

# **Sound the Trumpet: An introduction to the life and ministry of Tiyo Soga, 1829-1871**

**John S. Ross\***

*\* Dr. John Ross lives in King William's Town, South Africa, where he teaches Church History at Dumisani Theological Institute and researches Eastern Cape mission history. John holds a Ph.D. from the University of Wales (Lampeter). A minister of the Free Church of Scotland, he was formerly CEO of Christian Witness to Israel, has held pastorates in Inverness, Scotland, and Belfast, Northern Ireland, and served as a missionary in Nigeria. Married to Elizabeth, they have three children and nine grandchildren.*



Blow the trumpet,  
You, His people;  
Sound the trumpet  
of His Word.

Let far away nations,  
Know it;  
Let them turn to Jesus,  
And love Him.

*English translation of Soga's Xhosa original.*

## **The Early Years: 1829-1846**

A number of memorials commemorate Tiyo Soga's life and work. One of the first was the biography written by his close friend and colleague, the Scottish missionary, John Chalmers.<sup>1</sup> This book, now very difficult to obtain, has the honoured place of being the first biography of a black South African, possibly the first biography of any South African. In 1971, Donovan Williams, then Head of the Department of History at the University College of Fort Hare in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, wrote a second

---

<sup>1</sup> John A. Chalmers, *Tiyo Soga: A Page of South African Mission Work* (Edinburgh: Andrew Elliot, 1877). This work forms the primary source of information on Soga's life and ministry.

biography called *Umfundisi*.<sup>2</sup> In 1983, a collection of Tiyo's own writings was published.<sup>3</sup> In 2008, the Amathole District Council funded the publication of *African Intellectuals in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century South Africa*, which includes a brief account of Tiyo Soga.<sup>4</sup>

More than one church has been named in honour of Tiyo Soga and at least one branch of the African National Congress political party. St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in King William's Town, a congregation which Tiyo helped to establish, commemorates his life in a stained glass window. In October, 2001, at the inaugural *ZK Matthews Memorial Lecture* at the University of Fort Hare, former President Thabo Mbeki listed Tiyo Soga first in a catalogue of black intellectuals, but Soga was far more than an intellectual; as his Xhosa epitaph on the memorial stone at Tutura witnesses, he was, in the English translation offered by his biographer, John Chalmers,

a friend of God, a lover of His Son, inspired by His Spirit, a disciple of His holy Word. A zealous churchman, an ardent patriot, a large-hearted philanthropist, a dutiful son, an affectionate brother, a tender husband, a loving father, a faithful friend, a learned scholar, an eloquent orator and in manners a gentleman. A model Kaffir.<sup>5</sup>

Well may we thank God for the gift of Tiyo Soga.

Tiyo Soga was an aristocrat, descended from a line of great leaders, wise councillors and brave warriors of the Ngqika clan of the Xhosa people living in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. His grandfather, Jottelo, highly respected both as a councillor and a warrior, fought and, it is said, died, in the battle of Amalinde in 1818 when Ngqika's son, Maqoma was overwhelmed by the forces of his rival, Ndlambe.<sup>6</sup> Tiyo's father, usually referred to with great respect as Old Soga, was also a fighter and an important councillor, who in 1878 died bravely resisting the colonial army.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Donovan Williams, *Umfundisi: A Biography of Tiyo Soga 1829-1871* (Lovedale: Lovedale Press, 1978). The isiXhosa term *Umfundisi*, meaning 'Teacher,' is a style accorded to Christian ministers, approximating 'Reverend'.

<sup>3</sup> Donovan Williams, ed., *The Journal and Selected Writings of the Reverend Tiyo Soga* (Cape Town: A. A. Balkema, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> Mcebisi Ndletyana, ed., *African Intellectuals in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century South Africa* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> The term 'Kafir,' variously spelled as Caffre, Kaffir, etc, is derived from an Arabic word indicating a person without religious beliefs. In the mid-nineteenth century the term was used widely with little offence. Today it is considered highly offensive. To avoid language that is derogatory, 'Xhosa' has been substituted throughout this article.

<sup>6</sup> John Milton, *The Edges of War: A History of the Frontier Wars, 1702-1878* (Cape Town: Jutta, 1983), pp.68f.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p.272.

Old Soga was an impressive man. He was described by the British Ngqika commissioner, Charles Lennox Stretch, as having an imposing physique, striking eyes and the ability to sum up a situation with a glance. He was married to eight wives, fathered thirty-nine children and owned many cattle, all of which tells us he was an important and wealthy person, holding a much respected position both in the Ngqika clan and in wider Xhosa society.

