

This Month in Moravian History

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Christian Protten - Missionary to the Gold Coast of Africa

275 years ago Christian Protten, together with Heinrich Huckoff, began mission work on the Gold Coast of Africa (now Ghana) which had little result, but was remarkable as an early example of an African-born missionary returning to his homeland to evangelize others.



Christian Protten was the son of a Dutch sailor stationed at Christiansborg, a Danish fort in West Africa, and an African woman of the Ga tribe. Although he spoke two African languages (Ga and Fante) and his mother was likely the daughter of the tribal king Ofori, Protten's upbringing included strong European influences. He attended school under the tutelage of a Lutheran minister at the fort, where he learned Danish and was introduced to the Gospel. In 1727 at age 11 Protten was chosen to attend school in Denmark, a choice he later recalled as made "by force," but nonetheless aspired to further education toward the ministry. When he arrived in Denmark he was disappointed to begin training instead as a blacksmith, but through persistence was

finally educated in theology.

He studied at the university for a few years before meeting Zinzendorf and becoming acquainted with the Moravians in 1735. He remained in Herrnhut for two years where he learned German but still did

not feel entirely at home, probably due to racial differences evidenced by descriptions of him as "africanish wild" (African savage) and "mohrisch" (Moorish). Protten's perceived pridefulness was a point of contention for Zinzendorf: "Protten has a high opinion of himself. Presumptiveness and a high opinion of oneself only prostitute a person and carry no weight with the Saviour." Despite his

shortcomings Protten was chosen as missionary to the Gold Coast along with Heinrich Huckoff, a native of Moravia. Zinzendorf wrote instructions to Protten prior to his departure: "Dear Christian: In order to convert the Moors, you must leave all your Moorish bad habits in Amsterdam."

The pair arrived in Elmina on the African coast on May 11, 1737. Huckoff died a month later. Protten sought permission to start a mulatto school, but instead was imprisoned for three years. When released he served as a teacher for a year before being recalled to Germany, having no success with mission work. He was then sent to St. Thomas where he remained aloof from the other missionaries and returned again to Germany in 1745. Within a few

months he married the mulatto widow, Rebecca Freundlich, and remained in Moravian communities for the next ten years. Protten's relationship with Zinzendorf remained tenuous perhaps due to his perceived pride or persistent alcoholism. In 1756 the couple was banished to Grosshennersdorf, and soon after Protten received permission to return to Africa, leaving his wife behind to rejoin the Herrnhut community.

In Africa Protten resumed teaching and reconnected with his family, but still felt unsettled. In 1761 he accidentally shot one of his students while cleaning a gun, and after a brief imprisonment he returned to Europe where he rejoined his wife and the Moravians. In 1764 the Prottens returned to Africa with the blessing of the church in order to begin a school for the mulatto children at Christiansborg. The undertaking did not go well, however, and Protten died in 1769. Rebecca, his wife died in 1780, along with several missionary reinforcements sent from Europe in the meantime. Although the Gold Coast mission was largely a failure, Protten did succeed in producing the first published grammar of Ga and Fante in 1764.

Sources

Image: The Protten Family (Unity Archives, Herrnhut). *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson; Hamilton, *History of the Missions of the Moravian Church* (Bethlehem 1901); Müller, *200 Jahre Brüdermission* (Herrnhut 1931); Jon Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World* (Harvard University Press 2005).