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The last Khoikhoi Chief of Komaggas.

The Khoikhoi people of Southern Africa, their language and culture have all but disappeared. Oral traditions of how and when this happened are slipping from us. The story of Chief Karusap provides an intriguing glimpse of what happened when Khoikhoi and early colonists first crossed paths.

**By
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Khoikhoi Chief Karusap and his people lived near the clear springs in the hills of Komaggas in Klein Namaqualand (Northern Cape). This was in the late 1700's before the towns of Springbok (copper mining), Kleinzee (diamond mining), and the harbour of Port Nolloth appeared on any map. The Khoikhoi called themselves *the real people*, to distinguish themselves from other groups, such as the San¹. They had lived in the area since time immemorial. Evidence points to their presence here 200 years ago. Summer rains made their goats and cattle get fat and when water and grass were scarce they took their livestock to the sandy coast, some sixty

¹ Source: The Cape Herders – A History of the Khoikhoi of Southern Africa, published by David Philip Publishers (Pty) Ltd, first published 1996. ISBN 0 86486 311 X.

kilometres west-ward, where vegetation and roots sustained them. All along this coast Khoikhoi practised this migration, making the seasons work for them and their animals.

A humble grave in the garden of a private home in Komaggas is all that reminds us of Chief Karusap today². Two erect stones, less than a meter apart, reveal that people here used to be buried in a sitting position. One generation later the missionaries introduced the practice of the dead lying stretched out in a coffin.

Chief Karusap was probably the last Komaggas leader before the lives of his people here changed and their culture and way of life disappeared – forever. There is no oral history of a successor to Karusap (see endnote 3).

A little more than two hundred years ago, first in a trickle, and then in great waves, *trekboere* arrived where the Khoikhoi people lived. The *trekboere* were Dutch farmers who preferred to live beyond the control of the VOC, or Dutch East India Company, which at that time had only limited power over the land around their fortification at Cape Town. Much to the resentment of the Dutch farmers, the VOC would set the prices the farmers could charge for their produce and then force them to trade exclusively with the VOC.

At the same time the VOC would barter livestock from Khoikhoi herders where value was dependent on the demand created from passing ships. Supply depended on the number of animals Khoi groups offered for sale at any point in time. Dutch farmers saw the advantage that locals had and wanted part of the action for themselves. They moved in fanlike pattern away from the Fort at the Cape, often losing all physical contact with the VOC.

Several early visitors to the Cape who travelled up the west coast commented favourably on the hospitality they enjoyed at the isolated *trekboer* homesteads. But they also made disparaging remarks about some *trekboer* lifestyle, which in

² Some say it is not a grave but a memorial stone and that the actual grave was somewhere higher up in the mountains.

many respects had begun to resemble that of the Khoikhoi. Instead of mud-brick houses the *trekboere* now built reed huts like the Khoikhoi, enabling them to move their abode frequently depending on where their animals found suitable grazing. And they wore clothes like the Khoikhoi made from the hides of their animals³. Khoi words and cultural practices crept into their culture. Three commodities however distinguished them from the local people: they had horses (the Khoikhoi rode oxen that were also their beasts of burden), they had the Bible (and remained devout however far they were from the Cape), and they made brandy (much stronger in alcohol content than what locals knew). Although there was some co-operation between the new arrivals and the local people, the newcomers were competing for grazing land and market share when selling their animals at the Cape.

Social proximity to the Khoikhoi also meant that children were born who, it may be generalized, were of Dutch fathers and Khoikhoi mothers; Khoi men seldom if ever fathered children with Dutch women. Consensual liaisons, concubinary and rape resulted in children growing up who had cultural links to both the intruder and the indigenous worlds but, in the end, the new and foreign invariably won over Khoi traditions and culture. Horses replaced oxen as the mode of transport, Christianity replaced indigenous beliefs and customs, and brandy became the preferred liquid for recreation and relaxation.

Initially the Khoikhoi fought valiant wars to retain their independence but they were soon outnumbered and with inferior weaponry, were the losers. As early as 1659 a leader by the name of Doman led his people in the first Khoikhoi-Dutch War⁴. When their political back was broken most had to sell their labour in generally wretched conditions the newcomers.