Not far from Old Soga's kraal was the place of Ntsikana (c.1780-1820), reputed to be the first Xhosa convert to Christianity. Like Old Soga, Ntsikana was also one of Ngqika's councillors who as a teenager had had contact with the gospel through the work of the Dutchman Johannes van der Kemp of the London Missionary Society. Subsequently, certain mystical visions and experiences inclined Ntsikana away from his calling as a diviner of traditional Xhosa religion and towards Christianity. He wanted to know more of 'Thixo and his son.'<sup>8</sup> Instruction was sought, first from Joseph Williams, the missionary at Ngqika's Great Place, on the Kat River and then from John Brownlee of the London Missionary Society at the Tuymie mission. For Ntsikana this life-transforming encounter with the gospel was not merely personal but to be shared, and one of those with whom he shared it was Old Soga. Whether Soga should be ranked as a Christian convert is doubtful; certainly he later declined to support his son and showed little interest in taking sides with the missionaries. Perhaps the most we can say is that he was influenced by Christianity but seemingly did not make any profession of personal faith. Interestingly, however, he refused to allow Tiyo to be circumcised and sent to join the Abakwetha, although there is no evidence that it was Christian principle that led him to take this decision.<sup>9</sup>

Tiyo's father was a very progressive man, willing to take advantage of the best of the new ideas brought into his country by the early settlers. He has the reputation of being the first Xhosa to cultivate his farm with a modern iron plough and to irrigate his land by opening up water channels. He sold his crops of peas, beans, barley and potatoes to the British soldiers for a good profit.

Old Soga's great wife, Nosutu, was a Christian from the Amantinde clan. Tiyo was born in 1829, the seventh of Nosutu's nine children. She gave him the birth name of Zisani, which was shortened to Sani. Later his father called him Tiyo after a great councillor and brave warrior, hoping his son would

---

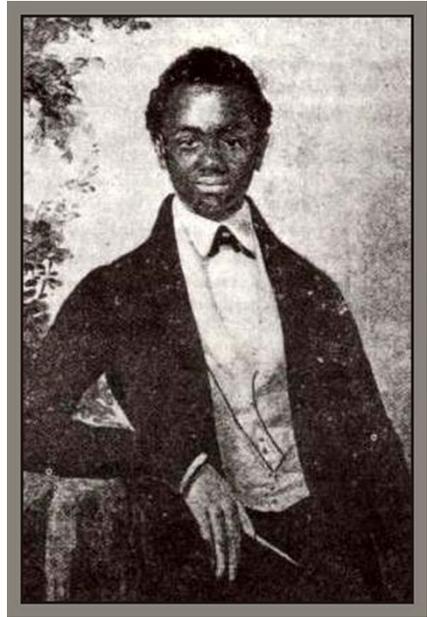
<sup>8</sup> The amaXhosa name for God is u-Dali, but two other words are also used, Qamata and Thixo, probably of Khoikhoi ('Hottentot') or San ('Bushman') origin. Whilst u-Dali expresses the ideas of Creator and Supreme Being, the term Thixo has been used since at least the advent of the first missionaries as expressing a fuller concept of God more compatible with Christian teaching. Cf. John Henderson Soga, *The Ama-Xosa: Life and Customs* (Lovedale: Lovedale Press, n.d.), p.150.

<sup>9</sup> For a comment on circumcision in Xhosa society, see fn. 15.

also have an equally important place in the history of his people.<sup>10</sup> Of course, he did, but Tiyo's wisdom was not mere human wisdom; it was, as James 3:17 puts it, the wisdom that is 'pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.' Likewise his courage would not be proved on the battlefield but in the cause of the gospel among his people; however, unlike his father and grandfather, Tiyo did not die in war, but he did lay down his life in his Lord's service.

Old Soga's family kraal was at Gwali, near the Tuymie mission station which had been founded by John Brownlee in 1820.<sup>11</sup> By the time Tiyo was reaching manhood, the station was under the guidance of Rev. William Chalmers of the Glasgow Missionary Society.

Tiyo's eldest brother, his father's great son, Festiri, seeing the benefits of the education offered by the missionaries, neglected the cattle he was supposed to be herding and went to school to learn to read. At first, his father was angry and punished him for his carelessness, but seeing his heart was set on receiving an education and knowing he was fully supported by his mother, he yielded. Tiyo's first teacher was Festiri, who passed on what he had learned to the junior members of his family in a little schoolhouse he built himself, with the help of his mother. After his brother, Tiyo's next teacher was William Chalmers, who eventually sent him and Festiri to the central school at the mission station further down the valley. Not far away was the Lovedale Seminary, a secondary school, where in 1844, the fifteen year old Tiyo started his formal education.<sup>12</sup>



*Young Tiyo Soga*

<sup>10</sup> Williams (op. cit. p.1) speculates that 'Tiyo' is derived from 'Theo', an abbreviation of 'Theodore' but this seems very doubtful in view of Chalmers' description of its derivation (op. cit., p.10).

<sup>11</sup> For an accessible modern account of Brownlee's missionary activity, see Basil Holt *Greatheart of the Border: A Life of John Brownlee Pioneer Missionary in South Africa* (King William's Town: South African Missionary Museum, 1976).

