CHAPTER 8

Old Lena and Wilhelmina Stompjes: The Indispensable Intermediaries

We have argued that before the mid-twentieth century very few women even gained recognition as lay preachers. However in some exceptional circumstances female evangelists could surmount the barriers placed in their way by the gendered organization of ecclesiastical authority. One such was was Vehettge Tikkui (Old Lena) of Bavianskloof who inadvertently emerged as a key figure in the making of early Moravian missions in South Africa. Another was the South African Thembu woman known to Moravians as Wilhelmina Stompjes, pioneer of their mission among the Xhosa. Their experiences shed a great deal of light on gender roles in evangelical operations.

Old Lena emerged as an unlikely heroine because she kept a flame of evangelism alive during a period when German missionaries abandoned South African operations. As for Wilhemine, her ‘fervent desire to bring the gospel to her own people’ made her a nineteenth-century Moravian mission celebrity. Her memoir combines the spiritual biography beloved of Moravians with an account of the part she played in extending mission operations from the Western Cape into the more densely populated Bantu-speaking chieftaincies of the Eastern Cape. It was reprinted many times in mission journals and as a pamphlet in several European languages during the later nineteenth century. The various titles given to these pamphlets reveal the ambiguity of her position. Never is she identified as a preacher or missionary. She is ‘Helfer-Schwester’

---

1 Memoirs of indigenous converts, and especially of ‘helpers’ or ‘first fruits,’ that is converts who belonged to the first generation of converts or rose to some prominence because they actively supported the mission outreach, were collected and globally distributed by the Moravian Church during the eighteenth and, increasingly less so, during the nineteenth century. These short spiritual biographies or memoirs, a literary genre for which Moravians are well known and which were compiled since the early eighteenth century for all members, were important textual representations and tools of identity making within the Moravian church. Because the Moravian mission enterprises were global from their beginnings in the early eighteenth century, the lives of indigenous converts were read, printed and distributed across the world. The memoirs of women converts are a rare source for the gendered experiences of indigenous women who converted to Christianity.
(Helper-Sister), ‘Aide-missionaire’ (Missionary Aide), ‘Kaffer-Dolmetscherin und Nationalhelferin’ (Indigenous Interpreter and Helper).  

The reasons for Lena's and Wilhelmina's highly unusual rise to fame lay in the peculiar circumstances that made early Moravian missionaries in South Africa depend on women. In addition, they were recognized as key pioneers of an important mission field. And, of course, they stood out by virtue of their own abilities and force of character.

Keepers of the Flame

Moravians came to South Africa as part of the mission’s first global wave of proselytizing outreach in the 1730s when women briefly emerged as significant actors. Khoisan women in the Cape region who engaged with Moravian missions in the eighteenth century occupied a very specific gendered place in the frontier farming society that had developed since Dutch colonization commenced in 1652. Khoi herders and San hunter-gatherers had lost much of their land; many had been drafted onto farms as a part of a captive labour force that included imported slaves. In the Western Cape only a small number managed a precarious independence in areas of marginal economic possibilities. (Today, because of their close relationship, particularly in language, most scholars speak of them collectively as the Khoisan). When the first Moravian missionary, George Schmidt, set up operations in 1738 he needed domestic staff, which he drew from Khoisan women who had lost the capacity to live independently. These women initially regarded the Moravian mission as just another colonial household in which they might find employment. Over time these women from the lowest social strata found that the mission offered the additional advantages of access to literacy and a rhetoric of Christianity that could help them to negotiate a racially stratified, strongly hierarchical colonial society.

---
