

Kotz, Ernst (1887–1944) and Hilda Ella Marie (Koster) (1888–1932)

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Ernst and Hilda Kotz were German Adventist missionaries in Africa. Ernst Kotz was instrumental in writing a grammar manual and in translating a primer, a hymnal, the Gospel according to Matthew, an Old Testament story book, and the New Testament into Pare. Hilda Kotz held the semi-official leadership of the whole Pare field in the absence of her husband.

Early Years

Ernst Kotz was born at Strombach near Gummersbach, Germany, on February 11, 1887. He did some theological studies at Friedensau Mission School near Magdeburg, the Seventh-day Adventist College for Central Europe at the time. In preparation for his missionary service in what was then called German East Africa, he studied with the well-known professors Carl Meinhof and Felix von Luschan at the Oriental Seminary in Berlin for one year. Thus, in spite of his young age of 18 at the beginning of his missionary service, he was among the best-trained workers for cross-cultural ministry in the Adventist denomination at the time.



Ernst Kotz and wife, Hilda

From Baldur ED. Pfeiffer, *Die Siebenten-Tags Adventisten in Deutschland: Bilddokumentation* (Hamburg: Gemeinschaft der Siebenten-Tags-Adventisten in Deutschland, 1994), 50.

Marriage, Mission and Language Work in German East Africa (Tanzania)

Arriving in Africa in July 1905, he was assigned to the South Pare Mountains, where the denomination already had one mission station and planned to erect others. Kotz started to work on the Asu (Southern Pare) language immediately after his arrival. Because of his outstanding language abilities that were soon recognized by his colleagues, language work became his special assignment in 1909. Beginning in April 1910, Kotz served as director of the Pare field after his marriage to Hilda (also spelled Hilde).

Hilda Ella Marie Koster was born in the Freetown of Lubeck, Germany, on September 15, 1888. She was baptized and joined the Seventh-day Adventist church at the age of seventeen. For over two years after her baptism she engaged in the colporteur work, giving all the proceeds to the church. From 1908 to 1910 she attended the Friedensau school to prepare herself for the Bible work. After her marriage to Ernst Kotz, Hilda joined him in the mission field in Africa.²

Much of the early translation work into Pare was Ernst Kotz's responsibility. In cooperation with Petro Risase and Anderea Senamwaye, two of the early converts, he was instrumental in writing a grammar manual and in translating a primer, a hymnal, the Gospel according to Matthew, an Old Testament storybook, and finally the New Testament. In addition, Kotz launched a periodical called *Mbirikizi* (Preacher). The Gospel of Matthew, which was issued in 1910, was the first translation of a portion of the Bible ever published by a Seventh-day Adventist. Kotz's language work made a significant impact on the denomination as a whole by stimulating similar activities in other Adventist missions, particularly in Eastern Africa, where Adventists soon participated in Bible translations into Luo, Gusii, Kinyarwanda, and, later, Jita.

On the practical level, Kotz was involved in various lines of missionary work, mainly at Kihurio. Kihurio was the most successful area for Adventist operations before World War I, and the mission administration was also located there. For a considerable time before Christianity was brought there by Seventh-day Adventists, this large village at the southeastern end of the Pare Mountains had been under a variety of influences, including Islam and non-Pare people groups such as the Sambaa, the Zigua, the Maasai, and the Nyamwezi. This may explain why in the pre-war years Kihurio emerged as the largest Adventist congregation with almost 100 members; moreover, half of the teachers came from the place where Kotz was the major missionary personality. After realizing that religious debates with Muslims did not yield any significant outcome in their conversion to Christianity, Kotz's strategy was to prevent as many persons as possible from becoming Muslims by building a "bulwark" of Christianity at Kihurio.

Under Kotz's leadership, the Adventist education network in Pare expanded to 28 teachers and 2,300 pupils among a population of 20,000. After the first baptism in 1908, membership numbers reached 250 in 1914. A peculiar aspect of Adventist missionary operations in Tanzania that should also be mentioned is the acceptance

of “spheres of influence.” For the sake of orderly educational work, Kotz helped negotiate a partial comity agreement with the neighboring Leipzig Mission, which provided Adventists with the opportunity of working without interdenominational conflicts in their mission field.