<sup>12</sup> The moving story of Lovedale's founding, mission, and deliberate subversion as a multiracial academy by the passing of Henrik Verwoerd's notorious Bantu Education Act 1953 (No.47), is told by Robert Shepherd, its last Principal, in Robert Shepherd, *Lovedale: The Story of a Century, 1841-1941*, (Lovedale: Lovedale Press, n.d.).

It was a challenge to leave behind his family and the familiar sights and sounds of the Amathole hills and his father's kraal. Lovedale, though only a few miles away, was a completely different world where Tiyo would face many new struggles. Run by the Free Church of Scotland, Lovedale's educational policy was multiracial. Sitting side by side in the same class were Xhosa students and the sons of settlers and missionaries. Some students, both black and white, reminded Tiyo that as a newcomer he was the lowest in the class, but this did not worry him; over the coming months he worked steadily, passed all the others, and became top of the class in every subject, except mathematics, in which he came second.

### **The First Visit to Glasgow: 1846-1848**

In 1846, the War of the Axe broke out. On 11 April, a large colonial force under the command of Colonel Henry Somerset crossed the border at Block Drift and invaded Xhosa territory. Lovedale was situated right on the border and on the outbreak of war the seminary was closed and the students sent home. Many, including the Scottish missionaries and Tiyo's mother, Nosutu, fled to nearby Fort Armstrong for safety.

With Lovedale closed and war raging, the principal, Rev. William Govan, decided to return to Scotland and invited Tiyo to go with him to complete his education in Glasgow. Tiyo's father could not be consulted as he was in the Amathole mountains fighting the British, so Tiyo's mother was asked to give her permission. Nosutu's response was swift and simple:

My son is the property of God; wherever he goes, God goes with him. If my son is willing to go I make no objection, for no harm can befall him even across the sea; he is as much in God's keeping *there* as near to me.<sup>13</sup>

Tiyo eagerly agreed with the plan, and together with Bryce and Richard Ross, the two sons of the missionary Rev. John Ross of Pirie, they set out by ox waggon for Port Elizabeth and from there by ship to Cape Town and the long voyage to Britain.

It is hard to imagine what thoughts passed through Tiyo's mind as he left his mother and sisters at Fort Armstrong, his father among the Xhosa warriors, and his home at the foot of the Amathole mountains. Would this new adventure be disappointing? How would he fit in to life in Scotland? Would he, a black African, be an object of hostile curiosity as he walked the streets of Glasgow? One thing was sure, and Tiyo soon learned it, that when God calls His people into Christian ministry and leadership, He often requires them to step outside their comfort zone and face hardship and

---

<sup>13</sup> Chalmers, op. cit., p.39.

misunderstanding. In Scotland Tiyo would learn that there are many battles in doing God's will, but no battle is ever won by running away.

By the beginning of October, the three South African youths had arrived in the city of Glasgow. Like Tiyo, both Bryce and Richard Ross had been born in the Cape and everything in the booming industrial city was as new and strange to them as it was to him. Shortly after his arrival, Tiyo commenced his studies at the Free Church of Scotland Normal Seminary, where he remained until 1848. Like many new arrivals, the seventeen year old Tiyo imagined he had come to a Christian country and that as a result the city of Glasgow would be free of crime, but he soon discovered the truth, the hard way. One day, playing football with his classmates, he put his bag of books on the doorstep of a house facing the street in which they were playing. When the game was over, Tiyo turned to pick up his bag only to discover it had been stolen.

The large John Street United Presbyterian Church in Glasgow took financial responsibility for his education; the minister, Dr William Anderson, showed Tiyo much kindness, understanding his loneliness in the city. In this way, Tiyo was saved from many temptations and dangers that may have led him astray; the seed of the gospel, planted in his heart by his mother, now began to germinate and blossom.

On 7<sup>th</sup> May, 1848, Tiyo made public profession of his faith, being baptised by Dr Anderson and received as a member of the John Street United Presbyterian Church. An adult submitting to Christian baptism in the United Presbyterian Church was required not only to make an intellectual commitment to Christian doctrine but also, and especially, to testify to a personal commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. When interviewing a candidate for baptism, the ministers and elders of Scottish Presbyterian Churches looked for what is traditionally termed a 'credible profession of faith.' As a result, three important questions were – explicitly or implicitly – addressed to adults professing their faith.

Q. Do you repent of your sins, and profess your faith in God, the Father who has created you, Jesus Christ who has redeemed you, and the Holy Spirit who has enabled you to trust in the grace and love of God?

Q. Do you promise to nourish your faith by the study of God's word and by prayer, in private and at public worship?

Q. Do you promise to live, with the help of the Holy Spirit, a godly life and take your part in the work and witness of this church?

