

The Rhoda – Morkel Connection

Part 2. The Christian Rhoda Family

By Rodney Rhoda, Timothy Visser, Ebrahim Rhoda and André Morkel

A combination of oral family history and archival research has that the Christian branch of the Rhoda family stems from a son, Abraham Rhoda, of a Morkel and a slave girl Rhoda, or Kandaza (also spelled Candaza). Documentation for the Morkel/Rhoda connection is lacking and research evidence only starts with Abraham. However, oral traditions of this connection are pervasive throughout the extended Rhoda family. While details might change with retelling, the central theme is powerful. Here we seek how the story fits together.

Rodney Rhoda (1) writes:

For many years, there were no written records, and information was passed on from one generation to the next through word of mouth. Stories of the family were told to children who in turn passed them on to their children. This included genealogy and family relationships.

The Rhoda family started in the early 1800s with a slave woman. She was Muslim, of Javanese birth and was known by the name Rhoda or also Kandaza. Under Dutch rule at the time at the Cape, slaves were imported from Java and the islands now known as Indonesia. They worked as cooks, tradesmen, craftsmen and farm hands. Rhoda was the property of a German farmer, Jan Hurter Morkel, (*it was likely Daniel Johannes Morkel – A.T.M.*) who owned a farm in Hottentots Holland. Rhoda was very attractive and soon caught the eye of her owner. A serious affair developed between Morkel and Rhoda and subsequently a child was born. According to information obtained from the archives, the first-born son was named Abraham Rhoda. There were other children as well, and although some were not the children of Morkel, they all took on the surname Rhoda. Some of the children adopted the Christian faith, others the Muslim faith.

Abraham Rhoda was a good-looking young man, half-German and half Indonesian. He received special attention from his father and was given a piece of land and some cattle so that he could establish a dairy farm. Part of the land is today occupied by a large block of flats next to the Apostolic Church in Lourens Road, Somerset West, adjacent to the prime business district of the town. Up to 1976 there was still a dairy on the old premises.

Extracts from two research papers (2) of Ebrahim Rhoda, posted in Part 1:

According to the oral history of the Rhodas of the Christian faith, it starts with Abraham. He was the son of a Javanese slave girl Kandaza and the father was allegedly one of the Morkels on the farm *De Bos*, near Somerset West. She married a fellow-slave, adopted the Muslim faith and settled at the Strand, which was then known as Mosterd Bay.

My research showed that there was indeed such a slave as Abraham, the son of Kandaza, and of an unknown father. Kandaza later married Kalamdien Rhode (Rode/Rhoda), and their children became the Muslim Rhodas. It seems that both the Muslim and Christian descendants adopted the Rhoda surname.

Initially, we knew that Abraham had children, Christian, Dinah and Eva, but we did not know who his wife was. Using the Slave Register of the farmer, Hendrik Johannes Morkel (1798 – 1859, of the farm *Onverwacht (De Bos)* I found Christian who was born on 27 January 1832 and the Registration Date was 14 February 1832 and the mother was indicated as Eva.

From 1816 it became compulsory that slave owners should keep Slave Registers. Slave owners had to enter every slave child that was born in these registers in addition to the slaves they owned. On 15 November 1833 Christian's sister, Dinah, was born, and the mother was again Eva according to the entry in the same register. These registers did not indicate the father of the child, so at this point we had no proof that Abraham was indeed the father of Christian and Dinah. We succeeded in tracing Eva to 1816 in the Slave Register of Wilhelmus Marthinus Theunissen, the owner of the farm *Vergelegen* in Somerset West. Eva was then just a little girl of five years old, which tells us that she was born in 1811. Who Eva's parents were, we do not know and we still could not prove that Abraham was indeed the father of Christian and Dinah.

In the *Report of the Resident Magistrate on Mission Institutions* (3), published in 1849, we found the first tangible proof that Abraham was indeed the father of Christian who was then 17 years old and his sister Dinah who was 16. Abraham was now staying for ten years with his family on *Erf* no.9 of the Wesleyan Mission Grounds in Somerset West. At this time Christian was unemployed and Abraham was working for someone who undertook trading journeys. Abraham could neither read nor write. We also learn from this Report that Abraham had six children in 1849, of whom two were older than 16 years and the others were under 12 years of age. In attempting to fill the gap of 15 years between Emancipation year in 1834 and 1849 we can deduce that they had to serve another four years Apprenticeship period before they could leave the farm as free human beings, which means that they must have settled on the Wesleyan Mission Grounds after 1838.

Farmers were compensated for their slaves when slavery was abolished. Thus slaves had to be appraised so that a monetary value could be attached to them. So it is that we find Abraham, Eva, Christian and Dinah among the 33 slaves on the list of Farm 3934, *Onverwacht (De Bos)* which belonged to Hendrik Johannes Morkel. As a matter of interest, he received £2,340-17-6 for the 33 slaves, including one deserter.

The two versions of oral history complement each other. Thus far, the origin of the Christian Rhodas from the slave, Abraham had been proven beyond doubt. The Muslim Rhodas' version thus partly corroborates the Christian Rhoda's version and the possibility of the link between the Christian and Muslim Rhodas now almost becomes a reality.

