**Carl Adolf Hoffmann, a missionary in colonial South Africa**

In 1947, a year before the National Party came to power in South Africa, the 79-year-old Carl Adolf Hoffmann reminisced:

> My childhood and youth were characterised by an insatiable quest to visit strange lands and to sail across the wide oceans. During my years at school and as a student, geography, ethnography, history were the subjects that fascinated me the most. Therefore I became a missionary and as a result my dreams were fulfilled.[1]

From this it is easy to imagine that a 'missionary' must have been some kind of 'adventurer', or 'explorer' – or 'coloniser', or a combination of all these. What did it mean for Carl Hoffmann to have been a missionary?

Hoffmann was 25 when he completed his training at the seminary of the Berlin Missionary Society; he arrived in Cape Town in 1894 and spent most of his missionary career in what was then known as the Transvaal. As a missionary he experienced the changes effected on the South African population by the British victory over the Boers in the War of 1899-1902, as well as the two World Wars. During all three these conflicts, there were German South Africans who were interned as enemy-aliens, but Hoffmann was overlooked every time. He seems to have had a way to get along with the authorities, ending his career as *Präses* of the Berlin Mission in South Africa. After his retirement, he continued to act as treasurer until 1943. By the time he was buried in Pietersburg (today Polokwane) in 1962, he was no longer a German citizen. Had he become *bodenstandig* in the same way as many other Berlin missionaries and their descendants who settled in South Africa?[2]

Much of what Hoffmann had accomplished, was facilitated by the colonial order of his day. Some might argue that his cordial relations with the white authorities (Afrikaans- and English-speaking) enabled him to create opportunities for Africans and mitigate their oppression; others would argue that he should have gone a lot further, that repatriation to Germany would have been the real test for anti-colonial action. Others still would argue that he never should have left Germany in the first place.

Historians have a responsibility to investigate what was possible at any given moment in the past, to establish how much scope any individual may have had to bring about change. As a starting point, it is insightful that in the nineteenth century, the Germans' "interest in their multiple 'Others'" was not just about colonialism and yearnings of power:

> The German interest in non-Europeans – in their cultures, their religions, their physiognomy, their physiology, and their history – were tightly bound up in a range of intellectual traditions that were much richer and more multifarious than a simple colonialist drive. These included humanism, liberalism, pluralism, monogenism, and a persistent desire to know more about the world that went hand in hand with the German commitment to *Bildung*.[3]

Hoffmann certainly arrived in Africa with such an interest, and he continued writing about African culture until long after his retirement. His contribution to the recording of northern Sotho cultural knowledge as it was divulged to him in their own language, Sepedi, by numerous local African

[1] C.A. Hoffmann (1947), Lewensskets, *Die Brandwag.* 1947, pp. 33 & 45.

[2] For a more extensive treatment of Hoffmann's career, see: A. Hoffmann et. al. (2015). *Ethnography from the Mission Field. The Hoffmann Collection of Cultural Knowledge* (Leiden: Brill), pp. 15-73.

[3] H.G. Penny and M. Bunzl (2006). *Wordly Provincialism. German Anthropology in the Age of Empire* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), p. 9.

interlocutors over the years, is the legacy of a man who learned from the people he was meant to teach. Unfortunately, as Penny and Bunzl continue to explain, the nineteenth-century liberal humanist German curiosity about a world full of difference hardened in the twentieth century into a racial approach to culture. Hoffmann was not unaffected. He published his research in journals that put knowledge in the service of advancing German colonialism. Also, in the 1930s, under Director Siegfried Knak, the Berlin Mission's insistence on an inherent difference between Africans and Europeans, developed into a position from where *Gleichstellung* between black and white could not be contemplated. But Director Knak also believed, as explained by historian Richard Elphick, that:

> numerous African virtues … had been damaged by contact with whites. … As African societies continued to disintegrate, missionaries [were supposed to] ensure that Africans' "spiritual heritage can be saved and transported into the new era … under the new conditions of life."[4]

During the twentieth-century struggle against white supremacy in South Africa, such a paternalistic mission was a false note in a situation where Africans were denied equal rights and the freedom of citizenship in a modern democracy. Ironically, under post-Apartheid African nationalism, a renewed interest in an African spiritual heritage turned missionary ethnography into a strangely serendipitous font of information. If this missionary-ethnographic legacy were to be dusted off and disinfected from all its patriarchy and condescendence, it would be useful to understand how Carl Hoffmann had manoeuvred as an agent in a colonial world.