³ Missionary Hinrich Schmelen wrote that when he returned from Komaggas to visit the Cape, that his first port of call was always a tailor as the urban white folk he would visit or who saw him on the streets would look disapprovingly at him if he wore the leather garments he had gotten used to.

⁴ From *The Cape Herders*, page 72

Change was in the offing. In Komaggas the initial impulse came, not by a trekboer (they came later) but through a survivor from a shipwreck. Then came a missionary and then came mining, first copper and later diamond mining. Each set in motion changes that at first diminished and then obliterated all that was Khoi – identity, language and culture.

The shipwreck survivor.

According to oral history, Jasper Cloete's father was a Dutch sailor who survived from a ship wrecked not far from Komaggas at a place known today as Port Nolloth. Was he the sole survivor? He had no idea how far Cape Town was and with no prospect of getting there, he sought help from local people. Before long he took a local woman as his wife. One of their offspring was Jasper. Eventually Jasper also married a local woman and bought land around Komaggas. According to legend Jasper had bought the land from a lesser Chief serving under Karusap in circumstances many in the community, including Karusap, found questionable. Jasper Cloete became rich and it is said that his cattle were seen grazing, all the way, one hundred kilometres north, on the banks of the Great Gariep, the river the Dutch later called the Orange River.⁵

After some years the people of Chief Karusap wanted to have the intruder and his appetite for land and riches stopped. They asked that Jasper and his five strapping boys be killed.

Before consenting to the community's request Chief Karusap is said to have asked that he see Jasper, (whose mother was Khoikhoi, as was his wife) and his five sons who were after all not totally unlike the locals in appearance. Instead of ordering their execution, legend has it, the Chief saw five beautiful boys and proclaimed that, instead of their death, each one should, in time, marry a local woman. And so it happened. In time each son became the founder of a separate Cloete dynasty and their name is, to this day, the most known surname in Komaggas and beyond.

Chief Karusap's fateful decision to save Jasper and the boys, generated changes beyond what anyone could have imagined.

⁵ Conversation by the author with Ds. Jetro Cloete, former parish priest in Komaggas.

The never-ending need at the Cape for meat demanded by the crew and passengers of passing ships from Holland en route to the Far East and back, became the source of Jaspers wealth. His father's tragedy became his great fortune and triggered the end to the existence of the Khoikhoi as a distinct people. Commerce and intermarriage were at the heart of this process. The same thing was happening to Khoikhoi in other parts of Southern Africa.

The missionary.

Chief Karusap never met missionary Hinrich Schmelen and his wife Zara, people representing the London Missionary Society who settled in Komaggas in 1828. Karusap had died before their arrival, and before the start of the century that brought mostly devastation in its path to this part of the world. 1828 is the first time a written record of Komaggas is available. It is from which date the writer reconstructs the history.

Zara, the missionary's wife, would not have been much of a stranger to the locals when she came to live there, for she was Khoikhoi herself and spoke the local's language. Her family hailed from nearby Steinkopf, less than forty kilometres away. In contrast to her, her husband Hinrich, was pale skinned and struggled to learn their language. Despite his drawbacks, he had come to change things. One change he affected was to rename the village his wife's family came from. It was known as Byzondermeid before he renamed it Steinkopf. He did this as a tribute to Dr Steinkopf who headed the German religious community in The Strand, London. Hinrich had met Dr Steinkopf when he first arrived as a refugee from the occupied Duchy of Hanover, later a part of Germany. In 1803 Napoleon occupied various German principalities and the count of Hanover had to pay tribute by supplying soldiers to Napoleon. Rather than serve in Napoleons army, destined in 1812 to attack Tsarist Russia, Hinrich escaped the draft and left for London.

Young and unemployed, Hinrich was drawn to a London Missionary Society (LMS) meeting where, on a certain day, Missionary Johannes Jacobus Kicherer, a Dutch national in the service of the LMS at the Cape, spoke and introduced

three Khoikhoi Christian converts to those assembled. Hinrich, in his own words, went to Kicherer after the meeting and said: What you are doing I also want to do. And so it was arranged that Schmelen become a missionary, but not before he was sent to Berlin for several years of training⁶.

