

**Christian emergence among the Batlhaping ba ga
Phuduhucwana¹ tribe in Taung:
the London Missionary Society**

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Abstract

The Batlhaping people, like other communities, nations and countries have encountered difficulties such as invasions, war and conquest and, in some cases, have stood up to defend themselves against their enemies (one well-known battle in which they successfully defended themselves was the Battle of Dithakong against the Difeqane/Mfecane (Madise 2002:276)). In spite of all these difficulties, missionaries still found their way to evangelise and convert the Batlhaping. This article is intended to show how Batlhaping ba ga Mankuroane came to embrace Christianity from 1829 onwards through the London Missionary Society. A number of denominations made inroads into Taung and established themselves among the tribes who lived in this area, the main denominations being the Methodists, the Anglicans, the Catholics and the United Congregationalists. In this article, however, I will focus mainly on one denomination, the United Congregational Church.

Introduction

This article will pay particular attention to the emergence of Christianity among the Batlhaping tribe in the area of Taung. It is well known that Robert Moffat started and ended his mission expedition in Kuruman among the Batlhaping (these are popularly known as Batlharo Tlhaping, as opposed to Batlhaping in Taung). Moffat was stationed in Kuruman, and this area was the focus of his mission. The tribe of Batlhaping where he laboured was different from the people who occupied or settled in Taung. In other words, Robert Moffat never laboured among the Batlhaping ba ga Phuduhucwana (those who occupied the area of Taung). The Batlhaping ba ga Phuduhuc-

¹ This is one of the Batswana (Southern Batswana) tribes in the North West Province which was led by Chief Phuduhucwana Mankuroane. It is one of the first tribes among the Batswana to embrace Christianity.

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wana lived about 210km east of Kuruman (i.e. near Taung), and this tribe are known by this name even today (personal interview with Daniel Ngaba). This area was first evangelised by the missionaries from the London Missionary Society (J Wing, unpublished notes).

The sources used include the unpublished notes of people such as the Reverend Joseph Wing and Mr S Sebitloane, and personal interviews conducted with a number of people (some of whom were very old and some of whom are the descendants of those who were involved in the events related in this article).

Background

The area that is occupied by the Batlhaping is bordered on the south east by the westward flowing of the Harts River and on the north west by the Kalahari desert (Sebitloane, unpublished and undated lecture). The one factor that determines the ecological limitations of this area is its aridness. Rainfall is seasonal, unreliable and minimal. Although the entire area north of the Vaal is cut by valleys, it is surrounded by river beds that are dry most of the time. At the same time, the modern irrigation scheme has been adopted to control the flow of the Harts River. This river used to flow like the Molopo River and the Kuruman River. The texture of the soil is basically the Kalahari sand, which retains little moisture; the thunderstorms in this area are heavy, and run-offs can flood the river beds. This area is occupied mainly by the Batlhaping, the Barolong and the Batlharo, who are the three main tribes around the Northern Cape and the south west of what is currently known as the North West Province (Madise 2002:3).

Mission among the Batlhaping ba ga Phuduhucwana

Robert Moffat was the first missionary to settle among the Batswana towards the western part and south of Kgalagadi (Kalahari). This tribe was known as the Batlharo Thlaping and they lived in Kuruman (which, at the time, was known as Kudumane); as a result, they were the first tribe of Batswana to be evangelised. At the time of Moffat's mission among the Batlharo Thlaping, the tribe was experiencing unrest (which was by no means untypical), and this unrest led to the split among the Batlhaping, the largest group regarding Tau Mankuroane as their chief. This group of people moved to the east, where they settled (in 1830) at a place which they named Taung after their leader who was called Chief Tau Mankuroane. Chief Tau Mankuroane was a descendant of Chief Phuduhucwana, which is why this group is referred to as the Batlhaping ba ga Phuduhucwana (Sebitloane, unpublished and undated lecture).

