

February 2009

Hi there,

The journey to Komaggas is long and hot, mostly in the upper 30 degrees centigrade. Over 700kms directly north, flanking the west coast from Cape Town. The further you go the more arid it gets, until there is only grey scrubland. In winter rain invigorates the heather-like bush and in spring it turns into a carpet of colour, the well-known Namaqua daisies. Yes, the surrounds of Komaggas also! I have not been to see these flower carpets yet.

Anyone will tell you this is a tough land where only the fittest have survived. No wonder that hardship and pain is etched on people and beast alike. After Vanrhynsdorp one goes through the Knersvlakte – the gnashing of teeth plains. After you pass Bitterfontein the turn-off roads each tell their own tale: Soebatsfontein (Plead (ing) fontein), Moedverloor (Lost hope), Put-sonder-water (Pit without water). These names eventually give way to the Khoi and San names – maybe because the trekboere (or semi-nomadic white boer farmers) and the Cape Colony pursued these areas with less vigour. Komaggas is a khoi word for 'place with water for cattle'.

| The story goes that in the 1820's when white land occupation was gathering momentum, streams of displaced brown people were forced on to this road north, in search of land not yet occupied. The voorrijders (horsemen to spy out suitable areas) came back on one occasion and said: We found a strong fountain. The water is very brackish. We should settle there. The white man will never go there. – They were right. The town is in the Richtersveld, called Kuboes. On a previous visit I spent time there. The connection to Schmelen and Kleinschmidt was only made when upon

leaving I saw a notice behind the door to the improvised information centre. It read: We must not forget our past and our heritage. If anyone has recollections of events or people who spent time here over the past 150 years, please tell us. Amongst a list of names to jog people's memories appear the names of Schmelen and Kleinschmidt. They preached there on their way to and from Great Namaqualand (Namibia) just before or after they had crossed the Gariep (now Orange river) at a place known as Sendelingsdrift (Place where missionaries crossed with their wagons) – a place wide and shallow and thus permitting ox-wagon crossings.

My present journey up north was due to work I was doing in the de Beers diamond mines – now being de-proclaimed, as the yields and purchases of this unhappy stone have diminished. I'm investigating if aquaculture could become a viable alternative industry for the area. I was only an hour's drive from Komaggas. I had been there before, but because of the invitation of the young and energetic new dominee, Ds. Jetro Cloete (Minister of the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa), I would spend the weekend in the village where our great, great, great grandfather lies buried and where our great, great grandparents got married in 1842. To my absolute delight Ds Jetro invited me to stay in the manse – the old house, parts of which date back to the Schmelen and Kleinschmidt era. The picture (attached) from where I opened my eyes in the morning might have been the view they had each morning, nearly 200 years ago.

I should say that my entire weekend, if I really wanted to speak with people there, I had to listen and speak in Afrikaans. People are proud of their language, which is spoken with a dialect, different from the city variant.

Ds. Jetro recently got engaged, his betrothed still living in Cape Town. I had the pleasure though of meeting his parents, Oom Ben and Tante Cora. Ds. Jetro insisted I should sleep in his bedroom whilst he made do in his study.

Unlimited hospitality and kindness in very humble and modest circumstances! The church may have to loose Ds. Jetro in time because it will be unable to maintain his or any ministers' salary. This is mainly due to the closure of the diamond mine, which has and is resulting in retrenchments for the people of Komaggas. This in turn has profound consequences for the community, as many men will now be forced to migrate in search of work. There is no other employer in the area. Ds. Jetro fears an increase in crime, alcohol and drug-abuse. "Why don't rich parishes cross-subsidise a parish such as yours?" I ask. It becomes clear that in these parts White and Brown are still far apart. 'If they give money they also want control and influence; we don't want that.'

Oom Ben and Tante Cora are from Mariental in Namibia, both retired. I notice their hesitation toward me initially. They have not had good experiences with white people in their lives. Oom Ben tells me of his childhood when his father was a herdsman on a white man's farm. His mother worked in the white people's kitchen. "The man wanted to be kind to us, but the wife was the opposite. One day our house went up in flames – we knew she had done this and we packed up and went on the long road to find other work". When Oom Ben was barely sixteen he went to work on a farm, also as a herdsman. "It belonged to the Governor General" (who administered Namibia – a South African appointee on behalf of the League of Nations). On an occasion the sons of the farm owner and he tried to get cattle into an enclosure. He used a stone, which hit one of the oxen on the head. The sons took umbrage. With a rope they made a noose, put him on the back of a horse cart, drove it under a tree and tied the rope to a branch. Then they whipped the horses to run. Oom Ben tells how he fought and jumped and eventually the branch broke – and in the dust and commotion he ran, some sixty kilometers to where his parents worked. No policeman in those days would take his statement. He still bears the marks round his neck.

How come the Dutch Reformed Church in Komaggas? Schmelen had initially come to these parts, sent by the London Missionary Society. At some stage the LMS concentrated its efforts toward the Eastern Cape and ushered in the newly established Rhenish Mission to take over. The Rhenish withdrew due to a lack of funds during the great depression in the 1930's and 'without local consultation', handed over to the Dutch Reformed. This caused tensions in the community not least because the DRC was run on racial lines; Komaggas was placed under the white tutelage of the DRC Sending (Mission) church, the junior church 'for the brown people'. DRC (without designated name) was for the whites, the DRC in Africa was for black people and there was yet another one for people of Indian descent.

