

An investigation into the large number of churches in Rehoboth¹

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According to a 2005 report published by the Rehoboth town council² there are at least 70 different churches in Rehoboth. For a population of less than 40 thousand people this is an enormous amount. The question than arises why there are so many different churches in Rehoboth? To answer this question we will have to look into the history of the Rehoboth Basters.

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Historical context

The Basters are descendants of European settlers and the indigenous people of Southern Africa, the Khoikhoi. In colonial times, they were not accepted as citizens by the colonial authorities due to their skin colour. Neither were they accepted by the Khoikhoi who deemed the Basters to European. As a result of this process, starting in the 18th century, they established independent communities of which some can be considered states.³

These states were formed around Baster ethnicity and provided them a community in which they could live without the discrimination prevalent in colonial society. A very important factor in the establishment and growth of these Baster states was the role of Christianity as religion and the Church as institution. Christianity gave the people a purpose and explanation on the best way of life, while the institutions of the Church, aided by European missionaries, provided the organizational framework of the Baster states (together with the political institutions of the Kapteins' council). Christianity was one of the pillars of historical Baster identity and is also one of the pillars of the present-day identity of the Rehoboth Basters. The Rehoboth Basters are a group of Basters who established an independent political entity in the latter part of the nineteenth century in present-day Central Namibia. They also enjoyed substantial autonomy in the twentieth century and had self-government in the 1980's, based on their constitution established in 1872.⁴

Historical churches

The church that is associated most with the history of the Rehoboth Basters is the Rhenish Mission Society and the missionary Friedrich Heidmann. In 1866, Heidmann was offered the position of

¹ Article adapted from the book: Injustice against the Rehoboth Basters (2008) – Chapter three. The number of churches in Rehoboth

² Rehoboth Town Profile 2005. A report published by the Town Council of Rehoboth that looks into the potential economic growth sectors of Rehoboth and also provides a summary of the pressing social issues. (available online at: www.rehobothbasters.org)

³ Marais, J.S. 1939?. The Cape Colored People 1652 – 1937. Johannesburg, South Africa. Witwatersrand University Press.

⁴ *On the Discrimination of the Rehoboth Basters; An Indigenous People in the Republic of Namibia.* A fact file prepared for the 11th session of the UNWGIP and the 45th session of the Subcommission 1993.

missionary for the Baster communities in De Tuin, Amandelboom and Schietfontein. Missionary Heidmann accompanied the Basters when they migrated to Rehoboth between 1868 and 1870. In Rehoboth, he continued with his religious teachings and until his retirement at age 66 in 1907, he remained the main spiritual teacher among the Rehoboth Basters.⁵

During these days, education was largely in the hands of the Church and in this way Christianity had a major impact on the people of Rehoboth. The Church in Rehoboth was led by European missionaries from the Rhenish Mission Society; first Friedrich Heidmann, until 1907, then Adolf Blecher as of 1 January 1900, accompanied by Hermann Schroër in 1912⁶.

All this changed with the war of the German colonial government against the Basters in 1915. Because of this conflict, all people of European descent were forced to leave Rehoboth, including the missionaries. The following South African invasion of German South-West Africa ended German colonial rule and started a new era for the Basters and other African people living in South-West Africa. When the missionaries returned after the German defeat by South African forces, they were no longer welcome in the Baster community and the leadership of the church was taken up by Basters. This act disturbed the relationship between the Rhenish Mission Society and the church in Rehoboth, which caused the church to decline due to lack of funds and support from abroad. On 23 June 1920, missionary Schroër returned to Rehoboth. Around the same time, the Catholic church established itself in Rehoboth under the leadership of pastor Lipp⁷. This was met with great protest by many prominent Basters, because they saw the Rhenish Mission Society as part of the Baster historical heritage. Nonetheless, the Catholic church was very successful in gaining a large following, mainly due to the fact that they offered free education and healthcare.

The South African government that was in control of Rehoboth at that time tried to usurp more control over education and consequently appointed extra teachers that were brought in from the Cape. The majority of Basters did not agree with this policy, because they saw it as a support for the South African government. In June 1926 (after the Rehoboth Rebellion of 1925 in which a large number of Basters declared independence from South Africa) a majority of Basters (represented by the New Council (in Afrikaans: 'nuwe raad')) refused to send their children to the South African backed schools and no longer attended the church services of the Rhenish Mission Society. Instead, they established their own school based on the principles of the school run by the Methodist mission in Karibib. This school paved the way for the formation of the Methodist Church of Rehoboth. In the 1930's, when tensions between the Baster community and the South African government decreased, many Basters returned to the church of the Rhenish Mission, which continued to be the main church in Rehoboth. In 1956, the Congregational Church also established a church in Rehoboth.

