

Klaas Koen: Identity and belonging in the Berlin Mission Society during the late nineteenth century

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Klaas Koen should not have belonged. Of Khoisan descent, he wasn't German, he wasn't white, and he came from the "wrong" class background to be a missionary. (Indeed, as Elizabeth Elbourne has demonstrated, by the 1830s, many white settlers in the Cape – and some missionaries – saw the Khoikhoi as being sub-human and dismissed missionary notions of the "reclaimability" of those who converted to Christianity.¹) However, after his training in Berlin, Koen became so German that he sat in tears on his first Christmas at his own mission station in South Africa. There was no Christmas tree decorated with candles in German style. Koen died a "blessed death" in the service of the Berlin Mission Society. A tract was produced about his life. This article examines the life history of this man and explores why the mission society treated him, wrote about him, and remembered him as they did. It also suggests some reasons why the young missionary may have made the choices that he did. It concludes with an examination of some aspects of his posthumous identity.

The Mission

The Berlin Mission Society (as it was known from 1908) had been founded by a group of Prussian notables in 1824 as the Society to Promote Evangelical (or Protestant) Missions among the Heathen (*Gesellschaft zur Beförderung der Evangelischen Missionen unter den Heiden*).² Their first mission station in South Africa was that of Bethanien in the Orange Free State, established in 1834. A station was opened at Cape Town in 1837 to work among the Khoikhoi and slaves. The same year saw the expansion of the society's mission activity into British Kaffraria, with the Bethel Mission station being established to work among the Xhosa. Evangelisation among the Zulu began in 1847 with the founding of the Emmaus Mission Station in Natal. Mission activity among the Pedi in the Transvaal began in 1860 with the opening of Gerlachshoop Mission Station. From these original bases, the mission society spread out its operations to work in other areas and among other groups. In spite of closures and the relocation of some mission stations, there were

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1. E. Elbourne, *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799–1852* (McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2002), especially chapters 6 and 7.

2. See especially H. Lehmann, *150 Jahre Berliner Mission* (Ev.-Luth. Mission Erlangen, Stuttgart, 1974), p 9; U. van der Heyden, "The Archives and Library of the Berlin Mission Society", *History in Africa: A Journal of Method*, 23, 1996, pp 411–412; D.W. van der Merwe, "Van Paternalisme tot Selfbeskikking: Die Berlynse Sendinggenootskap en Kerkstigting in Transvaal, 1904–1962", PhD thesis, University of South Africa, 1980, pp 1–3; and M. Wright, *German Missions in Tanganyika 1891–1941: Lutherans and Moravians in the Southern Highlands* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1971), p 3.

31 Berlin mission stations in South Africa in 1870.³ The society and the scope of its operations continued to grow. Koen was stationed in Vendaland. In this area, the stations of Ha Tshivhase, Tshakhuma and Georgenholtz were established in 1872, 1874 and 1877 respectively.⁴ Using these stations as a springboard, mission work expanded into Mashonaland in 1892. However, this over-taxed the southern African resources of the mission and this part of the mission work was handed over to the South African Mission Society in 1906.⁵ A fourth mission station, Gertrudsburg, was established at Makhado near the new white settlement of Louis Trichardt in 1899, after the final military defeat of the Vhavenda in the preceding year.⁶ Outside southern Africa, the Berlin Mission expanded the scope of its operations into China in 1882 and East Africa in 1884.⁷

The central guiding spirit of the mission society lay in early nineteenth century Pietism. In essence, this was a spiritual reaction against the “cold rationalism” of the Enlightenment.⁸ Pietistic theology emphasised “faith as ‘living faith’ which must bring forth ‘fruits of faith’”.⁹ This partly manifested itself in a rejection of the orthodox Lutheran and Calvinist doctrine that rejected mission-work as human interference in the will of God.¹⁰

Kritzinger, Meiring and Saayman have argued that arising from this background, the whole concept of Christian conversion predominant in German missions

3. These were spread as follows: three stations operating in the Orange Free State; five in the Cape Colony; five in British Kaffraria; six in Natal; and twelve in the South African Republic: *Berliner Missions-Berichte* (hereafter *BMB*), 1871, pp 185–186.
4. Van der Heyden, “Archives”, pp 412–413. For the history of the Berlin Mission in South Africa from 1834 to 1914, see D.J. Richter, *Geschichte der Berliner Missionsgesellschaft, 1824–1924* (Buchhandlung der Berliner Ev. Missionsgesellschaft, Berlin, 1924), pp 91–318, 357–418. Ha Tshivhase also appears in Berlin Mission records as Ga-Sebase and Sebäse. It is known now either as Beuster, or by its Tshivenda name of Maungani. Earlier missionary spellings of Tshakhuma were Tschakoma, Tsakoma, Tshakuma and Tsakhuma. See A. Kirkaldy, *Capturing the Soul: The Vhavenda and the Missionaries, 1870–1900* (Protea Book House, Pretoria, 2005), p 27.
5. Van der Heyden, “Archives”, pp 412–413.
6. Kirkaldy, *Capturing*, p 30.
7. Richter, *Geschichte*, pp 521–631 (China, 1882–1922); and pp 632–694 (East Africa, 1884–1914).
8. S.B. Ferguson and D.F. Wright (eds), *New Dictionary of Theology* (Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester and Illinois, 1988), p 516; quoted in Van der Merwe, “Paternalism”, p 2.
9. L. Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1969), p 30; and S.P.P. Mminele, “The Berlin Lutheran Missionary Enterprise at Botshabelo, 1865–1955: An Historical-Educational Study”, MEd thesis, University of the North, 1983, p 11.
10. Mminele “Berlin Lutheran Missionary”, p 1. See also D.G. Warneck, *Abriss einer Geschichte der Protestantischen Missionen von der Reformation bis auf die Gegenwart: Ein Beitrag zur Neueren Kirchengeschichte*, 7th edition (Verlag von Martin Warneck, Berlin, 1901), pp 54–76; D.G. Warneck, *Outline of a History of Protestant Missions from the Reformation to the Present Time: A Contribution to Modern Church History*, Authorised trans. of 7th German edition (Oliphant Anderson & Ferrier, Edinburgh and London, 1901), pp 53–73.

hinged on the conscious personal decision of the individual after a fierce ... penitential struggle ... It concerned mainly (very nearly only) the affairs of the soul, the religious sphere of life, and therefore accepted a dualistic understanding of human reality with clear compartments: (holy) church / (sinful) world, (holy) soul / (sinful) body, (holy) religion / (sinful) politics, etc. ... Repentance and conversion would therefore imply a move out of the realm of sin, into the realm of holiness, and it is difficult not to interpret this move as essentially a withdrawal from the (sinful) world.¹¹

Werner van der Merwe and Marcia Wright have argued that in implementing this driving spirit in practice, the Berlin Mission Society was extremely hierarchical and paternalistic, and “fully supported the autocratic and conservative character of Prussian and, after 1870, German social and political life”.¹² The “stress on obedience and humility” in its training of seminarians was carried over to the management of missionaries in the field. Flowing from this, the missionaries easily assumed “the role of the paternalists over converts. Even the Superintendents, however, were never allowed to forget the superiority of the authorities at home ...”.¹³ Pakendorf has argued that this gave rise to a “typically conservative ... petty bourgeois worldview that shaped their thinking and which they sought to impart to their converts in Africa”. Theologically, this “revolved around concepts of sin, redemption and salvation”. Economically, “it expressed itself in terms of the work ethic, that is, high productivity based on an internalised self-discipline”. Ideologically, “it consisted of values such as orderliness, diligence, cleanliness, frugality”.¹⁴

During the nineteenth century, as in their other stations, the typical Berlin missionary in Vendaland was German-speaking and of lower-middle class background. At the time of his entry into the mission he had an elementary school education and some experience in a trade. Eight of the ten who served in the area during this period were the sons of railway workers, traders, artisans and a smallholder (rather than a farmer). Two were bakers at the time of their entry into the mission; one worked for a trader in glass and porcelain goods; two were locksmiths; one was a shoemaker; one was a builder; and one was an office worker. One of the eight was 20 years old at the time he joined the seminary; two were about to turn 21; two were already 21 years old; and three were 22. In their life-stories (*lebenslauf*) written on joining the mission, three wrote specifically of life-altering conversion experiences.¹⁵ What they did not write about was the fact that entry into the mission

