THOMPSON SAMKANGE:
TAMBARAM AND BEYOND

BY

TERENCE RANGER

(St Antony's College, Oxford)

Introduction

In March 1938 Thompson Samkange received an invitation to the International Missionary Conference to be held at Tambaram in Madras in December of that year. Samkange was then in his forties and was very much a representative of the first generation of African Christians in Southern Rhodesia. His father had been a member of the Zvimba chiefly dynasty and a famous hunter, who despised Christianity. Thompson had not attended school as a child, but after a period of labour migration he had converted to Methodism and commenced his primary education. In 1938 he still had no higher qualification than Standard Six and was being criticised in the African press as too old and too uneducated to make an effective leader. Nevertheless, he was the obvious person to be chosen for Tambaram.

For one thing, he was the pre-eminent African pioneer of Protestant ecumenism. As early as 1921, just after he had completed his schooling and was working as a teacher, he had founded the Wesleyan Evangelists and Teachers Convention and become Secretary to its Mashonaland section. By the next year he had become Secretary to a national Wesleyan Convention and begun to lobby for an all-Protestant African Conference. When the Native Missionary Conference emerged in 1928 he became its Secretary and directing force. By 1938 he had run the Native Conference for a decade and had been hailed by the Bantu Mirror, journal of the Christian progressives, as the leading spokesman for all the Africans of Southern Rhodesia.

In addition to all this, Samkange had become a key figure in his own church. After fifteen years of service as teacher and evangelist
in Wankie and Bulawayo he had been admitted to the full Methodist Ministry in 1936 and the year after been posted to take charge of Kwenda Circuit—one of the first Africans to be entrusted with such a responsibility. During all these years he had read voraciously. His three years of ministerial training, under the inspiration of the great radical missionary, John White, confirmed him in a highly activist Methodism. His notebooks from that period show him reaffirming the Methodist prophetic tradition; stressing the need for Revival so as to counter both ‘spirit worship’ and purely formal Christianity; discerning a ‘stirring of new life in native peoples’ which would bring an end to white racist paternalism; and insisting that ‘we have an ethos of our own which is of value to humanity and to destroy this and to insist on making us black Europeans is to inflict a wrong upon us.’

During this training Thompson made a close friendship with another ministerial candidate, Esau Nemapare. The two men agreed on the stage which the Methodist Church had now entered. African aspirations were increasing, they agreed, but the ‘indigenous church’ was further away than ever. The new generation of missionaries were less sympathetic to African advancement than the old. There were bound to be acute tensions and clashes. Thereafter the two friends adopted a shared nickname, writing to each other as ‘Stage’ to ‘Stage’, so that they should never forget their analysis and their determination to act upon it.

Preparing for Tambaram

It can be seen that Thompson Samkange was as well equipped as anyone in Southern Rhodesia to attend the Tambaram conference and that he had already reached conclusions which prepared him intellectually for it. But he received the invitation in no triumphalist spirit. ‘It humbled him to be chosen to represent all the Africans of the country’, says Esau Nemapare. ‘It was a surprising blessing.’ ‘If the churches feel that I will be able to represent the Africans there, the Lord will guide me in what I am expected to do’, Thompson wrote to the Methodist Chairman, Herbert Carter. He set about preparing himself as best he could. ‘I do not want to go to India with an empty head’, he wrote in July; he would discuss the preliminary Organising Questions sent to him by the International Christian Council ‘with anybody who may,