After 1948 when apartheid became the official doctrine, the DRC became something like a state church. It justified 'separateness' and 'subjugation' with pseudo theological terms. In Komaggas the tensions rose and in 1956 a split happened. Those who considered the Dutch Reformed Church an ally of the apartheid government formed themselves into the Calvinist Church. The fear was that more of the communities, communally managed land would be alienated from them played a significant role. The tree under which the first service took place stands to this day. An inscribed stone marks the founding.

This however marks the backdrop why there are now three churches on the spot where Hinrich Schmelen once asserted Christianity for the people who lived in this water-rich valley. There is the old Rhenish church, built with mud bricks and now all but totally in disrepair. Ds Cloete, to prevent further damage has recently had breezeblocks put into the doors and windows. Next to it stands the DR Mission Church erected in 1979, a typical architectural phenomenon of the DRC of those days. Behind both churches stands the Calvinist Protestant Church of the breakaway group. Both churches owe and acknowledge the first church building as their common heritage. Ds. Jetro: "The restoration of the original

church and the common use of it thereafter, contains the hope for a much sought reconciliation and healing”.

Fortunately the two Dominees, who have roughly equally large congregations, are now working for unity, something that the community at large is also in need of.

On Saturday morning Ds. Jetro took me on a two hour ride through the veld and over the mountain. He wanted to show me the place where Schmelen first built a church. It is known as Bethuel – only rudimentary foundations remain. We had to ask our way to the exact location. Young people say by foot it is about an hour's journey up the Komaggas valley and down the other side where, in those days, the biggest section of the community was located. Our journey by truck took us through communal land, miraculously not disturbed by apartheid. Vee buiteposte (goat outposts) dot the countryside; land is collectively managed to this day – and time has stood still. Here we met a brown man whose grandfather, or his great grandfather, had built a stone house with hewn rock. It stands without mortar to this day. What he needs he makes with his hands. He is rough, straight in his answers but immediately helpful. His leather 'cowboy' hat is of local variety. He joins us to find the ruin. After about fifteen minutes he says we should stop the truck and walk, three abreast up a ravine and then he notices the last evidence of surrounds of two rooms. We stand there and try and imagine what it was like when Heinrich and Zara came here at the behest of Kasper Cloete – then a leading brown or mixed race farmer. In the surrounds lie pieces of broken crockery. Could they be from that time?

It's at least half a kilometer to the next veepos but nearby is a room, also now a ruin where people once lived. An even circle with stone surround marks the place where donkeys would be lined up four or five side by side, to walk in a circle stamping the corn that Schmelen first introduced to these parts. The farmer tells us that they still separate the chaff from the wheat like that. When it's done and the wind blows you

use forks to lift the trodden wheat, with the chaff blowing away. These days the wheat is used as animal feed only.

On the way back I notice a narrow stone laid pass. It has not been used for a hundred years. Ds. Jetro tells me this was built in missionary times for the ox wagons to get to Komaggas.

When we get back the heat is suddenly broken with a heavy downpour. Thunder and wind lasts for less than half an hour during which time we have to sweep the floors in the manse to get water back out. Age and lack of funds for repairs is telling on this building. The gutters are nearly all broken. Later we learn that a mini tornado hit another part of Komaggas. We go to have a look. Some shacks have been flattened and the roofs of some twenty houses ripped off. Amongst this poverty this is a huge catastrophe. Luckily no one was seriously injured.

The next morning Ds. Jetro makes the tornado the centerpiece of his sermon. He is modern in approach and my agnosticism is not questioning his approach. Singing, lead by some substantial ladies with strong lungs in front, binds those who attend. Then Ds. Jetro invites me to speak to the congregation. The family tree, designed by the late relative, Erika von Zetlitz (Salzburg, Austria) adorns the pulpit and I hold a copy of Ursula Truepers book about Zara. They are my tools to expand on this to the relevance of Komaggas and its people. I reflect on Zara and her work, her intellect, her role as a local woman who was central to writing the Khoi grammar and then translate part of the bible into Khoi.

The previous evening I was introduced to a Mr. A.B. Smith as the great, great, etc. He knows that I know and that I know that he knows that even now, fifteen years after apartheid, he is a brown man and I am a white man. With a broad smile he says: "But then the same blood that flows in your veins flows in my veins, cousin." I refer to him as my cousin in the service. It turns out that whereas, I am a descendent from Hanna, the first daughter of the Schmelens, and he is a

descendent of one of the other two Schmelen daughters.

| Fate would have it that he ended up on the one side of the track and me on the other. When we met we get to know about that nexus. Ds. Jetro implores the congregation to now contribute and help write up the Schmelen and Kleinschmidt family tree such that it is not only a white tree, but a brown tree also.

Zara was born Zara Hendricks. She was a catechist in Pella, maybe with links to Steinkopf, the former Bijzondermeijd. Who were the Hendricks'? Where is her family now? I have asked people in several places to make enquiries.

Horst Kleinschmidt

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