

**We, descendants of Zara and Hinrich Schmelen,
celebrated our common humanity, our rich heritage and our
racial diversity.
Through re-narration of the past we pointed to the promise
of a new future.**

Two hundred years ago, a Khoi-Khoi African woman married a white European missionary. She was Zara Hendricks-//Geixas; he was Johann Hinrich Schmelen. From 18 -23 September 2014 some 200 descendants and their friends gathered in the village of Komaggas in the Northern Cape to celebrate this union. The years of colonialism and apartheid caused division, separation, denial, and inequality among these descendants. Now they gathered in Komaggas to commemorate, to celebrate and to reflect, but also confess and acknowledge wounds of the past. Participants came from Namibia, South Africa, Germany, Finland, the UK and the USA.

The event took place during South Africa's Heritage Month.

The gathering was organised in the once flourishing village of Komaggas, the place where the Schmelen couple lived and brought up their four children from 1828 onwards.

The villagers, many themselves descendants of Zara and Hinrich, provided extraordinary hospitality, opened their homes and offered four days and nights of meals accommodation for every visitors.

It was necessary to provide translation from English into Afrikaans and from Afrikaans into English to ensure that all felt included in the event. The other languages heard during the event were Namaqua, Finnish, and German.

Wednesday, 17th September: Viewing of the first Nama Bible

In central Cape Town, Melanie Geustyn, Principal Librarian for Special Collections at National Library provided with a beautiful venue where the Library displayed the 1831 published edition of the Gospels, Hymns and Catechism that Hinrich and Zara Schmelen translated into the Nama language. Also on display were related contemporary Nama texts.

In a moving speech Kenneth Makatees, a descendant of the Schmelens, provided the context for the coming days.

Thursday, 18 September: Visit to Zara's graveside.

A convoy of some 20 cars arrived on a farm on the slopes of the Heuningberg, between Saron and Porterville in the Swartland Region northwest of Cape Town. We had only recently found circumstantial evidence that led to the identification of a group of graves, one of which is presumed to be Zara's. Zara died here in 1831, a couple of days after she and her family began their journey by ox wagon from Cape Town back to Komaggas. We handed out a set of documents that lead to the identification of this location. They will be made available on this web page.

Kenneth Makatees once more welcomed those present and read from the diary entry of missionary Gustaf Zahn from Tulbagh who had come to the farm of Lodewyk Botma at the Heuningberg, on the Berg River. He came to console Hinrich Schmelens and to bury Zara. This happened 183 years ago in April 1831. Zara was barely 38 years old. Standing on the back of a pick-up truck Kenneth and Valda's nine-year-old daughter Anna, read the identical text from the Bible that missionary Zahn read at Zara's funeral – Hebrews 12, verses 1 and 2. This was followed by an address from Olle Eriksson of the Finnish group of visitors after which I explained what my research into finding the gravesite involved. I invited each of those present to place a rose in memory of Zara at the gravesite now existing in the midst of weaving wheat fields. DsWG Cloete from the nearby village of Saron lead us in prayer¹.

Mr and Mrs Mouton and Mrs Kellerman, the farmers on whose land the graves are located attended the proceedings.

Two large laminated notices, one in English, the other in Namaqua, explained the role and importance of Zara in her day. The notices formed the backdrop to the proceedings. They are now on permanent display at the Porterville Museum. Copies of the two notices are on this website.

Friday afternoon, 19th September: Steinkopf.

After a long journey by road north from Cape Town, and south from Namibia, the travellers met up in Steinkopf in the arid Northern Cape. Here Ds Eddie Leeuw and members of the local Uniting Reformed Church welcomed us with refreshments in the old mission church. Steinkopf is the place where Zara's family came from. Hinrich had named the place Steinkopf in honour of Dr Karl Steinkopf, the man who inspired Hinrich's Christian faith when he came to London in 1803 to evade conscription into Napoleon's army. Napoleon had occupied the Duchy of Hanover where Hinrich lived with his parents.

Two beautiful choirs and a string band (*snaar orkes*) provided the background to a short service, lead by Ds Leeuw. Before we left, a group of musicians in the churchyard led us

¹ Ds is the abbreviation for Dominee, the title given to a pastor in the Calvinist tradition.

in a Namastap dance. Visitors and locals mingled as they danced in the desert dust under a setting sun. (See film clip of this posted by Amy Nicolai on Facebook)

Friday evening, 19th September: Arrival at our destination.

At dusk, the ever-growing cavalcade of cars entered Komaggas. Villagers stood at the entrance to Komaggas waving welcome.

At the Community Hall, we were registered and introduced to our hosts. Some forty families had offered rooms in their houses for the next four days².

