

Methodist Missionaries and State formation in 19th century Southern Africa

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Introduction

I would like at the outset of this paper to say something about how I came to work on the introduction of Methodism into the area now known as Botswana. I want to do this because I think it raises issues which are quite important for how research is done and more especially on how research is disseminated.

I taught in Botswana from 1975-96 and was also a local Preacher in the local Methodist Church. I continued my theological education there by extension and then part-time at the University of Botswana doing a Diploma in Theology. Part of that Diploma was a project on local Church History and that is how I came to work on the coming of Methodism to the Botswana people.

When I began to look into that history I was surprised that it took me right back to the origins of Methodism in Southern Africa at the Cape. I was fortunate to be able to use the Methodist records housed at the Cory Library in Grahamstown, South Africa and the National Archives in Gaborone, Botswana as well as the mission records housed at the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. All of that was in 1986. Nine years later the Department of Theology and Religious Studies approached me with a request to allow my Diploma in Theology dissertation (and those of fellow students) to be edited into a booklet and published for use by the students in the Department. The Department had come to realise how minimal were the resources for students to work on local Church History and how inaccessible to people in Botswana most of the records were.

I have written about this here at some length because I feel that it is important that, as we try to ensure for British Methodism that we do not 'lose' our mission history, it is equally important that churches and students of church history in the former mission fields, have access to the resources that we produce relating to their country or area, so that they, too, can understand and write about their own church history.

Methodist Missions in Southern Africa

As I have hinted already, the coming of Methodism into the area now known as Botswana cannot be understood without looking at the whole context of missions to Southern Africa.

In the early days of British contact with the Cape, Methodist missionaries were not given permission to preach and hold services. That privilege was reserved for the Dutch Reformed Church among the settlers and the Anglican Church among the army garrison. The first Methodist missionary called by Methodist soldiers in the garrison came in 1814, was forbidden to exercise his ministry and proceeded to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in frustration. Two years later another attempt was made to gain the services of a missionary and Barnabas Shaw arrived built a Chapel at Wynberg only to find that it was burnt down almost immediately.

Barnabas Shaw then hit on the idea of going beyond the boundaries of Cape Colony – way beyond areas of British or, indeed, any other control. Having obtained information from a London Missionary Society (LMS) missionary about the lands further north, Shaw and his party set off towards Lilyfontein, where the inhabitants were largely Khoisan people. To cut a long story short, Shaw and other missionaries who came to join him made links with Griqua traders in the interior, with the LMS missionaries at Campbell and Kuruman. Although the region was in a state of warfare and tumult, they decided to try to work amongst people known as Bechuana (Batswana). Why did they identify Batswana as the people to whom they would go? There were two reasons. Firstly, because the Tswana people were known to be a settled group, unlike the nomadic and semi-nomadic Khoi and Griquas and secondly, and far less laudably, the Methodists did not want the LMS to have a monopoly on work with the tribes of the interior. The LMS who had offered considerable help to the Methodists were pretty angry over the scarcely veiled challenge to some of their mission areas.

By 1822 a Methodist mission party consisting of Revs Broadbent and Hodgson arrived at Griquatown ready to set off to establish a foothold among the Batswana people. By chance as they travelled they met up with a group of people fleeing from attack. In time they were able to identify the group as the Barolong of Seleka, a Setswana-speaking group who had been attacked in the context of the fighting and unsettled nature of the interior. In those chaotic conditions chiefs were eager to have their ‘own’ missionaries, as a source of protection and information as well as a possible source of guns and other desired objects. Broadbent and Hodgson decided to throw in their lot with this group of Barolong led by Chief Sefunelo. The missionaries desperately wanted to find a suitable place to settle. To do so would allow them to build houses and grow crops and offer them the hope of learning the language, teaching and preaching to the people. Time and again attacks and rumours of attacks meant that they had to abandon their fledgling settlement and move on. Things became so bad that Sefunelo withdrew with his people to the north, to the area of the Molopo River where they sought refuge with the related Tshidi Barolong group. In frustration the missionaries withdrew south to the relative security of

Griquatown.

The missionaries were deeply frustrated. They wanted desperately to get on with the work of preaching the Gospel to the people. They wanted to be able to send positive reports back to their supporters in the churches in Britain. So in 1826 they tried once again to get the Barolong to settle and they did this by trying their hand as peace negotiators between the warring groups but all to no avail. Their mission was on the brink of failure and so they threatened Sefunelo that unless his people settled, the missionaries would leave them and go and seek another tribe to work with.

Sefunelo gave way under this ultimatum and the whole tribal group and ‘their’ missionaries moved eastwards to Platberg on the Modder River. For a while life was settled, crops were grown and harvested and a start made with schools and the building of a place for worship. In 1832, as a result of fighting in the Molop o area, the Tshidi Barolong with whom Sefunelo and his people had sought refuge returned the complement and came to live with their cousins at Platberg. This event precipitated a crisis – there were now in excess of 8000 people living in a restricted area which could not support their needs adequately. The missionaries began to investigate other areas in which the people might settle and have land sufficient to sustain them. The Methodist missionaries travelled eastwards and spoke with their friends the Paris missionaries who had established themselves with the Basotho King, Moshoeshoe. Land near the Caledon River was identified and an agreement, later to be a cause of much dispute, with King Moshoeshoe.

