# The Development of the Sudan Pioneer Mission into a Mission among the Nile-Nubians 1900-1966

# **By Gerald Lauche**

The Sudan Pioneer Mission (SPM) was founded in Aswan in the year 1900 and was renamed the Evangelical Mohammedan Mission in 1928, the Evangelical Mission in Upper Egypt in 1953, and Fellowship of the Gospel in the Middle East (in German, *Evangeliumsgemeinschaft Mittlerer Osten*) in 1990. The Swiss based Mission on the Nile International (MNI), the former Swiss Evangelical Mohammedan Mission, and later the Swiss Evangelical Nile-Land Mission traces back to the SPM, too. In this article, I will use the original name, SPM, as I will primarily describe the first seven decades of its history.



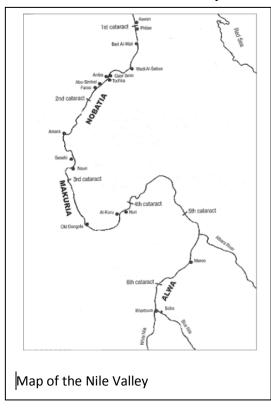
## **General Information about the Nile-Nubians**

The Nile-Nubians referred to here are those who occupied the Nile Valley between Aswan in southern Egypt and the area south of Khartoum in Northern Sudan since the fourth century A.D. Today, the Nile-Nubians live between Aswan, Egypt, at the First Cataract and al-Debba, Sudan, between the Third and Fourth Cataracts. This differentiation is necessary in order to avoid confusion with the ethnic groups living in the Nuba Mountains, Uganda, and Kenya who are also called Nubians.

The Nile-Nubians essentially divide into two main groups that must be linguistically distinguished. In Egypt, there are the Fadicca-speaking Nobiin and the Kunuuzi-speaking Kunuuzi Nubians. In the context of SPM's historical development, we will therefore speak generally of Nubians, always referring to the Kunuuzi-speaking Nubians who were the main focus of the SPM and whose settlement area was in and south of Aswan.

Prior to the coming of the Nubians into the Nile Valley, the Cushites were adherents of the Meroitic religion. In the fourth century A.D., the Nubians immigrated into the Nile Valley and mixed with the Cushites, who had been defeated by the Axumite Kingdom. In the sixth century A.D., the three Nubian Kingdoms, which had come into existence in the Nile Valley in

the middle of the fifth century A.D., consecutively accepted Christianity and remained



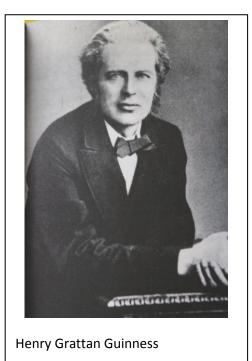
Bible school trained devout Christians from Europe and Africa of various strata of society for missionary service. Before long, reaching the people groups in the Sudan Belt, unreached at that time, became his highest priority. The Sudan Belt encompassed the geographic sub-Saharan region from Senegal in the West to Ethiopia in the East. Guinness collaborated in launching several missionary initiatives aimed at reaching the Sudan Belt, some of which however failed. After the quelling of the Mahdi uprising in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan in September of 1898, the way seemed open for a Sudan mission, using the Nile as an access route. Guinness was a charismatic and visionary pioneer who set up and supported new initiatives and then delegated responsibilities to others until finally he was able to withdraw from them altogether.<sup>2</sup>

consecutively accepted Christianity and remained Christians until the process of Islamization began in the fourteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Today, the Nubians are Sunni Muslims and strongly influenced by Sufi Islam.

#### **Precursors of the SPM**

Before the founding of SPM in the year 1900, several groundbreaking developments took place and several connections between three dedicated, mission-minded, and strategically thinking people were established that were to bring about many positive effects.