In 1957, the Rhenish Mission Society decided that they wanted to stop all their missionary activity and they therefore organized a large meeting in Okahandja to determine the future of the many church communities in South-West Africa. At this meeting it was decided that all of the religious communities would fall under a new church called the 'Evangelical Lutheran Church in South-West Africa'. Although the churches would in theory retain their independence, the policy of the church would be determined on a national level. This meant that the church of the Basters would be part of a much larger South-West African church and the Basters would lose their (religious) independence. This prospect caused the biggest break in Rehoboth Baster religious history.

On 13 September 1959, the majority of Basters seceded from the Evangelical Lutheran Church and established the Rhenish Church (in Afrikaans: 'Rijnse Kerk'), that identified itself as the continuation of the true Baster – Rhenish Mission Society church. In 1967, another split occurred. This time the split occurred in the Rhenish Church, of which part of the community established the 'Evangelische

⁵ *Vollmer, Richard*. 1996. *Missionar Friedrich Heidmann, ein Pionier von Rehoboth*. John Meinert Printing.

⁶ *Vossen, Ellen*. 2002. *Strewe naar Eenheid. Religie en etniciteit bij de Rehoboth Basters in Namibië*. Utrecht University, unpublished thesis. Page 69

⁷ *Ibidem*. Page 71

Sendings Kerk', also called the 'Rijnse Bastergemeente'. In 1979, the Evangelical Lutheran Church split and a new church under the name of Rhenish Evangelical Lutheran Church was formed. This was the last of the major break-ups of Rehoboth churches. This did however not mean that the religious landscape of the Basters stabilized. On the contrary, the enormous diversity and number of churches that we see in Rehoboth today can be contributed to a large degree to the rise of the Pentecostal movement.

Rise of the Pentecostal movement

The previous paragraphs described the historical connections between the church and the Basters and how religion influenced politics and vice versa. As of the late 1970's, a new phenomenon entered Rehoboth (and Southern Africa); the Pentecostal movement. Based on the 2002 and 2005 publications that investigated the number of churches in Rehoboth most fully, it is estimated that there are currently between 50 and 70 different Pentecostal churches active in Rehoboth alongside the older and more 'established' churches.

These Pentecostal churches differ from the established churches in that they place a greater emphasis on a personal connection with God as well as the encouragement of extravert behaviour and happiness through spiritual enlightenment. The Pentecostal churches have been very successful in Rehoboth as well as elsewhere. In a competitive and increasingly individualistic world, people are looking for a place of belonging and community based on democratic and individualistic principles, which is something the Pentecostal churches provide. This same principle is also at work in Rehoboth. The difference in Rehoboth is not so much the rise of the Pentecostal churches, but the fact that there are so many different Pentecostal churches in Rehoboth. In order to answer this question correctly we have to look again at the culture and political situation of the Baster people.

Baster culture

The continuing struggle for freedom and independence are essential elements of the culture of the Basters. The repeated attempts at political self-determination give clear evidence of this. Furthermore, the Basters are a very modern people, in the sense that they were one of the first peoples in Southern Africa to adopt a Western political lifestyle based on individual rights and duties. This is evident from the fact that Baster political culture was codified in their constitution and law books, which provided for an elected leadership and specific procedures for them to follow. When most other indigenous groups were still organised based on tribal rites, the Basters already followed the European movement towards the modern nation-state with its individual rights based on enlightenment ideals.⁸

Because the Rehoboth Basters are individualistic, democratic and in many respects a modern people, colonial rule was able to penetrate deep into the heart of Baster society. According to the modern ideals of Baster political culture, success and status were to be attained by hard work and individual prowess, but in reality success depended mostly on having good connections with the ruling European elite. Although historically, there have been many successful Basters and the people enjoyed considerable autonomy, the true elite did not consist of Basters but of Europeans and, since the independence of Namibia, black-Namibians. Individual success therefore was dependent on the opinions of others who in general did not have the good fortune of the Basters at heart.

The drive for freedom and independence that is so central to the mentality of the Rehoboth Basters is to a large degree a result of this situation where the Basters, individually and as a people, are deliberately placed in a lower societal position. This has led to the cultural traits that many Basters do not want to concede to others or make compromises; Basters prefer to be their own boss. This

⁸ *Carstens, Peter*. 1983/1984. Opting Out of Colonial Rule: The Brown Voortrekkers of South Africa and their Constitutions. In: *African Studies*, 1983, vol 42, no. 2, p. 135-152; vol. 43, no. 1 (1984), p. 19 – 30.

quest for freedom is often labeled as stubbornness and lies at the heart of the large number of different churches in Rehoboth.⁹

Divisions among Pentecostal churches

Besides the fact that the Pentecostal churches put a different emphasis on how to be religious, they also differ from established churches in the sense that they are more egalitarian and democratic. The leadership of the large established churches is often in the hands of trained theologians who have studied many years and had to rise through the bureaucratic ranks. The Pentecostal churches on the other hand do not require any formal schooling and have very little bureaucracy. This allows people that would not be able to go through the bureaucracy of an established church, to become an important spiritual leader in the Pentecostal church. In that sense, the Pentecostal church leader is much closer to the common people than he is in one of the established churches. This democratisation is a trend that has been going on since the Basters took over control of the leadership of their church from the missionaries in 1915. Before that time, the European missionaries were the head of the church and were in true colonial fashion, *above the common people*.

