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Written On Our Hearts: Tswana Christians and the ‘Word of God’ in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

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Abstract
The adoption of Christianity by Tswana people in southern Africa during the nineteenth century generally involved being inspired in some way by stories and ideas presented in the Bible, but the role of Christian scripture varied according to local and personal circumstances. Although European missionaries introduced Christianity to the Tswana, they had little control over the different ways that early Tswana converts perceived, adapted and proclaimed the new teaching. This was particularly true among western and northern Tswana in the mid-nineteenth century before the extension of colonial rule into the interior, as many Tswana communities remained largely intact and were able to accommodate Christianity on their own terms. Rather than being simply a European-made tool, the 'leboko la Modimo' (word of God) was also an expression of Tswana beliefs and aspirations, composed not on passive objects of missionary evangelism, colonial rule or scholarly inquiry but on tablets of human hearts.

Keywords
Tswana, Christianity, Bible, translation, nineteenth century

Introduction

You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. (II Corinthians 3: 2-3)

The adoption of Christianity by many Africans during the nineteenth century generally involved being inspired in some way by stories and ideas presented in the Bible, but the role of Christian scripture varied considerably according to the specific cultural and historical context of both the dispenser and recipient of that ‘good news’. In the case of Batswana (Tswana people) in the interior
of southern Africa, the evangelists were European missionaries who produced a translation of the Bible in written Setswana (Tswana language) as well as Batswana who embraced the ‘word of God’ to become preachers and teachers themselves, and the dominant event during the course of the century was European expansion from the coast into the interior. However, translation, evangelism and colonization were very gradual and complex processes, spread out over several decades across an immense territory and involving a wide range of peoples and interests, and Tswana acceptance of the Bible was not simply an act of submission to Europeans and their ways.

Although European missionaries introduced Christianity to Batswana, they had little control over the different ways that early Tswana converts perceived, adapted and proclaimed the new teaching. This was especially true among western and northern Batswana in the mid-nineteenth century before the extension of colonial rule into the interior, as many Tswana communities remained largely intact and were able to accommodate Christianity on their own terms. Those Tswana terms included not only the translated ‘word of God’ but also various local interpretations of Christianity and the leadership and composition of many small congregations that were beyond the direct oversight of missionaries. Moreover, echoing Paul’s description of converts in Corinth, it was not only Batswana whose hearts were inscribed by ‘the Spirit of the living God’; missionaries themselves were moved by Tswana expressions of faith and adapted their evangelism to achieve such success, welcoming each convert as a ‘letter from Christ’. The biblical narrative of conversion that inspired both European and Tswana evangelists allowed for varied experiences of a shared faith, with multiple subjectivities or ‘hearts’ manifesting a universal divine love.

This paper follows a recent growing emphasis on African agency in histories of African Christianity, but it locates the origins of African independency before colonization and seeks Africans at center stage throughout, beyond the limited scope of the colonial European gaze. The case of Tswana Christianity is in some ways similar to contemporaneous cases in West Africa, where Christianity was also adopted by small groups of Africans before the advent of European colonial rule, but it differs in two important ways: first, in the early production of a Setswana Bible, the earliest complete translation in a sub-Saharan African language, and, secondly, in the establishment of most congregations within Tswana communities rather than at separate European-run mission stations. In contrast to the later adage that Africans gained the Bible while losing their land, most Tswana converts during the mid-nineteenth century, including many members of ruling families, managed to possess both. The dominant social milieu was therefore not European but Tswana, and the
Bible was primarily adopted not as a vessel of European power but as the ‘lefoko la Modimo’ (word of God).

Attempts to locate and amplify African voices from the period are fundamentally hindered by reliance on a documentary record that has been authored and archived almost entirely by Europeans, but such dominance of the surviving texts should not be equated with dominance of the conversations that took place between Batswana and Europeans. Although most missionaries were loathe to admit their weaknesses and unlikely to portray themselves as peripheral to the spread of Christianity, there is considerable evidence within their writings and elsewhere that Africans were capable of ignoring European ideas of ‘civilization’ and of shaping Christianity to fit their own world views. This capability became significantly hindered by the expansion of European rule, but many Tswana communities—particularly in the north and west—retained much of their integrity until late in the century, and Tswana understandings of Christianity continued to defy European expectations and elude description.

This study’s emphasis on the Tswana-ization of Christianity more than the Christianization of Batswana differs from that of Jean and John Comaroff and other scholars who, while acknowledging the dialectic and variable nature of the changes that took place, have nevertheless emphasized Christianity’s connections with European influence, portraying the Setswana Bible as a form of ‘linguistic colonialism’ that compelled Batswana to adopt European modes of discourse.\(^1\) Their view arises in concordance with prevailing scholarship on the hegemonic power of cultural norms over the agency of individuals, and from a search for the foundations of modern South African society that projects later European domination back into the early nineteenth century. This study, however, in its depiction of the spread of Christianity, is closer to the work of Lamin Sanneh (1989), allowing for the translatability of Christian teachings and areas of congruence between different cultures, with multiple personal understandings of shared religious experiences. In its treatment of Tswana history, this study also reflects more the focus of the historian Paul Landau (1995) on Tswana agency in times and places beyond European control, though with less emphasis on the political utility of ‘the word’ and more on other meanings of the Bible for various individuals and communities. Rather than being simply a European-made tool, the lefoko la Modimo was also an expression of Tswana beliefs and aspirations, composed not on passive objects of missionary evangelism, colonial rule or scholarly inquiry ‘but on tablets of human hearts’.
Translation of the ‘Word of God’ into Written Setswana

Missionaries introduced the teaching (thuto) of Christianity to Batswana as the ‘word of God’, which was recorded in the Bible and accessible to all who could read or hear the word read to them, but the development of Setswana scripture was a gradual process involving input from many different parties. The first European missionary agencies to work in the interior of southern Africa were the London Missionary Society (LMS), the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMS) and the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society (PMS), each focused, respectively from west to east, on different culturally related groups who were initially identified collectively as ‘Bechuana’ or ‘Basuto’ and eventually as ‘Sotho-Tswana’.1 Though often portrayed as the singular achievement of the LMS missionary Robert Moffat, the translation of the Bible into Setswana involved many different people and took forty years to accomplish, from the first written version of the Lord’s Prayer in 1817 until the completion of the Old Testament in 1857. Although missionaries were primarily responsible for reducing Setswana to written form, Batswana acted as central agents in translating and presenting the ‘word of God’ to others, and during the mid-nineteenth century the lefoko la Modimo was as much spoken as it was written.