The exhausted travellers were served a warm meal at the Hall before tucking in for the night. Local women's groups prepared the meal, the first of eleven outstanding breakfasts, lunches and dinners during our stay. They cooked not only for the visitors but for the very many local participants.

From the moment we arrived we were treated to musical performances by Riël and Namastap dancers from Northern Cape villages where the Khoi traditions enjoy resurgence. The dancers came from Pella (where Zara and Hinrich first met), Onseepkans, Carolusburg, Soebatsfontein, Loeriesfontein and Elizabethfontein. We are indebted to the ATKV (Afrikaanse Taal en Kultuur Vereeniging) and especially Mr Elias Nel, who arranged for the groups to get to Komaggas without expense to us.

Saturday, 20th September: Formal opening of the proceedings.

After breakfast in the Community Hall, visitors and local participants engaged each other around the wall and floor displays of the Schmelen-Kleinschmidt- Uirab-Rautanen-Bam-van Reenen family tree configurations. The displays served as a quick way for people to discover and meet relatives. Whatever the language, culture or colour barriers might have been, they vanished right there. (See photos on this web page).

On the walls of the hall we had displayed thirty meters of newsprint on which family photos, the family tree and its various configurations appeared. We encouraged people to visit the displays, to add to them and even correct them. The 'Tree' remained a magnet for exploration and discussion throughout the event.

Ds Christo Present of the Calvin Protestant Church of Komaggas opened the gathering with a prayer and words of welcome. Then Mr J F van Wyk, the Mayor of the Nama-Khoi regional municipality welcomed us, followed by Oom Willem Cloete, a leading member of the local organising committee and chairperson of the local Funeral Committee (coincidentally it was the committee's 75th anniversary). We were then taken on foot to the newly fenced old graveyard. Those with a sense of adventure decided to get taken there by traditional horse cart³.

² Payment for accommodation, food and money for a local (completed) project, brought around R170,000 of commercial value into a village.

³ A group of Schmelen descendants who met in Wuppertal, Germany in October 2013 contributed funds for the old graveyard to be fenced. Since our visit trees donated by the Environment Department have been planted in the graveyard..

A community of two hundred people gathered around the grave of Hinrich Schmelen and the recently erected memorial stone to Zara Schmelen. Ds Petrus Booys of the Rhenish Church and one-time Pastor in the village, lead proceedings and prayers in Nama, Afrikaans and English⁴. He then invited relatives to bear testimony about their connection to this diverse family. One after another, cousins in the sixth or seventh generation of descendants of Zara and Hinrich, testified about their connection to a family divided by social conventions and racial laws.

During the afternoon Namastap dancers attracted close to 1000 joyous villagers to dance with us in and outside the hall. (You can find out about Namastap and Riël dancing on YouTube)

Both in Steinkopf and in Komaggas traditional matjies (mat) huts were on display demonstrating how people used to live and how, in fact, the early missionaries sought shelter from the elements.

Many locals sold trinkets or T-shirts that commemorate our gathering. Special mention has to be made of Amy Nicolai from the USA who provided everyone with a multi-coloured bangle with an inscription that said: Schmelen-Kleinschmidt-Bam - 200th anniversary.

In the late afternoon, Kenneth Makatees led Auntie May Adams into the hall. At age 103 she is the oldest Komaggas resident. Addressing us over the microphone, she told us that she remembers her teacher Ellen Bam, the daughter of Friederike, third daughter of Zara and Hinrich. And she added: Ellen Bam was a very strict teacher.

In the evening, a school play written by local teacher, John Cloete, was re-enacted. He wrote the play in 1979 as a protest against apartheid and racial segregation. He knew that he would lose his job if he expressed his views openly and thus chose theatre to communicate his message. In the play, he celebrates the marriage of Hinrich and Zara, how they loved each other and collaborated in translating and publishing the Gospels in the Nama language. The script of the play survived and the pupils who acted in the play in 1979, now in middle age, performed the play for us. (See script on website).

The play was followed by another energetic, engaging, and creative stage performance by the group *Namjive* from nearby Okiep. Their lyrics and dance celebrated Nama culture in a beautiful yet critical manner. One of the questions they teased their audience with was: why do we, the Nama descendants, spend so much time straightening our naturally curly hair?

Sunday, 21 September: Church service

A service lead by Ds Christo Present and a sermon by Dr Peter Grove to a packed congregation linked local narrative with that of the visitors. Here in Komaggas people are deeply religious. Some of those coming from Europe and North America have set

⁴ Ds Booys was instrumental in 2013 to have the memorial to Zara erected next to Hinrich's grave. It was inaugurated on South Africa's Women's Day, August 9.

aside their religious roots. Despite this, all joined in the infectious singing of numerous choirs. Community unity was shown in that Ds Present of the neighbouring Calvinist Protestant Church officiated here in the Uniting Reformed Church.⁵

Hanna Kleinschmidt, daughter of Zara, translated several Hymns into Namaqua. To this day the Hymns are used in Namibian Nama-speaking congregations. The Uirab descendants of Zara and Hinrich are members of the Lutheran Church in Namibia. During the service they paid tribute to Hanna and sang most beautifully these Namaqua hymns.

