

Karl Roehl and the Entangled History of the Swahili Bible in East Africa

Introduction

In 1930, an advert appeared in the Tanganyikan missionary periodical *Ufalme wa Mungu*, or Kingdom of God. As the name might suggest to any Swahili speakers in the audience, this was a Swahili-language publication, produced on a monthly basis by the Lutheran missions.

The advert began by reminding readers that there was one book which surpassed all others in the world. This book was, of course the Bible.

But, as these readers knew well, the Bible was readily available in Tanganyika, modern-day Tanzania, in 1930. Why, then, was it being advertised?

The advert moved quickly to answer this question before it could be asked. True, the Bible was available. But while it already existed in the Swahili language, 'it now has a new body'. In case suspicious readers saw this as a marketing trick, encouraging them to buy another copy of a book they already owned, this point was reiterated. Not just the clothes, 'but the body itself has changed completely'. For the Swahili in which this was written was, the advert claimed, a truer form of the language. 'It should be recognized by every person in our country that the language of this new book is the real Swahili.'¹ The advert went on to describe the dramatic effects this book could have on people. One person who read it was, we learn from this advert, amazed and exclaimed: 'until now I did not understand the meaning of this book because of the many Arabic and English words, but now as I read I see that all the words are in the real Swahili and we people of Tanganyika Territory and every person who learns Swahili in East Africa can recognize the meaning of Jesus' story.'²

This new translation was the translation produced by Karl Roehl, the Karl Roehl of my title. And this new translation is the topic of my talk this evening. For while *Ufalme wa Mungu* was emphatic in its praise for the new translation, others welcomed it rather less warmly. The translation sparked a controversy among missionaries, but this was a controversy which makes sense only within its wider East African and global context.

In my paper this afternoon, I want to show how looking at the controversies over the Roehl Bible might not only add to our understanding of the history of Bible translation in East Africa, but also suggest one way in which looking at Bible translation might serve as a means of better understanding the connected and entangled history of colonial East Africa.

To this end, I'll start by saying something about the current historiographical trends among African historians who have studied the process of Bible translation in Africa, before looking in some detail at the specific controversy over the Roehl Bible, then in the remainder of the talk developing some of the lessons we might learn from this case.

¹ Advert, 'Agano Jipya', *Ufalme wa Mungu*, September 1930.

² Advert, 'Agano Jipya', *Ufalme wa Mungu*, September 1930

Part II: Historiography

This audience is perhaps more familiar than most with recent historical trends in the study of Bible translation in Africa, and indeed mission Christianity more broadly in the continent. But for those who haven't been following the twists and turns of that particular historiography, let me start by saying something about how this looks from an African history perspective.

For a long time, the history of missions in Africa was a distinctly unfashionable area of study. Back in the 1960s, the first generation of Africanists, and by that I don't just mean historians, but also sociologists and anthropologists, were primarily interested in African initiatives. Mission Christianity seemed to be inextricably linked to the colonial enterprise: the Bible and Flag were seen as advancing in unison across Africa. As far as mission Christianity was concerned, agency seemed to lie with Europeans, rather than with Africans. Attention thus focused on African independent churches, and on the spaces in which African seemed to be making their own religious history, free from European domination and interference.

But if the 1960s saw a turning away from the history of missions in Africa, the 1980s saw the beginnings of a return. As Adrian Hastings wrote in 2000, summing up thirty years of the writing of the history of Christianity in Africa:

'It was right enough in the 1960s to turn away from missionary history fairly emphatically, but that could be only a temporary tactic to achieve a new style of African history, and now the missiological revival is entirely welcome. For the African historian to ignore it would be suicidal.'³

The return to an interest in missions has, however, led in two somewhat contradictory directions.

In the first place, towards a renewed interest in the links between mission and colonialism. Thus the work of Jean and John Comaroff has stressed the role of missionaries in creating new forms of subjectivity in the populations amongst whom they worked. Alongside political colonization went a 'colonization of consciousness', as they see it.