Before publishing a Setswana translation of the Bible, Europeans first needed to learn how to speak Setswana and then devise a written form of the language. This task was initiated by a series of explorers and missionaries who visited and occasionally resided among Tswana communities during the first two decades of the nineteenth century. Travelers such as Heinrich Lichtenstein and William Burchell, and missionaries such as James Read and James Campbell, each compiled lists of Setswana vocabulary and phrases, which were rendered in Roman script and translated into Dutch with the assistance of multi-lingual Griqua and Tlhaping traders.2 Read also produced manuscripts for a small Setswana catechism and a spelling book, a few experimental copies of which were published at Griquatown, but they evidently received little use.3 When Robert Moffat succeeded James Read as head of the Tlhaping mission in 1821, his initial translation efforts involved reading aloud from a Dutch Bible and then writing down a translator’s spoken Setswana version of the text. As Moffat admitted in his first attempt at the Lord’s Prayer, ‘The meaning of some of the words I have been obliged to guess at’, and it would be several years before Moffat’s knowledge of Setswana would be sufficient to develop a suitable orthography and compose his own translations.4 Other missionaries underwent a similarly slow learning process, and they generally collaborated with one another in their early efforts, sharing notes and gradually freeing themselves from their dependence on African translators.
As missionaries devised written forms of Setswana, they eventually produced a number of Setswana publications, starting with spelling books, catechisms, Bible extracts and hymnals and then complete books of the Bible. Many of the works were printed locally on presses at the LMS mission of Kuruman or the WMS mission at Thaba Nchu, but the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) in England also played an important role, supplying the mission presses with paper, type and ink and printing several of the larger books in London. At Kuruman, the primary missionary translator during mid-century was Robert Moffat, with William Ashton as his partner and manager of the printing press. For the WMS, James Archbell and Richard Giddy were responsible for most of the early translations, joined by Joseph Ludorf in 1848 after he transferred from the printing office of the PMS at Morija.

Early Setswana publications were accompanied by disagreement over issues of translation, editorial control and reputation, both within and between the different mission societies. One controversy involved publication of the biblical book of Isaiah in the late 1840s. When Moffat began his translation of the Bible, he admitted that the PMS missionary Prosper Lemue was probably better qualified, as Lemue, unlike Moffat, knew Greek and Hebrew, and Moffat therefore sought his advice. Several years later, however, after Moffat had gained some fame in Europe, when Lemue submitted a draft of Isaiah to be included in the LMS Bible, Moffat and several other LMS missionaries refused to consider it, printing Moffat’s version instead. Ashton nominally sided with Moffat, but he soon expressed resentment that his own part in the translation work had not been recognized by the LMS, and he later recommended that new editions of the Bible should include more input from other missionaries.

One major reason for disagreement was that different versions of ‘Setswana’ were spoken by the various groups with whom the missionaries worked, frustrating attempts to produce a single, standard written lefoko la Modimo. The LMS had hoped that the language of the Tlhaping (Tlhaping people) in the southwest, which appeared to be comprehensible throughout the interior of southern Africa, could serve as the language of a single ‘Setswana’ Bible, but it soon became clear that significant variation between dialects would limit the usefulness of a Tlhaping (Tlhaping language) Bible. When Moffat began his translation work, he suggested that the LMS should work with the WMS in developing a common orthography and that the Setswana spoken further north would be ‘more widely understood’ and better suited for mission publications. Accordingly, Moffat and other early LMS missionaries made extended visits to Bakwena, Bahurutshe and other central groups in order to improve their Setswana, with the intention of producing a single, complete Bible for all ‘Batswana’.
The PMS and WMS, however, decided to produce different translations more appropriate for southeastern Sotho-Tswana groups. Ludorf complained of Moffat’s ‘Setlapi’ New Testament that even though ‘our people understand that dialect well’, the book had ‘so many mistakes, counter-senses & unidiomatical phrases’ that he felt it necessary to produce a different translation for the Barolong.11 While the PMS soon printed most of its works in what came to be called ‘Sesotho’, the WMS produced works in Serolong as well as Sesotho, Serlokwa and other local languages.12 This situation was further complicated after 1860 with the introduction of separate German mission publications for Bapedi, Bakwena and other northeastern groups, and European missionaries would remain divided over translation issues for many years.

The debate over Setswana orthography involved issues similar to those encountered in other missionary attempts to develop written African languages. The basic question was whether related local languages were mutually comprehensible dialects of a larger language that could be served by one orthography, or whether they were in fact separate languages each requiring a different orthography. As explained by Adrian Hastings (1997: 155), ‘The roots were there in genuine linguistic and cultural differences... The issue was whether in the move from orality to literacy one gave more weight to the dialectal divergence or the long-term needs for a larger social unity.’ The perceived ‘long-term needs’ of European missionaries, however, did not necessarily coincide with those of Africans. In some cases, for example, Igbo and Swahili, missionaries emphasized the cultural unity of different groups in order to facilitate church or colonial administration, and they attempted to establish a single written language for all of the groups.13 In other cases, for example, Shona and Tsonga, missionaries emphasized regional variations that coincided with competing European spheres of influence.14 The development of written Setswana partly followed both patterns. While the LMS attempted to standardize written Setswana among all the groups with which it worked, European missions working with other communities and agendas preferred their own systems of writing. Nevertheless, different people were all still seen as Batswana, reflecting European assumptions about the categorization of people into races and cultural groups, and their languages, though written in different ways, were all assumed to be the dialects of a more widespread Tswana nation.

During the mid-nineteenth century, these debates were generally of greater concern to missionaries than to Batswana, who continued to think of their different dieme (tongues) primarily as spoken, not written. As expressed by the German missionary Heinrich Schulenburg, in criticism of a new LMS orthography in 1870, ‘I think we do not write books for sense [of] 40 or 50 missionaries who have to study the words as well as the pronunciation but for
the natives, and every native if he at all understands what he is reading, will of course pronounce the word right enough.”15 Several years later, when the LMS began publication of a Setswana newspaper, *Mhoko a Becwana* (News of the Batswana), an anonymous writer to the editor asked, ‘in whose language will the newspaper of the Batswana be printed? Realize that, although Europeans group us together as “Matswana”, we are ourselves a variety of different nations and languages.’ While critical of the objectification or ‘ma’-ness implied in the European use of ‘Batswana’, the writer nevertheless apparently accepted it as a label for ‘us’ and concluded, ‘I say that only one language should be used for printing, not the mixture that people use when writing by hand. And, since books began among the Batlhaping, should not the language for printing be that one in which books began?’16