After the service the guests were taken on a walk to the old mission church ruin, the old manse and the remnants of the *leiwater* system (water managed through a system of canals and sluice gates) and the once productive allotment gardens, all testimony to a once thriving village, but now in disrepair. Neglect under apartheid of towns like Komaggas where no white people other than the missionaries ever settled, is responsible for the poor water reticulation choices made 40 years ago. Coupled with an influx of people when the nearby diamond mines offered many jobs, the former simple but stable infrastructure collapsed. Mass retrenchment by de Beers Diamond Mines in 2008, has put further pressure of the once thriving village.

Sunday, 21 September: Nama history beyond our family.

On Sunday afternoon we had two lectures in the Calvin Reformed Church. Professor Nigel Penn from the University of Cape Town gave the main lecture. He has researched and written extensively detailing the impact which colonial policy had on the people of the Northern Cape. His seminal work *The Forgotten Frontier* reinterprets the way conventional history treats the colonial era.

After Prof Penn we heard Ursula Trüper, the author of the book on Zara Schmelen, *The Invisible Woman, Zara Schmelen, African Mission Assistant at the Cape and in Namqualand*. This book first highlighted the role Zara, an African and a woman, played. The book challenges the conventional histories written from male perspectives. Ursula offered thoughts about Nama society in the time when Nama culture and life was in fact, substantially extinguished.

Monday morning, 22 September: Truth, Acknowledgement, Reconciliation and Justice.

About 90 persons participated in a discussion on Truth, Acknowledgment, Reconciliation and Justice. In my opening statement I acknowledged in public for the first time in my life, the racial terminology and conventions into which I was socialised and which I had to confront and overcome when I set out, in early adulthood, to oppose inequality and injustice. I wanted to put in words how I was taught to believe in the

⁵ Colonial and apartheid church policies have left destruction of church structures in their wake. Initially the London Missionary Society established itself and then withdrew from the Northern Cape leaving a void. Then the Rhenish mission filled the void, but after WWI due to lack of funds they handed over most of their Cape mission churches, without adequate consultation with their congregations, to the Dutch Reformed Mission Church. This led to several further splits from within the former Rhenish and DRC Mission churches.)

superiority of the white race and to regard other race or colour groups as lesser beings. I wanted to admit before all the racial teachings I grew up with which I had to un-learn. My examples and anecdotes drew gasps of shock and disbelief.

Charles Otto Uirab spoke next. He read his poem, in which he asks the question: What is your intention? Why come here now after all that 'you' have done and what is it you want us, those who were wronged, to believe? Ultimately he does not reject his 'white' brothers and sisters but seeks from them admissions and acknowledgements that can restore the dignity of those previously denied it.

The ensuing discussion centred on what is often in South Africa referred to as 'unfinished business', or 'healing the wounds of the past' and on forgiveness. It was proposed that more such discussions should happen between the Schmelen descendants. (Both Otto's and my testimonies will be placed on this web page)

Monday midday: visit to Bethel.

The ever-efficient women's group provided picnic lunches before some 30 vehicles took off to the Komaggas hinterland, the land Hinrich Schmelen had secured for this village in 1831⁶. Here people tend to their herds in a collective and rotational manner as their ancestors did from time immemorial. The village elders took us to the place where the Schmelen had built the first church after they settled in this community in 1828. Today only rudimentary evidence of a mud foundation remains, but a photograph of 1897 bears testimony to the mud-brick structure that once stood here. (See notice with text and photograph on web page)

Oom George Cloete addressed those assembled at the former Bethel church about the welcome impact sowing wheat and baking bread had made on their culture, something for which they thanked Hinrich Schmelen. Strumming his guitar, he and Mrs Mona Engelbrecht then sang a song Oom George had written and dedicated to Zara Schmelen and another he dedicated to nine-year-old Anna Makatees.

Monday evening Farewells.

At dinner that night visitors and locals thanked each other for the richness of the six day encounter. Although few in Komaggas have internet or email access, people promised each other lasting contact by snail mail. New friendships between hosts and guests will be nurtured.