Kotz and Traditional Culture

Kotz was outstanding among the Seventh-day Adventist missionaries of that period in that he was the only one who showed a deep interest in ethnography, demonstrated in his books on the Pare, *Im Banne der Furcht* (Under the Ban of Fear) and *Sklassen* (Slaves). Although the titles betray his critical view of many elements of traditional culture, his overall perspective of Pare life is realistic and reveals much appreciation for the culture—for example, traditional Pare law and economy. He insisted that an African is capable of being a “philosopher, poet, and thinker” (the title of one chapter in *Sklassen*) and declared that Europeans could learn a lot for their own parliamentary sessions from the patience and respect governing Pare courts. Moreover, at a time when some degree of racism was common even among missionaries, he declared that Andrea Senamwaye, one of the earliest converts, was a real friend to him. Considering the absence of other anthropological works by Adventist missionaries until more than a generation later, Kotz’s sympathetic approach to the Pare is definitely exceptional.

At the same time, Kotz was cautious enough not to idealize traditional culture. He criticized the romantic idea that Africans were “happy children of nature” in view of many Pare practices which, according to him, were dictated by fear rather than by harmony with creation, e.g. infanticide, a common practice linked to various traditional taboos.³ Thus, Kotz envisioned a thorough transformation of the entire Pare culture through the influence of the gospel,⁴ a perspective that was uncommon in the Adventist thinking of the time. However, this vision would ultimately prove true for, in the long run, the region where he worked—southern South Pare—became more than 90 percent Adventist, an unplanned but actual Adventist folk church⁵

Administrative Work and Later Years

World War I halted the thriving Adventist activities in Pare, and in 1917 Kotz was interned in India and Egypt together with most of his fellow missionaries. Hilda Kotz held the semi-official leadership of the whole Pare field in the absence of her husband until she was repatriated with most Germans in 1918-1919. After a short time of studying at a university in Germany in 1920, Kotz was appointed editor of the *Adventbote in der Heidenwelt* (Advent Messenger in the Heathen World) magazine in 1921, assistant field secretary of the European Division in 1922, Home Missions secretary of the European Division in 1923, and finally associate secretary of the General Conference in 1927. From this post he resigned in 1933 and left the denomination; Hilda had died a short time earlier, May 2, 1932,⁶ and he left the church because he felt the other leaders did not address problems that he felt were urgent and important.⁷ Thus, although he had been elected president of the Central European Division

in 1933, this call was not implemented. His two sons Hans and Siegfried continued to serve the denomination as missionaries in Africa, and his daughter Ilse also remained a church member. Kotz married a second time; his wife was named Kathe and was born in 1905. They lived in New York until the early 1940s,⁸ and Ernst died in Berlin on September 27, 1944.

Contribution

In spite of his separation from the church that he had loved, Kotz has been justly called “one of the most gifted Africa missionaries that Adventism had brought forth” (D. Heinz). He was the first Adventist cultural anthropologist and Bible translator; his balanced view of culture and insightful reflection on mission also mark him as one of the few Adventist missiologists in the era. His contribution to the incipient growth of the denomination in today’s Tanzania was significant, and his unusual closeness to the Pare people with whom he worked is a fitting example of intercultural Christian brotherhood.

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. This article is an update of an earlier version: Stefan Höschele, "Kotz, Ernst," *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*, <https://dacb.org/stories/tanzania/kotz-ernst>, accessed June 6, 2018.
2. "Mrs. E. Kotz," Obituaries, *ARH*, March 17, 1932, p. (21) 261, accessed May 23, 2019, https://www.adventistdigitallibrary.org/adl-352753/advent-review-and-sabbath-herald-march-17-1932?solr_nav%5Bid%5D=d9bdafcbad406da00d91&solr_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr_nav%5Boffset%5D=1.
3. Against what he viewed as the tendency of over-appreciating "folkhood"—a term that was central in the thinking of the well-known Lutheran missionary Bruno Gutmann, who worked in a neighboring region—he warned, "If one tries, as a missionary, to sustain the folk identity of the Pare man, one will, unfortunately, experience again and again that one can transfer into Christianity only a very small remainder of his customs and practices, because his whole doing and thinking is completely dipped in pagan religious and superstitious ideas" (*Im Banne der Furcht*, p. 203).
4. He formulated that a time may come when, among the Pare "everything has become new, and still the people will not have lost their identity in language and character. Only the ugly and the mean have had to cede" (*Sklaven*, p. 182).
5. Cf. Stefan Höschele, *Christian Remnant—African Folk Church: The History of Seventh-day Adventism in Tanzania, 1903-1980*. Leiden: Brill, 2007.
6. "Mrs. E. Kotz," Obituaries, *ARH*, March 17, 1932, p. (22) 262.
7. E-mail Darlene Douglass—Stefan Höschele, August 24, 2011. Mrs. Douglass is a granddaughter of Ernst Kotz.
8. The U.S. Census of April 1940 notes that he worked as a translator.

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