

MGWALI MISSION AND TIYO SOGA (c. 1829-1871)

compiled by Yvonne Surtees

Mgwali Mission is synonymous with Tiyo Soga. One can safely argue that Mgwali owes its existence to Tiyo Soga in that he helped secure a title deed for Mgwali and additional grants of land for educational purposes.

Tiyo (possibly an Africanisation of 'Theo') Soga is also unique in the history of the Black people in South Africa. He was the first ordained minister to be educated overseas; the first black missionary among Africans, the first black South African ever to preach at a white church; the first black translator of an English classic into an African language, and the first to formulate a philosophy of Black Consciousness – thus a forerunner of Steve Biko (1946-1977) by a hundred years.

Tiyo Soga was born c1829 at Mgwali in the Stutterheim district, at the time when Chief Maqoma and his people were being expelled from their ancestral lands in the Kat River Valley by the colonial government.

His father, 'Old Soga', was one of the principal counsellors of the Xhosa chiefs Ngqika and Sandile. Old Soga was a polygamist, and Tiyo was the 7th of 9 children born to Nosuthu, one of his eight wives. Tiyo had 29 - 39 siblings! After his birth, his mother became a Christian and sent him to Tyumie Mission where his potential was recognized by Rev Chalmers, to the extent that at age 15 he was sent to Lovedale for further studies. Nosuthu was also instrumental in not allowing Tiyo to be circumcised, which led to suspicion and mistrust from many of his people.

What is both ironic and interesting is that patriarchal Xhosa traditional rules and traditions were subverted by Nosuthu.



Tiyo Soga and his wife Janet Burnside

At Lovedale he lived a multiracial existence among the children of missionaries, absorbing Scottish education and Presbyterianism. In 1846 the Seventh Frontier War broke out and he was chosen with three white youths to go to Glasgow, Scotland, to be educated. This radically different world exercised a great fascination for Tiyo. He learned to love it and its civilization as much as his own country, and thus as a young man he was already a person of two worlds.

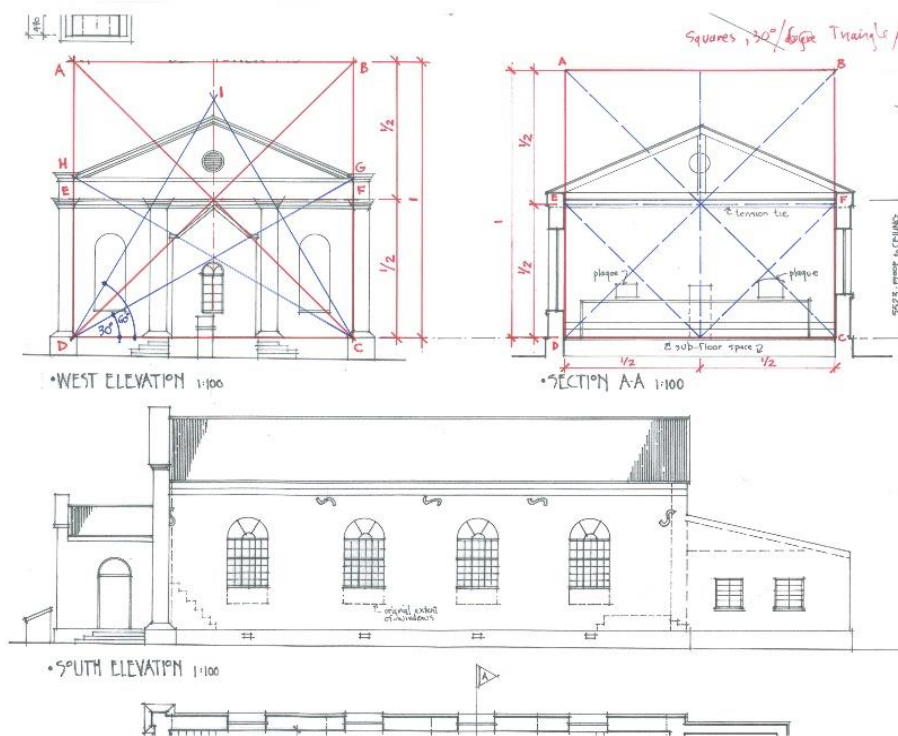
He came back to Kaffraria in December 1848 as a mission schoolmaster, but when the 1850 war broke out he felt compromised. Chief Maqoma expected his allegiance, but Tiyo didn't want to promote war, so in June 1851 he returned to Glasgow to study for the ministry at the University of Glasgow, and the United Presbyterian Church, Free Church of Scotland. He struggled with his studies as he didn't have

the background; he was looked upon as an exotic figure and didn't fit in socially (read Marguerite Poland's *Sin of Omission* for a picture of his situation). Still, through hard work, he was ordained in 1856 and was already suffering from tuberculosis when he married Janet Burnside, an attractive Scottish lass, early the next year. She was two years older than he and she left with him for South Africa a couple of months after the marriage. They landed in Port Elizabeth and he was reminded of the harsh realities of colonial colour prejudice when, as a black man with a white woman on his arm he stopped the traffic to calls of "Shame on Scotland!"

