

Ruufoo ('Christian Ludwig Paulus Rufo'): Oromo Bible translator



Former slave from the Oromo kingdom of Gummaa and first Oromo translator of the New Testament in southern Germany, informant on culture and language of the Oromo people, trained Protestant missionary

Born in Gombota in the kingdom of Gummaa, Ruufoo was entirely unknown to researchers up until a few years ago. He featured as one of the 'anonymous authors' on the title page of Oromo translations of the Holy Bible, which were usually attributed in their entirety to the well-known southern German missionary and linguist Ludwig Krapf: merely one name in the list of names of Krapf's otherwise unknown aides. No narrative was connected to it, no biography - and hence no influence or independent role at all in the history of German cultural research in the region. His significance for the underlying idea of this exhibition is also owed to his complete anonymity: the overlooked is characteristic of the history of the region's exploration, a history that is dominated by only a few narratives, many of which fail to acknowledge the local contribution, and instead solely put the European explorer at

their centre. The early history of the linguistic and cultural exploration of the Oromo people in what is today Ethiopia and northern Kenya is in essence tied to the German Krapf, whilst his northern African assistants remained unknown and are (and were) non-existent from the point of view of scientific history. Since then, research in the archives of the mission have led to the previously unknown Ruufoo gaining visibility, so that his central role and importance for the early research history of the Oromo can be made recognisable. Ruufoo was a young slave, who had been abducted from the then independent Oromo kingdom of Gummaa to Ethiopia and later sold into Sudan. For more than a decade already Krapf had planned to create an Oromo Bible, and for this project he was in need of Oromo aides. He therefore "ordered" an Oromo slave from missionaries in Sudan. In 1866 the then about sixteen or seventeen year old Ruufoo was accordingly brought to him to Wurttemberg, and was told that he was now a 'free' man, but that he must work on the translation of the Bible. The extant documents tell of some resistance on Ruufoo's side, as he saw no point in this work, being neither Christian nor Muslim. He demanded authentic freedom. Said conflicts led to several relocations, among others to Heidelberg, where he became a source for one of the early German pieces on the Oromo people. Along with his growing command of the German language, the constant occupation with the Bible and its translation into Oromo, however, awakened in Ruufoo an interest in Christian teachings and missionary work. In 1869 his public baptism in Basle attracted a great deal of public interest and he became a missionary student. In 1871 he died in Cairo before his planned delegation as a native missionary. Krapf's plan to generate a Protestant movement among the Oromo, in order to get a reformation wave under way in the whole of Africa, could not be realised. The investigation of the Oromo people and their language, however, rapidly continued since, Ruufoo's translation of the Bible was printed several times, and a deep rootedness of the mission among numerous Oromo groups resulted from this. Ruufoo represents a methodical strand of cultural research, which was inextricably linked to the early mission. It combined the ideas of reform and modernisation with religion, having a profound impact upon the region.

Text: Wolbert Smidt

