

Reflections on Yosefa Mhalmhala's involvement in the formation of the Igreja Presbyterian de Moçambique

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Abstract

This article reflects on the missionary journey of Yosefa Mhalmhala from Valdezia, South Africa in 1875 to Delagoa Bay in Mozambique. While we acknowledge the role and work done by the Swiss missionaries from Lesotho in 1872 to Valdezia in 1875, it is imperative to indicate and perhaps appreciate the foundation laid by Mhalmhala before the arrival of Paul Berthoud on the 9th of July 1887 in Mozambique. Being the first evangelist to be consecrated and sent as a missionary to Mozambique, he managed to accomplish the vision and aims of the Swiss missionaries beyond. What is intriguing is the way in which Swiss missionaries have ignored Mhalmhala's contributions through evangelisation in the area of Delagoa Bay (Maputo) and elsewhere in Mozambique. Could it be that they thought an African man who had no theological training could not have archived so much in a short space of time? This article will provide a historical perspective and the missionary work of Mhalmhala as it attempts to resuscitate his name and deeds for the Igreja Presbiteriana de Mozambique.

Key words: Yosefa Mhalmhala, Culture, Suffering, Excommunication, Swiss mission

1. Introduction

The arrival of the Swiss missionaries, Ernest Creux and Paul Berthoud in 1875 in Valdezia brought many developments for the region and many parts of (then Northern Transvaal) South Africa. They continued with the missionary policy of establishing self-governing and self-supporting mission stations, churches, educational and medical centers (see, Maluleke 1995; cf, Gerdener 1958:66-67). Therefore, the purpose for writing this reflection is:

Firstly, to indicate the brief historical context of the arrival of the Swiss missionaries in Lesotho, South Africa and Mozambique. Even though Yosefa Mhalmhala did not grow up in Mozambique, his passion for evangelisation could not stop him from embarking on the mission of salvation. As a first black evangelist to be

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consecrated, he accepted a missionary call to Mozambique with specific mandate of establishing the bases for a future implantation of a Swiss Protestant Mission in Delagoa Bay, Mozambique.

Secondly, to show that despite his hard labour in Mozambique, that is, having established three spiritual centres including the Rikatla seminary, mission station and other projects, the Swiss missionaries failed to acknowledge his achievements as the first black missionary under the Swiss church.

As long as the church is still in existence in Mozambique, Mhalamhala's legacy is unavoidable particularly when we narrate the work of missionaries in that region. His work shaped and nourished the Christian faith, and spirituality (cf, Njoroge 2002) in Delagoa Bay. The church that was born through the initiative and work of Yosefa Mhalamhala, namely the Igreja Presbiteriana de Mozambique (IPM), celebrate more than a century in existence due to the foundation he laid. This is worrying, as he is not celebrated as the hero of the church. It important to indicate here that, Mhalamhala's parents were from Mozambique and had settled in a farm bought by missionaries Klipfontein (Spelonken) on the Rivubye River (see, Cuendet 1950:13). They came to the country in 1830 when the VaNgoni³ invaded Mozambique. They went to the North of Transvaal and established their home in Spelonken (Maphophe 1956: 9).

2. Historical Formation: Lesotho to Delagoa Bay

The missionaries Ernest Creux and Paul Berthoud arrived in Lesotho (then Basutoland) in 1872 after being sent by the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society (PEMS) (see, Bill 1965:114; Maluleke 1993: 237). Creux and Berthoud were said to be the first Swiss missionaries sent to Lesotho by the Evangelical Church of Canton of Vaud, to introduce Christianity religion (See, Reymond 1958, Archives of Missionary Department 1215 6 C; Butselaar 1988; Harries 2007). However, their initial successes (until about 1847) were rudely interrupted by the contact between Moshoeshoe's subjects and the South African settlers [ushering in]... a new era of wars and insecurity (see, Maluleke 2003c:160). Maluleke (2003c) point out that many converts, including chiefs and headmen, left the church due to their disappointment with the role of missionaries in the wars. The situation was not looking good as the Basotho lost their lives and pieces of land. Nonetheless, the arrival of the new missionaries in that region of Lesotho in 1860 did improve the lives or situation of people (see, Maluleke 2003c). According to Ellenberger (1938), the breed of missionaries breathed a new spirit and brought methods that were to renew the whole work. Few years after their stay in Lesotho, another journey of exploration was undertaken

