

A PLAY

Written by John Cloete in 1979. He was a teacher in Komaggas and wrote the play as a protest against apartheid segregation.

The play was performed by the senior pupils of the High School in Komaggas and re-enacted by the same actors, 35 years later, in 2014, at the 200th anniversary of Zara and Hinrich Schmelen's marriage, celebrated in Komaggas by their descendants.

(Translated from Afrikaans into English by Di Oliver)

Schmelen, the Giant of Missionaries

Johan Hendrik Schmelen was born on 7th January 1777 in Cassebruck, near Bremen in Germany. He died on 26th July 1848 and is buried in Komaggas.

His wife Zara was born ca. 1793 and died in 1831 when returning with her husband from Cape Town after the first Nama Bible was published. Together they translated the Gospels into the Nama or Khoi-Khoi language. Her gravesite is on the farm Heuning Fontein in the Picketberg District.



Characters:

The Revd. Johann Heinrich Schmelen
His wife, Magriet Meyer
Dr. Steinkopf
Jasper Cloete
Resident of Komaggas, Willem
The Governor
A family consisting of:
Father
Mother
Young son
Young daughter

[Organ music followed by a choir singing LEAD KINDLY LIGHT (or Be My Shepherd..)]

[As the curtain opens, Schmelen comes on with measured step. The only light on the stage is from the small torch he is holding. He goes to sit in the corner on the left side].

A VOICE: There were giants! This fact is engraved on the white marble gravestone in the old church cemetery in Komaggas. The man buried there on 26th July 1848, 131 years ago, deserves to have a wreath laid on his lonely grave to remind us what this man did for the Lord during his very eventful life. He did pioneering work. He is the one who started mission work in Komaggas. His name remains etched in our memories. His name was **Johann Heinrich Schmelen!**

SCHMELEN: [seated] I am Johann ... [stands] Johann Heinrich Schmelen! [begins to walk up and down the full length of the stage while he talks and gesticulates] It was in Germany that I saw the first light of life. Everything that I shall tell you here is the truth. Although my parents were poor, they gave me a good school education. When I became a teenager, I also became less of a believer. I remember well the time my friends and I kicked, hit and swore at two old guys. And do you know why? It was about cigarettes. Yes, I know that sounds funny. It even sounds funny to me now. Sometimes young people do get reckless. On another occasion I wanted to hit my father. Fortunately I didn't. And then one day our village was invaded by French soldiers. They wanted us to go and fight for them. I didn't see my way clear to doing that. I asked my parents if I could escape to England, to which they immediately agreed because they didn't want me to be conscripted into the military. You see, I was their child and they loved me. When I arrived in England, I, the reckless Johann, made acquaintance with Dr Steinkopf, a minister from the land of my birth.

DR. STEINKOPF: [with spectacles on, middle-aged, Bible in hand] Good day, young man. By what name are you known?

SCHMELEN: Schmelen, Doctor, Johann Schmelen. I came here because I wanted to avoid compulsory conscription into the French army.

DR. STEINKOPF: [shaking his head] I see. Tell me, Johann, do you perhaps know Jesus?

SCHMELEN: [looks at the doctor with a slight frown and then drops his head] Yes... ..no, not really. I have heard a great deal about him.

DR. STEINKOPF: That's nice. Tell me where you have heard about him? And what do you think about all the stories that have been told?

SCHMELEN: [rubbing his chin] I've heard about him from Doctor for the last three Sundays. I don't think anyone would want to do what he has done for sinners.

DR. STEINKOPF: [very satisfied] So you think he has done something really wonderful?

SCHMELEN: Yes, definitely

DR. STEINKOPF: [hands on Schmelen's shoulder] Now, young man, you need to listen very carefully. A little while ago you told me you didn't want to serve as a soldier under the French. But do you know what? You can be conscripted for Jesus? You can become a soldier for Him and in that way win souls for Him. I trust you will give this serious consideration. Let me know once you have decided. May God give you guidance. See you again! [leaves stage]

SCHMELEN: [walks across to the other side of the stage] I thought long and hard about what Dr Steinkopf had said. I lay awake for many hours at night. I became aware of the long lost nature of my soul. I thought about how my soul could be lost forever if I did not come to conversion. The words fell like seeds for sewing into my heart and caused a struggle inside of me. I struggled with God for three years as to whether I should stay in London or whether I should go to preach the joyful message of Jesus to unbelievers. Dr Steinkopf had given me advice.

