Cannibals become Church Members

By rev. P.G. Boon ©

In South Africa the following song is well known:

7  Jehova, Modimo wa Israele
(from: Lifela tsa Sione)

1. Jehova, Modimo wa Israele
   U re faladitse lefifing la pele
   Re thaba hakaakang
   ha re u khumamela.
   Kajeno re batho,
   re tseba ho rapela.

   Jehova, God of Israel
   you saved us from the darkness we were in.
   We are very glad
   when we kneel before you.
   Today we are people
   who know how to pray.

2. Maoto a khotso,
   a tswang ho Monghadi
   A tilie Lesotho,
   lefatseng la madi.
   A re a sa hlaha,
   Satan'a thothomela.
   Mokhosi wa khutsa,
   dira tse re bakela.

   The feet of peace
   were sent by the Master
   He came to Lesotho,
   the land of blood.
   When they came,
   Satan trembled.
   The noise stopped,
   the enemies fled.

3. Magageng a matso,
   thakong tsa ledimo,
   Ho binwa sefela se
   bokang Modimo.
   Naha ea nyakalla,
   e khabile ka metse
   Nala e hlahile
   bakeng sa ditsietsi.

   In dark caves
   where cannibals used to live,
   now a song is sung
   to praise God.
   The country is glad,
   there are many homes.
   Prosperity has come
   in the place of danger.

4. Ba neng ba khalane
   ba boela ha habo,
   ba diqhobosheane ba ba
   nka ka thabo.
   Leqhoku le akwa ke
   tlogolo tsa Iona,
   di tla di hodile;
   ho bokwe Mong'a bona!

   The people who were scattered
   have come home.
   Those who protected fortresses
   were received with joy.
   The old man
   sees his grandchildren.
   They grew up in the meantime;
   praise the Lord!

5. E, dipoko tsohle di hlabe hodimo
   Ho wena, Jehova,
   Morena Modimo!
   Re sechaba sa hao,
   se ratilweng ke Jesu.
   Tiisa 'muso wa hao fatseng
   lena la heso!

   Yes, let all songs go up
   to you, Jehova,
   Lord God!
   We are your people
   loved by Jesus
   Strengthen your kingdom
   in this country of ours.

The Poet
This song was written by Eugène Casalis. He was a Frenchman and one of the first missionaries to arrive in the interiors of South Africa. These missionaries founded – after negotiations with the chiefs – mission stations in the area that is now known as Lesotho. The most well known station is Morija, close to Maseru, where until today the hymnbook Lifela tsa Sione (Songs of Zion) is printed. Today we are well acquainted with the mission stations. They are located all over the country. Most of them are nowadays in a deplorable state. But have you ever thought where these stations come from?

The churches in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries became debilitated by Rationalism and Liberalism. Although the Europeans sailed the oceans and met foreign nations for many centuries whilst doing commerce, very little mission work was done. To the contrary, they subjected the foreign nations to the most horrible forms of slavery. Against this a reaction arose within Europe, especially at the beginning of the 19th century. Sincere Christians came together to collect huge amounts of money. With it they sent missionaries overseas to all the pagan nations, especially to those countries that had been colonized by the Europeans.

The poet, Eugène Casalis, was born in 1812 and originated from a traditionally Protestant province in the south of France. As student he came in contact with pastors like César Malan and the Scottish brothers Haldane, leaders of the Réveil in Genève. The Réveil (French for awakening) was a revival in Switzerland and France at the beginning of the 19th century. They rejected the upcoming Liberalism and clinged to the infallible Word of God. They also combatted societal injustices like f.e. the slavery. The 19th century movements of the Secession and Second Secession in the Netherlands, from which the Reformed and Free Reformed Churches in South Africa originated, had close ties with the Réveil. Also in Switzerland secessions took place. From these congregations many young men came to become missionaries in the service of the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society (PEMS). Just as his compatriots in the Netherlands Casalis was not opposed to hymns as such (he composed many in the Sotho language), but he was opposed against unscriptural hymns that were introduced into the churches in the 19th century.

Casalis arrived as a young man in 1833 as a missionary sent out by the PEMS in Cape Town, accompanied by two colleagues: Constant Gosselin and Thomas Arbousset. After having visited the
existing mission stations in the Cape Colony (like those of the Moravian mission), they ventured further north outside the borders of the Colony. They were the first Europeans to settle permanently in areas where the Sothos lived. These were the years before the Great Trek. In above mentioned song we find a reflection on what they saw with their arrival.

A remarkable song

This song doesn't but contain beautiful words in general, but it gives a historical description of the circumstances in which the Sothos found themselves with the arrival of the missionaries:

- They were cannibals
- They lived in caves
- Because of the tribal wars the people were scattered and nobody’s life was safe.

This situation specifically alludes to the pogroms executed by the Zulu king Shaka in the 1820’s, causing nations like the Sothos to become almost extinct. It caused large areas in the interiors to be devastated and depopulated. The remaining Sothos fled to the inaccessible mountaineous regions.

But more in general this song also refers to the general state of affairs in pagan Africa. The arrival of the missionaries however brought stability and joy. The song expresses it more precisely: The coming of the Lord Christ – with the feet of the missionaries – made Satan to tremble and the enemies to flee.