A second strand focused instead on the role of Africans in shaping mission Christianity. Far from simply being a colonial imposition, the process of translation inevitably meant that the growth of Christianity in Africa grew out of a dialogic process. Only by understanding this crucial point, does the rapid and lasting spread of Christianity in Africa begin to make sense.

Particularly influential was Lamin Sanneh's book, *Translating the Message*. Taking issue with those who understood the missionary enterprise as an exercise in cultural imperialism, Sanneh wrote: 'Missionary adoption of the vernacular, therefore, was tantamount to adopting indigenous cultural criteria for the

³ Adrian Hastings, 'African Christian Studies, 1967-1999: Reflections of an Editor', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, (2000).

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message, a piece of radical indigenization far greater than the standard portrayal of mission as Western cultural imperialism.⁴

While some of Sanneh's assumptions about pre-colonial societies might not win approval from historians, the broader point he makes about the "translation machinery" that "enabled local criticism to take root and flourish", ie the point that missionaries unwittingly provided the vernacular tools which Africans would use to oppose their rulers, has proved very important for historians' understanding of Christianity in colonial Africa.⁵

I certainly don't want to disagree with the way that African historians have begun to think about the Bible and Bible translation.

This seems to me to be incredibly productive and fruitful. It helps by turning our attention to arguments over translation, and towards appreciating the work of both Africans and Europeans in the process.

But my focus here is slightly different. Unlike the case studies which others have explored, Swahili was not a relatively localized and oral vernacular. It was already used as a language in which to transmit Islamic ideas orally. By the period I'm talking about, primarily the interwar period, it also had a relatively long history as a language in which Christian ideas could both be discussed orally and read. I'll come on to that later, but first let me say something very briefly about the historiography on this specific topic, the history of Roehl's Bible translation.

How, then, have scholars approached this issue of this new Swahili Bible?

As far as I am aware, there has not been a huge amount of work on this, but there has been some. A 1990 article by Ali Mazrui and Pio Zirimu tracked what they described as the process of 'secularization' of Swahili. In their four phases of secularization, the use by missionaries of Swahili as a language is part of a second, 'ecumenical' phase. An article by P.J.L Frankl in 1990, revisited in 1995, explored the reasons why the word 'Mungu' is used for God, rather than Allah.

Most relevant perhaps to my purposes is an article by the Swahili scholar Farouk Topan in the *Journal of Religion in Africa* in 1990, which explored 'Swahili as a religious language.'

Drawing primarily on an exchange of articles in the journal *Africa* in 1930/31, Topan documents the controversy over Roehl's Bible translation, and argues that the main impetus towards this new translation was the rising importance of missionary work in inland areas, and developing knowledge by missionaries of inland languages, and a 'Bantu' worldview.

Topan seeks to relativise the importance of written texts in light of the dominance of other forms of communication, specifically the oral, at that time. Thus, he writes, 'faith was formed, and in many cases transformed, through the oral medium; the influence of literature on the majority of the people could

⁴ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, p. 3.

⁵ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, p. 4.

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only have been peripheral and, more likely, as support for the teaching and preaching of the missionaries.⁶

But while for Topan, low levels of literacy suggest the relative unimportance of text, for me it is precisely the 'print' aspect which is interesting.

C.A. Bayly in his global history *The Birth of the Modern World* has argued that while our view of nineteenth-century history has often been dominated by the rise of those apparently secular ideologies of nationalism and liberalism, in fact the revival and expansion of the world religions from 1800 onwards deserves significant attention. This was a period in which world religions were both seeking to purify themselves and clarify their nature in relation to others, but in doing so were also borrowing from each other. Print played an increasingly important role in this process of defining new religious communities.⁷ The importance which Benedict Anderson attaches to print in the process of imagining new national communities is equally true for the imagining of new religious communities. Print helped to create new forms of 'Christian citizenship'.

It is these questions of community and identity which I want to use the Roehl Bible translation to explore, and suggest that the reason why the new translation seemed so important and why it was so controversial has something to teach us about the construction of community in the interwar period.

Before we do so, though, let me say something about the pre-history to this translation.

