

NEWSLETTER 19
A MEMORIAL TO ZARA SCHMELEN
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IN HONOUR OF WOMEN ON NATIONAL WOMENS' MONTH IN SOUTH AFRICA,
AUGUST 2013.

CELEBRATING A LITTLE-KNOWN WOMAN.

By Horst Kleinschmidt
18 August 2013

Two hundred years ago it took Hinrich Schmelen many weeks by ox wagon from Cape Town to Pella on the Orange River, a river then known as the Great Gariep. Here he taught the Christian gospel for the London Missionary Society (LMS). In 1814 one of his young catechists, Zara Hendriks, or //Xaigas before Dutch names replaced Khoi and San names, formed a union in marriage that was uniquely productive.

On Women's Day this year our journey to Komaggas, some fifty kilometres west from Springbok, took us a little more than seven hours. We headed for the unveiling of a memorial stone to honour Zara, next to the grave of her husband Hinrich. She died of consumption (TB) in 1831 on an ox wagon journey home from Cape Town to the Northern Cape. The place where she was buried is somewhere on the banks of the Berg River and cannot yet be located with certainty.

Zara, the Khoikhoi woman and Hinrich, the German missionary in the service of the LMS, are my great, great, great grandparents. As becomes evident from Hinrich's diary and his letters to the LMS, the two teamed up to commit to paper the first formal grammar of the Namaqua language. They did this to enable them to translate the Gospels and hymns into the Nama language.

In a letter to Dr Phillip in Cape Town, Hinrich told of his and his wife's progress with the translation: "Every sentence I translate, she is obliged to set it over to remain close to the words, but especially to take the proper meaning of what is said in the text and at the same time to make it sound Namaquas, and not Dutch Namaquas". In 1824 Hinrich sent another letter to his superiors in London and wrote, "It is impossible for me, to find out a method to write it that the claps [clicks] or pronouncation should come out by itself. I therefore endeavoured at first to find out how many different claps they had, and what part of the mouth was employed for the pronouncation ... I therefore took a looking glas and I and my wife sat before it, that shee might proper show, and tell me afterwards,

where and how the claps were made". (As is evident, Hinrich's command of English was poor. In later life he wrote that his German had also given way to Dutch/Afrikaans).

Together they invented signs for the different 'click' pronunciation sounds. When their translated bible was to be printed in Cape Town in 1831, the Bible Society had to request the making of new lead symbols that represented these different 'clicks' in London, causing a delay of many months.

A contemporary report states, "... in the [Cape] town nobody understood the Hottentot language. Schmelen himself did not dare to take over the corrections of the printed sheets ... when the last sheet was finished, she put down the quill and said, 'Now my work on earth is done' ...".

Sir Lowry Cole, the Cape Governor was present at the launch of the Gospels and praised the couple for their achievement. He is said to have offered Hinrich and Zara assistance should they ever require this, despite Komaggas being located beyond the border of the Cape Colony. Zara died on their way back to Komaggas. Hinrich availed himself of the Governor's offer a few years later when he wanted to protect his congregation from Trekboere who threatened the age-old tradition of collective cattle and goat farming of his congregation. By doing so Hinrich thus, questionably but not surprisingly, invited Colonial authority beyond the Cape boundary. Sir George Napier obliged by sending a land surveyor to peg out a sizeable piece of land the Komaggas community run on collective terms to this day.

Zara and Hinrich also ran a school for children and one for adults because, Hinrich believed, if you can read the bible yourself you do not have to rely on an intermediary (such as a priest) to do so on your behalf. Whatever one's opinion of the Christian missionary efforts, Zara helped pave the way to bring modernity into Khoi culture. Besides imposing a new religion on the Khoikhoi, Zara and her husband's efforts laid the foundation for formal education and thus equipped the people of Little and Great Namaqualand (today Southern Namibia) to respond and engage with the wave of trade that was pouring over the whole area in that period. This did not counter or save the Khoikhoi, the San, the Namaqua or Oorlam culture, nor and the many group identities of clans and tribes under these collective names, but it built a bridge that made it possible to better cope with the overwhelming changes that trade and the resultant embrace of a foreign culture brought.

On Woman's Day, Rhenish Congregations from Greater Cape Town, with the Komaggas congregations of the Uniting Reformed Church and the Calvin Protestant Church of South Africa, celebrated the role of this Khoi woman who in her time was a pioneer amongst her people. Zara's contemporaries, Sarah Baartman and Dawid Stuurman did not fare well in the Colonial oppression of the time. Sarah Baartman was taken to London to be displayed, barely clad, with exotic animals in a circus. She died in Paris, abused and even after her death became an object on display for European (men) who recognized two strange

confluences in her: sex and something that is other than human. Dawid Stuurman organized rebellion against the colony in defence of his peoples' land on the Cape's eastern fringes, something for which he was imprisoned on Robben Island twice (and from whence he escaped twice) and then died as a prisoner in far-off Tasmania.

If the South African narrative, - if teaching our history is to be of value, the imagery, achievements, symbols and names cannot be based on white history as it pervasively does to this day. A history that is dominated by white 'achievements', place names and reference points is wrong in fact and it counters the nation building Nelson Mandela implored us to work for.

In speaking as the great, great, great grandchild of Zara to the gathered congregations at the unveiling of the memorial to her, I spoke of my dream: a dream that white people of South Africa research, find, embrace and celebrate, instead of hide the Khoi, the Slave or the 'Coloured' ancestry in their genes. Such dream would not be complete without many 'Coloured' people also acknowledging, embracing and celebrating their Khoi or San ancestry. In truth all who have roots that go back more than a hundred years in South Africa, probably are mixed race people and the desire to be white or light-skinned is an obstacle in our consciousness that needs to be overcome and finally removed.



Cover page of the four Gospels translated by the Schmelens published in 1831 by Bryde Kirk in Cape Town. The document can be viewed at the National Library in Cape Town.



In Afrikaans (and Nama), the memorial stone reads: In celebration of Zara Schmelens's (1793 – 1831) translation of the Holy Gospels into Nama (1830) – The Rhenish Church in South Africa.



Zara Schmelen imagined by artist Christine Crowley in 2013. No contemporary pictures of Zara have been found.



Johann Hinrich Schmelen.



The gravestone of Hinrich Schmelen in Komaggas reads: To the memory of [the people of the] Little and Great Namaqua, Johann Heinrich Schmelen, born Kassebruch near Bremen on 17 January 1777, died 26 July 1848 in Komaggas. (On the tombstone his name is wrongly recorded as Heinrich instead of Hinrich)



Dr Petrus Booy's on the left was once parish priest in Komaggas.



Dr Petrus Booy's (on the right) was Reverend in Komaggas over thirty years ago. He and his wife played a leading role in the unveiling of the stone and the large delegation of congregants from Cape Town.



The memorial stone to Zara Schmelen, next to the gravestone of her husband Hinrich, unveiled on 10 August 2013. At the unveiling were Horst Kleinschmidt and Christine Crowley. Horst is the great, great, great grandson of Zara and Hinrich Schmelen.



Between my great, great, great grandparents.

Source material for this article is taken from the book by Ursula Trueper, "The Invisible Woman, Zara Schmelen, African Mission Assistant at the Cape and in Namaqualand". Published by Basler Afrika Bibliographien (www.baslerafrika.ch) ISBN 3-905141-91-4 and ISSN 1660-9638.