Throughout his long career, Carl Hoffmann had to act his part within the boundaries set by the state. This involved regular correspondence with officials of the Native Affairs Department. In 1904 he pleaded with the Government to assist Africans from Edendale near Pretoria to find a place to stay when a new farm owner wished to oust them.[5] In 1907 he wrote to the Native Commissioner on request of the Mphome-Kratzenstein mission station inhabitants about a dispute over water with the people of neighbouring Mamatola.[6] A letter of 14 July 1910 gives an impression not only of the tone in which Hoffmann liaised with the state, but also of the parameters of the possible within which the missionary could operate. He had some authority, but he had to know how far he could stretch it. Furthermore, the correspondence provides insight into the extent to which Africans' freedom of movement and their presence on alienated land (including farms and mission stations) had become regulated by this time:

> I beg leave to apply to you for permittance to station Native Evangelist Filemon Mangena, under my Superintendence, on the farm of Mr C.A. Lancefield, owner of Silverfontein near Krabbefontein in the Lowfield, for School- and Missionwork amongst the Natives. Mr Lancefield is prepared to accept the said man on his farm on condition that you have no objection against it with regard to the Squatter Law.
> I trust that you will kindly grant the permittance wanted for the little Mission Outstation, and remain
> Sir,
> Yours obediently

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[4] R. Elphick (2012). *The Equality of Believers. Protestant Missionaries and the Racial Politics of South Africa* (Scottsville: UKZN), p. 176 – quoting Knak (1931).
[5] History of Edendale, 15 February 1904, TAB SNA 196 NA 346-04, National Archives of South Africa, Pretoria.
[6] Sub-Native Commissioner Haenertsburg forwards letter from the Rev. C. Hoffmann of Mphome Mission Station, Woodbush, regarding dispute over water at Leshoane, 28 August 1907, TAB SNA 380 NA 3385-07-1907, National Archives of South Africa, Pretoria.

C Hoffmann, Lutheran Minister, of Berlin Mission Society.[7]

Native Affairs replied affirmatively on 26 July 1910, on condition that: "This permission must not be construed as authorising any additional relaxation of the principle of the Squatters' Law upon the farm." On other occasions, the Native Affairs Department was not so lenient. In 1913, upon Hoffmann's request that the relative of a deceased man could come and stay with another family on the mission station, he received the reply: "I have the honour to inform you that this family cannot be allowed to enter Kratzenstein."[8]

The Squatter Act of 1895 (limiting the number of African families allowed to reside on 'white' land), was initially not applied to mission stations, although it affected African Christians not living and working on missionary land. The concession to mission stations was upheld with the introduction of the Natives Land Act of 1913, and even with the passing of the Natives Trust and Land Act in 1936, but the Natives Urban Area Act of 1937 reversed this leniency towards the mission stations. From then onwards mission stations in 'white' areas could at any time be subjected to the Squatter Act: missionaries and station inhabitants were left in a state of uncertainty. Hoffmann was part of a Berlin Mission delegation that approached the Minister of Native Affairs to gain more clarity. While the segregationist minister had no plan yet where to send the Africans living on the mission stations, the Berlin Mission was instructed to apply for permission for station inhabitants to remain on the land on an annual basis.[9] In 1938 Hoffmann wrote: "Ich fürchte, man hat durch die Segregationsgesetze eine Saat gesät, deren Ernte geradezu furchtbar für Südafrika sein muß.[10]

The financial position of the Berlin Mission entered a continued state of deterioration as from the First World War, increasing uncertainty and breaches of trust between the Mission Society and African communities who lived on Berlin Mission farms. The seeds of the segregation legislation that Hoffmann criticised in 1938, were followed by apartheid legislation in the 1950s, and bitter forced removals of Berlin Lutherans from missionary land in the 1960s.