Part III The Swahili Bible

The story of translating the Bible in Swahili in East Africa began in the mid-19th century with Ludwig Krapf, and his translation of the New Testament and of Genesis in the Kimvita dialect, which was spoken around Mombasa and was the literary version of Swahili in the nineteenth century. In contrast, Bishop Edward Steere in Zanzibar focused on the Kiunguja dialect of Swahili, as spoken in Zanzibar, and although he seems to have had a copy of Krapf's Kimvita translation, his own translation was very different.⁸

But of course, Swahili was primarily a coastal language. It was tied up with a coastal identity, which was urban, Muslim and Swahili-speaking. What then of inland areas? Those areas where Swahili was not the local language, though increasingly, as long-distance trade spread inland over the course of the nineteenth century, some Swahili speakers were present in trading centres.

As missionaries began to work in inland areas from the late nineteenth century, the question of language was a constant source of concern, particularly for Protestant missionaries. Nineteenth-century missionaries spoke of the 'pragmatic' need to use Swahili, thus for Ludwig Krapf it was 'a practical suggestion', 'as the Kiswahili is the most cultivated of the dialects in this part of Africa, and is, moreover, spoken from the equator southwards to the Portuguese settlements of Mozambique, it should be made

⁶ Farouk Topan, 'Swahili as a Religious Language', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 22 (1992), p. 341.

⁷ Cf. Stock on textual communities?

⁸ C.M. Doke, 'Scripture Translation into Bantu Languages', *African Studies*, (1958).

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to supersede, as much as possible, the minor dialects inland which are spoken by only a small population’.

In practice though, there was much more reluctance to use Swahili in inland areas than these comments suggest. To see why, let me say something about the mission field I know best, that of the Leipzig mission in Kilimanjaro. The Leipzig missionaries working in Kilimanjaro were well aware that Lutheran doctrine emphasised the importance of employing the mother tongue and producing Christian literature in the vernacular.⁹ Moreover, the combined influences of Karl Graul who had been director of Leipzig mission society between 1844 and 1861 and Gustav Warneck on the need to build up new ‘national’ or ‘Volk’ churches ensured an attention to language, both as a means of preaching and as the only way of acquiring the knowledge of national customs essential if a national church were to be built.¹⁰ As a consequence, Leipzig missionaries working in Kilimanjaro were not allowed to marry or contribute to meetings until they had taken a language exam in the local dialect.¹¹

However, pragmatism drove them towards use of Swahili alongside their use of local dialects. And while they always maintained that Swahili would be a temporary measure, in fact the first decade of the twentieth century saw the local importance of Swahili increasing, not diminishing.

To see this in practice, let’s look at one example. In 1895, the missionary, Gerd Althaus reported his delight when he was finally able to tell a young adherent of the mission a Bible story in the Mamba dialect.¹² While he had already occasionally spoken of Jesus, he was now able to start evangelising properly in the local language, Kichagga. But evangelisation always existed in a multilingual situation. While a dramatic point in Althaus’s relationship with Chief Koimbere came when he sang and practised with him a song he had translated into Kichagga, he also records that the word used by the Chief for church was ‘the Kiswahili-word, Kanisa.’¹³

Althaus, like his fellow missionaries, was committed to learning the Kichagga language and evangelising in that language. But there were a series of problems. First, the fact that there were three distinct dialects of the local language, and missionaries could not agree on a project either to unify them or to promote one rather than the others. But second, the problem, shared with missionaries elsewhere, that they served a population larger than just that living on Kilimanjaro.

This became a problem when they moved towards introducing higher level education as a means of training African Christians to spread Christianity. While education at the lower levels could be carried out in the vernacular, the provision of this higher level training would only be worthwhile if it could

⁹ K. Fiedler, *Christianity and African Culture: Conservative German Protestant Missionaries in Tanzania, 1900-1940*, (Leiden, 1996), p. 15.

¹⁰ J.C. Winter, *Bruno Gutmann 1876-1966: A German Approach to Social Anthropology*, (Oxford, 1979), pp. 39-41; E. Müller, ‘Über die Lebensweise der Wamadschame’, *Evangelisch-Lutherisches Missionsblatt*, 1st March 1895, p. 94; G. Althaus, ‘Sprachstudien in Dschagga-Lande’, *Evangelisch-Lutherisches Missionsblatt*, 1 September 1894, p. 330.