This was 1857, the year after the 'Cattle Killing' which left most of the Xhosa impoverished. At the same time missions were very active, and they settled at Mgwali Mission, which Tiyo revived after it had been abandoned during the previous Frontier War. He worked there until 1867, trying to reconcile his two worlds by unifying the traditional Xhosa values he believed in, with the best aspects of Western civilization. He had a hard time of it: Tiyo's education and religion separated him culturally from his people, but he strove to work, as he saw it, for the good of his countrymen. Although he and his wife suffered from discrimination and the uniqueness of his experience made him lonely at times, he was proud to be Xhosa and was adamant in rejecting racist characterisations of blacks.

At Mgwali he established outstations for preaching and schools for education; in time some 400-500 hundred men, women and children lived at the mission station. The Mgwali Mission formed part of an overall Cape Colonial Government policy of pacifying the trouble-stricken Eastern Cape frontier with orderly settlements.

It became a centre of agricultural progress and its residents adapted to new farming methods. Five schools were established, one of which was South Africa's first boarding school for black girls. This became well known and many girls from all parts of SA were trained there as teachers.





Previous page,
above
and left :
architect
William Martinson's
drawings of
Mgwali Mission
Church; the Church
exterior and interior.
(Photos: W
Martinson)

Mgwali Mission was visited by Prince Alfred in 1860 (when the prince also visited Thomas River, and after which Port Frances became Port Alfred), and by numerous missionary and other friends. With Soga's arrival a new and thriving church was built - were it not for Soga's courage, the church could have remained wattle and daub. He had to raise a great portion of the funds for this church because the Missionary Society felt the blacks were too indifferent to Christianity to warrant the expense, and that it would be burnt down in the next War. All the while his health was plaguing him, but in spite of that he left Mgwali in 1868 to start a new station at Thuthurha, deeper in Kaffraria in the Centani district, Chief Sarhili's territory.

Over time the mission field seemed to be progressing slowly and Soga became quite disillusioned. But his literary work must have given him great satisfaction: he completed the Xhosa translation of the first part of the *Pilgrim's Progress*; he compiled a book of hymns, and was an active contributor to the revision of the four gospels of the Xhosa Bible. He was also an indefatigable newspaper contributor, sharing his philosophy of Black Consciousness in the midst of colour prejudice and territorial expansion by whites.



Memorial plaque and the English
rendering of its isiXhosa inscription
(Photo: William Martinson)

He saw his people as part of the wider African community, as sons of Ham to whom God had given Africa, and he taught his children never to be ashamed that their father was black. He himself revelled in disproving racial scepticism, and believed that education would raise the natives [sic] beyond their servitude to colonial society. He never disliked whites, despite the injustices he witnessed.

**This stone is to keep us in remembrance of
The Rev. Tiyo Soga,
The First Ordained Preacher of the [Xhosa] race.
He was a Friend of God; a Lover of His Son; inspired by His
Spirit; a Disciple of His Holy Word; 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 Devoted
Missionary who spent himself
in his Master's service.**

Tiyo Soga died aged only 42. In June 1871 he set out from Thuthurha to establish a new outstation. The weather closed in and he was trapped for several days in a damp hut. He returned to Thuthurha very ill and passed away two months later, on 12 August 1871. He was buried at Thuthurha, but a plaque in the Mgwali church also recognises his uniqueness and attributes. His death was lamented in the Colony and abroad, and his achievements widely acknowledged. Perhaps the greatest compliment, within the context of his times, came from the Grahamstown Journal:

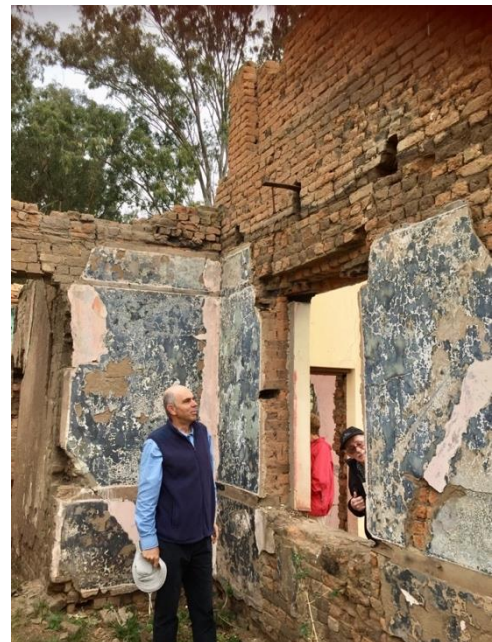
Men cannot despise the Kaffir [sic] race as they contemplate it in him.

The name of the village and the Mgwali River bear reference to a former Ngqika Chief, Mgwali Kanthaba, from the Alice (Tyumie) district. The Ngqika, as all other Xhosa tribes, made their living by farming cattle, their pride and symbol of wealth. After the last (1877-78) Frontier War a large portion of the Ngqika area was demarcated settler land by the Cape Government. By the 1880s Mgwali was surrounded by white farms. It was proclaimed a 'black spot in a white corridor' in the 1980s. The villagers faced forced removal and relocation, which they ultimately resisted successfully. The Church, fittingly, was where they gathered in their attempt to fight forced removals. They formed the Mgwali Residents Association (MRA), and endured a lengthy struggle, but with help from several organisations. In June 1985 the Government announced a reprieve for the 7000 families, and in July 1987 abandoned the plans to remove them. Mgwali is unique in that it is one of the first rural communities in the history of South Africa to successfully resist the apartheid forced removals: it became an inspiration to other rural areas also facing forced removals in the Border region. Its struggle was an extraordinary triumph of rural people united in their cause to fight the unjust, ruthless Ciskei and racist South African Governments.



Soga's Manse, as it was some years ago, and the burnt-out ruin it is now (below).

Right: William Martinson points out window features that had been there.





Unfortunately, the Mission site has become dilapidated because of economic self-sustainability issues, the fate of many cultural heritage sites. The original manse was burnt to the ground when children tried to smoke out bees. The girls' school is derelict, but the church still stands, though is in need of renovation. Despite our greatest efforts we were not able to get into the church, but were able to explore the surroundings. William Martinson, who had been there before, provided us with details of the church architecture.

FAMILY: Tiyo and Janet had four sons and three daughters. He loved his wife deeply and she was a devoted mother. After his death Janet returned to Scotland and his children went on to make a mark for themselves:

The eldest son, **Dr William Anderson Soga** was the first person of colour to practise as a medical missionary in the Transkei. Educated at Lovedale, he studied medicine at Glasgow University, then theology in Edinburgh to be ordained as a minister. His son in turn was also a doctor, in Idutywa.

The second son **Rev John Henderson Soga** was the first Xhosa historian. Educated in Glasgow and Edinburgh he was also ordained and served at a mission in the Mt Frere district. He completed the translation of the second half of *Pilgrim's Progress*. A composer of hymns, he also wrote two significant books on black history. In 1936 he presented Tiyo Soga's journal and Bible, inscribed by Prince Alfred, to the South African Native College (now the University of Fort Hare.)

Alan Kirkland Soga, the third son, read law and humanities at Glasgow University and entered the civil service on his return to South Africa. He served as assistant labour agent, Acting Resident Magistrate and was the editor of a newspaper called the *Voice of the People* (in isiXhosa). He took an interest in politics and was a sturdy protagonist of Black Rights.

The youngest son, **Jortello Festiri Soga**, was the first ever South African veterinary surgeon (not only the first *black* vet) - the next was only in 1912. Educated in Glasgow and at the Edinburgh Royal Veterinary College, he was a gold medalist in Botany. He practised mainly in Fort Beaufort and King William's Town and was noted for his work in the rinderpest epidemic of 1897.

Of Tiyo's daughters predictably less is known... the eldest died young, the second did mission work in the Transkei and the third went to Scotland at an early age and never returned.

Note: "I have used the term 'Black' to describe Tiyo Soga's ethnic group which he himself unashamedly called the 'Kaffir race' of which he was so proud. Historically the 'Kaffirs' were the Xhosa, but Tiyo Soga also perceived it as embracing all black people in Africa. There is no doubt about his insistence on colour (or as he described it, 'African blood') as an undeniable and identifying characteristic." Donovan Williams.

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