11. J.J. Kritzinger, P.G.I. Meiring and W.A. Saayman, *On Being Witness* (Orion Publishers, Halfway House, 1994), p 27. Cf. D.J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis Books, New York, 1991), pp 253–255.
12. Quoted in Van der Merwe, “Paternalism”, p 6; Wright, *German Missions*, p 13.
13. Wright, *German Missions*, pp 13, 16.
14. G. Pakendorf, “For there is no power but of God”: The Berlin Mission and the Challenges of Colonial South Africa” (originally published in *Missionalia*, the Journal of the South African Missiological Society), available at <http://www.geocities.com/missionalia/germiss1.htm>, accessed 24 May 2006, p 2. For a discussion of this with regard to British missions, see J.L. Comaroff and J. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa, Volume 1* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1991), pp 54–85.
15. Berlin Mission Society (hereafter BMS), *Acta der Berliner Missionsgesellschaft betreffend Personalia*: Beuster, Carl (Abt. II, Fach 3, Nr 14, 1865–1902); Baumhöfener, Dietrich (Abt. II, Fach 3, Nr 9, 1875–1883); Gernecke, Carl (Abt. II, Fach 3, Nr 28, 1856–1948); Gottschling, Ernst (Abt. II, Fach 3, Nr 27, Band 1, 1877–1956; Band 2, 1913–1952); Klatt, Carl Otto (Abt. II, Fach 3K, Nr 42, 1891–1943); Meister, Johann (Abt. II, Fach 3, Nr 6, 1884–1892); Wessmann, Reinhold (Abt. II, Fach 3W, Nr 16, 1880–1907); and Stech, Carl (Abt. II, Fach 3, Nr 1, 1866–1911).

served as a form of social advancement. The status of a missionary in charge of his own mission station was a far higher one than they could hope to aspire to back in Germany.¹⁶ It will be seen that social advancement through serving Christ played an even greater role in the life of Klaas Koen, who was one of only two of the ten whose backgrounds differed from the norm. The other was Erdmann Schwellnus, who was Lithuanian, rather than German, and his father was a relatively prosperous farmer. Thus, he was both “foreign” and from a slightly higher social class than his colleagues. Entering the seminary just before he turned 25, he was also a little older than the other candidate missionaries.¹⁷

Klaas Koen differed so dramatically that the mission captured his life history in a tract to demonstrate how one could rise above all obstacles and become reborn as a new person, and an ideal missionary, in Christ.¹⁸ His life and death was portrayed and remembered as typifying the Prussian bourgeois ethic and the Pietistic ideal. The way that the mission did this arose directly from Pietist conceptions of the role of the spoken and written word in conversion.

According to this way of thinking, conversion “could only be brought about in one of two ways: by way of a verbal challenge or invitation, or through the example of a godly life (i.e. a life according to the Pietist understanding of the Gospel).”¹⁹ The verbal challenge or invitation could take the form of personal testimony, a sermon or a tract. Even in cases where emulation of a godly life served as the power of attraction of the Gospel, it was expected that this would be explained by a Pietist missionary in a pastoral discussion or testimony with the convert. Thus, according to the Pietist understanding: “The word is … the central and overwhelming dimension of a call to conversion … Deeds were in a decidedly second position, and then only deeds expressing the sincere faith of the missionary himself or herself.”²⁰ Koen was seen, and remembered, as fulfilling all these requirements.

Klaas Koen: The ideal missionary

Klaas Koen is not new to the historiography of the Berlin Mission in South Africa. A short biography by D.W. van der Merwe appeared in *Kleio* in June 1977.²¹ More recently, Ulrich van der Heyden has published a fuller exploration of his life.²² However, both these sources focus on biographical information, rather than exploring issues of identity. In addition, they do not engage with the issue of Lutheran Pietism

16. See, in particular, Kirkaldy, *Capturing*, pp 91–92; and Van der Merwe, “Paternalisme”, p 4.
17. BMS, *Acta der Berliner Missionsgesellschaft betreffend Personalia: Schwellnus, Erdmann* (Abt. II, Fach 3, Nr 25, n.d.).
18. G. Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn, ein Missionar aus den Hottentotten*, Vierte Auflage, Dornen und Ähren vom Missionsfelde, V (Buchhandlung der Berliner Evangelischen Missions-Gesellschaft, Berlin, n.d.).
19. Kritzinger, Meiring and Saayman, *Witness*, p 28.
20. Kritzinger, Meiring and Saayman, *Witness*, p 28.
21. D.W. van der Merwe, “Niklaas Theunissen Koen, 1852–1883, Lewensskets van ‘n Pioniersendeling onder die Bawenda”, *Kleio*, 9, 1/2, June 1977, pp 22–30.
22. U. van der Heyden, “Treue bis in den Tod: Tragische Folge des Aufenthalts von Klaas Koen in Deutschland”, in U. van der Heyden (ed), *Unbekannte Biographien: Afrikaner im Deutschsprachigen Europa vom 18. Jahrhunderts bis zum Ende des Zweiten Weltkrieges* (Kai Homilius Verlag, Berlin, 2008), pp 76–89.

or the current literature on colonialism and mission, as do the works of Elizabeth Elbourne, the Comaroffs²³ and this present article.

Klaas Koen was born at Haarlem in the Cape Colony on 22 May 1852,²⁴ the son of Piet and Christina Catharina (Kristien) Koen. Klaas' father had been one of the pioneers of Christianity in the area, and been instrumental in getting the missionary Friedrich Prietsch to go to Haarlem in 1860 to establish the mission station of Anhalt-Schmidt. After the arrival of the missionary, Piet became an elder, and later the verger, of the small Christian community there. In time he became "a friend of the house" of the missionary couple. Always prepared to offer advice and help, he became a favourite of Prietsch's wife. Klaas was the sixth of the Koen's ten children.²⁵

Klaas Koen had both German and slave blood in his ancestry. On his father's side, he was a descendant of Johannes Casparus Koen van Roeksem, who arrived at the Cape in 1741.²⁶ On his mother's side, his great-grandmother was Lea van der Kaab, a locally-born (Cape Creole) slave. Her daughter, Emilie (Emily), married Hans Lehn, a fellow-slave whom she later described "as a Bastard German". Hans, and his and Emilie's children – including Christiana – remained slaves. Slaves were not always precluded from earning money on their own account, and Hans managed to purchase Emilie's freedom (nominal as this may have been). Piet Koen, a free black man, subsequently negotiated Christina's "freedom from the four-year compulsory apprenticeship that followed emancipation".²⁷

The Berlin Mission was either unaware of, or ignored, Koen's German roots. I strongly suspect that the latter was the case, at least in as far as his maternal line was concerned.²⁸ After Hans' death by drowning in April 1848, Emilie Lehn stayed with her daughter and son-in-law at Haarlem.²⁹ It is possible, and indeed likely, that she would have discussed her late husband's German roots with the Prietsch family. Despite this, and although the mission usually 'Germanised' Klaas' name to Klaus Kuhn or Klaas Kuhn,³⁰ it suited them to emphasise the fact that he was a South

23. Comaroff and Comaroff, *Revelation, Volume 1*; E. Elbourne, "Early Khoisan uses of Mission Christianity", in H. Bredekamp and R. Ross (eds), *Missions and Christianity in South African History* (Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 1995), pp 65–95; E. Elbourne, *Blood Ground*; and E. Elbourne and R. Ross, "Combating Spiritual and Social Bondage: Early Missions in the Cape Colony", in R. Elphick and R. Davenport (eds), *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Cultural and Social History* (James Currey and David Philip, Oxford and Cape Town, 1997), pp 33–36.