¹¹ Interview with Fr. Klaus-Peter Kiesel, Moshi, 1st July 2006.

¹² Althaus, *Mamba*, p. 21.

¹³ Althaus, *Mamba*, p. 26.

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serve students from all areas in which the mission was active. The need to teach in a language which could be understood by Chagga from all parts of the mountain, as well as students from the neighbouring districts of Upare and Meru, led to the adoption of Swahili for higher level courses in 1912.¹⁴

Because of the distinct dialects on the mountain, communication between parishes on the mountain also demanded the use of Swahili as a written language. Thus when in 1917 plans were drawn up to keep the church going should the missionaries be expelled on account of the war, elders of the congregations were instructed to meet once a month and to write their minutes in Swahili.¹⁵

So from the beginning the Leipzig missionaries in Kilimanjaro were willing to engage with Swahili and to use it as a school subject, as a means of instruction at the higher levels and as a source of Christian literature.¹⁶ A first generation of educated African Christians became committed to the importance of Swahili and willing to defend it against those missionaries like Bruno Gutmann who were more reluctant to make use of Swahili. Such was the case of Filipo Njau who went to be educated by the mission in Moshi in 1901. He remembered going through the first reading book very quickly. The next book was published by the government and was a Swahili text called *Amur, bin Nasser*. 'With this help', he wrote, 'we learnt good Swahili, as it is spoken in Unguja, Zanzibar.'¹⁷ Later, Njau was one of the first teachers to follow the teachers' training course in Swahili.

The twin difficulties which the missionaries faced in using local languages, then, were the need to communicate beyond very localized communities, and the need for a written literature, coupled with the fact that in Swahili, such a written literature already existed and was increasing. In Kilimanjaro, an attempt was made to meet this gap with a newspaper in the vernacular *Mbuya ya Vandu Vuu, or Friend of the Black People*, which first appeared in 1904. The newspaper dealt with the dialect problem by including articles in the dialects of Machame, Moshi and Vunjo. But by 1911 it had failed to satisfy anybody, and its substitute was not a new Kichagga-language paper, but Martin Klamroth of the Berlin Mission's Dar es Salaam-based Swahili-language *Pwani na Bara* which had begun publication in 1910.¹⁸ At first *Pwani na Bara* was subscribed to by the three Western stations in Kilimanjaro, later circulation rose to forty copies.¹⁹

Klamroth's *Pwani na Bara* was part of a growing effort by the German missionary societies in what would turn out to be the last years of German rule in the colony to embrace Swahili and encourage its use. The German government increasingly relied on Swahili for its administration and schooling, and missionaries were coming to accept they needed to do so too.

¹⁴ Fleisch, *Lutheran Beginnings*, p.87. Interview with Fr. Klaus-Peter Kiesel, Moshi, 1st July 2006.

¹⁵ Lema, 'Impact of the Lutheran Mission', p. 212.

¹⁶ A. Brumfit, 'The rise and development of a language policy in German East Africa', *Sprache und Geschichte in Afrika*, (1980), 219-331, p.295.

¹⁷ F. Njau, *Aus meinem Leben*, (Erlangen, 1960), p. 15.

¹⁸ Müller, 'Die 21. Konferenz der Dschaggamissionare im Januar 1906', *Evangelisch-lutherisches Missionsblatt*, 15th May 1906, p. 250; Wright, *German Missions in Tanganyika*, (Cambridge, 1971), p. 125.

¹⁹ Fleisch, *Lutheran Beginnings*, p. 88.

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German efforts had already begun to make Swahili more widely usable. However missionaries faced the problem that Swahili was associated with Islam. It had long been written in the Arabic script and contained many Arabic words better known to those on the coast than to those in inland areas who had recently learned Swahili as a second language.