A church in Rehoboth can easily split in two when there is a dispute within the church on how to interpret a minor part of the religious service. Stubbornness, the quest for freedom and the dream that every Baster should be his own boss, leads people to create their own church. The creation of a new church is thus also a way to gain power and status.

The creation of a new church, especially a Pentecostal church, is a way for poorer people to be part of a community in which they can escape the unfair and harsh competition of society. Because freedom can only be attained in a community, people can find liberation in a small religious community where equality and positive social behaviour are highly valued. In such an environment they can open up and try to find happiness. The fact that the Pentecostal churches are so popular in Rehoboth and that extraversion and happiness are a key ingredient of those churches, indicates that the Basters are in essence a happy and lively people, but that a competitive environment causes them to oppress these traits.

Activities towards unification

The Rehoboth Basters are well aware of the religious conflicts and divisions that were described in the previous pages. Back in 1970, a special religious committee was established with the purpose to organize a collective religious ceremony at the centennial celebrations (in Afrikaans: Eeufees) in Rehoboth. Since 1972, this committee has held regular meetings to discuss closer cooperation between the various churches. The Pentecostal churches are however excluded from this committee. Once a year, every church leader from a church that is a member of the Religious Committee holds a service in another church.

In 1990, the Union of Pentecostal churches was established to improve relations between the different Pentecostal churches, as well as to represent them.

These two religious unions have been at odds with each other on many occasions. Up till this day it has not been possible to create one body in which all churches in Rehoboth can cooperate and settle their differences. The even greater ideal of having one united Baster church, as was the case in the 19th and early 20th century, is probably farther away then ever.

If it were possible, should the Basters strive for one united Baster church? The Christian religion is an integral part of the identity of the Basters and many of the differences between the churches in

⁹ *Zandberg, J.G.* 2005. Nation and Image Building by the Rehoboth Basters. Negative bias concerning the Rehoboth Basters in literature. This book investigates the negative stereotypes of the Basters by European writers.

Rehoboth are minor and not deeply ideological. Furthermore, in countries like the Netherlands and England, a united protestant church that became linked to the national identity strengthened the identity of the respective people. In this way England has the Anglican church of which the queen is the leader. A similar situation exists in the Netherlands where the royal house is intertwined with the Protestant Church of the Netherlands. Another example which is closer to the situation of the Basters, is that of the Griqua.

The Griqua are a people in South Africa who are closely related to the Rehoboth Basters. In 1813, a group of Basters in the northern Cape renamed themselves Griqua and for numerous decades controlled several political entities up until 1878¹⁰. The Griqua Independent Church is the 'united' church of the Griqua and has played a very significant role in the identity of the Griqua. Unfortunately, the Griqua are also divided into several competing groups. There are consequently several Griqua Independent Churches, that have the same name, but do not cooperate with each other. A united Baster church would probably fare no better than the Griqua's, and could ironically be harmful to the continued existence of the Rehoboth Basters as a people.

Conclusion – unity in diversity

As discussed in the previous pages, the large number of different churches is due to the social and political situation in which the Rehoboth Basters find themselves. The inability of many Basters to fulfill an important social or political role in the community and the highly competitive and individualistic nature of society lies at the heart of the great number of churches in Rehoboth. The church is one of the few areas in which the Rehoboth Basters can achieve status and be free from every-day competition and oppression. The establishment of a separate church allows persons a degree of freedom and sense of community that is not available in larger society or in other churches.

The Rehoboth Basters identify themselves firstly through their ethnicity as Baster and this is valued higher than religious difference.¹¹ This means that people see themselves as Basters first and belonging to a particular religious denomination second. To encourage (religious) unity among the Basters would therefore first require a stronger sense of nationalism and an increase in status placed on Baster ethnicity. Only when nationalistic tendencies have minimized the individualistic competition among the Basters will it be possible to work towards a united church.

Instead of increasing the coherence and unity of the Rehoboth Baster community, a single united Baster church without first having communal values in Baster society, would instead degrade the continued survival of the Rehoboth Basters as a distinct people. If there were a situation in which the Basters would identify with one national Baster church, any dissent and split could be catastrophic for the Baster identity as a whole, because the church would be directly linked to the Baster identity.

As long as the Rehoboth Basters are faced with the social and political situation in which they are not in control of their destiny, combined with a strong internal individualistic competition, the religious situation with many different independent churches might be preferable to a single united Baster church. It is better to stand divided in unity, than to be united and consequently together fall apart through internal quarrels.

¹⁰ Zandberg, J.G. 2005. Rehoboth Griqua Atlas. Voorburg, the Netherlands.

¹¹ Budack, K.F.R. 1992. Memorandum to the High Court of Namibia on the Meaning of Bastergemeente and Evidence of Historic Self-Government