Whilst we cannot be sure that these questions were verbally addressed to Tiyo at the time of his baptism, either by Dr Anderson or the Kirk Session, in private or in public, we can be reasonably sure that the John Street Kirk Session would have adequately satisfied themselves on these grounds before

proceeding to baptise Tiyo and accept him as a communicant member of the John Street Church. We may thus be confident to say that for Tiyo Soga baptism bore witness to his intellectual commitment to Jesus Christ as his teacher, to the dedication of his heart to Jesus Christ as his Saviour, and to his lifelong allegiance to Jesus Christ as his Lord and Master. If there had been any reasonable doubt about any of these elements, the Kirk Session would have refused baptism and Tiyo would have had to remain outside the membership of the congregation until such time as his profession was credible.

Awareness of what was involved in taking this important step of Christian commitment helps us to understand how radical was Tiyo's decision. For him, becoming a Christian was no superficial change of religious allegiance. Nor was he 'converting to Christianity' in the sense of accepting the traditions held by those who had made provision for his education. Rather, he was professing what he believed to be true: that in the depths of his personality, he had been converted by the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit. So, on 7<sup>th</sup> May, 1848, Tiyo, independently, publicly and irrevocably, affirmed his commitment to Christ and His gospel. As Donovan Williams has commented, Tiyo Soga 'always saw himself as a Christian first; from this all else followed.'<sup>14</sup>

### **Uniondale: 1848-1850**

On 24<sup>th</sup> October, 1848, Tiyo, accompanied by a new missionary for Tyumie, left Glasgow by express train for London. There he boarded the ship that would bring him back to Africa, arriving at Port Elizabeth on 31<sup>st</sup> January, 1849. Shortly after returning home, he was given the responsibility with his colleague, Robert Niven, of opening a new mission station at Uniondale, in the Keiskamma valley, approximately twenty-five kilometres east of his home near Tyumie. It was here where he first preached the gospel, probably on New Year's Day, 1849, and here too that he first began to write hymns for the Xhosa hymn book of 1850.

It was also at Uniondale where he first experienced strong opposition to his Christian convictions. When it was noised abroad that Tiyo had not been circumcised, Xhosa fathers took their sons away from his school and some young men even threatened his life if he did not submit to circumcision; but even after his home had been broken into and his property stolen, Tiyo refused to compromise his Christian convictions. In later life Tiyo encouraged Xhosa Christian young men to disentangle the cultural elements of circumcision from those relating to traditional religion and the worship of the ancestors.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Williams, *op. cit.*, p.7.

<sup>15</sup> Male circumcision is still regarded as an extremely important, if somewhat controversial, rite of passage for Xhosa young men, marking their transition from

At the outbreak of the War of Mlanjeni, on the morning of Christmas Day 1850, Niven and his family left Uniondale to move to safety. Tiyo and an elder, a man called Busak, remained behind. That afternoon the mission station was attacked and burned to the ground; Tiyo and Busak grabbed a few of their things and ran for their lives to a nearby kraal where they knew they would be safe. This was a hard time for Xhosa Christians. Busak lost everything he owned and about a year later was found dead with assegai wounds. Other local Christians, afraid to leave the area and be denounced by the chief, Sandile, as traitors, hid in a cave in the Amathole mountains.

The outbreak of fighting so badly upset Mrs Niven it was decided they should return to Scotland and take Tiyo with them. For the second time Tiyo found himself leaving Africa for Glasgow. Just before embarking at Cape Town, Tiyo was offered, at a very good salary, the post of a government interpreter; however, he declined the offer, saying he would rather beg in the streets of Glasgow to collect his fees for Theological Hall so that he could learn how to preach the Good News of the Saviour he knew but which his countrymen did not yet know. Although his father refused to make any contribution towards his education, Tiyo did not have to beg on the streets of Glasgow; the John Street Church made generous provision for him.

### **The Second Visit to Glasgow: 1850-1856**

Tiyo prepared himself for ordination first at Glasgow University and then by attending the United Presbyterian Theological Hall. Here he made many friends, influencing some to consider missionary work in South Africa. On Sundays he taught in a Sunday school in one of the poorer parts of the city.

After completing his theological studies, Tiyo was ordained on 23<sup>rd</sup> December, 1856, by the United Presbyterian Presbytery of Glasgow as a minister of the John Street Church. The remarkable and controversial ordination prayer was offered by the senior minister, Rev. William Anderson. With his hand resting on Tiyo's head, he first earnestly prayed for God's

---

boyhood to adulthood. Without circumcision males cannot marry, inherit possessions, nor officiate in traditional ritual ceremonies. After circumcision the initiates (*abakwetha*) live together in seclusion to allow time for the healing process, during which they smear white clay on their bodies, eat a prescribed diet and observe numerous rituals. The use of a common blade is considered by some authorities to be linked to the transmission of STDs, especially HIV/AIDS, and is said to be the cause of a number of deaths each year, mainly due to septicaemia. In the 1990s, a programme was started in Alice, not far from Tiyo Soga's birthplace, to encourage the use of surgical scalpels and new blades for each initiate. Soga did not object in principle to circumcision for Christian young men, but insisted it be separated from all its traditional religious overtones and treated as a civil rite. Cf. Chalmers, op. cit., pp.264ff. Currently a number of Xhosa-speaking churches are exploring an alternative in which the operation would be carried out under hospital conditions, with the traditional 'circumcision school' giving way to instruction on biblical manhood.

blessing for his young African friend; then asked God to make the British government change its colonial policy; finally, he sought God's blessing on 'the noble chieftain Sandile.'