In this context, *Pwani na Bara* was an early example of creating a textual community of Christian Swahili readers. It was produced in Roman script, and was read by Lutherans across the territory, not just on the coast.²⁰ Klamroth's intended next step was a Bible translation which would be easier for mainland readers than the Steere translation with its many Arabic words. This was not Klamroth's project alone, but was the product of a 1912 conference of missionaries and government which recognised the need for a joint effort in the production of Swahili literature.²¹

When Klamroth died, the project was taken over by Karl Roehl. Roehl himself was a missionary in Shambaa region in Northeastern Tanzania. He had done extensive work on the Shambaa language and saw his 1911 book *Versuch einer systematischen Grammatik der Schambalasprache* as a contribution to the emerging study of Bantu languages.

Like his fellow German linguists, the great Carl Meinhof and Diedrich Westermann, Roehl believed that Swahili should become the shared language of Tanganyika in particular and East Africa in general, but that in order to do so it needed to be, in his phrase, 're-Bantuized'. He believed Swahili essentially to be a Bantu language, like the local vernaculars in the inland areas of Tanzania, but which had been corrupted by the introduction of Arabic words.

IV Roehl's Translation

To look at the Roehl Bible controversy in more detail, let us start by considering how Roehl himself defined his intentions. These were practical, theological and ideological.

As he wrote in the journal *Africa* in 1930, the practical problem was that on Swahili's move from the coast to inland areas, new confusions had crept in. He wrote, 'Thus the Shambala, who in their own language have no *r*, constantly confound *l* and *r* when speaking Swahili. The Jagga on the Kilimanjaro fail to distinguish voiced and voiceless sounds.'²²

The second problem was to do with the religious content of scripture. Roehl wrote that as Swahili had developed as a language, Arabic terms had been inserted into the language so that 'almost the whole mental and religious spheres of life were expressed in Arabic terms.'²³ As a result, when biblical translation was undertaken 'religious expressions were rendered by Arab loan-words', which at the

²⁰ *Pwani na Bara* was not the first missionary periodical in Swahili. After a couple of short-lived offerings after 1890, the UMCA's *Habari za Mwezi* appeared from 1894 to 1916, apart from a pause in 1907. After 1908 it was edited by an African preacher, Samwil Sehoza. The most comprehensive history of newspaper publishing in Tanzania is Martin Stürmer, *The Media History of Tanzania*, (Ndanda Mission Press, 1998). On *Habari za Mwezi*, see pp. 30-31.

²¹ Brumfit, 'The rise and development of a language policy in German East Africa', pp.300-306.

²² Roehl, 'The Linguistic Situation in East Africa', pp. 198-199.

²³ K. Roehl, 'The Linguistic Situation in East Africa', *Africa*, 3(1930), p.196.

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coast were 'linked up with Moslem ideas, which are very often strongly divergent from the corresponding Christian ones, and farther inland they are as a rule not understood at all.'²⁴

This last sentence is crucial. Roehl saw the problem as relating partly to the danger of confusing Christian and Islamic ideas, and partly the problem of readers not understanding the nature of Christian ideas at all.

At this point, let us step back from the Bible itself, and look at the broader challenges facing Lutherans in interwar Tanzania.

We have another source for this, and that source is the Lutheran monthly periodical which at that time was called *Ufalme wa Mungu*.

Written in Swahili, and including contributions both from African Christians and European missionaries, correspondents and writers in *Ufalme wa Mungu* were deeply concerned with the issue of how to maintain Christian morality in the face both of an alternative world religion, Islam, and in the face of the challenge posed by the transition from the first generation of converts to their children who might be less committed to earlier ideals.

Roehl was himself closely involved in the production of *Ufalme wa Mungu*, editing it for a time in the mid 1930s, and unsurprisingly *Ufalme wa Mungu* was one of the new translation's strongest supporters. Not only did they print adverts for it, they referred to it as 'our' translation. In 1932 when a correspondent wrote to the periodical asking how many translations of the New Testament existed in Swahili, the editor's response was to say that there were three, that of Zanzibar, that of Mombasa, and that of 'the mainland', or 'bara'. He continued: "ours' is Bara'.