Hinrich met Zara in Pella on the Gariep (Orange) River, where she and her sister were catechists and Hinrich their Christian teacher. When the LMS asked Hinrich to explore missionary prospects in Great Namaqualand (Southern Namibia), Zara formed part of the sizeable entourage who were to join Hinrich. Zara was a late addition to the trek party; she replaced the cook who had gone ill on the day of their departure.



Part of a map drawn between 1815-1834, "Compiled by the Capt. William Owen Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge". The only identified towns in the far north are Pella and Schmelens Station. The source of the information is presumably LMS Mission Inspector John Campbell.

The journey into uncharted country would be long and arduous. Several weeks passed before they found a suitable place where the river was wide and shallow enough to get the oxen to pull the wagons to the other side. The journey had to be undertaken in winter when the mighty river carried less

⁶ From Ursula Trueper's book "The invisible Woman Zara Schmelen - An African Mission Assistant at the Cape and in Namaqualand" published by Basler Afrika Bibliographien, Switzerland. ISBN 3-905141-91-4.

water and crossings could be navigated at points where oxen could keep their heads above water. According to the early maps there were four suitable places: One was near Pella, but it was considered too dangerous at that point, the next were Ramans drift and Gudsos drift, equally unsafe, leaving finally only Sendlings drift, in the desolate Richtersfeld.

Was it a case of propinquity? During the cold winter nights Hinrich curled up in his wagon in a traditional *kaross*, a hide that served as blanket, saddle and coat. Zara, he writes, had to make do, under his wagon. His concern for her being kept warm began to take on a new dimension. And so it happened that since he was many months of ox-wagon travel-time away from any other missionary or reverend, Hinrich, after long agony and soul searching, invented a do-it-yourself wedding by proclaiming, in front of those who accompanied him, that he would wed himself to Zara. The LMS was not impressed, the more so because he kept the marriage a secret from his superiors for several years.

Hinrich's venture into Namibia was not a success. The place he renamed Bethanien, where he established himself, suffered a devastating drought and the locals did not take kindly to his venture either. He, his wife and followers thus returned, crossing the Gariep back into Little Namaqualand.

Soon after crossing the river they came across Ryk Oom Jasper Cloete (rich uncle Jasper Cloete) who urged Hinrich to establish a mission station in Komaggas. Through his father, Jasper might have considered himself a Christian and might have known about the proselytising missionary enterprise that spread from Britain first and then from all the colonizing powers in Europe across the globe⁷.

Hinrich accepted the invitation and soon built a little church and with his wife started reading and writing classes. His vision for Komaggas hastened the thrust of change.

Here in Komaggas, Zara's three daughters - half Khoi and half European - spent their early childhood. As a Christian convert Zara consented that her daughters Anna, born in

⁷ The London Mission Society had been established at the Cape in 1801.

1815, Johanna, born in 1817 and Friederika, born in 1818, be given European rather than local names. Two daughters married white men, but Friederika married a man of mixed genes and her direct lineage is present in Komaggas to this day⁸. Zara's second daughter, Johanna, married German missionary Heinrich Kleinschmidt in Komaggas in 1842. The writer of this essay is a descendent from that marriage, making him 1/64th Khoi, a lineage traceable over six generations spanning 200 years. Zara's first daughter, Anna, married a Mr Hartwell who worked at the nearby O'Kiep copper mine. It is not known if they had children.

Was Zara pure Khoikhoi or was her family already of mixed race? We do not know. Could the villages where her family resided at Byzondermeid/Steinkopf and Pella have been undisturbed Khoikhoi settlements before Schmelen arrived? The Dutch-sounding name of Byzondermeid suggests there may have been colonial links long before Hinrich arrived. Could it be that her family were related to the Oorlam Witboois who made Pella their home around this time before moving across the Gariep? Their presence coincides with the period when Zara and her sister were catechists in Pella and where they met Hinrich. Nama and Oorlam were distantly related and intermarriage would not have been impossible.

The Witbooi Oorlam were people of Khoi, slave and white origin who had inter-married at the Cape during an earlier period. Colonial pressure forced this group ever further north. Eventually they settled at Gibeon in Namibia, eighty years before the Germans arrived – where their search for independence was finally and completely ended. The Witboois and other clans who went to settle in Namibia at that time are referred to as Oorlam. The name Witbooi derived from the white bandanna around the wide-brimmed hats of their horsemen.