“So at the close of 1833, the chiefs (Sefunelo had died and had been succeeded by Moroka) emigrated from Bootchap and Platberg on the Vaal River, and directed their steps towards the country of the Basotho. They were accompanied by their spiritual teachers, the Revs J Archbell, Thos Jenkins, J Edwards, J Allison and Thos Sefton. The unexpected appearance of these strangers created some alarm among the Basotho.”

(R. Germond, Chronicles of Basutoland p 165)

So in the years 1833-4 there was an exodus of people from Platberg to the new area of settlement near the border of present-day Lesotho. The missionaries consciously likened this movement to the Exodus of the people of Israel to the Promised Land and wrote hymns to make this parallel explicit: *Modimo wa boikanyo Re ikanya mo go wena O gogile borraetsho Mo dinageng tsa lenyora (Trustworthy God, We put our faith in you You led our forefathers Through the thirsty deserts).*

The new area of settlement was known as Thaba Nchu (Black Mountain) and became the centre and hub of Methodist work among Setswana speakers. The chiefly family took a great interest in the missionaries and their work without committing themselves. Both missionaries and the chiefly clan benefited from the settlement at Thaba Nchu. For the people it provided a better-

watered place with good soils for their agriculture and for the missionaries it was a place where people could settle and where schools and clinics and churches could be built and the work of forming a Christian community be undertaken. Thaba Nchu had similarities with the LMS initiated settlement at Kuruman.

In consequence of this missionary initiative Thaba Nchu was a Setswana-speaking enclave situated quite far east of other Setswana-speaking communities and in the midst of Sesotho-speaking communities. This was to play out in an interesting way during the latter days of apartheid when the Bantustan Policy of the Nationalist Government set aside land for the black population on a tribal basis. Bophuthatswana was the homeland designated for Setswana – speakers but it was not a continuous stretch of land – it was in 17 pieces, 16 in the North East part of South Africa while the 17th was 200 miles away to the east around Thaba Nchu.

In a way the activity of both the Methodist and LMS missionaries had contributed to the creation of a pan Tswana identity by collecting different sub-groups in these new settlements and by giving them, through education and the writing of their language a ‘group awareness.’

The Tshidi Barolong from the Molopo area near to present day Botswana, who had migrated with their ‘cousins’ to Thaba Nchu realized that if they left their ancestral lands unoccupied, the Boer trekkers pressing ever further northwards would consider those areas ripe for settlement. So from around 1844 groups of Tshidi Barolong began the long trek back to their traditional lands and they returned as Christians and as Methodists. Molema, a member of the royal clan had become a Christian, was literate in Setswana and had also trained as a Local Preacher. Once he returned to the Molopo area he kept worship going with only occasional visits from missionaries to do baptisms and training.

One of those visiting missionaries was the Revd Joseph Ludorf, a medical doctor of German origin, yet a Methodist missionary. He was appointed to the Tshidi people of the Molopo in 1851 but it was a difficult assignment to do well as the journey from Thaba Nchu to the Molopo was 300 miles and took 17 or more days. So accomplished a man was Ludorf that a group of Boers also asked that he be a minister to them.

In 1852 the Sand River Convention was negotiated between the British and the Boers which gave the Boers a recognized area in what was to become the ‘Transvaal’. This was before anything was known of the mineral wealth – diamonds and gold – of the area and the British were quite happy to have a hands-off policy. As part of the Convention the British agreed not to make treaties or sell arms to Africans north of the Vaal River. As part of this negotiation the Boers tried to claim all land from the Vaal up to the Equator.

Ludorf was very concerned about the material as well as the spiritual welfare of the Barolong

and related African and mixed race groups. He became their representative in dealings with the Boers. However the Barolong Batswana fled north of the Molopo into the area of the present-day Botswana and Ludorf withdrew to Thaba Nchu. For a time there was a hiatus in the relations between the British and the Boers and the Africans who laid claim to areas north of the Vaal. All this changed however with the discovery of diamonds around Kimberley in 1867. This set off a new scramble for control of land and minerals. No longer were the British so unconcerned about the claims of the Boers and, for their own interests and at the urging of the missionaries became advocates for the rights of the African chiefs and people of the area. By this time Ludorf was no longer a regular missionary in the pay of the Church but was established as a Doctor in Potchefstroom. Nevertheless he still continued his role as the Secretary for the Barolong Batswana chiefs at the Conference near Mafikeng in 1870 which met to discuss the boundaries between the Boers and the tribes of the area. This Conference was inconclusive – not surprisingly – and the whole matter went to arbitration the following year at Bloemhof. Again Ludorf attended with both the Barolong and Bangwaketse chiefs and their attorneys. The resulting ‘Keate Award’ gave one of the mixed race leaders, Waterboer, most of the diamond fields which he promptly ceded to Britain, who in turn named the area Griqualand West. The award was also very favourable to the Barolong and related African groups and thus extremely unfavourable to the Transvaal Boers who had no intention of keeping to its terms. Ludorf and the Barolong were so happy that Ludorf got carried away with his own ideas. He formulated a joint nation from the local African groups (Barolong, Bangwaketse and Batlhaping), drew up a constitution, issued a proclamation in their name, established a consulate at Klipdrift (Barkly West), set himself up as a commissioner and called a meeting of all the concerned chiefs at Taung. Ludorf died the following year and so his ambitions came to nothing yet his efforts serve to show us the ambiguities of the role of missionaries and ministers in the Southern Africa of the time.

These are just two examples of the effects of Methodist missionaries in the political evolution of 19th century Southern Africa. They were not passive observers in the rise and fall of empire but active participants in the cause of their own tribes and, at times, in the furtherance of British imperial ambitions.