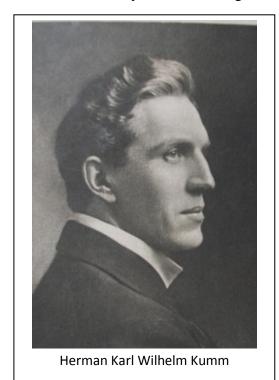
The first of these was Henry Grattan Guinness (1835-1910), who had a great vision for the Sudan Belt. Guinness was of Irish origin and worked as a travelling evangelist in Europe and North America. He was spiritually influenced by the Holiness movement in England. Encouraged by Hudson Taylor, Guinness and his wife Fanny founded the East London Training Institute (ELTI) in 1873. This international and interdenominational



<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>Roland Werner, Das Christentum in Nubien. Geschichte und Gestalt einer afrikanischen Kirche (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2013), 39-45, 50-65, 136-177.
<sup>2</sup>Cf. Klaus Fiedler, Ganz auf Vertrauen. Geschichte und Kirchenverständnis derGlaubensmissionen (Gießen,Basel:Brunnen Verlag, 1992), 70-77. Christof Sauer, Reaching the Unreached Sudan Belt: Guinness, Kumm and the Sudan-Pioneer-Mission (Nürnberg:Verlag für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft, 2005),43-81.

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Another important figure was Herman Karl Wilhelm Kumm (1874-1938), who had a vision for the unreached. Kumm grew up in Osterode, Germany, in the Harz Mountains. Raised in the Lutheran tradition, he had a conversion experience in 1894 and felt called to missionary service in 1895. A year later, he began his missionary training at ELTI, the institution founded



and directed by Guinness. In 1898 Kumm became a staff member of the North Africa Mission. Being stationed in Alexandria, he quickly discovered his passion for the Bedouins in the oases of the Libyan Desert. When in 1899 Guinness needed a companion for his travels south, Kumm seemed to be a suitable person for this purpose, having excellent local knowledge. Presumably, Kumm's vision for the Sudan Belt grew during this time, being under Guinness's direction and influence. On this journey, Guinness's daughter Lucy accompanied him, and she and Kumm fell in love and became engaged on January 11, 1900, in Aswan. At this time, Kumm left the North Africa Mission and along with Guinness founded the SPM. Aswan was chosen as starting point of the newly established mission, with the aim of advancing to the Sudan Belt from there.<sup>3</sup>

The third key person in the history of the SPM was the Kunuuzi-Nubian Samuel Ali Hiseen (henceforth: SAH) (1863-1927). Born in Northern

Nubia in 1863, he came to Europe as a Muslim boy in 1873 after having been invited to accompany the evangelist François-Henri Lavanchy-Clarke to Switzerland when he found the boy living on Cairo's streets. The Christian manufacturer Theodor Necker from Geneva initiated and financed this undertaking. The ten-year-old Nubian boy was trained in a well-known boarding school in Peseux, Neuchatel, and decided to follow Christ during his school days. On August 15, 1875, he was baptized in the Église évangelique libre des Granges de Sante-Croix (canton of Waadt) by the Reverend Otto Stockmeyer. Born Muhammed Ali Hiseen, he assumed the name Samuel at his baptism and experienced during the baptismal act his calling into full-time ministry as an evangelist. In 1879, Necker sent him to Guinness's ELTI. The years at ELTI had a profound impact on SAH. During this time, Guinness wrote an article about SAH's childhood and teenage years that unfortunately has been lost. In 1880, SAH started preparatory courses in



Samuel Ali Hiseen (SAH)

Gerald Lauche, The Development of the "Sudan Pioneer Mission" into a Mission among the Nile-Nubians (1900-1966), unpublished D.Th. dissertation (UNISA, 2015), 117-118. <sup>3</sup>Ibid., 118-119. Cf. Sauer, Unreached Sudan Belt, 82-123.Peter James Spartalis, Karl Kumm. Last of the Livingstones. Pioneer Missionary Statesman (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 1994), 1-19.