24. Haarlem is situated about 60 kilometres from Uniondale on the road to the Langkloof (the R62).

25. BMS, *Acta der Berliner Missionsgesellschaft betreffend Personalia: Koen, Klaas* (Abt. II, Fach 3K, Nr 7, 1876 – 1883); Letter, F. Prietsch – Missions' inspector X in Berlin, 24 April 1883. Also reproduced in "Aus dem Leben des Missionars Niklaus Koen" in the same file. See also I. Caton, *Niklaas Koen ... in the Fangs of Fate* (self-published by the author, 2009), family tree of Niklaas Koen, p 155; Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 8; and P.T. Mellét, "The Story of Emily Lehn and the Roots of the Kuhn Family", available at <http://cape-slavery.iblog.co.za/?s=piet+koen>, accessed 25 March 2010.

26. H. Heese, "Diakonie en Digitalisering: Sendingkroks en Geskiedenis in die 21ste Eeu", *Historia*, 43, 2, November 1988, p 32, footnote 11.

27. Mellét, "Emily Lehn".

28. It is possible that the paternal German connection was too distant to have been remembered.

29. Mellét, "Emily Lehn".

30. See, for example, BMS, Letter, Prietsch – Missions inspector X; BMS, "Aus dem Leben"; Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 5.

African of mixed descent. From their perspective, acknowledging a German ancestor in the maternal line would have weakened the mission portrayal of Koen as having risen above the constraints imposed by his Khoisan background. On a practical level, when they assigned him “to the high, hot northern area”, they “hoped that as a born Hottentot and an African, he more than anybody else would have the constitution which could resist the hot climate there”.³¹

On a more ideological level, the mission also chose to ignore his slave ancestry, of which they must have been aware. Instead of focusing on the oppression of slavery, they chose to emphasise what they saw as the degeneration of his Khoisan forebears. This, I would argue, was a calculated and deliberate decision. Escaping from the disadvantages of a slave heritage could simply have been read as overcoming obstacles placed in his path by settlers themselves. However, triumphing over what was widely seen as the degeneration of his people, and being reborn as a new “civilised” man through Christ, could be portrayed as a far more powerful example of the power of God, and His missionaries. Moreover, this depiction of the life of Koen removed any idea of settler culpability for the situation in which he, and others like him, found themselves. In terms of the twisted racial logic at the time, any suggestion of German ancestry would simply have weakened this portrayal.

Michele Ruiters has argued that colonial writings and discourses made the Khoisan “strange” in order to justify their economic, social and political behaviour in the colonies”. The colonial texts constructed the Khoisan communities as ““cannibals” and “heathens” … as a people who were ugly, shameless, beastly and thievish; they stank, mutilated themselves, and ate raw flesh and intestines”.³² In addition, at this time,

the concept of hybridity was moved from the natural sciences to humans and was used to describe a “mixing” of two people each of a “pure race”. “Mixed race” people were then deemed to have “dirty” or “impure” blood that made them “less than” those who had procreated within their “race” groups.³³

Reflecting these attitudes, and personalising them to the case of Klaas Koen, the Berlin Mission would record after his death that as a “Hottentot” he was descended from people who had gone around “half-naked … [living] in appalling filth and still more wicked foolishness and in all sorts of heathen sins and disgraces”. In time, this “weak and very lazy” people adopted the Dutch language and

replaced their skin clothing with European cast-offs. Because nobody was teaching them, they remained wretched heathens, going to neglect in their bottomless foolishness, especially through the vice of drunkenness.³⁴

31. *BMB*, 1882, p 358.

32. M.R. Ruiters, “Elite (Re-)Constructions of Coloured Identities in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Assimilations and Bonded Transgressions”, PhD dissertation, Rutgers, State University of New Jersey, 2006, pp 81, 83.

33. Ruiters, “(Re-)Constructions”, p 82. See also M. Adhikari, *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough: Racial Identity in the South African Coloured Community* (Double Storey, Cape Town, 2005), pp 23–25

34. Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, pp 7–8.

However, unlike many of the settlers and some of their missionary colleagues, the Berlin missionaries believed that their “patient” work among these “degenerate heathens” demonstrated that even they could be “awakened to a new life” in Christ. Piet Koen had been one of their earliest successes.³⁵ Their success with his son could be even greater. Although descended from the “contemptible Hottentots”, he would go on to “work more than others whose forebears were so-called Christians” and provide a shining light for others to follow,³⁶ a prospect that had come about through a combination of piety and good fortune.

Elizabeth Elbourne has argued that the Khoisan had a wide range of reasons for converting to mission Christianity. Among other trends, during the nineteenth century, conversion was used both as a tool to reconstruct and reintegrate a shattered society and as a means of gaining access to power, which was only available for Christians in colonial society.³⁷ As Lynn Zatoupli has argued in commenting on this: “In short, the Khoisan were active agents using Christianity to negotiate their way into the new colonial order.”³⁸ As the son of a convert, Koen was no less able to take the chances offered to him to build a life for himself far beyond that which the average convert on a mission station could aspire to.

Klaas’ path to ordination began with one of his father’s offers of help to the Prietsch family. Much of the produce of their flourishing peach orchard was sun-dried in front of their house. Piet Koen noticed that the chickens often ate the drying fruit. He told the missionary:

You cannot carry on like this, you must have somebody to chase the chickens away, otherwise they will destroy everything. I will give you my Klaas, if this is acceptable to you.³⁹

So, the nine-year old Klaas came to live in the Prietsch’s house. When the last of the peaches had been dried, Mrs Prietsch asked the old man:

“Piet, what now? The fruit is ready, what shall now become of Klaas?” Piet scratched his head in a somewhat embarrassed manner and eventually said ... “I do not know what to do with Klaas at home. He is not like my other children. When I say to them: Do this or that! ... they understand me and do it but Klaas ... he looks in the clouds and has not understood anything. The boy is extremely stupid! Do you not want to keep him here?”⁴⁰

The Prietsch family agreed to do this on condition that Piet and his wife formalised this in a written contract. This having been done, Klaas became their foster child. In time, they also took other children into their home, giving them a “good upbringing” and sending them to school. It soon became apparent to them that far

35. Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 8.

36. Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 30.

37. Elbourne, “Early Khoisan”; Elbourne and Ross, “Combating”.

38. L. Zastoupil, “Intimacy and Colonial Knowledge”, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 3, 2, 2002, p 7.

39. BMS, Letter, Prietsch – Missions’ inspector X; BMS, “Aus dem Leben” (quotation); and Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 8.

40. BMS, Letter, Prietsch – Missions’ inspector X; BMS, “Aus dem Leben”; Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, pp 8–9.

from being stupid, Klaas outshone his peers and had the capability to become a teacher or minister. The problem was finding funds to finance his training.⁴¹

Piet Koen died of consumption in 1862, at approximately 50 years of age. His death left Christina, Koen's mother, "with ten children and literally no money".⁴² It is likely that she welcomed the fact that Klaas, at least, had some hope for the future. This was eventually provided for by "a distinguished benefactress in Germany". Having lost her only son in an accident, Frau von Kröcher "decided to do some good for a heathen boy". Hearing that the Prietschs had a "couple of girls and three boys" living in their house, she contacted Mrs Prietsch. Having received written reports on these children and letters from them, she selected Klaas and offered him financial support for private lessons in English, German and the violin.⁴³ Ruiters has argued that

within the colonial framework social status was prized and based on Victorian conceptions of "acceptable behaviour" and aspirations to upward social mobility. Elites in the coloured community saw those options as their only way to transcend the confines of an imposed identity. This upward social mobility was evident in the importance coloured elites attached to education, the English language, and decorum.⁴⁴

There is no way of recovering how Klaas himself defined his identity at this time. It is nevertheless clear that he was being provided opportunities for advancement which the overwhelming majority of his peers could not even dream of realising. His subsequent career demonstrates that he seized these opportunities to (re-)fashion an identity for himself as the ideal Berlin missionary, exemplifying the Pietist worldview described earlier in this article. Through this, he achieved not only self-affirmation but also the approbation of the mission authorities. It will also become clear that during his short stay among the Vhavenda before his untimely death, he developed a close working relationship with a number of the local evangelists, and an extremely intimate (if sometimes tense) relationship with the local ruler, *Khosi* Makwarela Mphaphuli.⁴⁵

41. BMS, Prietsch – Missions' inspector X: BMS, "Aus dem Leben"; Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 9 (quotation).

