

Ulrich van der Heyden. *Martinus Sewushan: Nationalhelfer, Missionar und Widersacher der Berliner Missionsgesellschaft im SÖ¼den Afrikas.* Neuendettelsau: Erlanger Verlag fÖ¼r Mission und Ökumene, 2004. 454 pp. EUR 30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-87214-349-5.



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Over the past decade Dr. Ulrich van der Heyden has set himself the daunting task of familiarizing South African and German researchers with the considerable content and potential value of German mission archives for the writing of South African history. In several journal articles and source publications he introduced us to this remarkably dense and still relatively under-exploited material, which sheds a distinctive light on the history of black-white encounters in South Africa.[1] With his latest monograph, *Martinus Sewushan*, he illustrates the rich yield of the records of the Berlin Mission Society by constructing the life story of one of the most prominent members of the emerging black elite in the late nineteenth-century Transvaal. The work also relies on South African Republic (ZAR) and post-Anglo-Boer War Transvaal records held by the National Archives of South Africa. Furthermore, Van der Heyden manages to amalgamate a vast collection of scholarly work by mission historians, theologians and “main stream” historians from German, Afrikaans and English publications and to demonstrate its practical applicability. This is indeed a doubly exceptional feat: Not only does he address the tendency among church historians on the one hand, and political and social historians on the other, to oversee one another’s work, but also his synthesis of an impressive list of German publications together with research in different languages demonstrates what is often over-

looked in English-language research. On pages 48-50 Van der Heyden laments the problems caused by ignorance of other-language sources in historical research, something well articulated by Frankfurt ethnologist Beatrix Heintze:

“In this age of globalisation [inadequate knowledge of languages] affects German sources particularly.... Research is done ... as if there are no German primary sources nor German analyses and interpretations of the theme in question. Historical and anthropological researches are therefore based on publications in the first language of the researcher and one or other additional work that was more or less accidentally translated into that language, occasionally with additional sources from a second language.... The fact that this limitation affects not only the source basis of research but also aspects of the methodological debate ... is often completely ignored.”[2] *Martinus Sewushan* (I would have preferred the Sepedi spelling used by the man himself when he signed his own name: *SebuÅ?ane*) (1838-1924) is introduced in the book’s subtitle as “Nationalhelfer, Missionar und Widersacher der Berliner Missionsgesellschaft in SÅ¼den Afrikas” (Evangelist, Missionary and Adversary of the Berlin Mission Society in South Africa). *SewuÅ?ane* was one of the very few black Lutheran evangelists to have eventually, after years of subordinate apprenticeship, been ordained as a missionary by the

Berlin Mission Society (BMS). Although already famous for his long-serving role as faithful preacher in the white-controlled missionary church, he later achieved notoriety among whites and heroic status among his followers when he seceded from the BMS and established the independent Bapedi Lutheran Church in 1890.

Apparently Sebuane left very few personal papers. In order to have been able to extract a biography of him from historical sources in which he mostly appears on other people's terms, it was necessary for Van der Heyden also to have included a significant amount of information about the communities, individuals, and institutions that had an interest in Sebuane's life and work. It was no easy task to keep on Sebuane's trail. Information had to be scraped together, and deductions had to be made from sources which had no intention to foreground Sebuane's role in history. I appreciated Van der Heyden's approach to this challenge: the first six chapters of the book are dedicated to an exposition of the nature of missionary sources, methodological concerns and the current state of South African mission historiography. While some readers may find these first hundred pages tedious, they provide a comprehensive initiation into the undercurrents of this field of research. This dense context set out in the first section of the book, pervades the second, third, and fourth sections, in which Sebuane's career is traced. Throughout the book Van der Heyden continues to account for the origins and the nature of the evidence in the main body of the text, as if he is writing the history of the evidence into the story of the man. The readers are informed which accounts were recovered from the Berliner Missionsberichte and which from confidential missionary correspondence. The meaningful discrepancies between these public and private German texts are also pointed out. Readers are guided through ZAR government documents to trace government opinions. Information obtained through interviews with members of the Lutheran Bapedi Church are identified as such. When the explanations and conclusions of previous researchers are employed or contested, the authors are introduced to the readers as fellow-agents in the making of the book about Sebuane. While in my opinion this adds authenticity to Van der Heyden's "search for Sebuane," I can imagine that some readers will feel that the transparency of the text's construction is obstructing the "flow" of the narrative.

