**BETHEL CHURCH, KOMAGGAS**



The Bethel Church, built by Hirich and Zara Schmelen in 1897. Today nothing remains of the clay brick building but local people take you to the spot and point out the foundations.

(Photo taken by the Rev Gottlieb Meyer, last Rhenish missionary at Komaggas)

On a vast plain behind the hills where Komaggas is today, surrounded by occasional *veeposte* (stock posts), once stood the first Northern Cape Church, built by Johann Hinrich Schmelen, (missionary of the London Missionary Society) and his wife Zara. They arrived here in 1828 after drought and tensions in Bethanien (Southern Namibia) forced them to vacate their first mission station. They intended to retreat to the Great Gariep, the Orange River, but here they met Jasper Cloete, an influential farmer, who asked them to start a mission at Komaggas.

Khoi-khoi Chief Karusap died in Komaggas before the Schmelens arrived. He appears to be the last Chief before Khoi life and culture was radically and profoundly changed and affected by colonial traders, farmers and not least by the missionaries.

On these plains people looked after their livestock. When water was scarce, they took their cattle to the coast to benefit from winter rains. The land was managed and kept productive through rotational grazing in which all owners of animals participated. The system had been practised since time immemorial. This tradition was impinged upon when colonial nomadic stock farmers, known as *trekboere*, encroached on their springs and fields. The tradition of land use was further compromised when diamond companies alienated the coastal strip from Khoi communities in the north from the Orange down to the Groen River.

Hinrich Schmelen made three lasting interventions to the people of Komaggas and the wider Nama-Khoi communities.

Firstly, he and his wife Zara wrote the first Nama grammar and invented a written version of the ‘click’ sound. They did this in order to translate the four Gospels into the Nama-Khoi language and had the first Nama Bible printed and published in 1831. They also translated Psalms and texts for young catechists.

Secondly, Hinrich Schmelen introduced the cultivation of wheat into the region and into local culture. The diet of the people previously consisted mostly of meat, milk, honey and root vegetables but has since been augmented with the baking of bread. Each year wheat is now sown on these plains and the nearby *Koringtrap (trapvloer/threshing floor)* in the picture above, testifies to the way that chaff was separated from the grain.

Thirdly, the British Governor of the Cape, Sir Lowry Cole, in 1836, responded to Hinrich Schmelen plea that the land around Komaggas be surveyed and granted in perpetuity to the whole Komaggas community thus stopping further *trekboer* impingement of local springs and fertile grasslands. A section of the land surrounding Komaggas has remained for communal use by the original inhabitants to this day. Although smaller than what had traditionally been community land, neither colonial nor apartheid rule took away the land secured by Schmelen.