42. Heese, "Diakonie", p 32; Mellét, "Emily Lehn" (quotation).

43. BMS, Prietsch – Missions' inspector X; BMS, "Aus dem Leben"; Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 9 (quotations mixed among sources).

44. Ruiters, "(Re-)Constructions", p 74.

45. During the late nineteenth century, Venda land was dominated by three great *mahosi*: *Khosi* Makhado (Ramabulana); *Khosi* Tshivhase; and *Khosi* Mphaphuli. There were also a considerable number of lesser *mahosi* and *magota*, who exhibited varying degrees of independence. From time to time, the various groupings vied against each other for supremacy, leading to realignments in the balance of power. Kirkaldy, *Capturing*, pp 17–18. Missionary sources from the nineteenth century refer to *Khosi* Makwarela Mphaphuli as Makoarele. While he eventually came to succeed his father, Ranwedzi Mphaphuli as *khosi*, during the period under review, Makwarela's actual position was that of a *gota*. However, in common usage, a *gota* is referred to as *khosi* by his subjects. To show respect to somebody, one makes them greater than they are. On the other hand, people in positions of power often make people under them in the hierarchy smaller than they are. Throughout this article, I refer to Makwarela as *khosi*. Translating the Tshivenda terms *khosi* (plural, *mahosi* – "kings" or "chiefs") and *gota* (plural, *magota* – "sub-chiefs" or "headmen") into English opens a whole debate on the nature of leadership in African societies which I do not want to engage with in this article. Thus, I avoid using the English terminology.

When Frau von Kröcher died, her will made provision for Klaas to study in Germany to become either a teacher or a missionary. The seventeen-year-old boy registered at a preparatory institution in Ducherow in Pomerania. Having studied there for two years, he moved over to the Mission House in Berlin to study in the seminary there. Through his strenuous efforts, “this Hottentot Christian of heathen ancestry made such progress as to be an example to others”. For example, he mastered far more Greek and Hebrew than many of the other candidate missionaries.⁴⁶

As he proceeded with his training, Koen began to attend and preach at mission revival meetings. He proved to be extremely popular and made many friends among the clergy and the laity, rich and poor alike. “Above all ... he won the friendship of the God-fearing Verger and teacher Bröse, and the heart of his daughter Maria, who was prepared to brave all dangers to join him in his homeland to preach the gospel to the heathens.” However, Koen and Bröse decided that they would only marry after he had spent a year back in Africa as a missionary.⁴⁷

It is likely that on a personal level, Koen would have interpreted his popularity and his success in winning the heart of a girl from “God-fearing” German stock as affirmations of his continuing success in creating a new identity for himself. It is also likely that his family shared this sentiment. Mellét has noted that Emilie, Klaas’ grandmother, “died in poverty, but she died free, looking upon her grandson who went to the land of her masters and came back as a missionary who held the respect of his own people and the Europeans”.⁴⁸

On another level, these developments demonstrate that the Berlin missionaries and their wider church circle, accepted this “Hottentot” as one who had been transformed by Christ and by exposure to the “civilising” influence of German culture and a German seminary education. A number of authors have commented on the fact that for nineteenth century missionaries, adoption of Christianity necessarily implied full-scale acceptance not only of Western culture in general, but more specifically, identification with a particular European national culture.⁴⁹ Koen was a shining example of this. The extent to which he had become “white”, or “German”, through his life with the Preitschs, his studies and his experiences in Germany, is also clearly demonstrated in the mission’s account of his farewell sermon given in the tractate about his life and in the photograph of him used as an illustration (see below) in the tractate *Neu-Georgenholtz im Wenda-Lande*.

46. BMS, Prietsch – Missions’ inspector X; BMS, “Aus dem Leben”; Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, pp 9–10 (quotation, p 10).

47. Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 10.

48. Mellét, “Emily Lehn”.

49. See, for example, J.L. Comaroff and J.Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier, Volume 2* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1997), chapter 5; Elbourne, “Early Khoisan”, pp 68–69; Elbourne and Ross, “Combating”, p 47; Kirkaldy, *Capturing*, pp 154–157; D. Stuart, “For England and for Christ”: The Gospel of Liberation and Subordination in Early Nineteenth-Century South Africa”, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 6, 4, 1993, pp 377–395 (especially pp 381, 391 and 393); Zastoupil, “Intimacy”, p 10.



Klaas Koen⁵⁰

After six years of study in the Mission-House, on 29 August 1875, Koen preached his farewell sermon in the Bartholomäuskirche, the home-church of the Mission Society. The man who entered the pulpit "was scarcely darker than any of our own when he has been really burned by the sun. That his hair, crinkled in small bushes, stands a little curly on the head, one does not see from a distance". In addition, his face was drawn into a "sensible and serious expression. He preached about the parable of the talents (Matt. 25, 14–21)." Ending his sermon with thanks, "the stranger took his leave from the Christian congregation with which he had been tied in the worship of God for seven years".⁵¹

In the photograph, Koen wears the standard high-necked and dog-collared uniform of the Berlin missionary. His hair has been combed in such a way that it indeed appears curly but not "crinkled". The photograph also seems to have been exposed or re-touched so that his skin does not appear to be dark. He has become "white" or "German" in looks as well as in ideology.

Having completed his examinations, Koen set sail for Africa on 1 January 1876, eventually arriving "In the lands of the Bawenda" in April 1876.⁵² His first posting was to Tshak huma. As was customary for new missionaries, he was to be stationed here for a year to "be initiated into his calling and to study the language and customs of the Bawenda". He did this under the direction of missionary Erdmann

50. Appears as "Klaas Kuhn" in original, P. Heimbach, *Neu-Georgenholtz im Wenda-Lande, Neue Missionsschriften [Neue Folge]*, 25 (Berliner Missiongesellschaft, Berlin, n.d. [1909]), p 18.

51. Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, pp 6–7.

52. Ergänzungen aus den Stationsakten, in BMS, Acta betreffend Personalia: Koen, Klaas; and Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 11.

Schwellnus and his wife, Dorothea.⁵³ On 10 May 1876, Koen wrote to mission director, Wangemann:

... I am writing to you for the first time from the Northern Transvaal. I am really entering the proper mission work now. ... I have taken the preparatory classes over from Br Schwellnus and am teaching the people reading, writing and singing. Polygamy is part of the consciousness of the people. Those who are not married are regarded as children here and very little attention is paid to them. They love me but it is offensive to them that I am not a married man. Therefore I wish to ask, if it is possible, that my bride (Miss Maria Bröse) can come ... next year. I am certain that as long as one remains unmarried, one cannot be a missionary here.⁵⁴

As we have come to expect of him in his efforts to prove (and improve) himself, his progress was rapid. In November of the same year, he informed Wangemann that he was able to preach in Tshivenda, the local language.⁵⁵ This was an extremely admirable accomplishment. A tonal language, Tshivenda is notoriously difficult to learn.

On 13 July 1877, Koen, then 25 years old, visited the Vhavenda *Khosi* Makwarela at his capital village of Tshikwarakwara to make final arrangements with him for the establishment of a mission station in his territory.⁵⁶ Having negotiated the details of the founding of the station, Koen returned to Tshakhuma.⁵⁷ On 26 July, he returned to Makwarela's area, this time to stay.⁵⁸ Demonstrating the industriousness expected of a German missionary, Koen wasted no time in starting work on the establishment of Georgenholtz. His first task was to build a small house on the side of the mountain. The costs for this and later buildings were borne by a friend of the Missionary Society, Georg Holtz, lord of the manor of Manow in Pomerania. Hence the new station was named after him. Koen immediately began to preach to the local people. Having no bell, demonstrating his resourcefulness, he called them for services by beating on a piece of iron. Sometimes only ten or so came. However, there were sometimes reportedly up to 500 people listening to his preaching.⁵⁹

53. *Bawenda-Freund*, 1896, p 292; *BMB*, 1877, p 216; and Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 12. Schwellnus was the founding missionary of Tshakhuma.