The following Sunday, Tiyo was invited to preach his first sermon as an ordained minister in the church of which his old Uniondale colleague, the Rev. Robert Niven, was minister. The building was filled by a large congregation, most of whom had never before heard an African preach a sermon. During the singing of a psalm, Tiyo's hand was resting on the edge of the pulpit. A little boy who was sitting on the pulpit steps and had never seen an African before reached up and ran his finger across the black hand to see if the colour would rub off. Surprised that it would not, he moistened his finger and tried again with no greater success. Looking into the little boy's eyes, it was all Tiyo could do to stop himself laughing out loud at his bewilderment.

Among the many friends Tiyo made in Scotland was Janet Burnside, the young Scottish woman who became his wife. Janet, two years older than Tiyo, had been born in a poor district of Glasgow called the Gorbals, the eldest daughter of Alan Burnside and his wife Isabelle Kirkland. At the time of the wedding, the family address was Craignestock, a street in the Calton district of Glasgow famous for its cotton weaving industry. Here her father was employed in a relatively poorly paid job as a cotton yarn warper, the counterpart to a weaver, preparing looms for the production of cotton cloth.<sup>16</sup> The marriage took place in the western Glasgow suburb of Ibrox on 27<sup>th</sup> February, 1857, with Rev. John Ker officiating. Poor they might have been, but judging from the invitations Tiyo sent out to some of his friends, humorously announcing his being 'launched into the horrors of matrimony,' their wedding seems to have been a light-hearted and happy event.<sup>17</sup>



*Janet Burnside Soga*

<sup>16</sup> The task of cotton warper is described in Robert John Peake, *Cotton; From the Raw Material to the Finished Product* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, n.d.), p.86.

<sup>17</sup> The marriage certificate may be viewed and downloaded from, <http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk>.

Although the newly married couple did not suffer any embarrassment or criticism in Scotland because of their inter-racial marriage, when they returned to the Cape it was a different story. Walking in the streets of Cape Town and Port Elizabeth, they suffered the loudly expressed disapproval of ill-mannered, racially prejudiced colonists, but the Reverend and Mrs Tiyo Soga resolutely refused to be troubled by this small-mindedness. One day after their being stared at, Tiyo wrote that despite the criticism of unfriendly people, the principle of the equality of the races had triumphed.<sup>18</sup>

The Soga's arrived back home to discover the country devastated by the Cattle Killing.<sup>19</sup> In the winter of 1856, it was rumoured that the spirits of the ancestors had told the young prophetess Nongqawuse to instruct the people to destroy all their crops and kill their cattle; in return, the ancestors would sweep the Settlers into the sea. After eighty years of colonial aggression and seeing no way to regain their status as an independent people, many were only too ready to believe the prophecies. All across the region cattle were slaughtered and left to rot, granaries were emptied and the ground was left unplanted. The ancestors' promise, so it was said, would be fulfilled on 18<sup>th</sup> February, 1857, when the sun would rise red; but the sun rose that day just the same as on every other day and proved the prophecy false. The result was not only great disillusionment but a terrible famine in which thousands perished of starvation. For months the roads were full of hungry people moving from place to place seeking food and help.

### **The Mgwali Years: 1857-1868.**

In December 1857, Tiyo and Janet moved to Mgwali, near the German settler village of Stutterheim, and set to work providing food for the starving and homeless people flocking to their little mission station. They wrote to friends in Scotland appealing for financial aid. In one letter, Tiyo reported, 'We are seeing sights that are making our hearts bleed and our eyes weep. It was only yesterday that . . . with my own hands . . . I dug the grave of a mother and two children who had died of sheer starvation.'<sup>20</sup> Terrible as it was, worse was to come; as the time for sowing came near, the people were too weak to cultivate the land. Even so, there were good stories too. A young lad of around twelve had been brought in unconscious and at death's door, but kindness and good food, Tiyo wrote, 'are working wonders for him.'<sup>21</sup> Over the following months, the United Presbyterian Church and other churches in Scotland sent generous funds to alleviate the suffering.

---

<sup>18</sup> Chalmers, op. cit., p.131f.

<sup>19</sup> For a definitive account of the Cattle Killing episode, see Jeff Pieres, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing of 1856-7* (Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 1989).

<sup>20</sup> Chalmers, op. cit., p.142.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p.143.