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Beirut for his intended medical studies. When his sponsor, Necker, suddenly died, SAH's financing came to a halt. Eventually, after spending some time in England and Switzerland, he returned to Cairo in 1884. There, SAH was teaching first in a Protestant and then in a Catholic school. Both jobs turned out to be a disappointing experience for him. Shortly afterwards, his relatives persuaded him to return to his hometown of Ficcikol, Abu Hoor, in northern Nubia, where he was to live for thirteen years as the sole Christian. Both culturally and linguistically he had to undergo a socialization process, having alienated himself from his Nubian people because of the years he had spent abroad. After an initial period of observation and waiting, he became increasingly bold in witnessing for Christ, which almost cost him his life. He barely survived a knife attack and, much to the surprise of all the people attending a public village meeting, offered the perpetrator forgiveness and reconciliation. In those years of quiet testimony, SAH matured significantly and became increasingly confident as a witness to Christ. In 1898, being a translator for an English officer, he took part in the quelling of the Mahdi uprising by the Anglo-Egyptian army. After this conflict, he worked for the Egyptian post office in Aswan and Shellal, where boats traveling between Egypt and the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan landed.<sup>4</sup>

## The Founding of the Sudan Pioneer Mission

In 1900 Guinness, his daughter Lucy, and Karl Kumm returned to Aswan for the planned formation of a ministry aimed towards the Sudan Belt. As an engagement gift, as it were, Guinness handed the responsibility for the newly founded SPM over to Karl and Lucy. Guinness and Kumm enlisted the aid of a Coptic couple to teach in and run a small primary school, which was intended primarily for Nubian and Beja children. When Guinness, in search of a Nubian co-worker for the ministry, was made aware of SAH working at the post office, he went to meet him and was immediately convinced that SAH was exactly the person needed for the work. His spiritual maturity, Western education, and multilingualism were exactly what the SPM needed. SAH responded positively and without hesitation, perceiving the request as an opportunity to fulfill his life's calling. When SAH joined the ministry, the SPM was poised to begin its mission to the Nubian people. The mission's first step was to reach out to the Nubians and Bejas in the immediate area around Aswan. Then it envisioned work in the South, Kordofan, and Darfur. Its final step would be to advance into the entire region of the Sudan Belt.

The mission would engage, at least initially, in the following activities:

- 1. Scripture colportage
- 2. Primary school education
- 3. Evangelization
- 4. Translation work
- 5. Medical work

In October 1900 the SPM was founded in Germany and registered as a society in Eisenach. The Reverend Julius Dammann opened his home in Eisenach to the SPM as its first headquarters, and the Reverend Theodor Ziemendorff of Wiesbaden became its first chairman.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Lauche, *Sudan Pionier Mission*, 163-198. Cf. Samuel Ali Hussein, Aus meinem Leben (Wiesbaden: Verlag der Sudan-Pionier-Mission, 1920).

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 120-121. Sauer, Unreached Sudan Belt, 134-146. 181-198.

#### SAH's Importance for the Nubian mission

The development of the SPM's orientation into a mission among Nubians is essentially due to SAH. Analyzing the years leading up to the SPM's founding shows that SAH had been prepared for the ministry in a unique manner. Kumm saw his potential, put him in a position of responsibility, and sent him on an exploratory trip to Dongola in 1900 as his first major assignment. During this trip, distributing Bible literature, doing translation work, and collecting geopolitical data were primary tasks. After performing these services, SAH worked steadily as an evangelist, medical assistant, manager of the SPM bookshop, and Arabic and Nubian language teacher for the new missionaries arriving from Switzerland and Germany. From 1915-1924, the years during and after World War I, he also faithfully administered the SPM's property.

SAH's primary contribution was his linguistic work. With the help of German scholars H. Schäfer, H. Junker, D. Westermann, and C. Meinhof, he created literacy materials and produced ethnographic and biblical texts. Supervised by H. Schäfer and H. Junker, he translated the four gospels into Kunuuzi, which were printed in 1912 by the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) in Berlin. He also translated some Old Testament passages and nearly all the remaining New Testament books, but these were never published.