54. BMS, Leter, K. Koen – Director Wangemann, from Tshakoma [Tshakhuma], 10 May 1876, also reproduced in "Aus dem Leben", both in Acta betreffend Personalia: Koen, Klaas.

55. BMS, Koen – Wangemann, from Tshakoma [Tshakhuma], 1 November 1876, also reproduced in BMS, "Aus dem Leben".

56. Tshikwarakwara was recorded as "Schibongarragara" in mission sources at this time.

57. Tagebuch der Station bei Ha Makoarela (Nicolaus Koen), 13 July 1877, in BMS, Acta der Berliner Missionsgesellschaft betreffend Missionsstationen: Tagebücher der Missionare auf Makoarela (Georgenholtz), Abt. III, Fach 5, No 16, (I); *BMB*, 1878, p 490; and Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 14.

58. Ergänzungen aus den Stationsakten: Koen, Klaas; Stationschronik von Georgenholtz, p. 1, in BMS, Acta der Berliner Missionsgesellschaft betreffend Missions-Station Georgenholtz, Abt. IV, Fach IIE, Nr 13, Stations-Synodalakte Band I, 1906–1962, p 125; Tagebuch der Station bei Ha Makoarela (Nicolaus Koen), 26 July 1877; *Bawenda-Freund*, 1896, pp 292–293; *BMB*, 1878, pp 256, 491–492; *Mitteilungen des Vereins Heidenfreund*, 19, 1 October 1887, n.p. (pp 2–3); and Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 14.

59. Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 15.

Although he received a great deal of support from Makwarela, it took some time before the preaching of the Gospel made any real impact on the local people.⁶⁰ Also, even though Koen enjoyed and deeply appreciated the companionship and support of Makwarela, he was still a “heathen”. This meant that he could not fulfil all of the missionary’s needs for Christian companionship. Neither could the African converts. Arguably, by this stage, Koen had become so acculturated by German culture that he needed the spiritual, linguistic and material cultural input which only contact with Germans, more particularly German missionaries, could bring. This is partly demonstrated by Sauberzweig-Schmidt’s account of Koen’s first Christmas at Georgenholtz. Reportedly, the young missionary:

was extremely lonely on his first Christmas [there]. On Christmas Eve, he sat next to a gum tree decorated with quite a few candles (the spruce tree is not found there). His heart was so heavy that this carried over to his eyes [and he cried]. Then Brother Schwellnus came riding over bringing comfort. He also brought hearty greetings and a Christmas cake from Brother Beuster, decorating the small [Christmas] tree with this. On the next day, he could again stand before the heathens full of joyfulness and give testimony about the greatest Christmas present given by the Heavenly Father.⁶¹

Having been revitalised by his German brothers, Koen worked hard to save souls.⁶² However, his mission career continued to be plagued by illness. He came to typify the Christian ‘suffering servant’. Already in March 1877, Koen had written Wangemann, the mission’s director, Wangemann, that: “I have been ill with climate-fever [*Klimafieber*]⁶³ and still feel sick more often than healthy.”⁶⁴ Again, in February 1878, Koen was confined to his bed with a severe fever.⁶⁵ He was at first nursed by Makwarela himself.⁶⁶ This reveals the growing bond that was developing between them.

When it became clear that the health of the missionary was not improving, the *khosi* sent messengers to Beuster. He came and fetched Koen and took him back to Tshakuma. After several weeks, he was well enough to return to Georgenholtz. His recovery from what appeared to the local people to be almost-certainly a fatal illness, reportedly led to an increase in those attending church services and seeking conversion.⁶⁷ The mission took pride in the fact that Koen was, and continued to be:

60. *Bawenda-Freund*, 1896, p 293; and Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, pp 15–16.

61. Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 16. Carl Beuster was the founder of the Ha Tshivhase Mission Station.

62. *Bawenda-Freund*, 1896, pp 293–294.

63. “Climate-fever” and “fever” in this context refer to malaria. At this stage, the missionaries did not realise that malaria was carried by mosquitoes. They believed the cause was bad air (miasma), from marshes. See Kirkaldy, *Capturing*, pp 132–133.

64. BMS, Koen – Director Wangemann, from Tshakoma [Tshakuma], 28 March 1877, also reproduced in “Aus dem Leben”, both in Acta betreffend Personalia, Koen, Klaas.

65. Tagebuch der Station bei Ha Makoarela (Nicolaus Koen), 11 March 1878, pp 9–10; and 17 March 1888, pp 10–11; *Bawenda-Freund*, 1896, p 294; *BMB*, 1878, pp 496–497; and Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, pp 17–18.

66. Tagebuch der Station bei Ha Makoarela (Nicolaus Koen), 17 March 1888, p 10; *Bawenda-Freund*, 1896, p 294; *BMB*, 1878, p 497; Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 17.

67. *BMB*, 1879, pp 410–411; Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 18.

driven by his enthusiasm for God's Word. Untiringly he strained all his bodily and spiritual strength ... to serve his Saviour. He did not spare himself, even if it meant visiting the villages in the hottest heat of the sun. Then, in this overheated condition, he was surprised by drenching bouts of rain, or had to ride or swim through swollen rivers. These surely were contributing factors to the nagging illness within him to lead him to an early end.⁶⁸

In addition to continuing his mission work, Koen also built the “first solid dwelling-house” at Georgenholtz to replace the “small hut” that he had lived in until then. He completed this in September 1878.⁶⁹ This done, on 1 October Koen left for Natal to marry his fiancee.⁷⁰ Since he expected to be away for some months, he appointed one of his pupils, the as yet unbaptised Nathaniel Lalumbe, to run services in his absence.⁷¹

After waiting five weeks for her arrival, Koen and Maria Bröse were eventually married on 30 December 1878.⁷² After their lengthy return journey, which also served as a honeymoon, the couple arrived back at Georgenholtz on 21 February 1879. “A huge crowd of joyful people, accompanied by many drawn out of curiosity, came shouting and dancing and made noise.”⁷³ The situation that Koen and his new wife found gave them great hope for the future. Regular Sunday services had been held in the missionary’s absence and the congregation had made progress in their learning. Nine new pupils, including an uncle of Makwarela, had joined those receiving instruction in the catechism. To top all of this off, Makwarela was still among the most regular attendees at church services. “Many of the pupils were also asking to be baptised and were being prepared for this.”⁷⁴ In the nineteenth century, Makwarela was the only Vhavenda *khosi* of any significant power or status who showed this kind of sustained interest in Christianity and support for a missionary.⁷⁵

68. BMB, 1883, pp 358–359.

69. Stationschronik von Georgenholtz, p 1; Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 18 (quotation).

70. The missionaries were forced to get established at their mission stations before their brides or wives were sent out to join them. In some cases, as with Koen, they married women whom they had already met while in Germany. For others, wives were chosen for them by the director of the Mission-House in Berlin – usually from girls who had declared themselves willing to do mission work. The women were sent out to the Transvaal via Port Natal (Durban). If the man had come out unmarried, they would be married at Christianenburg Mission Station, just outside Port Natal. If they were already married, they would meet up again at Port Natal or Christianenburg. See Kirkaldy, *Capturing*, p 56.

71. BMB, 1879, p 413; Ergänzungen aus den Stationsakten: Koen, Klaas; Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, pp 18–19.

72. Ergänzungen aus den Stationsakten: Koen, Klaas; Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 19.

73. Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 19.

74. Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, pp 20–21 (quotation, p. 21). See also BMB, 1880, pp 413–414.