Could Hoffmann have done more to resist or prevent this, or to mitigate the effect? The advantage of such hindsight is the historian's prerogative, not that of the human actors at the time. Perhaps it is more helpful to ask how Hoffmann was perceived by his contemporaries? We do know that he managed to repair relations between the Berlin Mission and the royal house of the Mankweng-Mamabolo during his long stay on the Mphome-Kratzenstein station (1904-1934) adjacent to the Mamabolo location. In 1896 Kgosi Sehlomola Mamabolo dismissed Hoffmann's predecessor in favour of a black priest, Rev. William Mpamba. While he remained loyal to the Free Church of Scotland, the Kgosi did become friends with Hoffmann in later years. In 1931, with the inauguration of Sehlomola's successor, Kgosi Athlone Mamabolo, Hoffmann was invited to preside over the ceremony.[11] African Lutherans around Mphome Kratzenstein referred to Hoffmann and Pastor Philippus Bopape, his long-time Berlin Mission partner in the Woodbush area, as David and Jonathan

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[7] Rev C. Hoffmann, The Berlin Mission. Establishment of an outstation on the farm Silverfontein 2075, 21 July 1910, TAB SNA 473 NA 2486-10-1910, National Archives of South Africa, Pretoria.

[8] Native Commissioner Haenertsburg – Rev. C. Hoffmann, 16 October 1913, SAB KPB 2-2-14 N 2-2-2-7, National Archives of South Africa, Pretoria.

[9] W. van der Merwe (1987), *Die Berlynse Sendinggenootskap en Kerkstigting in Transvaal, 1904–1962* (Pretoria: Staatsdrukker), p. 70.

[10] *Berliner Missionsberichte* of 1938 (p. 107), quoted by H. Lehmann (1989). 1989. *Zur Zeit und zur Unzeit: Geschichte der Berliner Mission 1918–1972 Vol II* (Berlin: Berliner Missionswerk), p. 503.

[11] M.E.R. Mamabolo (1994). The origin and development of the Mamabolo tribe: A historical perspective of Dikolobe-tša-Bjatladi up to the 1960s. B.A. Honours essay, University of the North

– bosom friends. This seems plausible when reading the following in Hildegard Tscheuschner's obituary to Hoffmann:

> Eine große Rolle spielen im Schrifttum von Hoffmann die eingeborenen Mitarbeiter. … Wenn heute so viel von "Partnership" als dem neuen Verhältnis von Missionar und eingeborenen Pastoren und Evangelisten die Rede ist, Hoffmann hat das schon vor 50 Jahren geübt und dann auch geschildert. Er hat sich nie gescheut, von seinen Pastoren und anderen Helfern zu lernen, was es zu lernen gab.[12]

Was Carl Hoffmann an adventurer? He certainly had a sense for the adventurous … An Explorer? To an extent, yes, his missionary travels between the different outstations in the Woodbush mountains were a prolonged exploration of the environment and its people. Was he a coloniser? As we have seen, he continuously engaged with colonial officials. Probably, it is more accurate rather to call him a Christian missionary who worked in a hierarchical colonial context. He assumed authority over African tenants on mission stations, Christians in his congregations, and children in the Mission schools. In hindsight, it is clear that he was not ceding his position of privilege as a white male when he befriended Africans, or learned from then, or stated their case before the colonial government. But then again, it was precisely his respectable profile in the colonial system that enabled him to speak to authority, with authority.

Short CV – 7 August 2021

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[12] H. Tscheuschner (1963). Carl Hoffmann, Ethnologe und Missionsschriftsteller. *Die Brücke* 32/3, 8–10.