

Newsletter 12c

4. Komaggas.

On the second night of our trip we reached Komaggas. Dominee Jetro Cloete was once more our excellent and ever kind host. His congregation, the Reforming Church¹ of South Africa, was holding a potjie kos² competition on the evening of our arrival. We were welcomed in their midst, joined in the tasting of Oryx potjie to tripe and seafood potjie succeeded by lang-arm³ dancing and displays of the Namastapdans⁴. Our skills fell far short in both genres of dance but we felt warmth and accommodation from all never the less. Most of our missionary forebears would not have approved of frivolities such as dancing, I surmised afterwards.

The community in Komaggas is in transition – women and men of working age are leaving the village to find work elsewhere ever since the closure of the de Beers diamond mine⁵ occasioned by the global economic downturn in 2008. The public relations campaign by de Beers that it was leaving behind a legacy that aimed to benefit the people and region is empty public relations as all it has left behind is poverty and devastation. Untold greed has made the bosses and shareholders of de Beers rich beyond imagination. Simmering anger is all that is left in the Northern Cape, made worse by the memory that the land that yielded the diamonds was once theirs.

¹ Note the name, Reforming Church of South Africa. The South African Dutch Reformed Church (Calvinist) was previously divided into the principal church and the Sending Kerk (Mission Church). This was the way racial segregation was maintained between Whites and people considered not to be white. The new name, Reforming Church, designates a united church, where race is no longer a determinant, but equally signifies that the process of merger between the former two churches is on-going and not yet achieved.

² Potjie kos is food prepared in an iron tripod on an open fire, forming the centre of a social gathering.

³ Lang-arm is a colloquial term for ballroom type dancing.

⁴ Nama stapdans is a traditional dance, specific to the Nama people.

⁵ De Beers recently sold the land and mining license to Transhex. Thus principal ownership has changed from the Oppenheimer family to the Anton Rupert/Tokyo Sexwale empires. Why buy a mine if yields of diamonds are down and the world market is equally down? Apparently de Beers ran a centralized highly mechanized operation whereas the new owners run decentralized smaller scale operations – from which profits may yet be lucrative.

Old folk, wives and children characterize the village demographics. Men and a small number of women who got work elsewhere visit on weekends or once a month, sometimes at lesser intervals. Marital problems are on the rise Ds Jetro told us, as men develop new liaisons in the places where they now work. Poverty, lack of quality education and under-development remains written all over Komaggas.

But there is new hope! With enthusiasm and energy Ds Jetro tells us of a scientist, with family roots in the area, who works at the University of the Western Cape, who has completed research into the humble weed known as Kraalbos, unique to the region. The scientific pursuit grew out of the age-old observation that animals could not digest this weed at a particular time of year without becoming ill. Laboratory tests to show the reasons for the animal malady, to his surprise, showed that Kraalbos has healing and medicinal values – even as an anti-cancer agent. Justifiably Ds, Jetro calls Kraalbos manna from heaven. Further tests are currently conducted and a company pays good wages to those who harvest Kraalbos. Huge mounds of the weed can be seen in parts of the village, waiting to be processed. Will Kraalbos harvesting be sustainable in the long term? Will Kraalbos yield a benefit to those on whose land it grows? Ds Jetro says that precautions and contractual arrangements have been entered into to avert a repeat of the curse diamonds have been for the people here.

The other illustrious Hinrich-Zara family branch with even deeper roots in Komaggas.

After Zara died in 1831 (born 1793), Hinrich Schmelen married a second time. He married Elizabeth Maria Bam in 1833. There were no children from this marriage but there is another lineage that links the Schmelen, Kleinschmidt and Bam families. It opens another fascinating chapter of our collective history at the Cape. The detail below is not yet integrated into the family tree I circulated previously.

Elizabeth Maria Bam was born in 1807 and lies buried in Komaggas. She died on 14 November 1848 a few months after her husband Hinrich died. Her grave in Komaggas is not identified at present. She was the daughter of Cape Town people, Christiaan Jacobus Bam (born 1781) and Maria Rachel (born van Laar, 1784).

Christiaan Jokobus was the son of Johan Christiaan (born 1750) and married to Maria Christina Hooyer 16 April 1775. Christiaan in turn was the son of Jan (Johann) Andreas Bam who hailed from Schwerin in the north of Germany. At the Cape he married Anna Catherina van de Caab, the surname 'van de Caab' designated people who were born in the Cape of slave parents. They had 4 children of whom Johan Christiaan was the third.

Jan Andreas (who came from Schwerin), came to the Cape in 1725 as a soldier in the service of the Dutch East India Company. He became a 'burger' in 1734, presumably meaning that he bought his freedom from the company. He was a baker and died 28 November 1762. Nothing more is known about his wife.

Besides the marriage between Elizabeth and Hinrich there is more. Elizabeth had three brothers and two of them made history in the mission field as contemporaries and colleagues of missionary Heinrich Kleinschmidt. Christian Jacobus Bam, born 1809, Elizabeth's next sibling, married Frederika Schmelen (1819 – 1853), whose older sister (Hanna) had married Heinrich Kleinschmidt, in Komaggas in 1842.

Elizabeth's other brother, Johann (Jan) Hendrik (1811 – 1856) married Johanna Petronella Susanna Jooste hailing from Tulbagh. Both Bam brothers worked for the Rhenish Mission in Klein and Groot Namaqualand. Johann Hendrik and Johanna Petronella had 5 children. The first, Johannes Heinrich (1849 – 1891) lies buried in Bethanien. He married Lina Baade. The youngest, Cornelius (born 1856) was ordained as a Pastor in Cape Town but later appears to have been a trader in Okahandja, Namibia. And Daniel, another brother, became the moderator of the Dutch Reformed church in the Free State in the early part of the 20th century.

One or both Bam brothers were ordained missionaries in the Rhenish Mission Society. This is of interest in that they stand out as the first locally ordained missionaries not sent from Germany, and they were of mixed blood; that is not white in the racially defined sense. In other words they advanced despite huge obstacles being placed in their way by those who hailed from Europe and who even then confused their religious convictions with their social or cultural behaviour. There are Bam graves in Bethanien and in Scheppmansdorp. The latter is today known as Rooibank, the base of the South African army's springboard into Angola during the 1980's.

I visited a descendent of the Bam family in Swakopmund recently. She is Dorothy Makatees (below) and lives in the Welwitshia old age home. She was born in Komaggas in 1937. Her children live in Swakopmund, Cape Town and Pretoria. Her grandfather was Jacob Van Reenen, the son of Ellen Van Reenen, who was the daughter of Fredericka Schmelen and Christiaan Bam. Ellen was known as Ellie, a legendary figure who is still remembered by the very old in Komaggas.



Dorothy Makatees, Swakopmund, November 2011.

I am indebted for the content and corrections about the Makatees family and history to Kenneth Makatees, Dorothy's son who lives with his family and works in South Africa.