³ In Mozambique, the tribe is referred to as VaNgoni, as opposed to the name used in South African, Nguni

by Adolphe Mabile, Ernest Creux, Paul Berthoud, and others to Northern Transvaal. At that time the idea was to establish the mission station at Sekhukhuni land, under Chief Sekhukhuni of the Bapedi tribe. Chief Sekhukhuni refused to receive them and made it very impossible for missionaries to deliver their message of salvation.

While their reception was highly hostile in the Sekhukhuni land, Creux and Berthoud had left to the Zoutpansberg region where in 1875 they established a mission station named Valdezia and this was named after their home canton, Vaud. In there, they began to study the Tsonga (Gwamba) language (see, Anderson 1999:58) for communication preaching purposes. The Swiss Missionaries bought the farm Klipfontein (Spelonken) on the Rivubye (Luvubu) River from Mr. Watt, an English trader who had settled there. The farm was well watered and had several springs. The Swiss Missionaries changed the name of the farm Klipfontein (Spelonken) into Valdezia Mission Station, in honour of their homeland Canton de Vaud in Switzerland (Brookes 1925:6). The tribe among whom they had settled were the Ma-gwamba, and their language was called the Chi-gwamba, though towards the east, in the vicinity of Delagoa Bay in Mozambique it was also known as Thonga, Ronga or Djonga. Since that time, the activities of the Mission have spread out to other parts of the Northern Transvaal and to Portuguese East Africa, and the mission has constantly developed, not only geographically but in the nature of its work and the variety of its undertakings.

Between 1873 and 1875, black evangelists worked alone, laying the foundations for later Swiss missionary expertise. Similarly, it was a black evangelist, Josefa (sic) Mhalmhala who undertook in 1882 to take the gospel to his own people in Mozambique (Maluleke 1994: 94). The convert Yosefa Mhalmhala came to the Transvaal from Mozambique originally as one of Chief Joao Albasini's followers (Halala, 1986: 47-48, Mathebula, 1989:5-6). According to Butselaar (1988), in 1877 two brothers of the Mhalmhala family first heard the history of the creation of the heaven and of the earth from Bethuel, an evangelist from Lesotho. After several months of listening to and engaging in discussion with Bethuel, the two brothers came to the conclusion that "there was a God; and that they were sinners and needed to pray in order to be saved" (Butselaar 1988: 36). The resulting conversion of the brothers Mhalmhala brings us to the work of Swiss Missionaries in Southern Africa.

Yosefa Mhalmhala initiated missionary endeavors in what is now called Moçambique (the then Portuguese East Africa). Apart from Mhalmhala undertaking the gospel, there was Jonas Maphophe who after his ordination in 1910, brought a lot of changes and expanded the mission to different areas outside Valdezia. Maluleke (1994) is correct in his argument that, black initiative and contributions during this period should be accorded more prominence than has happened hitherto. Many of our African people played a vital role in the formation of our churches during the arrival of missionaries. Many of those people were forgotten and their history

is diminished as opposed to the European missionary work. Creux gave the name Joseph (was called Yosefa in his language), to him after his baptismal from Ndjomo Mhalamhala (see, Creux 1879).

3. Mhalamhala's Mission to Moçambique

Mhalamhala departed to Mozambique in search of his sisters. At that point, no one could foresee that this journey would bring transformation many people of Mozambique. Butselaar (1988) indicate that Mhalamhala introduced the Christian faith in many houses he entered during the first six months of his arrival in Mozambique. Other scholars agree that this new faith was accepted and deeply loved by many people (see, SMB 1879; Butselaar 1888). Those who did not see his mission as valuable and transformative to the people, conspired to assassinate him (see, Butselaar 1987). This never discouraged him from discharging his missiological responsibilities to the people of Mozambique.

