

A very different set of southern African cultural intricacies

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Mein Freund Maleboch

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illustrations

glossary

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The text published as *Mein Freund Maleboch** is the section of Berlin missionary Christoph Sonntag's diary, which describes the Boer conquest of the Bahananwa of Blauberg during the winter of 1894 in the Northern Province of present-day South Africa. The actual transcription of the diary is preceded by a 21-page introduction, jointly compiled by Van der Heyden and Konrad Sonntag, the son of the missionary. This informative section contextualises the Boer-Bahananwa conflict chronologically and geographically. It provides background information about the Berlin Mission Society's activities in South Africa, as well as more details on the whereabouts of the original manuscript of the diary. Konrad and Annegret Sonntag are to be commended for the mammoth task they undertook in transcribing the latter, thereby making the document accessible to modern readers. In the early 1980s, Konrad Sonntag published an English translation of sections of the diary under the title *My*

The editors preferred to keep the spelling of Maleboch and Bahananwa the same as in the original manuscript, although the modern northern Sotho orthography is acknowledged in the introduction: Malebogo [Mmalebôhô] and Bahananwa, or Bagananwa.

friend Maleboch. Until this time, no researcher had even bothered to consult this primary source on Boer-Banananwa relations.

The German edition of 1999 surpasses the previous English translation in that the diary entries are often more complete in the German publication than those in the English one. Phrases or paragraphs - sometimes even complete entries - which, in the opinion of the editor, were not of any use in coming to a better understanding of the 1894 war, were often omitted from the English edition. The more complete entries in the new German publication give readers more leeway to come to similar, or contradictory conclusions themselves regarding the relevance of material. Other differences between the 1983 edition and the 1999 edition may be ascribed to the fact that the editors had consulted both the manuscript reposed in the South African National Archives, as well as the one in the Mission Archives in Berlin, Germany. It is nevertheless regrettable that a publication intended for use by academic researchers does not provide contextual indications as to where the editors were merging the different manuscripts, found it necessary to add explanatory notes, decided to omit sections, or worst of all, improvising where the original was illegible. It is misleading to read a hundred-year-old text packaged as if it had been written yesterday.

Engaging with the text rewards the reader with a gripping narrative. The missionary and his family had been stationed at the Blauberg Mission Station for almost two years when the Transvaal Government in Pretoria decided that the Bahananwa had to be harnessed under their state machinery by force. Chief Mmaleboho's reluctance to succumb to Boer demands for, amongst others, the paying of taxes, confirmed his persistent claim that his domain was independent from the colonial state within which it was situated. This would, by the end of the nineteenth century, no longer be tolerated by a Boer Government anxious to convert its control over the northern outskirts of their republic from relatively nominal to a much more substantial level. During the ensuing conflict Sonntag, who had had a curiously friendly relationship with Chief Mmaleboho before the outbreak of hostilities, was torn between his sympathy for the Bahananwa and his allegiance to the Boer State.

Van der Heyden and Konrad Sonntag also focus on this ambiguity in their introduction to the publication, as their use of *on the one hand ... on the other ...* juxtapositions proves: On the one hand the missionary noticed the unjust treatment of the Bahananwa, on the other he recognised the authority of the Government responsible for the injustice; on the one hand he condemned the violence against the Bahananwa, on the other he encouraged them to surrender to their perpetrators voluntarily. The two editors explain that missionary Sonntag not only reckoned that a Bahananwa community subjugated by the Boers would have been more receptive for his evangelising efforts, but probably also anticipated that the Bahananwa would have been willing to convert to Christianity out of gratitude for the *lip-service* sympathy he had doled out to them.

The editors find it ironic that the same missionary, who was (quite unjustly) suspected in Europe of misusing his position to supply the Bahananwa with ammunition, was actually in favour of their subjugation. Regardless of all the suspicion from both sides, Sonntag was used as messenger by both the Boer command and the Bahananwa leadership throughout the war. This reconfirms the complexity of the debate around the missionary's professed neutrality during

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hostilities. It seems as if the Bahananwa were the ones who had compromised and made use of Sonntag's services while being fully aware that the latter was playing according to the rules of their enemies. One should, of course, bear in mind that Sonntag would have lost his privilege to be present at the battle scene if he had defied Boer authority openly in favour of the Bahananwa. The very creation of the Sonntag diary as a source of information about the Boer-Bahananwa conflict depended on Sonntag's compliance with Boer regulations.

While trying to grapple with the issue of Sonntag's public and private affiliation during the 1894-conflict, the reader works through a rich and thought-provoking source of information on all the missionary's daily encounters with a wide variety of informants. Having been rather meticulous, the missionary often recorded whole arguments or stories he had heard from visitors on a particular day, before starting to refute or endorse them. These visitors to the mission station included Afrikaans/Dutch and English speaking members of the Boer forces as well as representatives of Mmaleboho, until it had become too dangerous for the latter to go to him. After Mmaleboho's surrender at the end of July 1894, the missionary provided for the needs of the destitute Bahananwa who had not fled, been taken captive or indentured by the Boers. In this capacity he continued communicating his observations of the Bahananwa community through his diary. There is, however, no indication that the missionary ever tried to visit or console Mmaleboho after he was taken to Pretoria and imprisoned until 1902.

Mein Freund Maleboch is an attractive publication, which will certainly prove to be an unforgettable read for anyone interested in the history of the Transvaal at the turn of the nineteenth century. This publication will not preclude the researcher, seriously focusing on the particulars of Boer-broker-Bahananwa relations, from consulting the complete original diary, but it will certainly leave the reader with a better understanding of the way in which nineteenth century missionaries consciously and unconsciously transposed their Euro-Christian perspectives onto a very different set of southern African cultural intricacies.

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