

### Unacknowledged Mission Heroes

**Ursula Trüper, *The Invisible Woman: Zara Schmelen, African Mission Assistant at the Cape and in Namaland***

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At the age of thirteen, the author of this book, living in Germany, discovered that she had an African ancestor, who had been married to her great-great-great grandfather, the missionary Johann Heinrich Schmelen, who had worked for the London Missionary Society (LMS) in what is now Namibia and the Northern Cape in the early nineteenth century.

Her family knew nothing of this African woman, not even her name. In the LMS archives, Trüper learnt that her name was Zara (Sarah) Hendrichs, and found evidence that suggested that without her help, Schmelen would not have been able to undertake his pioneering work of translating the four Gospels into Nama. Also in the work of evangelisation, Zara had played a previously unacknowledged role. Other recent work on early missionary work in southern Africa has emphasised the previously neglected role of both missionary wives and indigenous assistants. In this case the two were combined in the person of Zara Schmelen.

Zara remains “invisible” in that no picture of her exists, and little is known of her life. Trüper tries to provide context by writing about the background to Schmelen’s work and she includes sixteen appendices, but she does not distinguish clearly enough between fact and speculation (Schmelen may well have been helped by other mission assistants to translate from Nama, for instance).

More importantly, her book, published in German in 2000, has not been updated. Trüper has not used recent relevant work that would have helped flesh out her slight story and place it in better context. She lists Tilman Dederling’s excellent book on the missionaries in southern Namibia, the most important single source for that context in her Bibliography, but not Elizabeth Elbourne’s major work on the missionaries in the Eastern Cape, nor the detailed studies by

Douglas Stuart, Julia Wells and Candy Malherbe.<sup>7</sup> As a result, Zara's story is not seen in the comparative context that would have given this book greater depth.

One example in this regard is that she does not outline how often the early missionaries formed relationships with indigenous women, nor the significance of the 1817 Synod in Cape Town, here mentioned only in passing (p 44), which dismissed and recalled James Read after his adultery, but found that Schmelen's marriage, though irregular (he had conducted it himself, by his own account after he and Zara had had to spend a night alone in a closed wagon together), was not grounds for dismissal (Appendix 8 and Elbourne, *Blood Ground*, pp 229-230). Another example: while we are told that Zara "had managed to do what was thought impossible, namely transform the difficult Nama language with all the clicks into a written language" (p viii), Schmelen's translation of the Gospels and hymns from Nama was incomprehensible to the Nama themselves because the printer had omitted the click symbols.<sup>8</sup> Nor does she mention, let alone explore, the possible significance of the comment by Schmelen's followers when Zara died, that "he must have a Christian wife" (Dederling, *Hate the Old*). One could go on. While it is good to have this book available in English, it should be extensively revised and updated for a new edition.

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7. T. Dederling's revised UCT doctoral thesis was published under the title *Hate the Old and Follow the New. Khoekhoe and Missionaries in Early Nineteenth Century Namibia* (F. Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart, 1997). His review of the German edition of this book, U. Trüper, *Die Hottentottin. Das kurze Leben der Zara Schmelen (ca. 1793-1831)*, appeared in *South African Historical Journal*, 45, November 2001. Also: E. Elbourne, *Blood Ground Colonialism, Missions and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799-1853* (MQUP, Montreal, 2002); D. Stuart, in Institute of Commonwealth Studies, *Collected Seminar Papers on the Societies of Southern Africa XVIII*, (University of London, London, s.d.); J. Wells, "The Scandal of Reverend James Read and the Taming of the London Missionary Society by 1820", *South African Historical Journal*, 42, May 2000; C. Malherbe, "The Life and Times of Cupido Kakkerlak", *Journal of African History*, 20, 3, 1979.
  8. W. Haacke, "Nama: Survival Through Standardization", in I. Fodor and C. Hagege (eds), *Language Reform History and Future* (Buske, Hamburg, 1989), p 404. I thank Professor Haacke of the University of Namibia for this reference.