The declared aim of *Ufalme wa Mungu* was to build unity among Christians in East Africa, and Swahili provided a means of doing that. As one Chagga Lutheran wrote of a meeting which had been held in 1930 bringing together Lutherans from across the region, 'How could we meet with so many tribes in this way, when we can't understand each other using our own languages, but for Swahili, which is very useful to us these days?'²⁵ Missionaries like H. Personn praised the spread of Swahili, but emphasised that it must serve the aim of spreading the word of God, and of enabling Christian communication. Of plans for a meeting of Tanzanian Lutherans in Dar es Salaam, readers who might be interested in going were reminded that they would need to be fluent in Swahili.

But this was also a question of defining a Christian community as distinct from a Muslim community. The editors of *Ufalme wa Mungu* were aware that Islam was spreading in interwar Tanzania, and advised their readers to arm themselves against this spread. They advised readers to read the Koran, and to read the biography of Muhammad, available in Swahili in the *Baraza* series of books, in order to help them in arguments with Muslims. But they also thought that the Christian values of love and cooperation would win out against Islam. To be Christian was, they said, to be an *mstaarabu* or *mwungwana*, a civilised person, free rather than a slave, explicitly redefining nineteenth-century coastal ideas of what it meant

²⁴ Roehl, 'The Linguistic Situation in East Africa', p.197.

²⁵ M. Ruben, *Ufalme wa Mungu*, (1930).

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to be civilized, in which civilization was intimately tied up with Islamic identity.²⁶ Stories of Muslims who decided to convert to Christianity when they saw what love and cooperation meant in practice provided evidence of the distinctiveness of the two faiths. Removing the confusion that could arise from the introduction of Arabic words with specific meanings in Islamic contexts was part of this process.

But while the pages of *Ufalme wa Mungu* suggested that the new translation was popular and that it was fully supported by the Lutheran Church in Tanzania, there was disagreement both from other Protestant missionaries and from others within the Lutheran Church.

To begin to look at some of these disagreements, we might again start in the pages of *Africa*. Roehl's article on 'The Linguistic Situation in East Africa' inspired a response from the Anglican Canon Broomfield, who had been closely involved in attempts to standardize the Swahili language in the interwar period. Broomfield disagreed with Roehl's fundamental contention, that Swahili was originally a Bantu language which had been 'corrupted' by the introduction of Arabic words. Rather, Arabic words were integral to the Swahili language as it had developed. Just as English had absorbed words of Latin origin, so too had Swahili absorbed words of Arabic origin.

It might be expected that dissension between Broomfield and Roehl would appear. Many German missionaries were critical of the British administration's education policy in East Africa, and indeed its wider policies. Broomfield portrays the Roehl debate as one over the control of Swahili, and a rejection by Roehl of attempts by the Governments of Kenya, Tanganyika, Zanzibar and Uganda to standardize Swahili. Broomfield's article ended by reminding readers that missionaries had been involved in that process, and that it had been approved by the German linguist Carl Meinhof. An Inter-territorial Language Committee involving Government and Missionary representatives had been established in 1930, and would now be in charge of monitoring all books and assuring that they were written in standard Swahili. 'In future', he wrote, 'no books will be used in the Government and assisted schools of East Africa unless they have been approved, with regard to their Swahili, by the Inter-territorial Language Committee. No pressure will be brought to bear upon the missions with regard to the Swahili of their religious books, but they will hardly seek to perpetuate types of Swahili which will rapidly become obsolete.'²⁷

But there was opposition from within the Leipzig mission, which had from the beginning been committed to the Bible project, too.

In a long paper, Paul Rother of the Marangu seminary argued against the notion that all loan words were necessarily detrimental to a language. He accused Roehl of having changed the aim of the translation. While Klamroth had sought to produce a work which was easier to understand than the

²⁶ Though the nature of 'civilization' had changed over the course of the century, from *uungwana* to *ustaarabu*, reflecting the rise of Omani Arab power and wealth. On this shift over the course of the nineteenth century, see Randall Pouwels, *Horn and Crescent: Cultural Change and traditional Islam on the East African coast, 800-1900*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

²⁷ G.W. Broomfield, 'The Re-Bantuization of the Swahili Language', *Africa*, (1931), p. 85. On the standardization committee, see Derek Peterson, 'Language Work and Colonial Politics in Eastern Africa: the making of standard Swahili and "School Kikuyu"', in David Hoyt and Karen Oslund (eds.), *The study of language and the politics of community in global context*, (Oxford, 2006), pp. 185-214.

