CHAPTER 3

The Reverend Tiyo Soga: Negotiating Culture, Race and Nationality among the Embattled Xhosa of South Africa

Born of a father who served as an adviser to an important chief, Tiyo Soga became a Christian through the agency of his mother, who welcomed his education at a mission school, and later in Scotland, where he married a Scotswoman and became the first black South African ordained as a minister of the Presbyterian Church. He returned to his native land as a missionary to a people ground down by decades of warfare with an advancing tide of white settlement. During his fifteen-year ministry he sought to reconcile what he regarded as the best features of Xhosa culture with the commandments of his Christian faith. In a long document written for his children as tuberculosis tightened its grip on his fragile body, Soga laid out a programme for the preservation of the Xhosa as a Christian nation in defiance of white settlers’ claims of racial superiority and the alleged doom of his people. His texts exemplify the difficulties of reconciling the conflicting authorities he had to accommodate as a Xhosa man and a Christian minister. This conflict increased, particularly from the 1860s onwards, when circumstances in the Cape Colony fuelled his growing opposition to settler depredations and colonial rule. Although his early biographer Donovan Williams saw him as a proto-nationalist, this probably exaggerates his commitment to national independence for the Xhosa.1 In fact he better exemplifies the ways in which indigenous Christians in the colonial period straddled several contradictory positions and these continue to be reflected in the ways they are represented by competing groups in the modern period. Tiyo Soga remains a hero of the standard contemporary histories of Christianity in South Africa which emphasize his commitment to the conversion and modernization of his people. But for other contemporary commentators he exemplifies collusion with colonization. His conversion set him against the more resistant figures of his time who engaged in direct action through warfare and who refused to adapt to the new ways. Neither view does justice to the complex story told by the texts he left behind.

From his birth in the late 1820s until his death in 1871 the Eastern Cape was the site of an unrelenting struggle between the Xhosa and the white settlers who were erupting from the Cape Colony into what were then the frontier regions to its East. By mid-century it seemed to many Xhosa chiefs that settlement in the region by whites meant the collapse of their traditional ways of life and the undermining of their social and political structures. The longstanding missionary view that the evangelization and gradual ‘civilisation’ of the Xhosa would lead to a peaceful settlement of the long-standing conflict had been discarded by many on both sides.

Soga studied for two periods in Scotland, fleeing there on both occasions after conflict on the Cape frontier threatened the lives of the missionaries and their converts. As a convinced Christian Soga supported the conversion of his people, but this did not mean that he had abandoned his Xhosa identity. His principal teacher in Scotland, Prof. John Brown, was strongly of the view that conversion did not mean deculturation. In 1857 the year of Soga’s second return to the Cape as the first ordained Xhosa minister, Brown had written that becoming a Christian does not unhinge the relations formed by nature; it draws them closer. It does not extinguish the affections which grow out of those relations; it regulates and sanctifies them...Paul, when he becomes a Christian, became a cosmopolite – a citizen of the world; but he did not cease to be a Jew. He became a philanthropist. But he continued a patriot.2

It was not until the 1860s that Soga committed his views to writing. When he did he contradicted the increasingly conservative mission view that the Xhosa were doomed to die out and be absorbed into the superior colonising culture, a view that prevailed also in other settler colonies such as Australia and New Zealand. As well as the long series of wars Xhosa culture had been massively disrupted by an even greater disaster in 1856, the so-called cattle-killing when many Xhosa were persuaded by the Xhosa prophetess Nongqawuse, niece of the spiritual leader Mhlakaza, to slaughter their cattle to purify themselves for the ongoing struggle with the white invaders.3

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