionaries again, all this and more revived the hopes for Borneo, and on July 21, 1847, at the request of the deputation, the General Assembly declared it to be the Rhenish Mission's irrefutable duty to follow the Lord's call and not to leave the field that it had been tilling for 12 years to return to wilderness just when the first fruits of their laborious sowing were

beginning to show. And so Beyer and Denninger were ordained on September 29 and delegated, and traveled, at the urgent representations of our veteran Barnstein in Borneo, from here, both of them now married. Beyer was to serve as Becker's assistant since the latter was very busy with his translation work, and Denninger was to remain at first with Barnstein in Banyermassing. But when they arrived in Borneo, a sad event had further diminished the number of missionaries. Hupperts had had to be removed from his office because of a moral weakness into which he had fallen, which unfortunately exposed him several times before the eyes of the Dayaks, and so the recently arrived missionary Denninger had to take over the Bintang Station right away (van Höfen had taken over the Bethabara Station from the late Berger), and the previous number of four brothers in Borneo was augmented by Beyer alone.

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Source: *Geschichte der Rheinischen Missions-Gesellschaft* (1857). From the sources provided by L. v. Rohden, Second Inspector at the Rhenish Missionary Seminary. Second revised and completed edition. Barmen: J. F. Steinhaus, 1871, pp. 54–63. Available online at: <http://mdz-nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb10703950-7>

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