With their own hands, Tiyo and his colleague Rev. Robert Johnston built a small mud-walled church. Johnston painted the woodwork and Tiyo learned to cut and fit the glass for the windows. Each Sunday they took turns to conduct services, one in English for the few settlers in the area and the other in Xhosa. Tiyo thought that disillusionment with the failed prophecies might open hearts to the gospel, but at first there was resistance. On 21<sup>st</sup> January, Tiyo wrote, ‘Conducted a Xhosa service in the morning . . . there [were] a few Xhosas present.’<sup>22</sup> But as time went by, things began to change. In March he wrote, ‘There were three red Xhosas present in our services.’<sup>23</sup>

On Sunday 10th April, the little church was opened and the Lord’s Supper was celebrated with forty communicants. By the end of May, attendance had reached around 150. Tiyo now felt optimistic: ‘our little Sanctuary was quite full & the attention sustained in all the Services.’<sup>24</sup> By September 1859, the Mgwali church was too small. Tiyo’s journal entry for Sunday, 16<sup>th</sup> September, states, ‘Another splendid day in attendance — No room at all — some had to stand outside — a good company of fine young people.’<sup>25</sup> On 3<sup>rd</sup> December he wrote ‘a fine company of people, some dressed – others in their Xhosa blankets – Never preached more more wretchedly – The house was crowded to excess.’<sup>26</sup> Acknowledging God’s blessing, Tiyo believed the time was ripe to raise funds for a new and larger building, and wrote in his private journal, ‘You bless me, Lord, your work overwhelms me, but the Spirit [enables me]. Let those who are crying over their sins move me to cry over my own, and help me to believe what I am preaching to others. Father, I throw myself on you as I am.’<sup>27</sup> Assessing the results of the past year’s labour and hoping for yet greater blessing, Tiyo wrote on 29<sup>th</sup> January, 1860, ‘This is still the day of small things. But I thank God that we have been enabled to do even this much – The work is his – May he command the blessing upon it – & may he give us the necessary strength & perseverance in this good work.’<sup>28</sup>

It would be wrong, however, to give the impression that the work in Mgwali went forward smoothly and without difficulties. A serious accident with a pot of hot glue badly burned Tiyo’s face and set his house on fire, which mercifully was soon extinguished. Then, feeling severe pains in his side and chest, he rode to King William’s Town to see a doctor only to be told it was an early sign of tuberculosis, from which he eventually died.

---

<sup>22</sup> Donovan Williams, ed., *The Journal and Selected Writings of the Reverend Tiyo Soga* (Cape Town: A. A Balkema, 1983), p.16.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p.17.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p.19.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p.21.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p.23.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p.22.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p.25.

Then, just as the burden of the work was increasing, Tiyo found himself left alone when Robert Johnston accepted a call to become minister of Trinity Presbyterian Church, Grahamstown. Whilst believing that Johnston would remember the mission work in Mgwali and raise prayerful and financial support for it, Tiyo was saddened and discouraged by his leaving. Writing from Grahamstown on the day he had participated in Johnston's induction, he wrote, 'I truly wish he had remained in Kaffraria. His departure was to me a great trial, as we have always worked together cordially, and in harmony.'<sup>29</sup> Tiyo especially missed Johnston's company and support during the planning and building of the new church at Mgwali, which was built not just at the cost of a large sum of money but at the price of Tiyo's health.

It was difficult to raise funds for the building either from his own Xhosa people or the settlers and missionaries of the King William's Town district. Once, hoping to raise £150, he was disappointed to find the collection produced only £13. As expected, Johnston's congregation in Grahamstown donated generously the sum of £50 and other churches gave £68. In Port Elizabeth, Tiyo's eloquent addresses raised over £200, some from children. Tiyo wrote to the mission board in Scotland, telling how the children had 'stretched out their little hands towards me with pennies, threepences, sixpences and shillings, saying . . . "this is to build your church."<sup>30</sup> In all £450 was raised from South African supporters, with the rest coming from friends and supporters in Scotland, including a generous donation from his church at John Street in Glasgow.

In July 1861, the foundation for the new church was laid and about a year later on Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> June, Tiyo's fine new Mgwali United Presbyterian Church, accommodating 600 people, was opened. That was a day full of great rejoicing, hearty feasting, good fellowship and fine preaching. The seventy-one year old Congregational pioneer, Rev. John Brownlee, rode over from King William's Town to preach at the morning Xhosa service. Tiyo's former teacher and friend, the Rev. William Govan, principal of Lovedale, preached in English at noon. Tiyo's close friend and fellow student, Rev. Bryce Ross of Pirie, preached in the afternoon in Xhosa from the text Matt. 5:9, 'Blessed are the peacemakers', alluding to the work of Tiyo and intending the benediction to rest upon him.