DR. STEINKOPF: I see that nowadays you are looking forward to this work, young man. I am so delighted the Lord wants to use you in His service.

SCHMELEN: I am too, doctor. But I am still not sure what precisely is wanted of me.

DR. STEINKOPF: You mean you don't know exactly where the Lord will use you?

SCHMELEN: Yes, exactly. I don't know if I should work here in London or whether I must rather go to the heathens.

DR. STEINKOPF: I think I can solve that problem for you. The best advice I can give you is to allow yourself to be trained by Pastor Janicke. It will take four years, or is that too long?

SCHMELEN: No, it certainly isn't too long. I shall follow your advice. I feel that is the best thing to do.

DR. STEINKOPF: You won't regret it, young man. Just know this: God will always be with you. You just stay at God's side.
[leaves the stage]

[HYMN: ALBET-DUET: a Cross far away]

SCHMELEN: In 1811 I went to South Africa to work amongst those who had not heard about Jesus. It was in the region of the Orange River. It was a harsh environment. But I was not alone as I found my way into these unknown worlds. No, there was Webner, Helm and Sass. Just remember ... those were difficult years. Yes (sigh) ... but the Lord was always with us. At the Orange River, I moved around with the people ... from place to place. I taught them from the Bible every day and taught their children to read and write. You ask me what they wrote on? In the sand, friends. You probably also want to know what they used to write with. With their fingers, of course. No, (laughs) ... there wasn't homework. I was of course very patient with them, and never gave anyone a hiding. Remember, they knew very little about civilization. It was a difficult assignment. In 1816 I went to Steinkopf where I married Magriet Meyer.

MAGRIET: [comes onto the stage] You must be hungry, my dear husband. You work so hard and hardly ever rest.

SCHMELEN: My rest is not on earth. I'll rest when my work here is done. And do you know, dear one, without you it would have been much harder.

MAGRIET: [laughs roguishly] Oh, dear husband, how exactly do I help you? You do all the work here. I just make sure you have something to eat.

SCHMELEN: That's exactly why I can do my work so well. You inspire me to greater heights. You help me to proclaim the Word of the Lord.

MAGRIET: Thank you very much for those kind words, dear one. You make me feel so happy. I would do anything to help you in your work.

SCHMELEN: But you are already doing so much. You forget that it is you who is helping me to translate the Bible into Nama.

MAGRIET: Yes, but I feel it is my duty because I know our language very well.

SCHMELEN: You are such a dear person. Do you still remember our wedding day?

MAGRIET: Of course I do. How could I forget? It was the most wonderful day in my life.

SCHMELEN: I assume you recall that I was the one to marry us?

MAGRIET: So, what is wrong with that? You couldn't have done anything else. There was, after all, no one else to do it.

SCHMELEN: But, do you feel you are married?

MAGRIET: [goes closer and puts her arm around his neck] Of course I feel like I am married. I'll always feel that way. But, wait now, there are still things to do outside. [leaves stage]

SCHMELEN: Remember that I loved her very much. The good Lord gave her to me. She has been a tower of strength and a good friend for life. I had her and, of course I had ... Koeskopus. That was my pack ox. Whenever I travelled, it was with him. On one such journey, Jasper Cloete, a farmer from Komaggas came across me in 1829 on the farm in Ugrabies, near Port Nolloth.

[in the veld... in the morning ... the sound of sheep can be heard]

JASPER: [appears, klerie in his hand, hat on his head] Good morning, Sir. My name is Jasper Cloete.

SCHMELEN: Pleased to make your acquaintance, Jasper. It is always good to come across new faces. I am Schmelen, a missionary. Where are you travelling to?