75. The only *khosi* who converted during this century was *Khosi* August Makhahane, a minor ruler of the Vhalembetu, one of the smallest and least powerful sub-groupings making up the Tshivenda-speaking peoples. His territory lay at a bend in the Luvuvhu River, in what is today the northern part of the Kruger National Park. See A. Kirkaldy and L. Kriel, “Converts and Conservatives: Berlin Mission Representations of *Khosi* August Makhahane and *Kgoši* Matsiokwane Leboho in the Northern Transvaal, c. 1870–1900”, *Le Fait Missionnaire: Social Sciences and Missions*, 18, July 2006, pp 109–144.

However, in the interpretation of the mission, “on earth, in the face of joy, we still have our cross to bear.” Koen’s “young wife had to fight against severe attacks of fever”. Georgenholtz lay “right in the feverlands”. Both Klaas and Maria periodically became extremely ill. On occasion, Beuster would have to come over from Ha-Tshivhase to nurse them both. However, with “God’s help, they withstood these tests”.⁷⁶

On 27 July 1879, the new bell at Georgenholtz, donated by German Sunday school children, was rung for the first time. “Its first ringing called Makoarele’s people to a real celebration. The first four [adult] converts would be accepted into the Christian Church through baptism”.⁷⁷ In the interpretation of the missionaries, the fact that Makwarela was not among those baptised led to tensions between him and them.⁷⁸ They also believed that because of this, there was a great increase in hostility towards them shown by all Makwarela’s people.⁷⁹ In addition to the situation at the capital, the spreading of the Gospel in surrounding areas also “came to a halt”.⁸⁰ However, Nathanael Lalumbe, who had been appointed as the native assistant [*nationalhelper*] of Georgenholtz on 1 January 1880, “went quickly to the surrounding kraals” in an attempt to defuse the situation. He reportedly had to “endure ridicule and scorn” because of this.⁸¹

76. Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 21. See also *BMB*, 1880, p 414.

77. Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 21; *Stationschronik von Georgenholtz*, p 1; *Mitteilungen des Vereins Heidenfreund*, 19, 1 October 1887, n.p. (p 3); *Bawenda-Freund*, 1896, p 294; and *BMB*, 1880, p 211.

78. The situation was far more complex than this. I have argued elsewhere that Makwarela “was attempting to come to terms with the encroaching Boers, the missionaries and internal power-struggles within his society”. He “attempted to deal with the tensions by forming a close working relationship with the missionaries”. In doing so, he clearly “found the skill of literacy and the access to Western material culture which they brought useful.” He also seems to have “found the religion that they brought appealing. At first, it seemed likely that he would convert. Over time, and involved in a series of battles for succession with his brother [Tshikalange], he realised that this was impossible. Conversion to orthodox mission-interpreted Christianity would alienate him from the majority of his subjects, who followed African religion. He would no longer be able to perform the rituals essential for the maintenance of social stability. If he was not assassinated, he would either have been deposed by his father or, through the loss of most of his following, lost his succession struggle with Tshikalange.” In my reading, despite his intimate relationship with Koen, “Makwarela was trying to operate creatively in a situation of dynamic change. For him, conversion was only one strategy amongst many to deal with social cohesion, encroachment and successionary struggles. The missionaries could not accommodate this. They wanted more than his royal favour – he was to be either a ‘heathen’ or a ‘Christian’, either a savage or a civilised man – there were no shades of grey in between. This static opposition was crucial to their entire world view. To challenge it would be to negate all their work and sacrifice in the area.”: A. Kirkaldy, “Consuming Christianity: Deconstructing Missionary Accounts of Cannibalism in Vendaland in the Late Nineteenth Century”, *Historia*, 49, 1, May 2004, pp 24–25.

79. Kirkaldy, *Capturing*, pp 255–256.

80. *Bawenda-Freund*, 1896, p 294; and Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 23.

81. *Stationschronik von Georgenholtz*, p 1; Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 24 (quotation). See also *BMB*, 1880, p 417; and 1881, p 360.

Despite these setbacks, the Christian congregation grew gradually. Although “a few were baptised” every year, “many pupils also turned away again”.⁸² Klaas and Maria Koen had two children, a son named Gerhard August Peter, born on 4 January 1881, and a daughter named Hedwig (known as Hettie), born on 18 July 1882.⁸³ The year 1882 also saw the completion of a new house at Georgenholtz. The old dwelling became a church.⁸⁴ At this stage, “there were but 28 Christians at the station who held faithfully to God’s Word”.⁸⁵ Also, in time, the relationship between Koen and Makwarela was partly restored.⁸⁶

In the interpretation of the mission: “Heavier for the progress of Christianity at Georgenholtz than the hostility of the heathens was the illness of the missionary. It became increasingly clear that he was beginning to fade away.”⁸⁷ He nevertheless continued to live what the mission authorities saw as an exemplary life, driving himself far beyond what could reasonably be expected of him in his zeal to serve the Lord. Thus, in December 1881, Koen wrote to mission director Wangemann that:

It has become difficult for me to carry out my duties, and I am very worried that in the future I will become a spectacle. ... I suffer from [a] sore throat and pain in the chest, the sore throat comes and goes but the chest pain remains, and the coughing of blood becomes ever more serious ... Speaking has become difficult for me.⁸⁸

By the beginning of 1882, “he was really deteriorating” and spent long periods confined to his sickbed.⁸⁹

His wife also suffered from fever again, so she could not offer a hand, and also their one-year-old little son was without the necessary care and supervision, which made the hearts of the parents even more heavy.⁹⁰

In spite of the serious condition that he found himself in, and the difficulties that he encountered in speaking, Koen set an impressive example of devotion to duty and paternal care for his congregation. Whenever he was able to, he would leave his sick bed and preach. He regularly called the converts together and gave them instruction, so that they could go out and spread the gospel in neighbouring villages. He taught in the school daily but, so that he did not have to speak too much, appointed a congregation guardian to take over the work that he could no longer do himself. He also spent a great deal of his time working on a translation of the Gospel of John into Tshivenda. Thus, despite his terrible health problems, he “did not fail in moving devotion to his calling”.⁹¹

82. Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 24.

83. BMS, Koen, Georgenholtz – Wangemann, Berlin, 26 May 1881, also reproduced in “Aus dem Leben” and Ergänzungen aus den Stationsakten.

84. Stationschronik von Georgenholtz, p 1.

85. Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 24.

86. *Bawenda-Freund*, 1896, p 294.

87. *Bawenda-Freund*, 1896, p 294.

88. BMS, Koen, Georgenholtz – Wangemann, Berlin, 30 December 1881, also reproduced in BMS, “Aus dem Leben”.

89. Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 25.

90. Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 26.

91. Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, pp 26–27.

By June 1882, his health had deteriorated to such an extent that he wrote to the committee of the Berlin Mission Society:

Because, due to my illness, I feel as if I am incapable, I beg you to relieve me of my duties and send another missionary to Georgenholtz ... During the 7 years of my duty, I have done as much as has lain in my weak strength.⁹²

In response to Koen's declining health, the young (not yet ordained) missionary Dietrich Baumhöfner was sent out from Berlin and arrived at Georgenholtz on 1 August 1882.⁹³ Baumhöfner found Koen "so changed that he did not recognise him". However, at times when he felt strong enough to force himself out of bed, "he did not relent from his work". In October, he was again confined to his bed, often in such great pain that he begged to be released from it. Despite his suffering, in times of lucidity he concerned himself with the "poor Bawenda" and the "poor Makorela".⁹⁴ Baumhöfner reported that:

On the 16.October [1882], the dear patient suffered great pains. He called out: "Oh please give me a cloth and tie my body together, because everything seems to be falling apart." Half an hour later he shouted: "Oh my heart, my heart! It is breaking! My Saviour, free me." Even he now thought his hour had come. He gave instructions about guardianship,⁹⁵ and sent greetings to the Brothers Beuster and Schwellnus. Then he lamented about the misery of the poor Bawenda [Vhavenda] nation: "Oh, these poor Bawenda people, the poor people! Oh, poor Makorela [Makwarela]! I have loved him so much and would have so liked to see him again up there!"⁹⁶ When his wife then asked him: "My dear husband, do you not also have a word for me?" he replied: "Mama, I feel I am still staying with you. I'll tell you that I am going Home before I go." From then on he improved and he could sleep a little.⁹⁷