The shock expressed by the BMS at Sebuane's decision to break all ties with them and establish an independent church in 1890 can easily lead to the faulty deduc-

tion that his secession had been an impulsive act of annoyance or hubris. However, Van der Heyden gave me a profound impression of how frustrating Sebuane's long years under the restrictive tutelage of the white Berlin missionaries must have been. Some years previously, during the Dinkwanyane secession, Sebuane remained faithful to the mother church, but in 1890 compounded experiences of inferior treatment and disparagement were driven to a head when he was transferred to accommodate the preferences of the white missionaries, especially Carl A. Kadach. Sebuane then set in motion a plan, which in Van der Heyden's reading of the sources, had been long in the making.

The Mission Society's shocked response to the secession should not come as a surprise; for years the black pastor's stature had been diminished in missionary reports and periodicals. The way Sebuane was represented in missionary publications indicates that obedience and dedication, not innovation and independent-mindedness, were expected of him. When Sebuane finally did the unimaginable and went his own way, the initial expressions of betrayal were succeeded in subsequent years by a reduction in his visibility in the Society's periodical. There was an element of refusing to accept Sebuane's capability to have been as forceful and efficient as he was. In fact, the Society seemed reluctant to believe that Sebuane could have been capable of rebellion without instigation. In German mission, Wesleyan mission, as well as ZAR and later Transvaal Colony circles, this resulted in a misinterpretation and inflation of Johannes Winter's role in the establishment of the Bapedi Lutheran Church. Winter was expelled as BMS missionary because he supported the idea of greater autonomy for African Christians and because he acted as Sebuane's adviser and assistant—and also as the Bapedi Church's white spokesman in the white circles of authority where a black voice would not, either officially or literally, be heard at the time. Van der Heyden refers to recent studies of Johannes Winter which explain his fate of having been ascribed various lurid and even immoral characteristics in subsequent missionary historiography.[3] Regrettably, some 2001 and 2003 publications that include assessments of the establishment of the Bapedi Lutheran Church seem to have appeared too late to have been taken into consideration by Van der Heyden in his research for the Sewushan book.[4]

Much that is reproduced in this book is not new knowledge, but what makes this compilation a worthwhile read is the way vast amounts of scholarly output are arranged and thoroughly supplemented with re-

readings of contemporary documents in an effort to center Martinus Sebuane, to accomplish a representation of his life that can contribute to a greater awareness and understanding of the black elite of nineteenth-century Transvaal. While I do get the impression that the Transvaal whites may now and again be treated too harshly in fairly generalizing terms, Van der Heyden does not succumb to that great temptation of biographers, hagiography. One would hope that this monograph may also be translated into English.

Notes

[1]. See, inter alia, Ulrich van der Heyden, "The Archives and Library of the Berlin Mission Society," *History in Africa* 23 (1996): pp. 411-427 and Ulrich van der Heyden, "Mission Archives and the Political History of South Africa: The Example of the Berlin Mission Society," *Missionalia* 31 (2003): pp. 334-354.

[2]. Beatrix Heintze, *Etnografische Aneignungen: Deutsche Forschungsreisende in Angola. Kurzbiographien*

mit Selbstzeugnissen und Textbeispielen (Frankfurt am Main, 1999), p. 11, quoted in Ulrich van der Heyden, "German Mission Archives and South Africa," p. 336. The full article was translated into English by J. N. J. Kritzinger.

[3]. Andrea Schultze, "Wenn das Eigene zum Fremden wird. Deutschsprachige Missionsgesellschaften und ihr Umgang mit Dissenten, am Beispiel des Berliner SÄ¼dafrika Missionars Johannes Winter (1847-1921)," in *Vom Geheimnis des Unterschieds. Die Wahrnehmung des Fremden in Oekumene, Missions und Religionswissenschaft*, ed. A. Schultze, R. von Sinner, and W. Strierle (Hamburg: MÄ¼nster, 2002).

[4]. Kirsten Rheuther, *The Power Beyond. Mission Strategies, African Conversion and the Development of a Christian Culture in the Transvaal* (MÄ¼nster: LIT Verlag, 2001), pp. 129-161, and F. Malunga, "Schism and Secession: The Founding of the Bapedi Lutheran Church, 1890-1898," *Historia* 48 no. 2 (2003): pp. 48-65.

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