Creux indicate, Mhalamhala's visit to Delagoa Bay was a sign of eagerness in proclaiming the Kingdom of God (see, SMB 1879). In 1881, he was sent back to Mozambique with a special task of studying the country and asking for authorization to establish a Protestant Mission. The Portuguese refused to grant authorisation. However, a native chief called Magudzu gave authorisation. In 1882, Mhalamhala was definitely sent to Mozambique as the first African missionary to his people. During the five years that followed, Mhalamhala converted ordinary people and traditional chiefs.

4. A business man called Jimboy

Jimboy Ximungana was among the few men from Mhalamhala's neighbourhood who could read and write. He learned these skills while working in the Natal region (now known as Kwazulu Natal). Jimboy had established himself in a place called Katembe, which is located on the other north margin of the Indian Ocean. Jimboy was later given BUKU⁴, By Mhalamhala to read (Buku ya Xikwembu 1883; Loze 1896) and it was at that time where he was converted to Christianity. With Jimboy being a convert, they worked together and ended up converting twenty more people (see, ADM 487 B 13).

5. Chief Maphunga

For Mhalamhala to be successful in his mission to Mozambicans, he needed the support of influential figures in those communities. One of the influential person was Chief Maphunga. Maphunga's kingdom was situated at the Coast of Komati

⁴ BUKU or the Book of God was written by Swiss Missionaries in 1883 and served as the Catechism.

River near the actual Maraquene District (SMB 1886/87; Butselaar 1988). Upon hearing numerous reports about Mhalmhala's missionary work, the chief was inspired, particularly because of how Mhalmhala's work was contributing towards building a social cohesion and this was eminent through the behaviour the people in the community.

Eliachib⁵ compared the power of the BUKU with this of that of a gun, in that, this document is able to change the mind-set of the chief about life (SMB 1886/87; Butselaar 1988).

6. Lois's village and Rikatla Centre

When Ernest Creux sent Yosefa Mhalmhala to Mozambique in 1881, Yosefa went back to Spelonken with his aged sister Lois and her husband Eliachib. While in Spelonken, the couple was baptised and given training on evangelism. When they returned home in 1882, they continued the evangelisation started by Mhalmhala in 1880. They moved from the place they lived, and initiated their work in a place called Rikatla⁶ (see, Mathebula 1989) which later became a spiritual centre or seminary.

The Ricatla centre offered the following services prayer, literacy classes and evangelism. The prayer service and literacy classes were in the hands of Lois, her daughter Ruth, and her niece Marta (cf, Junod 1933). Rikatla was referred to as the source, because many conversions occurred there. According to Junod (1933: 143), "the Swiss missionaries considered Rikatla to be a special place, where people could drink the water of life". This centre was not only teaching about Christian faith, it gave protection and accommodation to many people especially women.

In virtue of the special work established by Lois, she was considered the soul of the community and Rikatla became known as the most important spiritual centre in Mozambique (Junod 1933).

7. Mhalmhala's challenges

During his missiological work, he delivered a letter to the Portuguese Governor, requesting a permission to establish a Protestant Mission in the region but unsuccessful. The local chief by the name of Magudzu, granted him permission to establish the Protestant Mission in his territory a hundred and twenty kilometres (120 km) from Delagoa Bay (known as Maputo today). The station where Mhalmhala discharged his ministerial duties (prayer and baptismal) was called as Antioka⁷ (see,

⁵ Eliachib was the husband of Lois Xintomana, who was Mhalmhala's aged sister (see, SMB 1886)

⁶ Through the work initiated by Lois, Ricatla was transformed into an important Spiritual Centre, where the United Seminary of Ricatla is located

⁷ Antioka is a Portuguese translation of Antioch, one of the cities where Barnabas and Saul preached

BSM 1886). Although very busy with his evangelistic work in Antioka, Mhalamhala acted as supervisor of the other two centres in Rikatla and another in Katembe. He was also the one who presided over the Holy Communion and baptized those who were converted. Commenting on the quality of work done during this period, Butselaar (1988: 50-51) note that, a kind of hierarchy was established in this community where Mhalamhala was seen as their chief in all matters pertaining to spirituality. Butselaar's observation shows that Mhalamhala was a highly respected leader of the Protestant Mission in Delagoa Bay. Because of the special vision that he had, he was able to train both young people (such as Ruth and Eliazer) and adults (such as Lois and Eliachib) during a time when this practice was usually not inclusive of young people and women. By virtue the comprehensiveness of his vision, the evangelistic work in Delagoa Bay grew in both quantity and quality.