Towards the end of the year, Koen had a slight remission of the fever. At this time, there was a severe famine in the area. Many people reportedly even had to resort to cooking and eating their skin clothing. Demonstrating what the mission saw as true Christian compassion, in addition to his zeal and industriousness, Koen managed to have maize fetched from outside Vendaland and shared it with the starving people, "until he himself was also suffering privation".⁹⁸ In addition to this act of kindness, even as his life drew to a close, the missionary showed his capacity for mercy by adopting a young boy "who had been picked up along the way" by Makwarela. The *khosi* wanted rid of him because of his inveterate stealing. Koen reportedly did this in memory of the kindness that he himself had received from the Prietsch family.⁹⁹

Despite Koen's illness, events that year contrasted strongly with those at the time of his first Christmas in Vendaland. While he was close to death, he was no longer alone and lonely:

92. BMS, Koen, Georgenholtz – Committee, Berlin, 23 June 1882. Reproduced in *Ergänzungen aus den Stationsakten*.

93. *Bawenda-Freund*, 1888, p 54; *BMB*, 1883, p 364; *Mitteilungen des Vereins Heidenfreund*, 19, 1 October 1887, n.p. (p 4); *Stationschronik von Georgenholtz*, p 1.

94. Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 27.

95. Presumably the guardianship of the station.

96. A reference to heaven. Koen would have believed that since Makwarela was not baptised, they would not meet in the hereafter.

97. *BMB*, 1883, pp 359–360.

98. Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 27. See also *BMB*, 1883, p 360.

99. Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, pp 27–28. See also *BMB*, 1883, p 360.

Under the decorated tree, the Christian children told the Christmas story and sang Christmas carols ... “Perhaps the Lord will give me another year so that I can spread his word wider among the Bawenda!”, Kuhn said at that time; however, shortly thereafter, when the pain became worse, Kuhn said to his wife: “Do not pray any more for my life, the Lord is coming shortly.”¹⁰⁰

Koen carried out his last official duty – the marriage of Paulus, a convert, and Mavhungo, a daughter of Khosi Ranwedzi Mphaphuli – on 29 January 1883. “He had to sit at this, Baumhöfner had made him a pair of crutches, with their help he could slowly take a few steps. His last hour was coming and he was fully prepared for this.”¹⁰¹

Despite Koen’s weak physical state, and his sense of his impending death, so complete was his identity as a Berlin missionary that he was not prepared to give an inch on dogma. This was seen by the mission as an extremely praiseworthy stance, well worthy of emulation by others. It would seem that Paulus had impregnated Mavhungo before marrying her. Koen would only allow the marriage to go ahead after Paulus had done penance in church.¹⁰² Normal practice in such cases, and that which was followed in this particular case, was that the guilty parties had to attend special penance classes for a set period of time. After this they were made to express their regret (do penance) in front of the congregation, before they were again regarded as true members of the congregation, in other words, before they were allowed to again partake in Holy Communion or permitted to be married in church. In the text, the penance is only mentioned in conjunction with Paulus. This suggests that Mphaphuli’s daughter was not yet a Christian – she might have attended classes but she had not yet been baptised. As she was not yet part of the congregation, she did not have to do penance!

Even with his crutches, Koen was so weak that he could only take a few steps at a time. Every now and then

he cried out: “Is my Saviour not coming soon?” To his wife he said: “Do not pray that I get better. The Lord’s will be done. May the Lord soon have pity on me and change things soon!” Then again he asked her: “Is it not wrong to wish for the end so ardently?” He bore his suffering patiently and never complained. He was not at all afraid of death, because he was assured of the forgiveness of his sins. Once he said to his wife: “Death is almost a good friend to me!”¹⁰³

100. Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 28. See also BMS, Letter from Frau Koen, Georgenholtz, dated 12 February 1883, reproduced in BMS, “Aus dem Leben”; and *BMB*, 1883, pp 360, 362.

101. *BMB*, 1883, p 362; Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 28 (quotation).

102. *BMB*, 1883, p 362.

103. *BMB*, 1883, p 362.

Koen's last days are movingly described in a letter written by his wife two days after his death and in the tractate on his life. Beuster was due to preach at Georgenholtz on Sunday 11 February 1883. However, as "a result of an unexplained uneasiness", he made the journey from Ha-Tshivhase on the Friday.¹⁰⁴ When Beuster bent over Koen

to greet him, he embraced him with both arms and called out loudly: See, now he is here! Then tears came to his eyes. ... Br Beuster was shocked to find him so emaciated and suffering. In the last days, his voice was only a quiet whisper. The terrible pain also sometimes made him terribly listless.¹⁰⁵

This reportedly did not prevent Koen from requesting Beuster to establish an out-station at Paulus' homestead, and for Franz (another convert) to live there as an evangelist. "So, until the end, he looked after the mission-work."¹⁰⁶ What more could one expect?

The end was nevertheless very near. His wife wrote that "On Saturday morning, he often asked: Has my saviour not yet come? Oh, I still trust [in Him]."¹⁰⁷ The dying missionary also requested that he be given

Holy Communion to make ready for his last passing. Beuster had brought a medicine-bottle of wine along. So the sacrament could be celebrated. Thereafter, he lay for some hours with half-opened eyes in slumber. Many times he sighed in deep pain, but his folded hands showed that he was looking for support in the right place in his last struggle. Once more, he asked to stand up from his chair, but he sank back ... As the breath became shorter, his wife thought of a promise that she had given her husband earlier and said to him: "Jesus' blood and justice."¹⁰⁸ Thereafter, those gathered there sang the last three verses of *O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden*. The dying [man] attempted to say some of the words together with them. Shortly before the end of the hymn, he took his last breath.¹⁰⁹

Soon after Koen passed away at about 1 pm, Beuster and Baumhöfner made a coffin for him from planks which Koen had already put aside for this purpose. Earlier, when Baumhöfner had been making a coffin for a congregation member who had passed away, "Koen had said to him: 'Please leave two for me.'"¹¹⁰ These proved to be insufficient and they had to chop up a door as well. The selection of planks for his coffin was not the only thing that Koen had done to prepare for his death: "He had

104. Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, pp 28–29. For Beuster's account of the events which follow and Koen's official obituary, see *BMB*, 1883, pp 139–140. Koen's life and death are also discussed in *BMB*, 1883, pp 358–364.

105. Letter from Maria Koen, 12 February 1883. See also *BMB*, 1883, p 362; Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 29.

106. Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 29.

107. Letter from Maria Koen, 12 February 1883.

108. This is a verse from a hymn. Koen had told his wife earlier that "he would like to die while the verse: 'Jesus' blood and justice' was being prayed, and if he could not speak any longer, she should pray it for him": *BMB*, 1883, p 363.

109. Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 29. See also *BMB*, 1883, pp 362–363. The well-known Passion-tide hymn "O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden" ("Oh Head full of Blood and Wounds") was composed by Paul Gerhardt. He preached through his hymns, which usually have many verses. This one has ten verses. They only read the last three verses, which deal with death and people leaving this earth.