Later, the Rev. James Read of Kat River preached a sermon in Dutch reminding the congregation that men were the same everywhere and all needed to ask the same question: 'What must I do to be saved?' And they should all alike also listen to God's answer, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.' Tiyo's United Presbyterian colleagues, Rev. James Laing and Rev. John Chalmers, were both present, as were his neighbours, Rev. Johann Kropf of the Berlin Mission at Bethel and Thomas Brockway and Henry Kayser of the London Missionary Society at Peulton.

---

<sup>29</sup> Chalmers, *op. cit.*, p.183.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p.197.

With the building work on the church now complete, Tiyo dedicated his time to writing. His great desire was to complete the translation of the first part of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, which he had begun when a student in Glasgow. The work was finished on 21<sup>st</sup> November, 1866. His journal entry for that day, reads, 'Quarter past nine o'clock, night. Finished, through the goodness of Almighty God, the translation of the first part of the Pilgrim's Progress, my fingers aching with writing.'<sup>31</sup> Tiyo dedicated the book to Lovedale's principal, Dr. William Govan, who arranged for it to be printed by the Lovedale Press.

After the last of the border wars, that of 1878, there was a curious anti-missionary story published in the *Tarkastad Chronicle* which told how after one battle a copy of the Xhosa *Pilgrim's Progress* was found on the body of a dead Xhosa fighter. It was inscribed with the words, 'Lovedale Missionary Institution. First prize in English reading, Junior Division, First Year, awarded to Paul Nkupiso.'<sup>32</sup> The *Chronicle* sarcastically ventured the caustic comment that 'The book will be kept as a standing

advertisement of missionary labour.'<sup>33</sup> We do not know who that dead warrior was, as sometime later Nkupiso turned up alive and well at Lovedale, nor have we any notion why he had taken the book with him into battle, nor do we know how he had come by it in the first place. What we do know is that he wanted it, perhaps for superstitious reasons, believing the powerful 'Word' of which the missionaries spoke, might protect him against bullets; however, I like to think that this story may suggest that it was neither white settlers nor the colonial army that had a monopoly on those who read and appreciated *Pilgrim's Progress*; it interested Xhosa patriots too.<sup>34</sup>



<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.340.

<sup>32</sup> Shepherd, op. cit., p.210

<sup>33</sup> Idem.

<sup>34</sup> Much could be written about the vicious anti-missionary bias of many white settlers who objected to education for black Africans (cf. Shepherd, op. cit., p.16); a

From Mgawli Tiyo established preaching stations at outlying kraals where people were interested and attentive. He was careful always to pay special attention to visiting at the kraals of traditional leaders, where he never lost an opportunity to speak for his Saviour. Once, visiting Sandile's place, he preached to twenty important men though Sandile himself was away from home that day. On another occasion, at Bholo, from whence people walked to services at Mgawli, he found them eagerly leaving their farms to come to hear him. In another place, the chief told him how unhappy they were when he was unable to visit them. Not only did Tiyo preach, but he also started schools and tried to meet basic medical needs. In the manse he kept a well equipped medicine chest and during outbreaks of smallpox went from home to home vaccinating to prevent the disease.

Tiyo Soga had a great ability to unite people. Not only were many of the Xhosa people open to his preaching, but the settlers also came to appreciate his ministry. He preached in large Presbyterian, Methodist and Anglican congregations in Port Elizabeth, Uitenhage, Grahamstown, Bedford, Alice, King William's Town and even in the Dutch Reformed *Moederkerk* in Cape Town. As a result, much of the early prejudice against him and his wife disappeared. One old white gentleman in King William's Town presented him with two beautifully bound books, one of which is now in the collection of the Amathole Museum, inscribed: 'To the Rev. Tiyo Soga, upon hearing the first sermon preached by him . . . at King William's Town. From an old resident.'

Tiyo also spent time exercising his considerable talent as a hymn-writer, writing hymns for inclusion in a school hymnbook which was published in 1864. He was also a member of the board for the revision of the Xhosa Bible. The translation of the whole Bible had been completed in 1859 and published in a single volume in 1864, but the missionaries were not satisfied with their work and in 1868 it was decided to undertake a major revision. Tiyo was an obvious choice as a member of the revision committee but died before the work was completed.

It was around this time that Tiyo began to be involved in journalism and developed ideas about Africa or Black-consciousness, later to be taken up and developed along secular lines by thinkers and activists such as Steve Biko. In March 1865, during a time of great personal discouragement, Tiyo's close friend and biographer, John Chalmers, wrote an unfortunate and derogatory article entitled 'The Kaffir Race' which was published first in Lovedale's Xhosa and English paper, *Indaba*, and then on 25<sup>th</sup> April in the *King William's Town Gazette and Kaffrarian Banner*. In this article Chalmers suggested that the Xhosa people would become extinct and forgotten forever unless they worked hard at making a contribution to the life of the Colony. Chalmers' attitude angered Tiyo. Writing to the *Gazette*,

---

prejudice reflected as the sub-plot of John Buchan's 1910 novel *Prester John*. Similarly, Tiyo Soga acknowledged that for many of the Xhosa the missionaries were little more than 'emissaries of Government', cf. Chalmers, op.cit., p.327.