We know that Zara was proficient in her Khoi dialect, part of the wider Nama language group, something that enabled her and her husband to write the first basic Nama grammar which in turn enabled the two of them to translate the

⁸ Johanna lived in Otjimbingue after her husband died. One of her sons married into a 'mixed-race' family, the other seven children all chose white partners.

Gospels as well as large numbers of hymns into Nama. The translations were produced in Komaggas and the printed New Testament published in Cape Town can still be viewed at the National Library in Cape Town today.

The launch of the New Testament in Nama in 1829 was twice delayed due to extraordinary circumstances. The first occurred when Hinrich and Zara had taken the manuscript, carefully stored in a wooden container, on the back of their ox-wagon, on the long journey to Cape Town. When they opened the box in Cape Town they found that termites had entered and eaten it. Hinrich and Zara had to start all over. When they completed a second translation a new problem arose when the printer told them: You have invented letters for the different Khoi 'click' sounds and we have no lead shapes that represent these new additions to the alphabet in our printing trays. Hinrich explained, "After Dr [Philip] had present⁹ the translation to the Bibel Society, they agreed that it should be printed, but I was not aware of it, that these little signs, I had put down for pronunciation would render the printer unable to do it. And as I am now used to them I am somewhat against it to have them changed. The Dr therefore concluded that we would send for them to England, to be cast there and then begin ..."¹⁰. Throughout a long and wet winter Hinrich and Zara waited in Cape Town for the Bible Society printer in London to produce lead letters that would represent the 'click' sounds for the first time in print.

When the Gospels were eventually printed and published in Nama, Hinrich and Zara made an important acquaintance at the launch event: that of the Cape Governor, Sir Bartle Frere. He commended Hinrich for his work and offered to assist him if ever he required his intervention in the far-off Komaggas. Such help would soon be necessary, as we shall see below.

Hinrich and Zara were in retrospect, important defenders of the Namaqua language. They wrote the first rudimentary

⁹ The grammatical and spelling errors that Hinrich made have not been corrected. His language was a mixture of German, Dutch, Cape Dutch, English and sometimes Khoikhoi.

¹⁰ From Ursula Trueper: The invisible Woman Zara Schmelen – African Missionary Assistant at the Cape and in Namaland.

Khoi grammar, they invented the written form of the click sounds and they are responsible for the first printed book in the Khoi language. The same cannot be said of Robert Moffat, who served the LMS at The Eye in Kuruman at that time. He wrote: It would not be a great loss if the Hottentot language be destroyed, even though this is not probable to be the case soon because of the scattered condition of the population.¹¹

In his letters Hinrich acknowledges the key part his wife played in committing the Nama language to paper. She stands out as a pioneer black woman in the early 19th century in Southern Africa for her contribution to the Nama/Khoi language. In August 1823 Hinrich wrote to Dr Phillip, his mission superior in Cape Town: “It is extremely difficult to hid [hit] the right pronunciation. Some times my wife must say the word over and over again, before I hid [hit] the right pronunciation ... 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”.¹²

Hinrich also writes: “It is impossible for me, to find out a methode to write it that the claps [clicks] or pronunciation should come out by itself. I therefore endeavour at first to find out how many different claps they had, and what part of the mouth was employed for the pronunciation. I therefore took a looking glass and I and my wife sat before it that she might proper show, and tell me afterwards, where and how the claps were made”¹³. Hinrich wrote that he and his wife had come to the “conclusion that they had at least four claps [clicks]” and that “[s]ome have a hard sound whilst others are pronounced quite soft, that one who is not used to it may take it to be quite a different clap”¹⁴. The different ‘click’ sounds that make Khoi or Nama distinctive did not make it into modern Afrikaans.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

Although Hinrich was an agent who brought change to the people of Komaggas he also became their guardian. He wrote to Sir Bartle Frere a short while after he had met him, asking for a land surveyor to peg out the land of his congregation to be protected from the ever more threatening encroachment of *trekboere*¹⁵ entering their land. When Hinrich wrote to Sir Bartle, he was on his own as Zara had died from 'consumption' on the road back to Komaggas after the launch of the Gospels. Sir Bartle obliged and the trust land around Komaggas bears testimony to this protective measure to this day. Not surprisingly the land was registered, not in the name of a Karusap heir, but in the name of Jasper Cloete.