Though they (the Batlhaping) were in contact with the missionaries from the London Missionary Society (LMS), they did not simply accept Christianity. During their trek from Kuruman to Taung, long before Moffat came and worked in Kuruman, they experienced attacks from the Koranas, Bushmen, the Graduals and other tribes, including the Mfecane (Madise 2002:276). During Isaac Hughes' mission to the Griquas in 1837, he decided to take a journey to the North – he preached and travelled until he got to Taung. He discovered that the Batlhaping were people who lived a simple life which, to him, was without “faith”. (J Wing, unpublished notes). This view was based on the western belief system of “moral values”; the Batswana people, like other African tribes at the time, were polygamous. Hughes' first contact was the chief (Mankuroane), who gave him no encouragement because people were “indulging more on drinking” during Hughes' sermons. Like Moffat in Kuruman, Hughes also condemned the lifestyle of Batswana: he constantly referred to them as being lazy and spending most of their time sleeping under the trees drinking traditional beer (Rev S Colane, personal interview February 2010). It seems that Isaac Hughes was not prepared to face the resilience of the Batlhaping, who did not accept Christianity easily. In fact, Hughes failed to make an impact among the Batlhaping – he decided to leave and return to the Griquas, albeit with a heavy heart. However, Hughes' failure in no way discouraged other missionaries from evangelising among the Batlhaping ba ga Phuduhucwana. His departure was succeeded by William Ross, who accompanied David Livingstone as a missionary of the London Missionary Society (Wing, unpublished and undated notes).

William Ross came to South Africa and settled among the Batlhaping ba ga Mankuroane in Taung. Unlike Isaac Hughes, Ross was patient with Batlhaping ba ga Phuduhucwana in Taung and this paid off. Ross was successful where his predecessor failed. Indeed, this success won him favour among the Batlhaping, who came to regard him as a “Father in God”. However, Ross's stay was short-lived owing to the wars that plagued the area; indeed, the Batlhaping themselves were forced to seek refuge and fled to Mamusa (today known as Shwiezer Reineke) after being attacked by the Matebele (Madise 2002, 276). Ross was also forced to seek refuge and found refuge among the Griquas in Griqua Town (J Wing, unpublished notes). After their battle with Matebele, Batlhaping decided to go back to Taung to rebuild their ruins and settle there permanently.

The mission in Kuruman was at an advanced stage: schools had been established and other developments had taken place. For other tribes near and around Kuruman this was now a place of “light”, simply because, in these schools, children were being taught to read and write, and some were being taught skills such as “agriculture”. The church around Kuruman was established and grew; it eventually came to have an influence on Chief Mothibi himself (who was eventually baptised at an advanced age). This

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development made Kuruman an envy of tribes in the surrounding area. As a result, many chiefs would send some of their people to Kuruman to recruit teachers who would start schools in other tribal areas. Many tribes saw themselves as being left behind in these developments which, in Setswana, they referred to as *go salela morago ka dithlabologo* (personal interview with Daniel Ngaba, February 2010).

In 1868, the missionary John Brown came to Taung through the London Missionary Society: Brown was stationed among the Batlhaping ba ga Phuduhucwana. Brown's efforts as a missionary among the Batlhaping gained momentum and he succeeded in establishing a permanent mission station at Taung. Indeed, Brown managed to build a mission house next to Kgotla.² This mission house was strategically located to protect 'the man of God' from possible attack by the "unconverted". One has to bear in mind that this was the time of instability among the Batswana and other tribes as a result of tribal wars. A school was later established under a mimosa tree in the village (Madise 2002:1). Young and old people attended the school to learn the 'magic of letters', which opened their eyes to the Bible (which had already been translated into Setswana by Robert Moffat). However, this did not mean that all the people were keen to be evangelised – some were by no means willing to give up their "old ways". On Sundays, services were poorly attended and sometimes disrupted by singing and dancing from the kgotla. Neither did the school escape such disturbances: some parents would interrupt lessons to tell their sons to go and herd the cattle, and some mothers would tell their daughters not to go to school and do the house chores instead. In certain instances, the girls were married by force (because this was deemed traditional) and, once married, a girl was regarded as a mature woman (and therefore had no need for school). The whole issue of wealth also came into it, again, especially with girls, since marriage meant the father of the girl received lobola which, at the time, was in cattle. John Brown was disappointed, but not discouraged, by the lack of response caused by such factors (J Wing, unpublished notes).

However, things started to turn around and people began slowly responding to Brown's teachings and preaching of the gospel – on one occasion, sixteen members of the Batlhaping professed their faith in Jesus Christ and, a year later, were baptised. These people were, in fact, the first church members and converts among the Batlhaping in Taung (personal interview with Rev S Colane 2010, February).