That Casalis did not exaggerate becomes clear when you read the reports of the missionaries. They gave a description of the pagan Bantu culture. Their description dates from before intensive cultural exchange started with the European culture.¹

German missionaries of the mission station Silo in the Eastern Cape (ministering among the Tembu-Xhosas) wrote in 1844 that the French missionaries from Basutuland paid them a visit. One of them, Arbousset, told the following: when he arrived in Basutuland, human bones lied scattered on the earth all around. But now many of the cannibals have turned around totally, they rejoice in the bright light of the Gospel and worship the crucified Saviour. The missionaries described also the way the Bantu nations treated their deceased. It was indeed not unusual to eat human flesh, especially in times of war being periods of food shortage.

¹ In connection with my research on the Moravian mission in South Africa I found this information in the reports of German missionaries from amongst others the years 1844 and 1845. I am sure in the reports of the French missionaries even more information will be found.
Cannibalism wasn’t only limited to Basutuland. Missionaries in the Soutpansberg area also found cannibalistic tribes, the so called Majabatho. The missionaries entrusted the confession of one of the repented cannibals to paper: all the tribes were waging war against one another, and everyone was a fugitive. Day after day people started to eat people, and also I have tasted human flesh. From that time I started to avoid my friends, because I was afraid of being eaten myself. What horrible days followed after I had chopped off the arm of my mother’s brother, cooked and eaten it. I also ate my father’s brother, every piece of him, and many others. Just as the prophet Ezekiel had seen a vision of dry bones of a whole nations coming together again, so I saw in my anxieties how the bones from those of which I had eaten the flesh, coming together and arising against me in the Day of Judgment. I see one with a necklace around his neck; another one arises from the earth with my knife in his chest, a third appears without an arm, whilst another points at the old pot in which I cooked his flesh. Woo me! I am scared! I am Kholumolumo, that ugly animal from the old fable, who devoured mankind and all the animals of the field.

The missionaries however came with the Word of God. Doesn’t God, Creator of the human body, demand in the 6th commandment not to kill a fellow human? Furthermore we find cannibalism in the Bible as something typical of a nation who had went astray totally from God.

The Bantu nations furthermore did not have the culture to bury their deceased. Only the chiefs were buried – in the cattle kraal. The bodies of all other people were left behind in the field for the hyenas and vultures. This was even done with terminally ill people.

Also in this regard the missionaries brought another message. They preached it but also lived it. Initially they had to dig the graves themselves. Since the hyenas were used to eating human flesh, they had to protect the corpses with branches. Because the hyenas started to open the graves. The missionaries noted in their reports that nobody was prepared to help them dig the graves, neither to help carry the deceased to the grave. Nevertheless they continued to bury their converts on the mission stations. Isn’t the burial of a believer a symbol of a seed that is planted for everlasting life, and for the fact that they body will rise from the grave on the last day?

In 1845 the French missionary Arbousset visited Genadendal, the Moravian mission station in the Western Cape. He was accompanied by a couple of converted Sotho men. One of them, Paul Motepi, delivered the following address to the congregation in Genadendal (whilst Arbousset was interpreting in Dutch):

“I greet you in the name of Jesus Christ. You are present here in enormous amounts in this house of prayer. I see that the walls are already brown because of age: hence the Gospel is preached here already for a long time. Many of you have probably been born here under the Word of God. We also hear now the Word of God, but I pity myself that I have become old in darkness. I see here also many of my color: before God all humans are equal, no matter of which skin color; nobody is excluded, everyone is accepted, who believes in Jesus Christ. He is the door, He has to lead, we have to follow Him. Remain faithful to Jesus, and we will, when we do not meet again here, meet each other with Him in heaven.”

3 T. Couzens Murder at Morija (2003), p. 95.
4 The Moravian mission was commenced in Genadendal in 1737, and the church building referred to here was built in 1800.
Another man, Paulus Matate, said the following: "I see here sons of Africa, sons of Europe, blacks, browns, whites, BaSothos, AmaXhosas, and Hottentots: all are equal before God, when they repent to Him. Your teachers have come to bring you the Word of God: honour them and follow them. We also have teachers now. Previously we lived in sin, we had many wives. I see, you have gardens and houses, that is good: work hard for your living. Don’t think I’m a Pharisee, laying burdens on others, whilst not carrying them myself. I also work in the sweat of my body. But on Sundays we don’t work, then we go to church, and listen to the Word of God. But on Monday I take my spade, and the bread that I eat in the sweat of my body, tastes sweet. Don’t sow on the flesh, whoever sows on the flesh, will reap destruction by the flesh. Lazarus was poor, but he was rich in God. The rich man sowed on the flesh, he had no treasure in heaven, and his soul was lost. Each tree, bearing no good fruit, will be cut down and thrown in the fire. Christ is the vine, his Father the farmer. Stay with Him, then we will meet again in heaven.

These are two of the earliest sermons preached by Sothos. In the meantime we live in the 21st century and Christ had already walked for two centuries with the Sothos. Although there is still a lot of paganism hidden below the surface, many Sothos call themselves Christians nowadays. There is still of lot of mission work to be done, but let us not forget that the Christianising of Europe also took centuries.