JASPER: I'm going back to Komaggas. Do you see how dry the earth is, Sir? It was when I was looking for good veld when I came across the Orange River. That is where one of my sons died.

SCHMELEN: Oh, I am sorry to hear about your loss. What did you do with his body?

JASPER: I buried him there. Life goes on. It doesn't help to be sad. Now I'm going to Komaggas again.

MAGRIET: Oh, good morning! I wondered who you were having such a good chat to, Johann.

JASPER: Good morning. My name is Jasper [shakes hands]. I am from the farm Komaggas.

MAGRIET: Oh, yes, I have heard a great deal about Komaggas. It isn't very far from here is it?

JASPER: No, only about three days journey from here.

SCHMELEN: It must be a productive farm, this Komaggas?

JASPER: Oh, certainly. It has plenty of water and fertile soil. I've actually been wondering if you wouldn't like to go there, Sir. We need someone like you there. We very much want the place to develop. There will be plenty of work there, Sir.

MAGRIET: Yes, Johann. It looks like we should go to this little place. It is, of course, the Lord who wants us there. After all, we are in His service. Come, let us go there.

SCHMELEN: Jasper, if my wife starts to talk like this, then I know I must go! Very well, I shall go there and see what the Lord wants me to do there. But first, I must be officially instructed to go there. I shall first have to let my principals know about Komaggas and tell them I'd very much like to go there.

JASPER: Thank you very much, Sir. I hope you will be very happy at Komaggas. [leaves stage]

SCHMELEN: I was then appointed to work there by the London Missionary Society. Komaggas is a lovely place. A real oasis. I remember how lyrical my wife was about the place.

MAGRIET: Oh Johann, it is a beautiful place! The Lord will always bless us here. Nothing can go wrong here.

SCHMELEN: Yes, that is true. One feels the presence of the Lord in such a place.

[Willem, another resident of the place joins Schmelen, his wife and Jasper Cloete]

WILLEM: Good morning Sir. Have you come to stay with us?

SCHMELEN: Yes, indeed

JASPER: This man has come to tell us about Jesus.

WILLEM: [surprised] About Jesus? Who is that? I haven't ever heard about Him.

MAGRIET: This Jesus came to die for our sins, yours and mine.

WILLEM: For me? Where? When?

JASPER: Willem, don't be in such a hurry. This man will still tell you everything. That is why he is coming here.

SCHMELEN: Wait a minute, Jasper, let me quickly reply to Willem. [turns towards Willem]. Jesus died on a hill called Golgotha very long ago. There are many songs about this.

[Albet duet]

WILLEM: Thank you, Sir. Thank you very much [leaves stage]

SCHMELEN: Tell me, Jasper, have you ever had any bread to eat?

JASPER: No, Sir, only meat, milk and honey.

SCHMELEN: [surprized] You don't know bread? Then it is time you folk started to eat bread.

[CURTAIN]

A VOICE: Johann Schmelen did not only bring the Good News to Komaggas. Oh, no. He also established fields for planting in suitable areas. And for the first time, the residents could have bread.

[in the house of a Komaggas family. The woman is busy in the kitchen. Her husband comes in with milk, honey and bread]

FATHER: My dear wife, what do you say about everything? We eat meat and honey and we drink plenty of milk. And now we are also going to eat bread [takes a roosterkoek out of the oven]

MOTHER: Yes, it means we are going to live very well in the future.

FATHER: Yes, we must remember what Ds Schmelen said – that the Lord provides for all our needs.

SON: [storms in] My father has arrived! My father is here!

DOGTER: When did father arrive?

FATHER: Just now, my child.

SON: What is this, Mother?

MOTHER: That is bread, my child.

DAUGHTER: Where did you get it, Mother?

MOTHER: from dear Jesus

BOTH: [surprised] from whom?

FATHER: From our loving Jesus, my children. Ds Schmelen told us about him.

SON: yes, alright. But when was Jesus here?

[Mother and Father look at each other]

FATHER: Listen here, my dear children. We can't see Jesus. He is far above in heaven. But it is Him who provides food and clothing for us. It is He who gives us life. One day when you are older you will understand. You just have to believe there is someone like this.