From 1900 until his death on March 8, 1927, he worked faithfully for the SPM and proved to be absolutely loyal to it. Though he was often referred to in the SPM's publications as a mere assistant, SAH was in fact the main pillar of the organization's ministry among the Nubians.<sup>6</sup> From a strategic point of view, the calling of SAH to be an evangelist was the most influential decision of the founders. He was uniquely prepared for promoting the vision and taking on a key role in the development of the SPM during the first decades of its existence. His tombstone appropriately says: "Here rests Samuel Ali Hiseen, the first fruit of those who returned to the faith of their forefathers and the faithful evangelist of the German mission ..."<sup>7</sup>

#### The Stakeholders of the Nubian Vision

Significantly, over the first six decades reviewed in this article, the SPM was constantly provided with missionaries who embodied the Nubian vision. The following are the five principal missionaries of this period.

Samuel Jakob Enderlin (1878-1940) was a missionary and lecturer. He and his wife, Elisabeth, were the only SPM workers who observed close up the life of SAH from 1903 until his death in 1927. SAH taught him Kunuuzi Nubian, and through several exploratory journeys southwards, Enderlin opened the first Nubian SPM base in Koshtamne, about 90 km south of Aswan, in 1926. In 1932, the School of Oriental Studies in Cairo appointed Enderlin to be a lecturer for Arabic, Nubian dialects, and Nubian history. Simultaneously, he started a ministry and gathered Nubians for regular meetings in the German-Nubian Club in the capital. He was supported in this by younger SPM missionaries. Unfortunately, it had to be abandoned with the outbreak of World War II in September 1939 and was not continued after the war. However,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup>Lauche, Sudan Pionier Mission, 241-273. Cf. Samuel Ali Hussein, Der Erstling aus Mohrenland. Samuel Ali Hussein: Ausmeinem Leben (Wiesbaden: Missionsverlag Wiesbaden, 1932).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup>Translation of the tombstone (kept by the SPM in Aswan) inscription from Arabic to English by the author.

the ministry south of Aswan in the village of Dakke and later in West Seheel would still be pursued.<sup>8</sup>

*Willy Gerson Fröhlich* (1880-1957) was a Swiss ophthalmologist who came to Egypt in 1906 to establish the SPM's medical work in Aswan and Daraw (40km north of Aswan). In addition to that, he implemented medical outreaches with an evangelistic focus to surrounding villages. During his visits, SAH acted as a medical assistant and evangelist. SAH taught him Nubian so that he could communicate with his patients. With the outbreak of World War I in July 1914, all German workers were prohibited from continuing their ministries. Fröhlich however, being a Swiss doctor, was allowed to carry on until September 1915 when he, too, was forced to leave Egypt, which ended his ministry with the SPM.<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that the SPM missionaries in Aswan, Daraw, and Edfudid did *not work* exclusively among Nubians. Medical and educational services as well as biblical texts and Christian literature were offered to all people regardless of their social, educational, religious, or ethnic background.<sup>10</sup>

*Abbas (Daniel) Samuel Ali* (1896-1918) was SAH's son. Though never an official coworker of the SPM, he developed a spiritual passion to share the gospel with his own people group, the Kunuuzi Nubians. In February 1910, he and his sister Maryam were baptized in the SPM church in Aswan, and he assumed the name *Daniel*. In 1914, at the age of about eighteen, he started to study theology at the theological seminary of the American Mission in Cairo. Due to the involuntary absence of the SPM workers during the years of World War I, Samuel Zwemer became his main promoter and paternal mentor during his studies. In 1912 a first invitation to work among Nubians in Cairo was issued by the Egypt General Mission. In 1915 Abbas succeeded in initiating a promising work among Nubians in the capital. Using the Nubian gospels his father had translated, Abbas gathered Nubian men in groups of up to 250 people around him for Bible discussions. Unfortunately, he died of tuberculosis unexpectedly early in 1918, cutting short the ministry of a potential SPM worker before it could even begin.<sup>11</sup>