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Steere version, Roehl's aim was that "No religious concept should be expressed with an Arabic expression."²⁸ The result was opposition from the people with whom Rother worked to what they described as 'Swahili for children'. According to Rother, he was told that 'We do not need an Inland Swahili'.²⁹

Rother charged that Roehl was making flawed historical comparisons. Roehl seemed to see himself as confronted with a situation like that which confronted German speakers at the time of Luther, of waiting for a written Bible to create a *Volk*, or national community. But there was no need for such a written language in East Africa, for '[t]his translation comes to a people for whom a written language has already been achieved'.³⁰

In July 1931 representatives of the Bethel, Augustana and Leipzig missionary societies met to discuss the Bible, and Rother's criticisms of it. Missionary Fritze, basing his claim to comment on the fact that unlike Rother who taught at Marangu seminary he was a parish missionary, claimed that it was wrong to disparage the language as a Swahili for children. One girl in his parish, had declared, precisely as Roehl hoped, that this was '*kikwetu*', the language of our place. The goal of producing a vocabulary in which the meaning of new words and concepts could be deduced from the stem had been achieved. In his parish, two hundred copies had been sold, none had been returned and only two people had inquired after the old translations. Yet other missionaries disagreed, with Missionary Ittameier reporting that in Nkoaranga Christians and teachers first greeted it with enthusiasm, but there were soon complaints that many of the words were incomprehensible to them. Sister Elisabeth of the Moshi Girls' school agreed that her pupils found the translation hard to understand.

The comprehensibility or otherwise of the translation was not the only source of disagreement. At the heart of the disagreement between Rother and Roehl and their supporters were two aspects. First, the difference between Swahili as spoken, particularly in the upcountry areas and Swahili as a written language. Roehl claimed that the words rejected by Rother had different meanings in spoken Swahili as compared with their meaning in written Swahili. Others disagreed, arguing that while the spoken Swahili to which Roehl appealed was certainly an authority, so too were the dictionaries appealed to by Rother. Second, it was argued by Rother Senior that Roehl had reduced the 'expressive potential' of the language. The ultimate aim should not be, as Roehl and the station missionaries claimed, intelligibility, but the ability of the language to reflect exactly what the Bible says. That required the use of all expressive means available, whether Arabic or Bantu. Moreover, were this limited Swahili to be used in school books, students would be isolated both from other Swahili speakers and from the world of Swahili literature. Ultimately, foreign words were not an optional extra but an essential part of any language.³¹

²⁸ Rother, 'Referat über die Bantuisierungsversuche der Kisuahelisprache in der Übersetzung des Neuen Testaments durch Missionar Roehl', p.5. Röhlische Bibelübersetzung, Korrespondenz, *ALMW*, 30.

²⁹ Schon hören wir Aussprüche wie die: Kisuaheli cha kitoto (Kinderkisuaheli) wollen wir nicht. Ein Kisuaheli cha bara (Inlandkisuaheli) brauchen wir nicht.' Rother, 'Referat', p.11.

³⁰ Rother, 'Referat', p. 11.

³¹ Protokoll der Nachmittagssitzung 11.8.1931, Besprechung des Referats von Schulinspektor Rother, gehalten auf der Sprachkonferenz am 30. u. 31.7.31 in Marangu und des Protokolls derselben Konferenz', p. 5.

