

Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, *Rebmann*

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Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's *Rebmann* is a journey taken into the world of memory, as it mirrors majorly the European (Christian) missionary activities in East Africa in the early 19th Century. The story is weaved around Johannes Rebmann's experiences in the mission field as he interacts with his fellow European missionaries, the East Africans, the ruling Arabs, and the European Government Agents. Written as a historical novel, the story is driven by the recollections of Rebmann on his journey back to Europe for retirement from the mission field. Marjorie as a CMS staff in East Africa portrays Johannes Rebmann as a man of 'like passions' whose story captures the pathos of human existence especially that of a Christian missionary in a foreign land.

The story is a tour de force of the first Christian missionary efforts in East Africa, covering the struggles among the contending European forces and the Arabs exploiting and

controlling Africa from about the time of the abolition of slavery by Britain. Significantly, the novel is rendered through a third person narrative point of view but the greater percentage of the narrative comprises memories and reminiscences echoed through Johannes Rebmann's voice towards the end of his life and ministry. In these memories and reminiscences are described various cultural practices of the East Africans subtly compared to those of the Europeans; the political and economic intrigues that characterize the power relations of various European nations in Africa; the symbiotic but unholy alliance between the missionaries and the various European government agents on the one hand, and the mutual but sometimes suspicious relationships among missionary groups on the other; the compromises made by some missionaries with the Muslims and traditional religionists in order to

secure some space for themselves; the hazardous nature of missionary work in Africa; and the slow response of the natives to the new religion and education. The aesthetical weaving of these elements into an engaging fictional narrative stands Johannes Rebmann out as a great storyteller who explores human foibles tactfully.

Rebmann from the preface is given as a 'novel based on real events in real lives; therefore it tries to tell a kind of truth about the situation, which, the history books - even the church histories - do not tell' (ix). The novel therefore starts with Johannes Rebmann's resigned claim that "I shall never see it again" (1), pointing to the fact that he is already blind and is finally leaving East Africa for Europe for retirement as a CMS missionary. But his 'Son in the Lord' who is accompanying him to Europe reminds him that he has not actually seen Rabai for a long time now so how come this lamentation. Rebmann in his emotionally charged state replies Isaac that 'there is seeing and not seeing' (1), referring to a passage in the Bible where the prophet prays for his servant's 'spiritual' eyes to open so that he could see that those who are with

them are more in number than those who have come against them. So Rebmann's 'seeing' here is the spiritual seeing where physical eyes are not relevant. As they are wished Godspeed by his admirers in several African tongues, he raises his hand in vague greeting as they depart from the shore of Rabai for Europe. Rebmann engages Isaac his 'God-son' in discussion, who sincerely expresses his belief that there will be a harvest (of souls) among his people. Throughout their journey, Rebmann recollects his personal experiences which he shares either with Isaac or any other passenger who cares to listen. Through these recollections and reminiscences, the plot is sustained while a number of interesting historical events are raised. Rebmann is shown buffeted by these memories as he confides in Isaac that, 'I am too restless to sleep, my son. There are too many memories alive in me tonight' (33).

One of the effects of these memories of his twenty-nine years of missionary work among the Africans is that Rebmann evidently suffers from identity crisis as he is afraid of facing life in Europe: 'he was not ready to be drained of Africa by Europe', comments the narrator (30). Having passionately embraced Africa for Christ,

Rebmann loses His European cultural orientation as is demonstrated by his mastery of African languages, songs and many other intricate aspects of African culture. He so loves Africans and their culture that on many occasions when some missionaries try to condemn the culture of the natives as barbaric, he intervenes with excuses and explanations, relating them to former European cultural forms or biblical stories where similar things occurred. As Christ would have done, Rebmann fully identifies with the culture of the people and insists on accepting the natives into Christianity as they are, rather than 'civilizing' them first before preaching to them as the CMS had done in New Zealand and in some other places. He sees this act as a feeling of superiority which negates what Christianity stands for and he therefore opposes the imposition of Western values on his new converts since he believes that, 'in the Lord's eyes none of this matters'. Rebmann's unconditional acceptance of his assignment and the people is therefore summed up in this statement, 'He (God) chooses me for the Wanika, the Wanika for me. We are to make the best of it' (111).

The missionaries made great sacrifices while in the field as the story reveals. Many of them died from one illness or another; for example during a cholera outbreak when there are no medical services available; also some had been hacked down by raiders or warriors. Once, Rebmann and his wife are shipwrecked on their way from Egypt to Rabai. Like Rebmann, his wife Emma loves the people and is engrossed in efforts to get them educated. Although she is advanced in age, much older than Rebmann, she conceives and gives birth to a baby boy who dies some weeks after. Emma appears not to be totally overwhelmed by her baby's death, but instead encourages Rebmann who is devastated by that death to overcome it.

Beyond the foregoing, poor feeding, poor housing, harsh weather, and a total absence of infrastructure increased their sufferings, and their condition is compounded by the fact that the Home Committee of the CMS has not always provided sufficient funds for them. These unfavourable conditions begin to take their toll on the missionaries especially Rebmann, who had hitherto seen austere life as part of serving God. When his wife suddenly dies, he

hardly could cope with life in general although he often finds solace in his converts who demonstrate great love towards him at the death.