110. *BMB*, 1883, p 364 (quotation); and Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 29.

prepared most things for his death. In his last days, he had put the station books [records] and accounts into the best order. Even in this, he was diligent.”¹¹¹

Due to the summer heat, the funeral could not be delayed. It took place on the very next day, Sunday 11 February 1882. Messengers were sent to Makwarela and to Schwellnus but there was not enough time for them to get there before the funeral. Not only was Koen’s wife distraught and Beuster deeply saddened, but reportedly “many of the Christians and heathens were weeping”.¹¹²

Harking back to the parable of the talents about which he preached before leaving for South Africa, the tract about Koen’s life commented that:

So rests under a large wild fig tree the first missionary in his far-away land. The faithfulness, about which he first preached to the congregation of the Bartholömauskirche, he had himself achieved. Although he was descended from the contemptible Hottentots, he worked more than many whose forebears were so-called Christians. It is certain that God’s words: “You are a pure and faithful servant, you have been among the few who have been really faithful. I wish to place you above many. Go forth to the peace of your Lord” apply to him.¹¹³

A true Pietist hero of the mission had been laid to rest, and his life celebrated in the spoken and written word and text. In missionary interpretation, through conversion, and his growth in Christian life after this, Klaas Koen became the new man, and the new German, that typified the kind of Christian that they wanted to represent them. They fervently hoped that the example of his godly life and his tireless labour and sacrifice for the Lord would call others to conversion and serve as a shining example for his brother missionaries to follow. In this, they were wrong. One of the greatest difficulties faced by the Berlin missionaries in Vendaland during the last three decades of the nineteenth century was that of making, and keeping, a significant number of converts. Between 1872 and 1899, at best, only 0,35 per cent of the African people in the environs of their three mission stations there had formally converted to Christianity.¹¹⁴ The story of Koen’s life and death are nevertheless a moving example of the life of a person from the margins of the colonial social order who took the exceptionally rare chances offered to him, and earnestly strove, to make the best possible life for himself as a Berlin missionary. His was a life and an identity which were not only unattainable, but probably also unimaginable for the majority of his compatriots. In doing so, he also became German in ways that nobody could have imagined.

Koen’s posthumous German identity

With her husband’s death, Maria, Koen’s widow first moved to Ha-Tshivhase with her two children. Here she taught the mission children. Later, on 9 December 1884, she married Rasmus Jensen, a Berlin missionary of Danish descent, who was training

111. Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, pp 29–30 (quotations, p 30). See also *BMB*, 1883, p 364.

112. *Ergänzungen aus den Stationsakten; BMB*, 1883, p 364; Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 30.

113. Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 30.

114. Kirkaldy, *Capturing*, pp 28–29.

the evangelists at the Mphome seminary. They would have four more children.¹¹⁵ Maria died in 1955, aged 100.¹¹⁶

Prior to her marriage to Jensen, when she began using this family name, Maria had signed her name as “Koen”. However, most likely at the time of her second marriage, and apparently in an attempt to avoid their categorisation as “coloured”, she subsequently changed the family name of her children to the Germanised “Kuhn”. As Maria’s granddaughter Ilse Caton writes: “Sadly, from that moment on, the true identity, origin and racial heritage of Niklaas Koen was kept a secret from the family – until I stumbled on it in 2003.”¹¹⁷

Gerhard and Hedwig Kuhn grew up on the mission station Modimolle, in the Waterberg. Having served as an assistant teacher there from 1898, Gerhard was accepted as a candidate missionary by the Berlin Mission in 1901. Returning to South Africa in 1909, he served at a number of stations in South Africa until his death in 1950. In 1911, he married Frieda Martha Beuster, one of the daughters of the trading store owner at Botschabelo. They had six children. Hedwig Kuhn never married.¹¹⁸

In 1972, at the height of apartheid, the Berlin Mission celebrated its centenary in Venda land. Just before the ceremonies began, it was realised that the history produced for the occasion spoke about Klaas Koen, the “Hottentot” missionary who had pioneered the station at Georgenholtz.¹¹⁹ As his descendants were invited guests at the occasion, and were very much “white”, the decision was taken not to distribute the document.

In 2003, I received a call from Ilse Caton (born 1953), the daughter of Gerhard’s son Fridtjof Gerhard Kuhn (1914–1993, a teacher by profession). She told me that she had recently acquired a number of Berlin Mission documents that referred to her great-grandfather, Klaas, as being of Khoisan descent with the family name of Koen, rather than Kuhn. In addition, her daughter, Tanya, had discovered an article of mine on the internet which contained similar information. The memory of him as a white “Prussian” missionary was very much a part of family tradition, and she was seeking the “truth” about his origins. Subsequent to this, we exchanged a number of e-mails, and met together. I also put her in touch with the historian Hans Heese, who provided her with further information. So enthused was she by the information that we provided her with that she set out to write a novel (subsequently privately published), depicting what she saw as “the intriguing life of a remarkable man”.

Progeny of the slave era, of questionable background, born in poverty, rejected by his parents – Niklaas Koen mixed fate with a sharp intellect and a pure heart and evolved into a missionary of highest esteem. Only to be discarded and forgotten – dispensed of when his racial background so suited the powers-to-be...¹²⁰

115. BMB, 1883, p 364; 1885, p 75; Caton, *Niklaas Koen*, p 151; Mellét, “Emily Lehn”; Sauberzweig-Schmidt, *Klaas Kuhn*, p 30.

116. Caton, *Niklaas Koen*, pp 151, 155.

117. Caton, *Niklaas Koen*, p 151.

118. Caton, *Niklaas Koen*, pp 151, 153–155.

119. Anon, *100 Jahre Vendamission* (Berliner Missions Gesellschaft, [West] Berlin, 1972).

120. Caton, *Niklaas Koen*, back cover.

So, in the aftermath of the fall of apartheid, Klaas Koen has acquired yet another identity. Partly a reclaiming of his origins, this is also a (re-)construction of his life and identity in a fictionalised and romanticised, proudly new South African, missionary family saga.

Abstract

Klaas Koen was the first South African-born missionary of the Berlin Mission Society. From the perspective of the mission authorities, he was the perfect poster boy for their activities in this country. In the dominant thinking of the times, the fact that he was of Khoisan descent should have condemned him to a life of “wicked foolishness and ... all sorts of heathen sins and disgraces”. Instead, in the interpretation of the mission, having been reborn in Christ, he worked diligently for the mission and remained faithful even unto death. His life was celebrated in a tract and other texts produced by the society. Given the fact that the reports sent back to headquarters by missionaries in the field followed a rigid format, it is difficult to recover what Koen himself may have thought about his life and actions. This article examines Koen’s life history and explores why the mission society treated him, wrote about him, and remembered him as they did. It also suggests some reasons why he may have made the choices that he did. It concludes with an examination of some aspects of his posthumous identity.

Opsomming

Klaas Koen: Identiteit en behorendheid in die Berlynse Sendinggenootskap tydens die laat neëntiende eeu

Klaas Koen was die eerste Suid-Afrikaans gebore sendeling van die Berlynse Sendinggemeenskap. Vanuit die perspektief van die sendingowerheid was hy 'n ideale advertensie vir hulle werksaamhede in die land. Volgens die heersende denke van die tyd sou sy Khoisan-afkoms hom moes verdoem het tot 'n lewe van “bose stompsinnigheid en ... allerlei heidense sondes en skandes”. Luidens die interpretasie van die Sendinggenootskap sou sy Christelike wedergeboorte egter tot gevolg gehad het dat hy nougeset vir die genootskap bly werk het en tot die dood toe getrouw was. Hy is vereer in 'n traktaatjie sowel as ander tekste wat deur die genootskap uitgegee is. Aangesien die verslae wat deur die sendelinge in die veld aan hulle hoofkwartier gestuur is, streng aan 'n bepaalde formaat voldoen het, is dit moeilik om te agterhaal wat Koen moontlik self oor sy lewe en sy werksaamhede gedink het. Hierdie artikel ondersoek Koen se lewensgeskiedenis en die redes vir die wyse waarop die Sendinggenootskap hom behandel het, oor hom geskryf het, en hom herdenk het. Dit doen ook moontlike redes aan die hand vir die keuses wat hy gemaak het. Daar word afgesluit met 'n besprekking van bepaalde aspekte van sy nadoodse identiteit.

Key Words

Ancestry; Berlin Mission Society; biography; Christianity; class and mission; conversion; Emilie Lehn; Georgenholtz; Haarlem Mission Station; identity; Khoisan; Klaas Koen; missionaries; missionary texts; othering; Pietism; prejudice; slave ancestry; Vendaland; Vhavenda.

Sleutelwoorde

Afkoms; Berlynse Sendinggenootskap; biografie; Christendom; stand en sending; bekering; Emilie Lehn; Georgenholtz; Haarlemse Sendingstasie; identiteit; Khoisan; Klaas Koen; sendelinge; sendelingtekste; anders-maak; Piëtisme; vooroordeel; slawe-afkoms; Vendaland; Vhavenda.