Dr Timothy Visser (a member of the Rhoda family through his mother) writes:

There is a strong oral tradition in the Rhoda family that, when one of the Rhoda elders died, the Morkel owner of Die Bos visited the family and offered his condolences. He also offered to pay for the funeral, which was politely declined. There is some uncertainty about who died, Abraham Johannes Rhoda (born 1859) or one of two Christian Robert Rhodas (1868 – 1940; or 1896 -1972).

My father and his cousin as children visited *Die Bos* (formerly *Onverwacht*) and were received like family – and called *Boetie* and *Sussie*, names which have persisted. On the death of Susanna Fortuin (née Rhoda, the Morkel family arrived at her home and reiterated the known family connection and offered to pay for the funeral (declined with grace). One wonders why Abraham did not take on the Morkel rather than Rhoda.

I was able to identify the *erven* in Somerset West that the Morkels gave Abraham, and commissioned a professional to research the archives for transfer documents. Sadly we were unable to locate any such transfers. Ryk Morkel was an attorney in Somerset West and informed the Rhoda family that he knew of the transfer of the *erven* to Abraham Rhoda. He is no longer alive and his daughters were unable to assist in our quest. He is from a line of Morkels that goes back to 3rd generation Daniel Johannes Morkel of *Onverwacht* (later *Die Bos*), then Willem Morkel of *Morgenster*, then Pieter Johannes Morkel of *Oatlands* and finally Nicolaas Morkel of Somerset West.

André Morkel writes:

The oral history (reinforced with family bible entries) makes a strong case that the Rhoda family stems from a Morkel owner of either *Voorburg* or *Die Bos*, and a Javanese slave Kandaza, also known as Rhoda. Ebrahim Rhoda's research shows that Kandaza and her young son Abraham were registered slaves on *Voorburg*, the farm of Willem Morkel. At a later stage, with emancipation in 1834, Abraham, his wife Eva and children were slaves at *Die Bos*. Old families could usually lay out relationships going back many generations. In the Rhoda case, they were remembering back to grandfather (or great grandfather) Abraham, not an unusual task.

While there might have been a tendency within the Morkel family to downplay what they would have viewed as an indiscretion by an ancestor, there were also acknowledgements – providing Abraham with property in Somerset West and cattle to start a dairy business, and paying respects to the bereaved Rhoda family and offering to pay for a funeral. Solicitor Ryk Morkel informed the family that he was aware of the property transfer from Morkel to Abraham Rhoda, as is a powerful corroboration of the Rhoda narrative.

The Morkel family probably owned some *erven* in Somerset West, from the time when they were involved in the establishment of the town in 1818. If so, they did not have to purchase the *erven* they gave to Abraham.

Considering the challenges involved with this research, it is not surprising that there would be some discrepancies and uncertainties. These are relatively minor and do not detract from the central theme.

- Ebrahim's research does not mention the *erven*, cattle and dairy business, but places Abraham Rhoda as an illiterate at the Wesleyan Mission, working for a travelling salesman. These two accounts are not necessarily in conflict and could refer to different stages in Abraham's life.
- The sources for the oral history may have been vague about the names for the Morkels at *Die Bos*. The owner at the time would have been Daniel Johannes Morkel, not Jan Hurter Morkel. There has been only one Morkel by that name, and about a hundred years later – the rugby springbok 'Jack' Morkel. His death during WWI would have been prominently reported. The Rhoda oral historian might have confused the 'Jan' handed down in the family with that of the more recent 'Jan Hurter' whose death at that time would have featured quite prominently in the newspapers. We do not know, and does it really matter?
- Ryk Morkel was the attorney known to the Rhoda family. However, he was not the owner of *Die Bos*, who would have been either Hendrik Johannes Morkel up to 1926 or, afterwards, his son Johannes Albertus Morkel. Ryk Morkel was the attorney in Somerset West, known to the Rhoda family.

The consensus is that the Rhoda family originally came a union of a Morkel with slave girl Kandaza. Kandaza was at *Voorburg* and her son Abraham at *Die Bos*. Providing *erven* and cattle would indicate that his heritage was acknowledged by the Morkel family. However, I find it sad that he and his family continued to be slaves until emancipation.

Within one or two generations, the Rhoda descendants of Kandaza and Abraham became prominent and leading citizens in Somerset West, prominent in education and the professions, remarkable achievements considering their slave origins. The journey was even more difficult because, being of mixed race, they had to contend with racial discrimination from the start. During the Apartheid years this escalated in the daily humiliations and restrictions imposed by the politics of the day and the bureaucracy.

Although they are the Rhoda family, their surname could easily have been Morkel. They form part of the extended Morkel family.

Sources:

1. Rodney Rhoda, undated. *One of the Somerset West Rhodas*. Published privately.
2. Ebrahim Rhoda, 2008. "The Origin of The Rhoda-Family of The Strand" and "Researching family roots and the Strand Muslim community: from 'Voorburg' to Lower Gordon's Bay Road, Strand" both papers are in Part 1 of this series.
3. Cape of Good Hope: *Master and Servant. Addenda Documents on the Working of the Order in Council of 21st July 1846*.