For obvious reasons, Rebmann appears to be disagreeing with the senior missionaries over funding and numerical growth. His stand is that baptism and other sacraments should be administered only when the converts are adequately taught. Hence Rebmann is considered by the Home Committee partially a failure and as such ranks low in the hierarchy of the church. Progress for him is not determined by material things nor population growth, but the quality of the converts; and so whenever there is need to demonstrate this point, he will quickly point at Isaac, his convert and servant who he sees as a quintessential Christian, as strong evidence of his success. He therefore presents Isaac proudly thus, 'Isaac is at least as intelligent as I am. His education has, like mine, been among people of different tongues... he can communicate the gospel to his own people with an accuracy no missionary ever will' (249). Even before the Home Committee, Rebmann would not budge and cares little about their ill-conceived notion of his work in Africa. He therefore addresses Mr.

Hutchinson and the Committee members when he appears before them in London: 'Mr. Secretary, I am not here to defend myself, I am here to be pensioned off' (252).

Rebmann equally recollects on this journey the thin line between Christian mission outfits and various European government agents who prepare the ground for the colonization of Africa. The abolition of slave trade saw to increased British military presence in most coastal areas of Africa. Also the consequent rivalry between British officials and other Europeans, whose interest in slavery had not waned, is felt by the missionaries. The British agents sometimes provide protection for them and subtly influence some of the missionaries who are desperately seeking for results so as to impress the Home Committee. Rebmann, who could not compromise the gospel for mundane things, fails to go into alliance with the government agents as some result-chasing missionaries have done. Before the Home Committee, he reiterates his opposition to this practice in these words, 'the freed slaves will be settled (and they should be settled, instructed, employed, nobody doubts that) not for Christ but for the British. They

will learn their proof texts in a language they may or may not understand, and be baptized. The Queen will not take responsibility but she will hold the puppet-strings through soft-spoken diplomats and gunboats and judicious presents' (253). He is therefore seen as an 'old fool' (253) by missionaries like Sparshott. Even Dr. Krapf in his reports to the Home Committee does not spare him. But for him, material things should not be used to entice people to the gospel, as he asserts, 'But do not tell them, 'You have houses, clothes, books, money and therefore you are Christians' (254).

In all this, Rebmann never takes the posture of a superhuman. He rather muses, 'Rebmann who came to bring the gospel, is a man like other men, who misses his wife and is partial to hot broth' (254). He does not exonerate himself from human errors and weaknesses, hence he volunteers information to the Home Committee about his quarrels with a co-missionary, Sparshott: 'I admit I have been on bad terms with Sparshott myself, would not shake hands with him, could not pray with him, could not let him think his goings-on tolerable to me' (253). The missionaries are portrayed as mere humans who are specially

trained for evangelisation but not perfect in all their ways. Rebmann consciously opposes missionaries who arrogantly lord it over their converts because to him that is a sinful act that is peculiar to Europe as he points out here, 'Arrogance is a major sin of Europe' (111).

Equally, the novel through the voice of Rebmann highlights the history of slavery in Africa which dates back many centuries. Many East African coastal towns are ruled by the Arabs who are actively involved in slave trade with the collaboration of the natives. The natives, the Arabs, the Europeans and even Christian missions are implicated in this horrendous enterprise. A good example is clearly stated here by the narrator, 'In Egypt the Franciscan nuns used to buy sick girls and admit them to school, since they could not afford the healthy ones' (92). Rebmann concerning the heinous slave trade says, 'The dreadful thing about slavery is the capture, the separation from loved ones and familiar objects, the terrors of the march and the market of which the late Dr. Livingstone has written so eloquently' (90). Rev. Rebmann reassures readers that the roles played by Africans during slavery may portray them as cruel but

cruelty seems to be inherent in all human races. He concludes: 'Do not let anyone tell you that the African - for all that his cruelties may be different from our cruelties and his apparent indifference to pain and grief not quite equivalent to the famous British stiff upper lip... He is a man at heart as we are' (90).

Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's *Rebmann* is a must read for all, especially critics, because of its portrayal of all cultures as dynamic human inventions with ever present rough vestiges. She uses the voice of Rebmann to tell the readers that there are always good and bad sides to all human establishments including religion. Like all her previous novels, *Rebmann* is presented as a masterpiece through the voice of Rebmann who proves to readers that he is an observant, focused, unbiased, talented, and sensitive storyteller with keen eyes

for details. The reader at the end of the novel sees why the title of the novel happens to be the name of the protagonist and narrator because of the convincing way the narrative is rendered. As a proficient writer with evident recourse to historical facts, imagination and memory, Macgoye's appeal stretches beyond history and culture to reveal the real nature of human races through the eyes of Rebmann, who keenly observes that every race arrogates to itself the right to life and the power to control other races that are considered inferior. Rebmann dies in his country home in Germany but like the Europeans who have physically left African continent after colonialism, he lives on in Isaac his convert who will continue to carry on all that Rebmann believed and lived for.