In this period, pressure on Khoikhoi families increased for them to drop their Khoi names and instead adopt Dutch surnames. Zara's family were no exception. Her family name changed from //Geixas to Hendriks. If Karusap had children, and one may assume he did, what surname did they adopt?

The *lingua franca* of the day was increasingly the language that was asserting itself throughout the region: the evolving Cape Dutch, later to be known as Afrikaans. Zara and Hinrich, from available evidence, spoke to their children in both Dutch and Nama although Hinrich admits in his letters that even in his older years, he struggled to speak Nama or the Khoikhoi dialects.

Hinrich died in 1848 in Komaggas where his neglected tombstone lies amongst those of the other early Christians.

The diamond mine.

At the time the original Cloete arrived, other intruders had already come to the area. At the nearby Spektakel mountain range, at Nababeep and O'Kiep, geologists, engineers, miners and fortune hunters from far-off places had come to exploit copper ore. And with mining came the need to build a

¹⁵ The trekboere also introduced the Kommando system. These were parties of armed men, supposedly there to reclaim stolen cattle, but they had become lawless raiding parties and according to Prof Nigel Penn were, until British rule took over at the Cape in 1804, responsible for the large-scale annihilation of both Khoi and San. See Nigel Penn's excellent book 'The Forgotten Frontier', Ohio University Press, ISBN 978-0-8214-1682-2.

mountain pass to the coast from where the copper was shipped to distant places. Komaggas was on the route to the Hondeklipbaai harbour first, and Port Nolloth harbour later. With mining came shops, hotels, brothels, artisan workshops and all else that miners and their bosses need and seek when not digging in the bowels of the earth. Copper had already attracted Simon van der Stel in the late 17th century, but serious mining was only started in the 19th century. Karusap might still have witnessed this.

The semi-nomadic life of Karusap's people, between the coast and the hills of Komaggas, was finally stopped, not by the *trekboere* but by the discovery of diamonds in the coastal plains. Government legislation allowed for diamond areas to be sealed off and trespassing into the proclaimed zone is a punishable offence to this day. And to this day, ninety years after the discovery of diamonds, ordinary citizens have not seen this coastline that was once theirs. The towns within the zone, Kleinzee and Koingnaas, are the private property of de Beers who control all services, shops, petrol stations and bars. All this so that foolish men will buy stones at exorbitant prices that are then treasured by gullible women swayed by de Beers' age-old sexist slogan that 'diamonds are a girl's best friend'. It has made the Oppenheimer and Rupert families some of the richest on earth – and left the offspring of Karusap and Cloete with neither the land that was once theirs nor a share in the fabulous profits de Beers and Transhex have made from mining their land.

Chief Karusap's legacy.

Jaspers five sons and Hinrich and Zara's three daughters provide us with a small window into how Karusap's people became integrated with those who were not Namaqualanders at the time. Besides their genetic make-up the newcomers brought trade and new commodities; they brought the Christian religion, the Dutch language, guns and horses and alcohol – all potent enough to vanquish those who once lived here. The system of chieftainship disappeared with Karusap, at least in its former role.

In the 21st century, when asked what happened to the Khoikhoi who once lived here, the Komaggasers' answer is vague and younger people say: we don't know, maybe the Khoikhoi went away. And what of the Khoi language? Some words are remembered but who can still converse in the language Karusap spoke? (See endnotes 3 and 4)

One generation after shipwrecked Cloete's union with a Khoi woman, and the union of Hinrich with Zara, the big South African melting pot was on the boil everywhere. Tragically, the actual moment when the 'melting' took place seems to have been forgotten by those who claim 'Coloured' identity and even more so, those who claim 'White' identity – up to the present day. But the Khoikhoi genes have not disappeared, as dark skins, wide hips and frizzy hair, to the chagrin of those in denial, return without warning and without predictable pattern, generation after generation. The writer's father, in denial about his great grandmother, was an avid consumer of Brylcreme, the pomade that straightened his otherwise black curly hair. – The nature of prejudice is to aspire to that which comes from Europe and to reject and hide that which is Khoi or black – a burden white and coloured families impose on themselves for fear of social rejection.