In addition to the problem of different dialects, missionary translators also had difficulty finding words for ideas and things in the Bible that had no apparent Setswana equivalents. In early translations, a commonly attempted solution was to Setswana-ize some Dutch or English words, but this often led to confusion. For example, Moffat’s use of ‘episetole’ for ‘epistle’ was mistaken as ‘pistols’, and ‘lilelea’ for ‘lilies’ was mistaken as ‘dileled’, the Setswana word for tarantulas.17 In finding words for such basic concepts as ‘heaven’ and ‘hell’, or for practices such as ‘baptism’ and ‘communion’, the missionaries struggled to find words that carried the appropriate meanings for a majority of listeners and readers.18 After leaving Kuruman to live with a group of Bakgatla further north, Roger Edwards recounted, ‘I found I had much to learn & unlearn, if I wished to speak the language correctly, & therefore resolved on an endeavour to promote my efficiency & get direct at the heathen mind, rather than attempt to foreignize their speech.’19

As missionaries could not compel Batswana to speak a version of Setswana not their own, neither could they force them to adopt European words or ways of thinking. The Comarovs cite Moffat’s use of the term ‘badimo’ (ancestors) for ‘demons’ as an example of ‘violence to both biblical and conventional Tswana usage’, but that term appeared only as a passing assertion by Moffat in his translation of the Gospel of Matthew, not in the earlier Gospel of Luke or later editions of the Bible, which instead used either a rendering of the English word as ‘temona’ or, more often, ‘mewa e e maswe’ (unclean/ugly spirits).20 The Setswana Bible was not presented by missionaries as a single, set document but developed over time and underwent numerous revisions, with significant input from Batswana at every stage.

Although seldom identified or credited by missionaries, it is clear that Batswana played central roles not just in the labor of running the printing presses but also in the translation process itself, pointing out instances of confusion or
contradiction and suggesting alternative words. In James Read’s early efforts to learn Setswana and preach to Tswana audiences, he relied on the services of a Tlhaping man named Sethlodi who had learned Dutch while residing among Griqua. When Moffat replaced Read in 1821, he at first dismissed Sethlodi and, frustrated at his own slow progress in learning Setswana, declared ‘There is not one interpreter who can give the proper meaning of a single sentence’, but in his translation work several years later, Moffat mentioned to the BFBS, ‘In order to hasten the work & ensure correctness I have an intelligent native youth at my elbow reading M.S. in order to detect any faults in the idiom or spelling.’ Moffat, however, rarely admitted his dependence on others, and Roger Edwards’s later criticism of Moffat’s translation work was based largely on the testimony of a ‘superior man’ who had had ‘superintendence of the Sechuana of Proverbs & Isaiah’ but whose advice apparently had been disregarded by Moffat. LMS missionaries would continue to rely grudgingly on Tswana assistants for many years, as indicated in a note from Roger Price to John Moffat that accompanied drafts of some new school books in 1866, ‘I have no doubt Morolong will be able to suggest an improvement here & there, but I don’t swear by all that Morolong says & I know you don’t & therefore I leave it in your hands.’

Although editorial control over publications lay in the hands of Europeans, Batswana did not necessarily regard their own role in the translation process as minor or subservient. One such assistant was John Mokotedi Serian, a member of the Monaheng Bakwena who grew up at Kuruman as a refugee under the patronage of Robert Moffat. When Moffat went to England on furlough in 1840, Mokotedi accompanied him ‘in the capacity of a servant’ to help with the editing of the New Testament and the needs of the Moffat family. While in England, Mokotedi was baptized and enjoyed public recognition as a model of LMS success, but on the ship back to Africa, he ‘positively refused to do an iota of service’ for Moffat or his family, fraternized with ‘the lowest of the crew’, and spoke critically of Moffat, complaining that he had not properly acknowledged Mokotedi’s role in the translation work. Upon returning home, Mokotedi was suspended from LMS membership for several years, but he continued to teach and profess faith in the Bible that he had helped to produce.

PMS and WMS missionaries were similarly dependent on assistance from Batswana. Among the leading early workers in the PMS printing office was David Sekonyana Motsieloa, who corresponded with George Grey, Governor of the Cape Colony, and was asked to provide information for the Cape government on the customs and history of the Basotho. Based on the large volume of translations produced by relatively new WMS missionaries before
1840, it is evident that they also received substantial assistance, but the names and activities of early helpers are not mentioned in the missionaries’ reports and letters.

As the Bible was translated into Setswana, Tswana Christians did not passively receive whatever the missionaries produced but actively participated in giving the message meaning and relevance, subverting presumed European control over its dissemination and use. As described by Edwards,

That the natives do think & talk too among themselves about the translations, & the missionaries, & observe who does, or does not read & speak in strict accordance with what is printed, & take the gage of each missionary’s Sechwana, who can deny or prevent. They are not less observant in these matters than Englishmen wd. be if Foreigners, not masters of English were placed over them as instructors.29

This awareness produced some doubt regarding the accuracy and authority of the missionaries’ thuto, but many Batswana remained intrigued by the gospel message and developed their own ways of explaining it to others.

**Role of Setswana Scriptures in Early Evangelism**

Translation of the lefoko la Modimo was a rather contested process involving multiple parties and agendas, and there was similar variation in how Tswana Christians made use of mission publications. Missionaries’ determination to produce a written translation of the Bible arose primarily from the Protestant belief that each person should have access to the word of God, but early missionaries disagreed whether all should be able to read it for themselves. In 1832, the missionary John Baillie objected to Moffatt’s insistence that converts should be literate: ‘Plausible as this may appear, on account of the circumstances of the natives and their former untutored state, I could by no means assent to such an unprecedented regulation.’30 The German missionary Jürgen Schröder later rescinded a similar requirement that had been instituted by David Livingstone among the Bakwena, asserting, ‘we would have no law of God to baptize only those who can read.’31

However, most missionaries eventually recommended literacy as a precondition for baptism, and, as Tswana evangelists did most of the teaching, they were expected to focus on people’s reading ability. In order to encourage their efforts, WMS missionaries decided in 1840 to pay African teachers a bonus for each student able to read the New Testament.32 In 1846, Kuruman missionaries called a meeting of their evangelists and ‘laid the matter before them, telling them distinctly, that their work was to teach the people, as well as the
children to read. The following year, they remained frustrated by the slow spread of literacy, declaring,

we still think that the time has gone past when by far the greater proportion of members in the Bechuana Church should be unable to search the scriptures. Why do we toil almost night & day at translating & printing; if our members are not to be expected to qualify themselves so as to profit by our labours?

Missionary complaints notwithstanding, most Tswana evangelists, at least early in their careers, spent a considerable amount of time teaching people how to read. Using poster charts and a spelling book, students first mastered the alphabet and basic pronunciation and then moved on to whatever works had been published, with each successive class devoted to reading a different book. The basic pedagogy was for students to practice reading aloud while the teacher corrected them and answered questions about the content. As people learned to read, they also instructed others. Giddy observed students, ‘when not in school, sitting in groups reading their lessons. They select one who can read something better than the others, who helps them over the difficulties with which they meet.’ Since most children were prevented from regularly attending school by farmwork and herding, much instruction was rather sporadic and took place beyond the walls of the school. As other WMS missionaries noted, ‘whether they sit at home or herd the cattle in the field they endeavour to learn to read. Several who have never received any instruction in our school can read well.’