In spite, of all this, the chief continued to resist conversion and was reluctant to accept the missionary's effort to develop Taung and Batlhaping ba ga Phuduhucwana. However, the small light that lit Taung was enough to soften the chief, especially as far as education was concerned. Given that

² Kgotla simply mean the chief's kraal or the chief's court.

being able to read and write was clearly an advantage to the Batlhaping, education at least come to be tolerated and, in time, most of the Batlhaping became regular worshippers (although they did not become members of the church) (J Wing, unpublished notes).

The establishment of education around Taung led to the building of schools in other surrounding (small) villages, such as Mogopela, Nkhabang, Magogong and Manthe (the latter is home of the Batlhaping ba ga Maldi a separate Batlhaping tribe with their own chief). The schools were used to hold church services and, over the years, a congregation was formed in these villages and many others. Like Robert Moffat, John Brown identified himself with the people he came to evangelise and even learnt to speak Setswana fluently. In fact, he compiled a dictionary of Setswana words which remained the standard Setswana-English dictionary until 1921. Brown was not only a preacher and a teacher, he composed hymns which were known Dihela³ in Setswana, some of which are still sung in Dikopelo⁴ today (J Wing unpublished and undated notes).

From its beginning, the church set itself against many challenges, especially as far as initiation rites (circumcision) were concerned. In his report of 1900, John Brown stated that there had been no initiation ceremony for 10 years and that he would like to see the end of it while he still lived (J Wing, unpublished notes). However, a century later after the Christian influence, initiation still persists and is perhaps one of the major factors limiting church growth amongst the Batlhaping. It is reasonable to speculate that the Batlhaping ba ga Phuduhucwana did not abandon initiation rites, but practised them secretly out of respect for Brown. Alternatively, Christian teaching may have discouraged them from taking their children to initiation schools (at the time, Europeans deemed indigenous people as being incapable of thinking and acting on their own initiative).

No recognition

Though the London Missionary Society was to see the church grow among the Batlhaping, the society failed to recognise the value of some of the local customs. This was not the only way in which the missionaries failed the local people (Batlhaping ba ga Phuduhucawna). The lack of recognition extended also to an African minister who was supposed to work among Batlhaping ba ga Maldi in Manthe (a separate Batlhaping tribe under Chief Motlhabane). The African minister concerned, who was supposed to minister to Manthe, was denied ordination and this led the congregation, in 1885, to withdraw from the LMS (with the support of their leader, Chief Motlhabane). These

³ This is a Setswana word referring to hymns which are sang in the church.

⁴ Dikopelo simply mean a hymn book in Setswana.

members, together with the minister, went on to form the Native Independent Congregational Church (NICC), but retained the liturgical forms of worship used by the LMS and the Congregational patterns of organisation (Comaroff 1986:11). In fact, the relationship between these two churches remained good. The NICC, unlike the LMS, was less rigid in its system of church discipline, and this made it more attractive to people who practised tribal ceremonies that were unacceptable to the original European missionaries.

In 1903, Brown retired after 36 years of missionary work among the Batlhaping, and he left a solid foundation for his successor. In his time the membership of the church started from 13 to 1 000 by the time he retired. He pioneered a number of other projects, education in particular. Some of the schools which he built are well known and still exist today; these schools include the Rabodigelo Primary School (formerly known as Tuang Village School) and Batlhaping High School. His successor was William McGee who, in 1904, was still a fairly young man (interview with Rev S Colane, February 2010).

William McGee was an energetic young man who saw the need to build a proper church structure as the old building was no longer able to accommodate the growing number of converts. As a result, McGee persuaded the chief to put aside a new site to build a new church structure. A new site was found and building began immediately. The new church building was officially opened and this occasion coincided with the Church's Golden Jubilee (in August 1908). The church was built on the edge of the hill which, in fact, was less costly, since it was built from rocks taken from the hillside rather than expensive bricks (interview Rev S Colane, February 2010).

