

Imagined communities, invented tribe?

Johannes Rath's linguistic research and the invention of the Herero

On September 30, 2011 Germany returned 20 Herero and Nama skulls to a Namibian delegation. The remains of individuals who had died between 1904 and 1908 during the 'uprising' against the colonial power had been brought to Berlin for research in the early 20th century. Who is considered Nama and Herero up until today, was largely influenced by the Rhenish missionaries, who started working in modern-day Namibia in 1842.

Johannes Rath (1816-1903) from Vienna, Austria was among the first Rhenish Herero missionaries and worked in central Namibia until 1861. During the course of his linguistic activities, Rath collected fables, compiled a grammar booklet and translated several Christian texts, for which he introduced numerous new words into the Herero lexicon. He recorded the results of his linguistic research in comprehensive manuscripts which, although they remained unpublished, served as the basis for the work of several of his colleagues and successors.

The decentralized social and political structures in Namibia at the time led the Europeans to believe that the Bantu-speaking groups were nothing but fragments of a 'more developed' Herero society, threatened by decay or even extinction. Especially since hostile Orlam groups raided the area frequently, the missionaries did not understand why the individual Herero groups did not join forces. In order to work against the assumed cultural and linguistic decay of the Herero and to protect themselves against the hostile Nama and Orlams, the German missionaries first had to unify the Herero and make them one 'tribe'.

Drawing on Benedict Anderson's concept of *Imagined Communities* (1983) and Terence O. Ranger's *Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa* (1983, revisited 1994), I argue in my paper that the missionaries did not only actively control the development of the Herero lexicon, but they also deliberately advocated for the Herero language and standardized it, as a unifying factor for the individual Herero groups. I will pay special attention to the significance of Rath's corpus planning for the identity formation of the Herero community. In order to expand on this in my Master's thesis in African History, I analyzed Rath's journals and letters (*Archiv der Vereinten Evangelischen Mission*, Wuppertal, Germany) as well as his linguistic manuscripts and further relevant documents (archive of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Namibia, Windhoek; National Library of South Africa, Cape Town).

Preliminary research indicates that Rath's linguistic activities can be defined as corpus planning which did not only extend to religious semantic fields, but which also had long-term effects on the language itself and on group solidarity among the Herero. Especially with his collection of fables, Rath contributed to the Herero being perceived as a homogenous, independent community which deserved to be supported in their freedom struggle against the Nama and Orlams. Consequently, one can assume that Rath significantly influenced the way in which the Herero were seen in Europe in the pre- and proto-colonial era.