As others took up the somewhat tedious task of teaching literacy, Tswana evangelists focused more on preaching, leading worship services and explaining the lefoko la Modimo. This normally took place in the same building as classes—the ‘house of thuto’—and books played an important role. As evangelists made scriptural references in their sermons or prayers, people in the congregation would follow along in their own books. When the brother of Mothibi, kgosi (chief, king) of the Bathaping, came to buy some books at Kuruman, he informed Moffat that on Sundays, ‘We read much in God’s word & pray & sing & read again & again & again, & I explain what we understand to those who do not understand the Sechuana language.’ Books thus acquired central importance in Tswana worship services, and each member made an effort to acquire the latest publications. By 1850, more than 5,000 New Testaments and similar numbers of hymnals, catechisms and other books had been purchased by interested Batswana.

When the first complete Setswana New Testament arrived, missionaries declared it to be ‘a mighty weapon in the hands of our Native Teachers’, but it
was not only literate Batswana who wielded books in hopes of harnessing their spiritual power.\textsuperscript{41} In 1836, Isaac Hughes commented on how many people had acquired the LMS books available at that time, 'some I trust with the object of profit for themselves & others, but a few may possibly do so merely with the view of appearing more learned than their neighbours.'\textsuperscript{42} Other missionaries similarly observed,

Anxiety to possess books in their own language is not wanting, especially to have a hymnbook. We have seen instances of many, very many, who have willingly paid their shilling for a copy who appeared to feel a great satisfaction in having the book in their hands no matter what end was uppermost. We have also seen many copies fingered & worn while the possessor could repeat scarcely one hymn by rote or any way else.\textsuperscript{43}

This reverence for the written word was also reflected in the conversion account of an early Pedi evangelist, Jan Masadi Kurwakae, who, while working far from home in the Cape Colony, was moved to become a Christian by dreams of fearfully dying alone but then following a flying sheet of paper into the joyful company of heaven.\textsuperscript{44} Tswana evangelists, however, generally emphasized the importance of the words within the books. As one evangelist reportedly preached to his congregation,

What did we think of this book before we were taught to read? Just the same as those think of it who are yet in that state of darkness and death in which we ourselves once were. We imagined it to be a charm of the White People to keep off sickness; a thing, only, like other things, or that it was a trap to catch us. . . It is a thing, it is true; but it is a thing compared to which all other things are nothing. We thought it was a thing to be spoken to; but now we know it has a tongue. It speaks, and will speak, to the whole world.\textsuperscript{45}

Literacy gave Batswana access to the written word of God, but that word only became real and meaningful in Tswana oral-based culture as it was spoken aloud and memorized. An early Setswana term for 'read' was \textit{buisa} (cause to speak), linking reading and speaking as a single activity.\textsuperscript{46} The primary objective of Tswana evangelists was to spread the word, and they therefore focused on preaching and reading aloud from the Bible, not on teaching literacy. Very few of the early evangelists could write, and several of them also had limited reading ability, instead memorizing what was spoken from books and then repeating and expounding it to others. In 1840, Peter Wright reported of some evangelists, 'The teachers increase greatly in knowledge, and I hope also in grace. They have committed to memory the chief part of all the portions of scripture &c, printed in their language.'\textsuperscript{47} Other Batswana likewise memo-
rized hymns, sermons and parts of the Bible. As Moffat admired, "The facility with which a number of young women commit large portions—whole books—of the New Testament & Psalms to memory shew they possess valuable powers of mind which can be turned to the best purposes."\textsuperscript{49}

This oral-ization of the Bible was exemplified by Tswana interest in the Gospel of Luke, the first book of the Bible translated into Setswana and the primary text used by Tswana Christians during the 1830s. Batswana were particularly affected by Luke's many parables, which resembled Tswana tales and presented new ideas in a familiar, accessible form. As Moffat observed in 1836,

I have frequently listened with surprise to hear how minutely some, who were unable to read, could repeat the story of The Woman who was a Sinner; the parable of the Great Supper, the Prodigal Son, and the Rich Man and Lazarus; and date their change of views to these simple but all-important truths, delivered by the great Master Teacher.\textsuperscript{50}

Hughes later attributed some of Christianity's rapid growth during the 1830s to the limited number of books available to evangelists: "Their vision by being less extensive was the more minute & distinct. Hence the strong impressions they received of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the Lost Sheep, &c of Luke's Gospel."\textsuperscript{51}

As Tswana evangelists drew the 'word of God' out from books, they also dissociated that word from Europeans. As one evangelist preached to fellow Batswana after the arrival of a new shipment of New Testaments,

'You said that the Teachers talked to the book, and made the book say what they wished. Here is the book, and it can talk where there are no Teachers. If a believer reads it, it tells the same news: if an unbeliever reads it, the news [words] are still the same. This book,' holding it out in his hand, 'will preach, teach, and tell news, though there were no Teachers in the country.'\textsuperscript{51}

Unlike missionary-led congregations, where members were more likely simply to accept the preaching of the missionary, 'where there are a few Christians under the care of a native schoolmaster, more independent thought is begotten. The Bible is the court of appeal. It is studied with some amount of intelligence.'\textsuperscript{52} In adopting the 'news' as their own and Tswana-izing its content and form, Tswana evangelists were able to present the thuto of Christianity in ways that gained the attention and interest of their fellow Batswana, beyond the reach of missionaries' voices.
Tswana Adoption of the ‘Word of God’

The beliefs and practices of Tswana converts were founded not just on the ‘word of God’ provided by missionaries but also on existing Tswana religious understandings. The Setswana terms that were used in the translation of the Bible carried old meanings and connotations that could not be ignored or significantly altered if the *thuto* was to be comprehensible to a Tswana audience. Similarly, biblical stories and sayings acquired relevance only to the extent that they reflected Tswana experience and resonated with familiar legends and proverbs. In this way, conversion involved not simply a replacement of the old by the new but, more accurately, a layering of new on top of old and gradual reconciliation of the two.