under the pseudonym *Defensor*, he immediately challenged his friend's ideas. He showed as untenable and illogical Chalmers' criticism that black people were 'indolent,' 'drunken,' 'averse to change,' and consequently 'doomed to extinction,' yet also 'capable.' Likewise, he argued that belief in the doom of the black nations was incompatible with the 'sheet-anchor' missionary slogan that 'Ethiopia shall soon stretch her hands out to God?' On the contrary, Tiyo argued, the Bible taught that God was committed to black Africans; had he not made them 'durable, tenacious and accustomed to adversity?' Not only would they survive, but they would flourish as 'a noble race,' provided they were not deprived of their land, moved around and made to settle wherever the whims of the Colonial government decided. Xhosa people, Tiyo believed, should be aware of their history and proud of their heritage and thereby develop self-respect. They should by all means take advantage of education, improved agricultural techniques, modern clothing and all the other benefits Western culture brought; but they should not fall into the trap of following the example of the worst aspects of "the outlaws and refuse" of the mother country' by, for instance, abusing alcohol. Above all, they should accept Christianity because everything good flowed from that spring. The importance of this correspondence between these two friends cannot be overstated, for their differences did not produce personal ill will. As Williams correctly remarks, 'As far as can be ascertained, the letters are the first of their kind by a black man in South Africa, and contribute to making 1865 the great year for the emergence of Black consciousness.'<sup>35</sup>



*Tiyo Soga*

Putting his preaching into practice, Tiyo spoke to his four sons about their future as children from an inter-racial family, 'For your own sakes never appear ashamed that your father was a Xhosa, and that you inherit some African blood. . . .*take your place* in the world as *coloured*, not as *white* men; as *Xhosas*, not as *Englishmen*.'<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Williams, op. cit. p.178.

<sup>36</sup> Chalmers, op. cit., p.430.

### Tutura and the End: 1868-1871

In 1868, the United Presbyterian Church appointed Tiyo to the new mission station at Tutura, in the Transkei, but he was very pessimistic about the outcome. He knew only too well that it was for political reasons that the king, Sarhili, and his councillors had asked for a missionary but were highly resistant to the Christian gospel. Yet the reality was not as bad as he anticipated: by 1870 about a hundred people attended the little mud walled church, and there was a small group of enquirers who were being instructed in basic Christianity.

In June 1871, Tiyo set out on horseback to establish a new outstation at Mapassa's kraal, but as Mapassa was away from home Tiyo had to wait. The weather turned cold and wet; for a number of days he was trapped in a damp hut with no food and no-one willing to take care of him. On the Saturday, cold and hungry, he rode back to Tutura in the pouring rain to discover his wife and family had gone to Butterworth and would not return for a few days. Suffering from fever, he lay down on a sofa and covered himself with a blanket to try to keep warm. By Sunday morning, he had recovered enough to force himself to preach, but for two weeks afterwards he remained seriously ill.

At the beginning of July, he felt a little stronger; and he agreed to vaccinate villagers who were worried about smallpox and sat on his verandah waiting for help. Once more he overworked and the illness returned. A doctor was sent for, but on 12<sup>th</sup> August, 1871, Tiyo Soga, only 41 years of age, gently passed away. Sitting at Tiyo's bedside was his close friend Rev. Richard Ross, who had been at Lovedale with him and at Glasgow, too, and in later life had shared in the joys and struggles of Christian ministry. Ross helped Tiyo to change his position in bed. While he gently raised him, he felt the body go limp; and as he looked into his face, Tiyo, 'calmly, gently, as an infant falling asleep, . . . breathed his last breath.'<sup>37</sup>

Three days later simple funeral services were held in Xhosa and English. Six Xhosa Christians carried the coffin to the grave in the orchard which Tiyo had planted, where his worn out body was laid to rest. Standing at the graveside was his widow, Janet, with her seven children: thirteen year old William Anderson, eleven year old John Henderson, nine year old Allan Kirkland, six year old Jotello Festiri and the little girls, Bella, Frances and Jessie Margaret. There too was his elderly mother, Nosutu, with words of Christian comfort for all the bereaved.

As a minister the United Presbyterian Church, Tiyo had confessed his faith in terms of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. I like to think that the words of the answer to the 37<sup>th</sup> question of the *Shorter Catechism* had a very special significance that day for his grieving family and friends:

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p.485.

The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection.

Today, whatever Tiyo Soga may mean to us, and he will mean different things to different people, he would want to remind us that we entirely miss the point unless by faith we receive for ourselves his Saviour, Jesus Christ and see the gospel of God's grace as the true source of all that is good, both in time and eternity. Two lines of one of his hymns sums up everything Tiyo Soga stood for, worked for and hoped for:

Rule! Rule! Lord Jesus;  
Through you will come happiness.