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Johannes Rath (1816-1903):  
Missionar der Rheinischen Missionsgesellschaft im südwestlichen Afrika

This Master's thesis in African History is dedicated to the biography of Johannes Rath (1816-1903). Born in Vienna, Austria, he worked as a missionary for the protestant Rhenish Mission Society among the Herero in modern-day Namibia from 1845 to 1861.

He founded the mission station Otjimbingue and explored the region on several expeditions. In spite of having no linguistic training whatsoever, he was, together with his colleague Carl Hugo Hahn, highly involved in the documentation of the Herero language, which was completely unstudied at that time. As a part of his linguistic research, which was the heart of his missionary activities, Rath collected fables, compiled a grammar booklet, translated several Christian texts and edited voluminous word lists. In this process, the Herero lexicon was expanded by numerous words for abstract concepts which the missionaries introduced together with the Christian faith. Rath recorded his results in several comprehensive manuscripts, which, although they remained unpublished, served as the basis for the work of many of his colleagues and successors.

This project examines the hypothesis that Johannes Rath, mainly with his linguistic research, significantly influenced the continuity of the Herero mission as well as the emergence of a distinct Herero identity. In addition to historic and contemporary secondary literature, the analysis relies on unpublished primary sources which were uncovered in several mission archives and evaluated critically.

The Master's thesis aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of proto-colonial central Namibia and hopes to contribute to the documentation of southern African mission history and to the history of southern African linguistics. As one of the first Europeans who lived in the region, Johannes Rath is of historical interest as no significant analysis of his mission activities has been conducted to date.