Tswana evangelists generally presented Christianity as the culmination of ancient Tswana yearnings rather than as something wholly foreign. When Diphokwe Yakwe first preached to Batawana in 1877, the people were surprised. ‘We expected, said they, to hear about white people and white people’s customs, and you spoke to us about our own customs and about ourselves—strange words such as we had never dreamed of hearing.’53 A few years later, one man concluded of Diphokwe’s Bible, ‘I say it is God’s word because it tells us things regarding our own customs that we never knew the origin of until God’s word came.’54 The evangelist Gabriel David explained the basic plot of the gospel to fellow Batswana using the legend of Sankatane, a boy who saved his mother and the rest of the human race from the evil serpent Kgogoluma.55 The evangelist Kgabo Tebele made similar use of the tale of the lizard that tricked the human race and brought death into the world, and William Crisp’s Setswana spelling book for Anglican students included several examples of Rolong proverbs, stories and royal genealogies.56 Second- and third-generation Tswana evangelists attending the LMS seminary in 1913 were still able to provide detailed accounts of various Tswana legends regarding God and creation, indicating the importance of the stories in shaping Tswana understanding of the *lefoko la Modimo.*57 More than sixty years earlier at Dikgathong, a woman named her newborn child ‘Gasentsha’ (it is not new), explaining, ‘The Heathen reproach us for having abandoned the customs of our forefathers for a new religion, but we know that God is from everlasting.’58

The most fundamental aspect of Christianity that was built on existing Tswana religious beliefs was the adoption of ‘modimo’ as the equivalent of the biblical ‘God’. Although there were some significant differences between the meanings of the two terms at the beginning of the nineteenth century, missionaries and Tswana converts tended to emphasize the similarities, resulting in a gradual reinterpretation and merging of the two into the single Christian ‘Modimo’.59 Scholars disagree somewhat over the extent and timing of that
mutual influence, but in order for the ‘word of God’ to carry any weight, there at least had to be some initial, basic common understanding of who or what ‘God’ was.60

The earliest recorded appropriation of ‘modimo’ as ‘God’ was by Jan Mathys Kok, a Griqua hunter and trader who was the first missionary to the Barlhaping, and successive missionaries generally also considered it to be the most suitable Setswana term for the Christian deity.61 As understood by Batswana at the time, modimo was an omnipotent, impersonal, creative force comparable with other elements of nature that sustained life in mysterious and unpredictable ways. The importance of modimo in people’s lives was evidenced by numerous proverbs, oaths and personal names that attributed various events and situations to divine agency. The early British missionaries James Read and Robert Hamilton were aware of the Tswana understanding of modimo, and they saw it as a basic goal of evangelism not to reject modimo but to redefine it as benevolent and personally accessible to all.62 In the mid-nineteenth century, missionaries continued to regard Tswana ideas of modimo as genuinely compatible with Christianity. As stated by Livingstone, ‘Morimo or God or Chief is at every man’s mouth. Intelligent Natives say their forefathers spoke of God in the same way.’63 Or as argued by Walter Inglis, ‘These things are done and have been done from time immemorial. It won’t do to say, These views are from the light of Miss’y labour.’64 Although, for converts, modimo acquired more personal and human traits than before, the wide scope of Modimo’s Christian love depended on prior Tswana awe and respect for modimo’s omnipresent power.

Modimo’s love was exhibited in biblical examples and promises of molemo (medicine, goodness) for sustaining life and health, and Africans often regarded Christianity as a form of bongaka (medical practice). In the 1830 Setswana translation of the Gospel of Luke, who was himself a physician, ‘Gospel’ in the title is rendered as ‘Mahuku a Molemo’ (‘medicinal words’ or ‘good news’), and Jesus is portrayed as a ngaka (doctor) healing numerous people of their maladies.65 When the first Setswana New Testaments arrived, one Tswana evangelist preached:

Some have sickness in the head, some in the feet, some in the heart, some in the liver, and some have the falling sickness. Jesus Christ tells us that all these sicknesses come out of the heart. Does your head ache? Here is medicine to heal it, and mend it, too, if it be cracked… This Book is the book of books: it has medicine for all the world and for every disease.66

The Griqua leader Andries Waterboer reportedly claimed during a dispute with Kuruman missionaries in the late 1830s, ‘that they [the Griquas] had
now themselves the “Bongaka” (the science of healing [souls]) & that they themselves were able to evangelize the whole land because they were now fully taught & were perfect in the science.67

Despite missionary attempts to differentiate European medicine from Tswana bongaka, they necessarily also adopted broader Tswana understandings of health and healing, which resonated more with biblical views and offered a means for missionaries to gain entrance into Tswana society.68 Livingstone accepted the title of ‘Ngaka’, and he and other missionaries, as Christian dingaka (doctors), administered cures not just for drought, death and bodily ailments but also for broken guns and wagons. It was their services as dingaka and advisors for dikgosi (chiefs, kings) that secured for missionaries the patronage and status needed to found congregations. Some veteran missionaries, particularly during mid-century, also acknowledged a certain respect for Tswana dingaka, and, when ill and far from European help, they occasionally even employed their services.69 While Europeans usually attempted to define and restrict Tswana bongaka as ‘heathen’ and ‘superstitious’, Batswana simultaneously incorporated Christianity and European molemo into their own holistic health practices, appropriated as additional tools in the repertoire of Tswana dingaka.

Like European missionaries, Tswana evangelists derived authority from their roles as religious specialists, healers and royal advisors. Several of the first Pedi evangelists were young dingaka when they adopted Christianity in the 1860s, and there were numerous similar cases elsewhere.70 The leading case among western Batswana was Maphakela Lekalake, who was from a prominent family of dingaka based with the Bakwena of Kgosi Sechele.71 Maphakela’s grandfather Moitsheki was an expert advisor to Sechele and other dikgosi in the powerful medicine of rulers, and Moitsheki’s son Lekalake was most likely the ‘rain doctor’ in an oft-cited dialogue with Livingstone.72 When Sechele converted to Christianity and pressured others in his court to follow him, Lekalake visited Tlhaping rulers to investigate the effects of Christianity and found that, while a few had managed to convert without losing their authority, others had simply incorporated the thuto into their rituals. Upon returning, Lekalake complied with Sechele’s wishes by attending church and designating one of his sons, Ngakaemang (who is the doctor?), to be a Christian, but he also continued to work as a ngaka, simply adding a copy of the Bible to his bag of medicines.

Lekalake’s son Maphakela, meanwhile, received training to become a ngaka, but he also gradually gained some knowledge of Christianity on his own without attending school. Maphakela spent most of his youth tending cattle and gathering medicinal roots and herbs, but he was intrigued by the schooling of
his brother Ngakaemang and by the worship services conducted by Sechele and European visitors. During the course of his apprenticeship as a ngaka, following the example of his father, Maphakela acquired some fragments of scripture, and with occasional assistance from literate Batswana he taught himself to read. Moved by what he read and by his cumulative experiences of Christianity, the young ngaka soon began to lead his own prayer services. When some other converts questioned his credentials, he became baptized, attended school at Kuruman and renounced his former profession as a ngaka. He thereafter worked mostly as an evangelist among Batlhware near Kuruman, eventually being ordained as the first LMS Tswana minister in 1910.