Tuesday, 23 September: School involvement

⁶ To secure the land for the Schmelen's missionary station, in terms that the Colonial rules and laws respected, the Rev. Richard Miles first wrote to Governor Sir Lowry Cole in 1829. He wanted to secure the land for a mission station where the Schmelen had settled in Komaggas, According to Colonial Secretary Bell this correspondence was later lost. In 1831 Hinrich Schmelen and the head of the London Missionary Society, Dr John Philip again wrote to secure the land. On 17 November 1831, an area 69,173 morgen and 131 square roots was surveyed to be land that had "always been occupied by them", the Komaggas community. In 1843 the Cape government recognised Komaggas as 'an incorporated community within the Colony'. This recognition prevented further encroachments on the Komaggas land by *trekboere* (white colonist). The land was also not alienated from the Komaggas community during the apartheid era.

As the visitors were having their final breakfast in the Community Hall, three classes from the local school arrived at the hall. I led them in a two-hour story telling and interactive experience using the displays of family trees and pictures. Several students identified their grandparents and were keen to add their parents, themselves and their siblings to the family tree by writing on the displays. Others showed off the few words of Nama they could speak. Still others posed for a photograph under the portraits of Zara and Hinrich Schmelen that Christine Crowley had painted. They would go home and tell their parents that they now knew that they too, were descendants of Zara and Hinrich.

Tuesday, 23 September: Sweeping up after the event.

In the afternoon I met with the women who had provided accommodation and food. Since most people do not have current accounts and there is no bank in Komaggas, we instead stuffed envelopes with bank notes for every provider, based on the number of bed-nights they made available and the number of meals to which they contributed. Over forty women were involved. To my great relief and satisfaction, the money collected from the visitors for accommodation and food squared with what had to be paid to those whose hospitality we had enjoyed⁷.

That evening I had a final meeting with the local organising and heritage committee to evaluate the event. We discussed successes and disappointments and importantly it was resolved to create a formal Heritage Committee with a constitution and elected members.

Kenneth Makatees, my cousin and close and brilliant collaborator in organising this gathering, could not be present on Tuesday as he had to get back to work in Cape Town.

Since the Komaggas event, there have been reports of tourists stopping in the village wanting to know more about the history of this village. The wide media coverage has made people curious about a village they would previously have just driven through.

Dorothea Davids, a teacher from Steinkopf, is likely to start classes in Komaggas, because our event rekindled interest in re-learning the Nama language. Namaqua is not one of South Africa's official eleven languages.

Conclusion:

The six-day event was momentous. It brought a family together after more than a century of division, built on the artificial barriers of race. Family connections and contacts that had been sustained until the 1880's, were broken or discouraged throughout the 20th century.

Zara and Hinrich's third daughter, Friedrike, married into a mixed-race family, the Bam's and the van Reenen's. Despite the Bam's and van Reenen's social standing, the Kleinschmidt relatives who thought of themselves as white, failed to show solidarity

⁷ The municipality had provided the hall at no charge.

with their darker-skinned relatives when Governments, both German and South African issued discriminatory decrees and regulations.

Ludwig Kleinschmidt, from whom the Uirab family stem, was the only one of the eight children of Franz-Heinrich and Hanna Kleinschmidt who did not marry a white spouse. Ludwig and his descendants were ostracised by the 'white' part of the family. Children of those who thought of themselves as white, when required to prove their Aryan or white acenstry, faced most painful discrimination in German colonial South West Africa and later in Nazi Germany.

Some worked hard 'to pass as white' to gain acceptance with the ruling group. They argued that their ancestor was not Khoi, was in fact not Zara, but someone with a European sounding name. This became the family lie. Through such falsification my father and others succeeded in their efforts to join the Nazi party in the 1930's. In South Africa the 'white' family created a myth that they were in fact 'pure' white.

My wish was not merely that we meet each other, but that we discuss and confront that which has kept us apart, not in the abstract but face to face, as one family. By telling the stories that have made us, we cannot wipe away the past but now the past will no longer involve a narration that sustains imagery that gives comfort to one group at the expense of the other. We have started to re-tell the past and we are on an important new journey. I hope our children will be able to bring closure to a dark chapter in our history.

We did not set out to cast judgement on the way that Christian mission served colonialism or whether it planted seeds of freedom or reconciliation. Instead, we dealt with our present-day reality and how to face up to it. The Komaggas event provides an example that can be replicated in other families. In this way we can all contribute to a new identity in which the narrow identity of 'white' or 'coloured', even 'black', is replaced with an inclusive one. We do not reject the cultural attributes that each group must treasure and sustain. But the primacy of any narrow group identity must be subordinate to the deeper identity we share together.

I am pleased with what we started. The many stories that we told in Komaggas and the many others not yet told deserve telling and recording. What we did has the potential to re-shape the way we think of society. We did not solve things but we started a grassroots conversation that aims to serve 'the common good' and can be an example on how one aspect of the unfinished business of the past, can help to make a new future possible.

Horst Kleinschmidt.

