

The Development of Methodism in modern-day Botswana: 19th century Nationals in Mission?

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[Note: Methodism in Botswana is part of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, Limpopo District. Congregations are concentrated in the South East, close to Mafikeng and the South African border, along the railway line, which runs through Botswana towards Bulawayo and in the area to the north and east of Francistown]

Why Botswana?

It may well seem very perverse to focus on missionary activity in the entity now known as Botswana. No Methodist missionary from Britain was ever stationed permanently within the borders of modern day Botswana until 1990, yes, 1990 not 1890, when the late Rev Alan Ingrouille was stationed in Gaborone the capital.

Botswana, Bechuanaland or the country north of the Molopo river as it was variously known over the period 1800 to the modern day was always on the edge, a route to somewhere else rather than an end in itself. [Batswana – that is people who speak Setswana in one of its various forms have always been more numerous in South Africa than in Botswana itself. The Barolong sub-group of Batswana have been the ones mission by Methodists from the early days.]

Botswana is almost 80% semi-desert, the population, now about 1.5million in area the size of France and Belgium out together, has always been small and cattle have always outnumbered people. The life-style of the people based on three site system of living – in a village , at the arable lands and far away herding the cattle has never been conducive to the development of consistent teaching and practice of the Christian life.

In religious terms, this area was long the preserve of the London Missionary Society as they moved north from the Moffatt base in Kuruman in what is now the Northern Cape of South Africa towards what is now Zimbabwe.

So why look at mission in Botswana? Firstly because that is where I lived for 21 years and where I became fascinated by the way in which the Christian faith in general and Methodism in particular has spread out over the years and left the impact of its mode of dissemination on present patterns of thought and organisation and practice within Methodism.

Also as recent generations of historians have looked at history from the underside, from my background in Geography I thought it may be interesting and informative to look at mission history from the underside of location, those on the margins, far from the centre of planning and

resources.

What does need to be said at this point is that the Bechuanaland of past decades and the Botswana of today, along with Swaziland and Lesotho, were never intended to be independent political entities. Both in the minds of the British colonisers and of white and black South Africans it was always supposed that these three entities would be incorporated into South Africa. Apartheid and the advent of the Nationalist Government put paid to that. Until the independence of Botswana in 1966, Mafikeng, a place so crucial to Methodist history was the capital and outside the border of Botswana. Ironically one of the areas in which the whole region still hangs together is in the Churches. Botswana remains today one of the six nations to compose the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

Why now?

Earlier this year as part of the Tercentenary celebrations the York and Hull District signed a Covenant with the York Diocese of the Church of England. That Diocese has a link with the Diocese of Cape Town and so the Methodist District also developed a link with the Cape of Good Hope District of the MCSA. It was not just a link of convenience to parallel the Anglican situation. It had its roots deep in mission history. The very first missionary to travel to South Africa and to move beyond the confines of Cape Town was one, Barnabas Shaw, a native of Elloughton in the East Riding of Yorkshire. His grandparents had entertained the first Methodist preachers and supplied the transport to build the first Wesleyan Chapel in Pocklington. The Bishop of the Cape of Good Hope District, Rev Andrew Hefkie, visited Elloughton in May this year to give thanks for the life and work of Barnabas Shaw and for all the influence which has spread from it. All of this is indicative of a renewed interest in mission history within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa itself.

The Methodists of Botswana also need to give thanks for the life and work of Barnabas Shaw, who, though he never set foot in any part of modern day Botswana was very influential in ensuring that the Christian Gospel reached the Bechauna as the people were then known.

The Long March

Shaw's main area of work was in Namaqualand, in the north of the modern day Cape Province of South Africa. The Missionary Society never planned for him to be there – in fact what they knew of the geography of the region could probably have been written on the back of a postage stamp. He went deep into the interior because he was prevented by the strict laws of the Cape from doing any serious work among the indigenous people and slaves of the area.

The early 19th century was a time of great upheaval in southern Africa – people on the move for trade and for land, people fleeing from war and people moving to wage war on others. Shaw and the colleagues who followed him entered a maelstrom – their missionary activity both a casualty and a beneficiary of the unsettled times.