Much evangelism took place in villages and homes beyond the direct oversight of Europeans, and missionaries had little control over how early Tswana preachers propagated and interpreted the thuto. This resulted in the development of some teachings and practices that did not entirely agree with missionaries’ vision of Christianity. During the late 1830s, the evangelist Thabe Thaiso criticized the teachings of Kuruman missionaries as ‘the thuto of hell’ for their emphasis on punishment and frequent suspension of people from church membership.73 The Kuruman missionaries, meanwhile, complained that Thabe and other Tlhaping evangelists had prohibited the eating of meat associated with various Tswana ceremonies without any such direction from missionaries or scripture.74 This assertion of Tswana control extended to other things introduced by Europeans. As one missionary complained, ‘many are too conceited to think that a White man can teach them anything, true he can make a gun, but it is the Mocwana who knows how to shoot.’75

Not all missionaries opposed the different ways that Batswana grasped and aimed the thuto. Although many were critical of Tswana innovations, a few were apparently more willing to accept them as helpful ‘new lights’ that illuminated rather than obscured the gospel.76 For example, in the Tlhaping food controversy, Griquatown LMS missionaries defended the prohibitions instituted by evangelists as legitimate interpretations of some passages in scripture, even if they did not agree with European practice: ‘The application of these texts to the various circumstances of Bechuana converts from heathenism, we of course have left to their own consciences, as they alone can fully be aware of all the temptations arising out of the heathen connections, from which they are just emerging.’77

Kgoski Sechele of the Bakwena was renowned for his extraordinary knowledge of the Bible and eagerness to discuss its teachings, but he also frequently conflicted with missionaries in his interpretations. For example, Sechele had become monogamous at his baptism, but he did not forbid other men from having more than one wife, arguing that the practice was condoned by the biblical example of King David and others who were polygamous but still
'men after God's own heart'. Despite missionary disapproval, Sechele continued to allow initiation rites, prosecute witches, engage in rainmaking and employ military force as expected of a Tswana ruler, arguing that the Bible 'did not require him to give up the customs of his ancestors, although it required him to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. He could be an orthodox Mochuana and a good Christian at the same time.'79

Kgosí Moremi of the Batawana similarly accepted the lefoko la Modimo while rejecting missionary directives. The ruler had studied the Bible with great interest and had submitted to baptism, but when the thuto's foreign patrons provided little support for the Batawana in their war against the Ndebele, Moremi renounced his church membership and opposed the work of Tswana and European evangelists, declaring that 'he needed none to teach him, and he knew the scriptures from end to end.'80 The missionary James Hepburn asserted his continued importance by returning Moremi's Bible that had been captured by Ndebele, but the ruler maintained a distinction between the word and the book.81

The power of the word was manifested not in its printed pages but in people's adherence to its precepts, posing a challenge to a Tswana ruler if people refused to participate in initiation rites, polygyny and other community-building practices. This resulted in frequent confrontation, such as erupted among the Tshidi Barolong of Kgosi Montshiwa in 1862. As reported by John Mackenzie, an 'unusually large number of young people' had begun attending classes and joining the 'bathu ba lehuku' (people of the word).82 Montshiwa at first allowed it, but he became increasingly upset as the Christians refused to participate in various communal rituals. They asked for some other task to prove their loyalty, asserting, 'you are still our father, & in all things belonging to your kingdom we are still your most willing subjects', but the kgosi remained concerned that 'as these Christians are obeying the Book more than the King, ultimately the Tribe would split & perish.'83

Montshiwa, Sechele and other Tswana rulers in the mid-nineteenth century managed to prevent 'the book' from causing communities to 'split and perish' either by becoming a patron of leading Christians or by adopting the thuto themselves. However, with the expansion of European settlement and government in the interior, dikgosi steadily lost control of land and people, and their authority became challenged less by Tswana Christians than by the increasing wealth and arms of ambitious rivals. It was not the lefoko la Modimo and bon-gaka of Christianity that threatened but rather the greed and individualism exhibited by some of its supposed adherents.

Contradictions among the 'people of the word' gave reason for other Batswana to question the power of the thuto. When Bakwena first heard the
teaching, they simply regarded it as the religion of ‘Makgoa’ (Europeans), but when they noticed that some European traders ‘observed neither the Sabbath nor any custom whatever’, the provenance and value of Christianity became more uncertain. For Sechele’s brother Kgosidintsi, the immoral behavior of people who professed to be Christian undermined their message. As he protested in 1854 in response to European invasion of Tswana territory,

Have not the English the word of God, and have not the Boers the word of God? Do their teachers teach them with the same book?—pointing to a New Testament. Are we only to obey the word of God because we are black? Are white people not to obey the word of God, because they are white? We know much of what the word of God teaches, but we are not allowed time to think about our souls while the Boers are seeking to kill us.

Twenty-five years later, a missionary wife said of Kgosidintsi, ‘he admires the beautiful character of Christ—but his followers as he sees them are not like Him, & therefore do not make the story real.’ Ultimately, in order for the thuto to become ‘real’ for a significant number of Batswana, it would depend not only on the faith of converts in the lefoko la Modimo but on their ability to demonstrate its benefits to others.

As missionaries gradually became more closely connected with the goals and support of the European metropole and less dependent on Tswana patronage, they came into greater conflict with Batswana over the meaning of the thuto. While Batswana struggled to maintain control over their land and labor, they also resisted European attempts to dispossess them of the ‘word of God’, as evidenced in the pages of the LMS newspaper Mahoko a Becwana. In 1884, after a missionary article stated that the biblical flood did not actually cover the entire earth, Sechele wrote to the editor, ‘Do you Europeans say so? But we speak of the writings as you have printed them. Is it that you are now taking us out of the secrecy of the writings, so that we should follow your advice more than the writings? Has God told you that, or even an angel or the writings?’ In a similar debate over European astronomical knowledge, one Tswana writer marveled ‘how intelligent Europeans are’, but another asked, ‘I say, does the intelligence of Europeans today contradict the words of God that are in his book? I have looked for the word that agrees with the knowledge of the Europeans, and I don’t see it.’

