



Video transcript

Redefining research

So, one of the major aims of my research was to collect and standardise all references to climate in the missionary archives related to Eastern Africa in the nineteenth century. And I want to give you an example here.

This is a letter that was written by a missionary called Edward John Baxter. And he wrote this letter on the 21st of February 1880 from a town called Mpwapwa.

It says "Just a line to let you know we are all well. This wet season has been extremely dry so that there is great scarcity of food... Until the latter end of last week, we have had no rain here excepting the few showers which fell in November and December which we thought were the commencement of the [rainy season]. Everything appeared to be scorched up or nearly, so much of our land has had to be resown..."

Now, we now know from over a century's worth of observations that the rainy season in Mpwapwa normally starts in December. Thus this letter indicates that the rains have not come, even two months into what would normally be the rainy season, and this contributed to much hardship in 1880.

Essentially, the 1879 missionary correspondence suggests very strongly that there are significantly deficient levels of rainfall compared to normal. The original of this letter is stored at the Cadbury Library at the University of Birmingham in the UK.

Now the majority of this archive has now been digitised and it is made available via subscription to AM, which is how I accessed it at my institution here in Montreal.