According to Butselaar (1988:51), the death of Chief Magudzu gave birth to violence within the community, which threatened Mhalamhala's work. Those who were converted to Christianity were persecuted by Chief Magudzu's successor.

This was the time where Mhalamhala sought help from the missionaries working in Spelonken. Through the approval of the church leadership in Lausanne (Switzerland), Berthoud was sent to Mozambique in July 1887 (Butselaar 1988). The Swiss leadership was of the opinion that Berthoud could visit the existing mission station established by Mhalamhala in Delagoa Bay, instead of initiating a new one. Meanwhile, Zebedea Mbenyane also left Spelonken to Mozambique with the aim of helping Mhalamhala in his challenges. On the 9th of July 1887, Paul Berthoud landed in Delagoa Bay and founded the Swiss Mission (Junod 1933). Contrary to expectations, Berthoud installed himself in Ricatla instead of Magudzu where Mhalamhala needed help. During the following six years, he never visited Mhalamhala and instead focused on organising the church according to the Presbyterian system.

8. The African culture challenged

Between the years 1887-1889, while he was formally establishing his church, Berthoud remained at Rikatla where he challenged the way in which worship was being conducted, partly through attacking the African culture. For him, this culture was inherently incompatible with the gospel (see, Junod 1933). Berthoud lacked understanding Mozambican ways of doing things and thereby labelled it as unsuitable to the gospel. However, becoming a Christian has nothing to do with adapting the western or any other cultural ways of doing things. Mugambi in Kalu (2005: 521) points out that, "conversion to the Christian faith demands that the convert identifies oneself with Jesus Christ and all that He stood for, and that this identifica-

and a great number believed and turned to the Lord. (Acts 11: 19-21)

tion leads the convert to a fundamental change in attitude towards God, oneself and others". The problem is that some of the missionary teachings were closely attached western ways of doing things. They expect many converts to appear in a particular way of dressing, association, dancing etc. as that would make them true servants of God.

Berthoud failed in showing care, and showing support to women in the service of evangelization (Junod 1933). In rejecting those women's services, Berthoud was actually rejecting Mhalmhala's leadership which incorporated women empowerment. This abuse fuelled increased violence against women (Chirinda 2008).

The arrival of Berthoud in Mozambique sows frustration to many people who worked with Mhalmhala in his evangelisation. He excommunicated the evangelist Jonas Xilote⁸ on the basis he was drunk. The community was not happy with his attitude and the changes without any consultation with Mhalmhala especially those who worked with Mhalmhala in establishing the Rikatla centre. The people were unable to understand the motives underlying the Swiss missionary's behaviour.

9. Mhalmhala says "No" to injustices and is excommunicated

The presence of white missionaries in Mozambique was due to the geographical extension of the area of activities and to the complexity of the work being done both in the church and in broader society. Because of the need for more people, two missionaries were sent to Mozambique, namely Arthur Grandjen, who arrived in Mozambique on 24th July 1888, and Henry Junod, who joined the team in July 1889.