Tswana writers to the newspaper debated the appropriateness of a wide range of practices and beliefs, and they based their arguments primarily on their own experiences and on the lefoko la Modimo rather than on the opinions of missionaries. Among the leading topics were bojalwa (sorghum beer), bogadi
(bridewealth) and bongaka, with each generating significant disagreement whether such customs contravened the thuto. In the case of moupo (protective medicine for crops), one writer responded to critics, ‘They regard crop medicine as sinful, but they found their fathers and mothers to be believers, and they were performing the ritual and did not think that crop medicine was sinful.’ Another opposed abandoning such traditions without good cause:

For goodness sake! When you see that which is new, you want to imitate it and you forget your past. You should know that you are not following either Tswana or European culture; you are just in the middle. I don’t know, Batswana, what we are, because we are not doing the practices of either Tswana or European culture. For how long are you going to be undecided? If Tswana culture is beneficial [molemo], we should stick with it, but if we see that European culture is beneficial, we should go entirely with it (1 Kings 18:21). There is no one who can serve two masters (Matthew 6:24).

In each case, the issue confronted by the Tswana Christian writers was not whether to accept or reject Christianity but rather to discern the requirements of the divine master whom they had already accepted as their own.

In their efforts to distinguish between the will of God and the will of men, Tswana believers often excluded European missionaries from their deliberations, frustrating missionary attempts to dictate their own views of Christianity. When Alfred Wookey published an article in Mahoko a Becwana critical of bridewealth, Tswana letter-writers regarded him as ‘a missionary talking about something that he doesn’t know’, and they directed their subsequent arguments on the subject to one another. ‘Time after time, missionaries found Tswana Christians to be complicit in ‘heathen’ activities that were evidently considered acceptable by most members of a congregation. Even when a congregation agreed with a missionary’s ruling, an expelled member often maintained his faith. As one old man asserted, years after being disciplined for taking a second wife to assist with his leprous first one, ‘Yes, Monare [Sir], God’s people have separated from me as one unworthy of their fellowship; but I don’t think God himself has cast me off for what I have done.’

Conclusion

Despite missionary efforts, at the end of the century many Tswana Christians continued to be illiterate and maintained a distinction between God’s word and the words of Europeans. As one writer complained to the editor of Mahoko a Becwana,
I am asking, how is it with thuto? I find it difficult, because I believe but I ask, is it books that are faith? I mean, you say that if a person is unable to read, he is not a believer. But when are you going to realize? I have discovered that those people who don’t know books are true believers, because they believe in the Spirit of God.99

Tswana Christians had accepted the spoken word of the Christian Modimo as infallible, but that word was dissociated from the book and its European publishers. Conversely, the utility of literacy in colonized areas attracted many Batswana to mission schools, but one could become literate without becoming Christian. Batswana ‘enquirers’ at Sunday worship were interested in Christianity for a variety of reasons, and baptized ‘believers’ tended to emphasize different aspects of the thuto as being most important or valuable, treating Christianity and European culture as an assortment of elements rather than as a single package.

This multifaceted adoption of Christianity also involved some adaptation to fit Tswana needs and expectations. Missionaries often criticized such adaptation as syncretic corruption of ‘true’ Christianity, but the lefoko la Modimo could only be truly meaningful in people’s lives if they embraced it as their own, forming a Tswana Christianity that differed in some respects from the faith that had similarly formed over time in Europe. European imperialism presented a contradiction between powerful Christians and a servile Christ, and Paul’s ancient vision of a global church would necessarily undergo further reinterpretation and contestation by believers, but they would continue to regard themselves as members of the ‘body of Christ’. Mutual processes of accommodation and abstraction thus operated in multiple directions, with African and European Christians each defining themselves in reference to the other and seeking confirmation of the translatability and efficacy of an idealized faith ‘known and read by everybody’.

Attempts to distinguish between the ‘word of God’ and the ‘word of man’ are fundamentally hindered by multiple overlapping assumptions and metaphors, for believers as well as for scholars attempting to remain objective. In both Christian theology and the social sciences, people become texts, texts become God, and God becomes a person. For Tswana Christians in the mid-nineteenth century, the power of the thuto lay not in its printed pages or human publishers but in the effect of its message on people’s hearts and consequent behavior, whether African or European. In this way, and as would become increasingly evident during the course of the colonial era, it was not European-made ‘ink’ or ‘tablets of stone’ that constituted Christianity for Tswana believers but ‘the Spirit of God’ revealed and enacted in their lives.
References

Published Sources


**Historical Periodicals**


*Mahoko a Becwana* (Setswana newspaper published by LMS).

*Monthly Extracts from the Correspondence of the British and Foreign Bible Society*.


*Reports of the British and Foreign Bible Society*.

**Archival Sources**

ALK—Africana Library, Kimberley.

BSC—Bible Society Collection, Cambridge University:

ECI = Editorial Correspondence Inwards (volume/page).

FC = Foreign Correspondence (year/item).

CWM—Council for World Mission, School of Oriental and African Studies, London:

MI = Matabeleland, Incoming Correspondence (box/folder/jacket).

P = Personal (box/item or box/folder).

SAI = South Africa, Incoming Correspondence (box/folder/jacket).

SAJ = South Africa, Journals (box/file).

SAR = South Africa, Reports (box/folder).

KRM—Robert Moffat Library, Moffat Mission, Kuruman:

GCRB = Griquatown church record books.


book 2: CM = Church Minutes, ML = Member Lists.

[elsewhere microfiched together simply as “Doop Boek” (Baptism Book)].


KCRB = Kuruman church record book:
BP = Baptismal Register (1825-1877).
CM = Church Minutes (1852-1892).
RL = Roll of Church Members (1829-1876).
MR = Marriage Register (1842-1872).
MMS—Methodist Missionary Society, School of Oriental and African Studies, London:
SA = South Africa microfiche set / mf = microfiche number.
RUC—Rhodes University, Cory Library, Grahamstown.
UCT—University of Cape Town, Manuscripts and Archives Department:
BCZA = microfilm copies of Moffat papers at Zimbabwe National Archives.
(MO = internal Moffat papers file number).
UWC—University of Witwatersrand, Cullen Library:
AB = archives of the Church of the Province of South Africa.
AB187 = papers of William Crisp.
A75 = papers of John Mackenzie.
WUB—William Willoughby papers, University of Birmingham:
DA49 = library file number (WCW = internal Willoughby papers file number).