Ironically, the writer's father, a staunch supporter of the white Nationalist Party, scornfully called the leader of the opposition party in the white South African Parliament at the time, Sir De Villiers Graaf, "Mr South Africa". Because of his frizzy hair he labelled him of being of mixed blood.



Wilhelm Franz Heinrich Kleinschmidt, 1936, father of the author.



Sir De Villiers Graaf, leader of the Opposition United Party in the white Parliament of South Africa from 1956 - 1977.

The melting pot produced its own rich culture and identity yet within it lay embedded new seeds of division that led to new forms of domination. Those with fewer Khoikhoi genes came to rule over those with more Khoikhoi genes. Those with fewer Khoi genes declared themselves to be 'White' and demanded the power over the land and declared those with fewer Khoi genes to be 'Coloured'.

The struggle for peace has yet to be won!

If Chief Karusap knew what would happen he might well have heeded the advice of his people instead of saving the Cloete's lives. Or maybe, in his wisdom, he knew he could not stem the change that follows when the newcomers arrive. Therefore let Karusap be celebrated because he did not do what later the apartheid rulers tried to do for half a century - breed racial exclusivity based on imagined race purity.

The humble stone in the private garden of a house in Komaggas is all that reminds us of Chief Karusap today. As the last leader of the Khoikhoi before his people lost their language and way of being, his memory deserves to be better commemorated and remembered. We, who carry traces of his people's genes in our blood, must re-claim this as part of our history.

Endnotes:

Note 1: If anyone can add to the story above or wants to correct assertions or distortions, the author would be pleased to hear and make corrections.

Note 2: The above story relies on oral history as told by people of Komaggas. Weaving the Cloete and Schmelen story into that of Karusap is a way to put a recorded dates to that history and then reconstruct events backward from what we know. One might configure the following:

1. Hinrich Schmelen born 1776 in Cassebruch, Hanover, Germany, died 1848 in Komaggas.
2. Zara Schmelen (nee //Gaixas-Hendricks) born ca. 1793, died in 1829, at Botma's Hof, Heuningberg, Porterville District.
3. Assuming that Jasper Cloete was an age contemporary of the above couple, he might have lived from, say 1780 - 1850.
4. Jaspers father, the shipwreck survivor, might thus have lived 1750 - until say 1810.
5. Chief Karusap, who was asked to put an end to Jaspers commercial enterprise, might then have lived around 1720 until 1800. Schmelen, does not make mention of Karusap in his letters.

But these are assumptions that cannot be proven beyond the speculations made here. They are not historic facts but a construct to try and better understand this period.

Note 3: A valuable source of information about the Khoikhoi is the book by Boonzaaier, Malherbe, Berens and Smith, *'The Cape Herders - A History of the Khoikhoi of Southern Africa'*, first published in 1996 by David Philip Publishers and Ohio University Press (ISBN 086486 311 X). On page 35 appears an insert under the heading: Reconstructing the 'traditional' Khoikhoi, "By the time the tradition of fieldwork in social anthropology had become established, little remained of Khoikhoi society as it existed before the contact with Europeans." The text refers to the work done by Winifred Hoernle, an early and recognised social anthropologist, who wrote in 1912, after visits to the Richtersfeld, that even here she was unable to find the "pure Hottentot" and concluded that the last traces of traditional "Hottentot culture" had all but disappeared. And in the 1930's Isaac Shapera concluded that various groupings of Hottentot had "disappeared" or "vanished" and their culture had been "effaced, destroyed" and been "hopelessly broken down".

Note 4: Reports in the 1860s state that almost all the people of Komaggas and Concordia were by now 'Bastards'. By 1950 it was widely accepted that there were hardly any Khoikhoi left in Namaqualand. (Ref. The Cape Herders, page 129)

Note 5: The San people fared far worse than the Khoikhoi. The white farmer Kommando's genocide of the San has not been acknowledged and remains hidden throughout South African society. It is important to read "The anatomy of a South African Genocide - The extermination of the Cape San peoples" by Mohamed Adhkari, UCT Press, ISBN 978-1-91989-544-4.