The teacher *Gertrud von Massenbach* (1883-1975) joined the SPM ministry in 1909 and, as a student of SAH, worked on the Kunuuzi Nubian language throughout her career with the SPM. She published several text collections, a grammatical sketch with a dictionary, and Bible tracts. In addition to these activities, she focused on sharing the gospel in the SPM center in Aswan and during her numerous visits to villages – often under the most difficult climatic conditions.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, *Elisabeth Herzfeld* (1890-1966) was a medical missionary for the SPM from 1926 to 1966, though her ministry was interrupted several times, especially during and immediately after World War II.<sup>13</sup> Emma Brunner Traut eulogized her on the occasion of her death in 1966: "All human desire Elisabeth Herzfeld sublimated to the one longing, to share the good news with her sisters in Nubia again. To the land that had forgotten the name of Christ ...she again carried the biblical stories through words and songs. Not teaching and arguing in

<sup>8</sup>Lauche, Sudan Pioneer Mission, 323-332, 361.
<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 320, 361.
<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 368-371.
<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 229-230, 361-362.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup>Ibid., 332-343, 362. <sup>13</sup>Ibid., 343-348, 362-363.

theological discussions, but unassumingly and vividly as her audience was able to understand."<sup>14</sup>

In addition to these key figures in the mission, there were a number of other contributors well worthy of mention. The SPM executive board as well as the extremely active team in the SPM headquarters in Wiesbaden, Germany, continuously supported the development of the work among Nubians. Among them, pastor and longstanding SPM chairman Theodor Ziemendorff was particularly important to the work. Special mention is also owed to the Swiss branch of the SPM and to its successor organization, the Swiss Evangelical Nile-Land Mission (the present-day Mission on the Nile International). The Swiss cooperated and provided much support, especially in the crisis years during and after the two World Wars. The continuation of the work would not have been possible without the help of these Swiss friends.

The SPM is also indebted to a number of its missionaries who provided information about the mission's work to supporters and the general public through the organization's various journals and news outlets. Further, SAH with the encouragement and help of his German colleagues produced a two-volume autobiography. Also, Gertrud von Massenbach and Elisabeth Herzfeld produced several Nubia-focused monographs. Finally, the SPM had the privilege of obtaining competent support from leading Egyptologists, Africanists, and linguists such as H. Schäfer, H. Junker, D. Westermann, and C. Meinhof. At times some of these scholars were even SPM board members, setting an impressive example for a fruitful symbiosis between science and mission.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

The SPM was the *only* mission to be focused on reaching the Kunuuzi Nubians. This niche was accepted and valued by various mission organizations. This was true even of the American Mission, which was predominant in Egypt and tended to consider the whole country to be *its field*. Yet implementing the SPM's Nubian vision was not easy.

Though there were a number of factors that had a negative effect on the work among Nubians, two stand out. First, the SPM was never able to move beyond its base among the Nubians in, around, and south of Aswan. Various SPM co-workers undertook several exploratory journeys to Sudanese Nubia during the first six decades of the mission, yet they did not succeeded in expanding into these areas because the British government, for political reasons, forbade it from doing so. Second, despite efforts at negotiation with the American Mission, the two mission organizations were never able to agree on a comity agreement that would have allowed the work to be pursued more effectively. Consequently, the ministry was consolidated in Aswan and in the surrounding areas and limited its efforts to work among Upper-Egyptians, Nubians, and Bejas.

In the years following World War II, returning missionaries succeeded in reestablishing the ministry in Old Nubia. Yet an increasing institutionalization of the ministry in Aswan and Daraw can be observed, and the original vision for an expansive work among Nubians became secondary after 1966. Still, in the 1970s and '80s, the work among the Nubians came to life

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup>Elisabeth Brunner-Traut, in *Elisabeth Herzfeld, Das Kreuz am Rande der Wüste*(Wiesbaden: Verlag der Evangelischen Mission in Oberägypten, 1966), 13-14. Translation from German to English by Andrew Craston.

again, both in Northern Sudan and Upper Egypt, causing many to look hopefully to the future. $^{15}$ 

The SPM, admittedly, has not yet succeeded in planting churches among its target groups. Yet the missionaries' humble, faithful, and sacrificial lifestyle and their decades-long perseverance in medical, social, educational, and evangelistic ministries have led to long-lasting and deeply rooted relationships of trust in the local community. These may yet lead to individual and collective fruit, by God's grace and in His time.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup>Lauche, Sudan Pioneer Mission, 363-367.