



Stamps & Stories Overview
Johann Hinrich Schmelen - a pioneer among the Nama people



When travelling in southern Namibia it is worthwhile to visit a historic place dating back to the pioneering times of the missionary era. Today it is known as Bethanien. It was called /ul//gantes, the rock fountain, when missionary Schmelen arrived there in 1814.



Johann Hinrich Schmelen was born on 7 January 1777 in Kassebruch near Bremen in northern Germany. Intent on dodging his military service he went to London. There he met Pastor Steinkopf (the little town in north-western South Africa is named after him) and through him became a believer. In 1803 Schmelen witnessed the confession of faith by four converted Nama (Khoekhoen) who were visiting London, and he realised that heathen also have a living soul. He moved to Berlin to be trained for missionary work under Pastor Jänicke.



In 1811 the London Missionary Society sent Schmelen and several other missionaries to South Africa. In Cape Town he made the acquaintance of German missionary Christian Albrecht who in 1805 had established Warmbad in the south of present-day Namibia together with his brother. Albrecht told him that the inhabitants of Warmbad had to flee from Jager Afrikaner's Orlam group and were now living in Pella, south of the Orange River. Thus it was Pella where Schmelen started his missionary work, moving with the Nama and their livestock from one grazing area to the next. He was elated when he heard a man say a prayer. Children under the age of five also took to the spirit of praying. The first baptisms among the Nama community took place in 1814.



Schmelen was instructed to explore the Orange River mouth. On 13 April 1814 he set out by ox wagon and an expedition team of some 150 people. On the way he felt that the Word of God was at work among his group. "It gave me courage and helped me to overlook the great difficulties and dangers of my travels. It was a sweet thought that souls would be won for heaven in this manner", he wrote years later (1831) in a letter. "I also hoped and prayed to God every day that his word should not be in vain among all the wild and uncouth people who I visited and who had not heard of Him yet".



The San (Bushmen) thought that the ox wagon was a ship and asked whether the large wheels were growing on trees. They were so in awe of what they saw that they did not dare to step onto the wagon tracks, but jumped over them. Word had gotten out that Schmelen was preaching and they came from near and far to listen to him.

A young woman called Zara Hendriks was part of the expedition and rode with Schmelen on the ox wagon. She was one of the first Nama to be baptised and since then had assisted with work in the congregation. Nights were cold and Schmelen did not have the heart to let her sleep outside. He invited her in, but it was just the two of them there and he certainly did not want to cause offence. "I was in utter distress because I was alone in the wagon with a woman", Schmelen wrote about his predicament. "My soul incessantly cried out to God for guidance so that I would not jeopardise the great work that He had assigned me to do. Therefore I have decided to ask for her hand in marriage." (Trüper, p.

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Zara became Schmelen's devoted wife. Since Nama (Khoekhoe) was her mother tongue she took on a special role in her husband's translation work later on. The couple settled in Bethanien in the south of present-day Namibia and built a house from natural stone which became known as Schmelen House. In his 1819 report to the mission society he wrote: "With the help of my people I started to build a house for myself in January. It was ready in April. Suitable timber is only available far away and difficult to obtain. But since Bethanien has lots of excellent rocks I built stone walls."

A drawing from 1875 shows Schmelen House with its two gables. Only remnants of the building are left today. The twin-towered church, built in 1859 by missionary Hermann Kreft from mud, can also be seen on the drawing. The church was restored in 1998 and proclaimed a National Monument.

In 1816 Schmelen travelled to Cape Town to buy new clothes. He had no shirt or cassock left, no hat and no shoes. Like the Nama people he wore garments made from animal skins. A sheep skin (karos) was his saddle and a mat of sorts to sleep on.

Schmelen experienced a huge movement towards faith in Bethanien. He felt that the words "a people shall become devout in one day" (Schmelen in a letter in 1831) were coming true. Unfortunately, however, problems followed and in 1822 he left the mission station. For a few years he travelled around South West Africa exploring the country.

In 1825 his expedition took him to Rooibank on the ephemeral Kuiseb River near Walvis Bay. In his reports to the mission society he pointed out that there was a natural harbour which would allow mission work to be expanded to the Ovambo people in northern Namibia. Rooibank offered water, grazing and wood – the prerequisites for starting a mission station. But 20 years passed before a mission station was established in Rooibank by the Rhenish Mission Society in 1845. And in 1969 I, Pastor Walter Moritz, built a small church with the congregation here in the desert.

In 1822 the London Missionary Society asked Schmelen to translate the New Testament into the Nama language. It was a momentous task which he started over and over again. In 1831 the Four Gospels were finally ready to be printed in Cape Town. One of the difficulties was to find signs for the click sounds which could not be expressed in letters. Zara was the proof-reader. She was sickly at the time and died on the return journey to South West Africa. Schmelen also compiled a small grammar, books for school starters and a Nama hymnbook. His manuscripts and the Four Gospels are kept in the Grey Collection of the National Library in Cape Town.

From 1829 until 1848 Schmelen was in charge of the mission station at Komaggas south of Springbok in north-western South Africa. As he was getting on in years he wrote two letters to the Rhenish Mission Society, asking them to continue his work among the Nama. Missionary Franz Heinrich Kleinschmidt arrived in Cape Town in 1840 and Schmelen came to meet him. Kleinschmidt worked in Komaggas for two years. He married Schmelen's daughter Hanna and in 1842 moved to Windhoek with missionary Hugo Hahn. It was the start of the Rhenish Mission's work in South West Africa.

Schmelen died on 26 July 1848 in Komaggas and was buried there.

#### Factfile

Missionary J.H. Schmelen, 1777-1848, Bethanien, issued in 1989, artist: Heinz Pulon

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