DAUGHTER: Yes, Father, I shall believe that.

SON: May I have some of the bread?

MOTHER: Yes, of course. Both of you take some and go and play with your friends [takes some bread and leaves]

FATHER: Do you know, my wife, this is really difficult. Dominee tells us we must believe, but I also don't understand everything so well.

MOTHER: What is the matter with you? Dominee only told us we mustn't doubt what he has told us. It is then that the devil takes his chance.

SCHMELEN: Good day, good day! How are things going here? There is a wonderful aroma coming from here!

FATHER: No, Dominee, everything is still fine here. We are very well.

MOTHER: There are no problems here, Sir. Wouldn't you like to taste our bread?

SCHMELEN: Definitely! [tastes] Mmmmm – it is delicious. I shall have to take some for my wife.

MOTHER: Only with pleasure. I shall wrap some in paper for her.

FATHER: It is such a great thing that you taught us, dominee – I mean how to sew seed. Now we have sufficient on which to live.

SCHMELEN: I am so pleased you see it that way. But this is the real bread of life in my hands. If you eat of this bread, you will never hunger. Listen to what is written here:

FATHER: Thank you very much for everything you are doing for us, Dominee. God will bless you.

[CURTAIN]

VOICE: In 1831 Heinrich Schmelen went to Cape Town with the four Gospels and a number of books written in the Nama language. His wife had helped him a good deal with these translations.

MAGRIET: You know, Johann, I am very pleased we have started with the translation of the Bible into Nama.

SCHMELEN: Yes, dear one, and now the translation and printing is ready.

MAGRIET: Now your work will be less demanding.

SCHMELEN: And I have all this to thank you for, my dear. Without your help, I would never have got this far.

MAGRIET: [shyly] I only did the Lord's work.

SCHMELEN: And the Lord will bless you greatly. You are a good person.

MAGRIET: My work on earth is now complete. Now the Lord can take me home.

SCHMELEN: Now we must hand a copy of the Gospels to the governor.

[music or song – lights out]

[in the Governor's house. Schmelen and his wife come in]

GOVERNOR: Ah, the Reverend Schmelen. Why do I have the honour of this visit?

SCHMELEN: Oh, Sir. Meet my wife.

GOVERNOR: How do you do, Ma'am

SCHMELEN: We have come to present you with translations of the four Gospels into Nama. It is the first translation of its kind.

GOVERNOR: [very impressed] That is excellent news. May I see?

SCHMELEN: My wife is chiefly responsible for this translation.

MAGRIET: And my husband worked very hard to complete it, good Sir.

GOVERNOR: This is an unsurpassed achievement, my dear friends. It is something that must be kept for future generations.

SCHMELEN: I am delighted you think so, Sir.

GOVERNOR: Now, what can I do for you and your people, Revd Schmelen?

SCHMELEN: It would gladden the hearts of my people if you could come to Komaggas, Sir.

GOVERNOR: I shall do that with the greatest of pleasure. Rest assured.

SCHMELEN: Thank you very much for that, Sir. You need do no more than that. And now my wife and I must return to Komaggas.

GOVERNOR: May you go well and please give my greetings to your people.

SCHMELEN: Only with pleasure, thank you, Sir.

A VOICE: On their return journey, God called the Reverend Schmelen's wife home. He remarried and continued with his mission work in Komaggas. But the years caught up. Schmelen's strength proved to be insufficient for this great work. By the age of 62 he had already taken on some help. His strength deteriorated and he could no longer do the Lord's work on earth.

[Schmelen lying on a bed. Women and children surround him, mourning]

SCHMELEN: Do not weep over me. I have to go home.

A WOMAN: [sniffs] But, dominee, you can't leave us here alone. We love you.

A MAN: Dominee, we won't be able to go on without you.

SCHMELEN: No, there is a time for everything. A time to come and a time to go. It is now time for me to go. [eyes become glassy; as he breathes his last] The Lord is near, the Lord is near!

[organ music – Where you go forever]

[curtain closes as the music continues]

THE END