McGee became 'a Motlhaping' (a totem which he adopted and identified with the people of Taung, as they are known), because he made an everlasting impression among Batlhaping by building a church for them. The first thing that McGee did was to identify with the older people and win them over. Indeed, McGee was recognised to the extent that some still refer and recognise some of the things (including the laws he made) he did as *molao wa ga Moruti McGee*⁵ and, to them, there was no higher authority (J Wing – unpublished and undated notes).

In spite of the impression McGee made, his pastoral service in Taung was constantly interrupted by his periods of absence, which were spent in Vryburg and Tiger-Kloof Mission School. At the same time there were three other missionaries who served Batlhaping for relatively short periods while McGee was in Tiger-Kloof. These were the Reverend Gavin Smith, who did valuable work for four years before he left for Tiger-Kloof to assume duties as a Bible tutor, the Reverend WH Organe (who, in fact, did not stay long)

⁵ McGee had made the rules of the church and older people referred to them as Rev McGee's law.

and the Reverend David Couper, who became popular with both the church and the Batlhaping during his seven-year stay as a missionary (from 1921-1928) (J Wing unpublished and undated notes).

Ordination of the first African minister

The first most significant thing that William McGee did was to ordain the first African minister to work amongst the Batlhaping. This meant that the Batlhaping's struggle to get an African minister ordained was finally won when McGee decided to sanction the ordination of the Reverend O Matshane in Taung. It is worth pointing out that Reverend Matshane's long ministry without ordination is remembered to this day and his descendants continue to occupy an important position in the community and play a very active role in the church. During his ministry in Manthe, the Reverend O Matshane managed to integrate members of the church who settled in the farms in the Transvaal (around what was formerly known as the border region on the tributaries of the Vaalharts River) into the Taung Mission. As a result of this integration, churches were built in Wolmaransstad, Schweizer-Reneke, Ottosdal and Britten and preaching stations were established on almost every farm from the Cape/Transvaal border to Klerksdorp (J Wing unpublished and undated notes).

These developments saw the closure of the LMS station of Barkly-West in 1909 and most of its work was transferred to the Lutherans, while some of it was transferred to Kuruman. The remaining part of Barkly-West, which included places such as Majaneng, Mmamutle and Boetsap, were incorporated into Taung. This work became one of the main centres of the London Missionary Society and witness in the Northern Cape. Two outstanding ministers were Africans, namely, the Reverend S Boihang and the Reverend Molife G Maribe. Moruti⁶ Maribe was stationed in Mmamutle as an evangelist in 1923 and was ordained after further training in 1928. Maribe served the area of Mmamutle until his death in 1964 (apart from the few years he spent in Taung) (J Wing unpublished and undated notes).

The developments in Taung not only centred on the church, but extended to education as well. This is evident from the measure of responsibility for African education assigned to the Cape Provincial Administration. This development saw the expansion of the Mission Educational programme and the building of schools which, by the time McGee retired in 1938, numbered 27. When he retired, McGee decided to settle among the Batlhaping and, in fact, to end his days among the people he had worked for so long (J Wing unpublished and undated notes).

⁶ Moruti is a Setswana word meaning a church minister (sometimes called Rev Maribe).

The Reverend GR Griffiths was appointed as the new minister to Taung in 1938 and his period of office marked the dawn of a new era. This era saw the passing of the 'missionary patriarchs' and missionary control became less rigid – a greater stress was laid on the local church. Griffiths served the church in Taung for four years and, during this time, significant progress was made in terms of self-determination, both in the church and in education; in short, for the first time, the Batlhaping were given an opportunity to discover their leadership potential and run their own affairs. Griffiths also pioneered the establishment of secondary education in his building of the Batlhaping Tribal Secondary School, a school that has produced many leaders and continues to produce the best leaders among Batlhaping people even today (personal interview with Rev S Colane 2010, February).

From 1920 to 1940, African ministers were given greater responsibility for the pastoral work of the mission and the church as they assumed the running of their own affairs (in Taung itself, the people involved were Rev Molefi Maribe, Rev B Kgwerethane and Evangelist John Motsage). In 1943, when the Reverend HW Cater became a minister in the area, he worked alongside the Reverend T Ikaneng: the two worked together in the church and schools as partners. The former did not stay long as he had to leave Taung owing to deteriorating health. Cater's departure left the Reverend Ikaneng with the huge responsibility of managing some of the schools; however, this responsibility led to the strengthening of the ministerial team, which included the Reverend JS Cidraas (in Wolmaransstad) and the Reverend Mosiiemang (in Manthe) (personal interview with Mr Albert Gill, February 2010).