10. The first conference and confrontations

As the presence of Swiss missionaries in Mozambique was increasing significantly, the need for planning and structured meetings became necessary. The first conference took place in August 1889 with delegates from Spelonken and Delagoa Bay. This Conference was attended by white missionaries only, and no invitation was extended to Mhalmhala, Lois Xintomana, Eliachib Madlakusasa, and Jimboy Ximungana (see, ADM 797 A; cf, Butselaar 1988). These are the people who laid a firm foundation for the church in Mozambique, and yet they were left behind. Whether Swiss missionaries wanted to diminish the black initiatives, contributions and successes in spreading the gospel (cf Maluleke 1993a; see, Kalu 2005) remains a question. This was a body that consisted exclusively of missionaries and acted as the local agent of the council in Switzerland, enabling the council to "control the direction of the work in Africa" (Bill 1965:145). This exclusive body became the body that controlled and directed the life of the "mission." (Maluleke 1994). For

⁸ Yonas Xilote was one of the evangelists that accompanied Paul Berthoud to Mozambique in 1887

Butselaar, this attitude of Swiss missionaries suggested an element of superiority that said sharing leadership roles with blacks was not acceptable (Butselaar 1987). One could interpret this attitude as complete arrogance and lack of consideration for the black pioneers of evangelisation in Mozambique. During this conference, the foundation of the third missionary station was discussed and approved. This station was to be placed near Antioka where Mhalamhala lived. Once more, Mhalamhala was not informed or consulted by the white missionaries about the idea of new station. A climate of suspicion and discomfort was thus being created between whites and blacks in the church. Another attitude that exacerbated the spirits of blacks was the rejection of the proposal of the integration of Eliab as a teacher in Rikatla centre. Eliab had been trained in Spelonken and was sent to Mozambique in 1888 in response to the request made by Joseph Mhalamhala in his letters in 1886.

This attitude offended all blacks working in Mozambique and Spelonken. The Conferences of Spelonken and Lausanne may have aimed to find solutions to these problems in Mozambique, but the arrogance of Paul Berthoud did not facilitate the process amicably (ADM 502 A 10; Butselaar 1988). The fourth incident that soured the relationship between Africans and Swiss missionaries was Paul Berthoud's refusal to send Daniel Magudzu to Lesotho. Magudzu was the only young man who remained with Mhalamhala after the persecution of Christians began after the assassination of Chief Magudzu. His departure was only possible after the intervention of the Union of Cadet's in Geneva which guaranteed his scholarship (ADM 284 A 9; Butselaar 1988).

The Portuguese wanted to conquer Mozambique, and as a result terrorized the protestant church being led by the Swiss Mission. In the midst of the war, members of the church chose to find security near Mhalamhala. This situation did not please the Swiss missionaries. Clear sighs of disunity began to emerge. Swiss missionaries saw the Mhalamhala's as rebels and decided to excommunicate them. However, to materialise this decision, they needed support from Spelonken, which was not ready to pronounce such a condemnation. These struggles and fighting for equality began weakening and undermining the Church, as the focus moved from caring for the people to confusing and dividing them.

In 1895, Zebedea Mbenyane decided to return to Spelonken, together with Yosefa Mhalamhala and the rest of their family members (ADM 514 A 8, 9; Butselaar 1988). In March of 1895, Yosefa Mhalamhala was heard by a committee of missionaries in Spelonken and expressed his distresses for the challenges and humiliations suffered at the hands of Swiss missionaries in Mozambique. His spiritual father, Ernest Creux, was also content with the committee's findings. The committee absolved him and nominated him as evangelist for an annexed congregation at Mashamba.

11. Conclusion

Despite being persecuted by chief, Magudzu's successor, and being discredited by the Swiss missionaries during the first conference in 1889, it remain true that Mhalmhala's missionary work brought people new perspectives.

The responsibility of training othesr at Rikatla was a hard work which grew beyond the preaching, and establishment of stations. Together with his brethren, they had entered into the life of many people, doing missionary work from the ground by engaging people with projects that would profit the entire community.

As time went on, the Rikatla center could produce converts who demonstrated the ability to read, write and do simple arithmetic and trained them to become evangelists.

Mhalmhala's attitude confirmed the prophecy made by Creux during his baptismal ceremony, when he said, "You will be a man of God who will win and who will ignore opprobrium (SBM 1879/81:4). Having reflected on the work done by Yosefa Mhalmhala in Mozambique, it shows a true vessel of honour for the Mozambicans, who laid a firm foundation of the Igreja Presbiteriana de Moçambique.

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