Shaw managed to settle at a place called Lilyfontein and attempted settled agriculture in the hope

that the semi-nomadic people who had pleaded with him to come and be their missionary would settle down and live a life conducive to teaching and the building up of a Christian community. Shaw and those who came to be his colleagues were always on the look out for new opportunities for mission and, it needs to be said, for ensuring that other Mission Societies, especially the London Missionary Society, did not steal a march on them and carve up areas of influence before they even got there.

So it was that they looked north and east towards some more settled Bechuana people with whom the London Missionary Society already had contact. Information about these groups did not only come from the missionaries of the LMS but also by way of the local traders who were always moving to and fro over large distances. The information and intelligence was not a one-way street. The peoples of the interior also began to learn about these strange white people, 'batho ba Lehoko' – 'People of the Word', as they came to be known, and saw the significance of having their own missionary. Missionaries became a necessary part of every chief's weapons of defence in the internecine wars that were taking place. Missionaries had contact with people of power in the Cape and beyond, missionaries had guns, missionaries could get messages from bits of paper, missionaries could summon water from the ground, proof indeed that they were people who were in contact with 'madeemo' (Modimo in modern Setswana) – the 'One Above'.

As well as struggling against powerful physical enemies, chiefs had also to negotiate the boundary between tradition and invading new ideas and practices introduced by the migration of peoples and by the coming of Europeans. Many cleverly kept a foot in both camps by inducting their senior sons into the tribal rites and rituals whilst sending the younger sons to stay with the missionaries and learn their ways or by sending them to school to learn the language and writing of the white people.

So from the 1820s onwards missionaries were sent out by Shaw from Namaqualand – Kay, Hodgson, Broadbent and Archbell were sent to the supposedly settled Batswana. But the Batswana groups of the area were not settled – war and rumours of war scattered them time and again. The missionaries who were sent to them became nomads and wanderers, too but much against their wishes so they were always looking for a way and a place to get people settled so that they could develop agriculture, institute regular worship and start working on the language and the education of the people.

It would take pages to detail the wanderings of the groups of Batswana and their missionaries so only the major points will be alluded to here. *(For a longer account see: 'The origins and Development of the Methodist Mission Work in the area of Present-day Botswana' by Jennifer Potter. This is part of the 'Studies on the Church in Southern Africa' produced by the Theology and Religious Studies Department of the University of Botswana.)*

In 1826 the missionaries identified Platberg, a place now in the Northern Cape and close to the Vaal River, as a place to settle the Seleka group of the Barolong, under their chief Sefunelo, with whom they had had most contact. The longed-for, settled work of mission began and there was also outreach among a nearby group of mixed race people, known as Griquas.

1832 was a very significant year for the future of mission work in the area and among Batswana generally. Warfare and unsettled conditions north of Platberg caused about 4000 Barolong from the area around the Molopo River (the border area of Botswana) to flee for protection to their 'cousins'. The arrival of this big group precipitated a crisis. The area of land around Platberg could not sustain the rapidly expanding population – grazing and water supplies were strained to the limit. Action had to be taken if people were to be saved from hunger and drought.

And so, to cut a very long story short, The Wesleyan missionaries took a bold and momentous decision. They sought a new and larger place for the people to settle and to this end they negotiated, through their friends from the Paris Missionary Society, with King Moshoeshe of the Basotho and were 'loaned' land to the west of the modern Lesotho border at a place called Thaba Nchu (Black Mountain). So in the years 1833-34 the whole company of people at Platberg on the Vaal set off on the long trek eastwards towards the Mohakare (Orange) River – a journey of 200 miles. With the missionaries at the head of the trek the movement was likened to the journey of the Israelites to the 'promised land'. In fact hymns were written which made this parallel explicit and which have helped to fix the memory of the migration in the minds of the Barolong as an instance of divine intervention in their history.

For the future of Methodism in Botswana the most significant factor was that among those who trekked eastwards were the group of Barolong from the Molopo River area – from 'Botswana'.

Once in Thaba Nchu the missionaries set to work to establish all that they considered necessary for thorough mission work – schools, a printing press, work on translating the Bible and hymns into Setswana, baptism classes and the training of local people as Local Preachers. One of those who came for baptism and later trained as a preacher was Molema, son of the chief of the Molopo Barolong. His public reception of Christianity caused his father much anguish but did not deflect Molema away from his faith.