A transition

The last LMS missionary to be sent to Taung was the Reverend Joseph Wing in 1950, who started work in 1951. His period coincided with the transition in which four ministerial sub-districts were each given a definite, more clearly status (J Wing, unpublished notes). This transition in the church led to a re-think of the relationship between the mission and the church. The LMS was replaced with a Church Council, which led to a deeper sense of churchmanship at a local level. This period in which Joseph Wing started his ministry around Taung also coincided with the introduction of the government's policy of apartheid. Needless to say, this was to present a challenge to Wing's ministry, since it brought into existence the Bantu Education Act. This Act led to debates in both the House of Assembly and in the churches. The Act was finally implemented in 1955 and, as a result, the churches were to lose their influence on education in South Africa. The mission schools gradually came under the control of the Department of Bantu Education and,

eventually, the link between church and education was severed (J Wing unpublished and undated notes).

The fact that the church no longer controlled education and the administration of education compelled the church to rethink its position. The immediate reaction of the LMS was to express a deepening concern for youth and Sunday school work. The Society came up with a new plan and established the Livingstone Fellowship; however, the plan was not a long-term solution because it did not offer a concrete alternative. This organisation focused on young people and spread rapidly under the leadership of young men such as Jackson Lesetedi, Pilane Tshetlo and Elliot Ikaneng, who also introduced Sunday school competition (which, in turn, encouraged young people to work for the church).

The impact of the political transition experienced in the 1950s was not only felt by the church as far as education was concerned, but also influenced the urban communities that were to be formed later on. These communities were completely divorced from the traditional patterns of tribal life. The result of this isolation from tradition was the formation of churches at Border, Hartswater, Reivilo, and Africander Mine (Klerksdorp) in 1951 and 1955; these churches displayed a vigour that was often lacking in older churches (J Wing unpublished and undated notes).

The birth of the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA)

The church in Taung was the first to be affected by the impact of these three churches at Border, Hartswater, Reivilo, and Africander Mine (Klerksdorp). At the same time, the Church Union of South Africa (CUSA) served the amaXhosa people at the Taung Station, along with Kimberley (on the southern border), where members of the LMS were partners with the CUSA. (Klerksdorp on the eastern border which was united with the American Board.) Taung was always aware of these developments: indeed, the closest proximity of the urban churches led to tensions which, eventually, became an impetus for growth. Indeed, these tensions led to the establishment of a new church in 1967 – which came to be known as the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA) – and Taung became part of this church. The birth of UCCSA saw Joseph Wing becoming its first General Secretary, and Wing was to serve in the South African Church Unity Commission (CUC). The same denomination was also at the forefront of ecumenism in South Africa, since it played a pivotal role in the Christian Councils of the five Southern African countries (J Wing unpublished and undated notes).

Conclusion

The one phenomenon which Christianity enjoyed and continues to enjoy in Taung is the preservation of its own history via the work of different denominations. The various churches all originally began as communities that met under the trees in the area (mainly mimosa trees); indeed, some of these trees can still be seen today (e.g. the mimosa tree that first 'housed' the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (Madise 2004:1). The United Congregational Church of Southern Africa has also preserved its original church building and the manse that was established by the LMS (both church buildings in Taung and Tiger-Kloof mission school). At the same time the church, is still referred to as the *Kereke ya London*⁷ (taken from the London Missionary Society). It is also an interesting thing to note that the LMS became the United Congregational Church among Batlhaping in 1969. The United Congregational Church still continues to be a strong church among the Batlhaping although, today, other denominations are equally strong in terms of membership numbers. Examples are the Methodist Church, the Catholic Church, and the Anglican Church. Both the Lutherans and Presbyterians are much smaller in number.

Not only did the United Congregational Church make a religious impact among the Batlhaping, but its contribution has helped to develop Taung socially, economically and politically. As a result, other denominations were also able to do missionary work in the area.

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⁷ Due the London Missionary Society founding the United Congregational Church in Taung, it is still being associated with the missionary society from London.

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