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By October of 1931 the disagreement between Roehl and Rother was such that Rother threatened not to use Roehl's translation at the Marangu seminary. In a strongly worded letter to the mission houses in Germany, Roehl argued that people all over Tanganyika and Kenya saw it as their language, and that even in the Leipzig mission in Kilimanjaro the New Testament was termed "*kikoru*".³² He went on: 'If the language of our Swahili New Testament is felt by people from the coast to the Great Lakes to be *kikoru* – *kikwetu*, that is, something *heimatliches*, if the people in reading it forget that it is a foreign language and believe themselves to be reading their own language, then its incomprehensibility cannot be as bad as you represent.'³³

At this point Senior Johannes Raum stepped in to diffuse the row, arguing in a paper written while on leave in Erlangen that Roehl's translations of key terms were acceptable.³⁴ Those who opposed his translation were those who had learned Swahili from books, and they should remember that the 'language of the gospel must be comprehensible to everyone, not just to the intelligentsia.'³⁵

V An Entangled History

So what does this squabble tell us, other than the fact that we should perhaps not expect all German Lutheran missionaries to get along?

This is where I come to the point of it being an 'entangled history'. By 'entangled', I'm referring to a literature which has emerged to counter the tradition of writing 'national' histories, and which explores historical events as 'the product of the connection and exchange between different discourses and practice', to quote Sebastian Conrad. Not only is there entanglement between nations here, between British and German protagonists, but also between those Tanzanians who claimed to support the new translation and those who argued that true Swahili was that spoken at Zanzibar and should remain such. Entangled histories, like other methodologies of global history, provide the means to shed new light on the formation of communities.

The incident sheds light firstly on a moment in German national history and attempts to construct a German national identity. As opposition to Roehl grew, particularly as he sought funds to produce an Old Testament, a clear nationalist aspect crept into the debate. He argued that only Germans were equipped to produce a new Swahili bible, the British not having the linguistic competence. Moreover, for Germany to give the African population of Tanzania a bible in what he considered to be "their" own language would repay debts incurred by Germany to Africans during World War One. At one point Roehl even argued that printing the bible in Germany rather than England was a patriotic duty as it would provide 10,000 hours of work in a time of mass unemployment. This then helps to explain the support with the German linguist Diedrich Westermann expressed for the Bible, this was partly about demonstrating Germany's unique contribution to African linguistics, which could continue even when, after the First World War, they no longer had an empire.

³² Roehl to Ihmels, n.d., c. 1931, p.5, Röhlsche Bibelübersetzung, Korrespondenz, *ALMW*, 30.

³³ Roehl to Ihmels, n.d., c. 1931, p.5, Röhlsche Bibelübersetzung, Korrespondenz, *ALMW*, 30.

³⁴ J. Raum, 'Um das Roehlsche Neue Testament', *AR2664 Lei A6*, p.5

³⁵ Raum, 'Um das Roehlsche Neue Testament', p. 14, p. 16.

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But it also sheds light on the history of the formation of new forms of community and new modes of citizenship and belonging in twentieth-century East Africa, namely the construction of a Christian community across Tanganyika and potentially across East Africa. Both Roehl and those who opposed him claimed that they were working to improve communication, but they disagreed on whether it was better to have a written language which might reflect the spoken word in inland areas, or have a written language which was uniform but which some might find too difficult at present. Related to this was a similar problem to that which faced those engaged, at the same time, on a secular process of standardizing Swahili: was it best to actively create a new and distinct terminology, or allow the language to continue to develop through interaction and usage by Tanganyikans?

Like others who sought to standardize Swahili from above, Roehl's ability to impose a new language from above was limited, but Swahili was increasingly being used as a language which enabled Christians to communicate across Tanzania and contributed to the development of a shared Christian identity. The development of Swahili emerged through a process of interaction, albeit within unequal power relations. No one could entirely control this language.

The main lesson of this incident, though, is the insight it offers into the process of the creation of both a more homogenous yet also more differentiated world in the interwar period. The insights it offers into the engagement with the modern world and Tanzania's place in it. The controversies of the Bible project were shaped by intellectual dynamics that crossed continents and oceans. Was Roehl too influenced by his understanding of German history? Should Swahili's rich Arabic heritage be used and built on to express complex ideas or rooted out in a process of purification, the idea of which owed much to nineteenth-century German ideas about language? At the same time, it points to the growing importance of print as a means of constructing new forms of community, just as important as the gradual emergence at the same time of new secular and nationalist presses. In short, this translation project provides a lens on the entangled nature of intellectual and religious life in interwar Tanzania.