The life in Thaba Nchu was very attractive for the Barolong from the Molopo – the soil was better, the rain more reliable and the area not so remote from growing centres but intelligence reached them that trekking Afrikaners had their covetous eyes on the land from which they had run away. If they did not return they would lose their claim over their ancestral lands. So it was decided that they had to return to their own land – a long and arduous journey.

They set off in 1841 and arrived back home in waves of people throughout 1848. It was Molema and the other young local preachers who maintained worship and teaching on the 300 mile trek back home and who continued to hold worship and to establish schools once they settled back home in the area near to Mafikeng. Hewson, writing in his *Introduction to South African Methodism of Bechuanaland* (Botswana), states “ He, Molema, kept this neglected claim safe for Methodism.”

Sadly life on the Molopo was no more settled in 1848 than it had been two decades earlier and within a short time after their return the Barolong of the Molopo were forced to flee to the northern side of the river, into present-day Botswana, into an area which was usually only the grazing land for their cattle. Despite their unsettled condition, indeed partly because of it, the

Barolong kept on asking the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society to send them a missionary. They did not waste much time in doing that for the new chief, Montshiwa, sent his brother, the preacher, Molema, back to Thaba Nchu to ask for one in 1849. The Missionary Society were sorely strapped both for personnel as well as for finance but in 1851 they sent the German Methodist convert, Rev J.D.M. Ludorf to check on the situation on the Molopo – a journey of 17 days. Ludorf was a doctor and a reasonably fluent Setswana speaker as well as a minister. He was also ‘bush-wise’ about the context into which he was going as one of his early sermons shows. Basing what he had to say on the text from Acts 10:29, “Wherefore did you call me?” he told the assembled company that if they had called him to extricate them from political difficulties, for trade, to make rain, to repair guns or give them ammunition they were going to be disappointed because he had come for love of their immortal souls to preach the Kingdom of God.

Ludorf stayed for some time and tried to make the material as well as spiritual state of the people better but the Boers were in expansive mode wanting to claim land ‘right up to the Equator’. They even tried to buy Ludorf off by asking him to be their minister and promising him material benefits.

As a result of the unsettled nature of the area and the difficulty of finding ministers to go to the Molopo work among these Barolong was under the superintendence of Thaba Nchu between 1852 and 1873, with Ludorf trying to pay annual visits whenever the situation would allow it.

The day to day care of the people, their worship life and the teaching in the school was under Molema and the other preachers who had been trained during their stay in Thaba Nchu. Requests for a missionary were sent repeatedly to the District Synod but all to no avail.

In 1880 Montshiwa, the chief, wrote to the District Synod,

‘I say I want a White Missionary. I quite agree with the words of the Church. I greatly desire one who will teach us the manners and customs of the White People ... I speak thus because I love my Church of the Wesleyans. If you cast me off, let me know speedily.’

Montshiwa was clever enough to be able to use the competition between missionary groups to his own advantage.

On the wider geopolitical map of Southern Africa the 1880s was the decade of struggle between the British and the Boers for control and occupation of vast areas of the interior. Spurred on partly by that and by the prospect of autonomy for the South African Methodist Church south of the Vaal River, there was a renewed attempt to get the work north of the Vaal organised on a better footing.

The newly appointed Chairman of the Transvaal District was Rev Owen Watkins, a man of vision and great plans. In the midst of all of this activity after so much neglect the faithful preacher and leader, Molema died on 21st January 1882. It is said that on his deathbed he

prophesied that ‘when the Missionary Society learns that I, your father, Molema, am dead and that you are orphans then they will send a man to take care of you and the Church of God.’

Watkins indeed had plans to send a missionary to Mafikeng as part of his three-pronged mission drive to the north based on Mafikeng in the west, Pretoria in the centre and Swaziland in the east. It was an ambitious plan but well thought out. Most of the work was to be done by African evangelists and to this end a Training Institution had been set up at Kilnerton, near Pretoria. At last it seemed as if the Molopo Barolong were going to become integrated into a much more systematic mission programme and that those north of the Molopo River in present-day Botswana might be given attention.

But it was not to be. In the 1880s gold was found on the Witwatersrand and all the Churches resources both financial and in manpower were poured into responding to the great influx of people to the mines and towns around Johannesburg. Molema’s people were left orphans and the Methodists across the Molopo River in Botswana continued to be an infrequently visited off-shoot of the work in Mafikng until way into the 20th century.

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