Notes

2. For more on the development of the ‘Sotho-Tswana’ label, see Volz 2004.
4. Read, 20 May 1817, CWM SAI 7/2/A; Hamilton, 24 Sep 1818, CWM SAI 7/5/A;
   Helm, 7 Mar 1818, CWM SAI 7/4/A; Read, 12 Jul 1820, CWM SAI 8/2/B; Bradlow
5. Moffat, 5 Aug 1822, CWM SAI 8/5/D, postscript in journal for 29 Nov 1821 to
   3 Jul 1822. Moffat makes no mention of Read’s Setswana translations.
6. A comprehensive history of early written Setswana has not yet been done, but an
   extensive list of nineteenth-century publications, with accompanying microfiche copies,
   can be found in Peters and Tabane 1982. See also Bradlow’s 1987 short history of the Kuru-
   man press. The largest collections of nineteenth-century Setswana publications can be
   found at the Africana Library in Kimberley (ALK) and the National Library of South
   Africa in Cape Town (SLC). The items at SLC were mostly provided by missionaries to
   Governor George Grey, at his request and as described in Ludorf, 16 Feb 1857, SLC MSB
   223/3/104 and R. Moffat Jr., 18 Nov 1858, SLC MSB 223/3/120A.
7. Moffat, 20 Nov 1836, BSC FC 1837/2; 3 Jul 1838, BSC FC 1838/4. These letters
   were reprinted, with Moffat’s admission of his shortcomings edited out, in Reports of the
   BFBS, 33 (1837) 85-86; and 35 (1839) 52-56. Before 1850, Lemue had several tracts
   published at Kuruman and co-authored a hymnal with David Livingstone, as listed in
   Peters and Tabane, 61, 66, 71. See also Lemue’s letter to Moffat regarding translation work,
   1 Aug 1838, University of Cape Town archives (UCT), BCZA 80/87 (MO 5/1/1).
8. For discussion of the case by LMS missionaries, see minutes of their meetings in
   Ashton, 23 Mar 1846, CWM SAI 22/1/A; Helmore, 12 Mar 1847, CWM SAI 23/1/A;
Solomon, 19 May 1848, CWM SAI 23/4/A; and Ashton 10 Dec 1849 CWM SAI 24/1/B. For Edward's detailed criticism of Moffat's translation and his preference for Lemue's, see 4 Sep 1849 and 19 Nov 1849, in CWM SAI 24/1/B. For Moffat's opinion on the matter, see 1 Mar 1848 and 1 Jun 1848, in CWM SAI 23/4/A; and his rebuttal to Edwards in 3 Nov 1851, CWM SAI 26/1/A.

9. Ashton, 2 Feb 1850, CWM SAI 25/1/B; 12 Oct 1857, CWM SAI 30/3/A; and 2 Apr 1860, BSC ECI 1/278; with sympathetic support from Ross in 12 Oct 1859, CWM SAI 31/3/B. In a letter to his son John, Robert Moffat acknowledges Ashton's translation work but disparages his abilities as a missionary, in 20 Aug 1856, UCT BCZA 80/25 (MO 1/1/6). For similar discord within the WMS, see for example Shrewsbury's criticism of Archbell's grammar book, in 10 Apr 1835, MMS SA305/mf94. Archbell's book was nevertheless published in Grahamstown in 1838.

10. Moffat, 30 Jan 1828, CWM SAI 11/1/A, as a separate note for LMS directors originally enclosed with letter of same date in CWM SAI 10/3/B; also Moffat, 12 Sep 1828, CWM SAI 11/2/B.

11. Ludorf, 26 May 1856, MMS SA315/mf35; Ashton, 10 Oct 1858, CWM SAI 31/1/B.

12. The PMS missionary Eugene Casalis (1841) initially called the people with whom he worked "Bassoutos" but their language 'Sechuana', as cited in Cole 1955, xxiii-xxiv. Thaba Nchu publications in various dialects are listed in the minutes of the WMS district meetings of 1838, 1839 and 1840 in RUC MS 15001. Giddy lists some publications of the WMS press in 12 Nov 1846, MMS SA315/mf125; and 16 Apr 1849, MMS SA315/mf28.


15. 10 Nov 1870, enclosed with J. Moffat, 3 Feb 1871, CWM SAI 36/3/C.

16. Anonymous, Mahoko a Becwana, 1 (1883) 2-3. This and all other quotes from Mahoko are translations from the original Setswana, done in collaboration with Part Mgadla and subsequently published in our 2006 book.

17. Northcott 1961, 122. Moffat's notebook on Setswana grammar and vocabulary can be found in UCT BCZA 80/90 (MO 5/4/1).

18. Moffat describes a few examples of these difficulties in 3 Jul 1838, BSC FC 1838/4.

19. 4 Sep 1849, CWM SAI 24/1/B.


21. Read, CWM SAJ 3/61 and 3/64; Campbell 1822, vol. 2, 4, 43, 169, 188-192. Setlhodi was frequently called by his Dutch name, 'Sederas' or 'Cedras', derived from 'sit en raas', the Dutch translation of 'setlhodi'. See also Breutz 1968, 252.

22. 5 Aug 1822, CWM SAI 8/5/D, postscript in journal for 29 Nov 1821 to 3 Jul 1822; 3 Jul 1838, BSC FC 1838/4.

23. 4 Sep 1849, CWM SAI 24/1/B. The 'superior man' may have been Koboyapudi, as indicated in KRM KCRB/RL, 124 and CM, 1; and Livingstone, 28 Dec 1852, in Schapera (ed.) 1951, vol. 2, 195.

24. 29 Aug 1866, UCT BCZA 80/26 (MO 1/1/6).
25. For a few details on the early life of Mokotedi, see Hamilton, Moffat and Edwards, 30 Sep 1833, CWM SAI 13/4/E; J. Orpen, SLC MSB 711/2; and KRM A3, KCRB/RL, 114.

26. Moffat, 3 Nov 1845, CWM SAI 21/1/B.

27. Other LMS missionaries support Moffat’s criticism of Mokotedi in Ross, 20 Jan 1844, CWM SAI 21/1/A; Ashton, 23 Mar 1846, CWM SAI 22/1/A and Solomon, 13 Nov 1848, CWM SAI 23/4/C. Among Mokotedi’s efforts to redeem himself was a request to join the Anglican church, reproduced in Hodgson 1983. For Mokotedi’s readmission to the LMS, see Hughes, 6 Dec 1858, CWM SAI 31/1/B and 26 Dec 1860, CWM SAI 32/1/A.


29. 4 Sep 1849, CWM SAI 24/1/B.

30. 16 Aug 1832, CWM SAI 13/2/D.

31. 29 Sep 1859, in Hermannsburger Missionsblatt (HMB), 7, 10 (1860) 150, originally ‘wir kein Gesetz Gottes hätten, nur die zu taufen, welche lesen könnten.’

32. Bechuana District Committee minutes, 8 Jan 1840, RUC MS 15001.

33. Hamilton, Moffat and Edwards, 18 Nov 1846, CWM SAI 22/1/B.

34. Moffat, Hamilton and Edwards, 25 Oct 1847, CWM SAI 23/1/B. See also Moffat, Hamilton and Edwards, 16 Jun 1837, CWM SAI 15/4/D; and Edwards, 10 Sep 1838, CWM SAI 16/2/E.

35. Some samples of basic lesson sheets and posters from Kuruman can be found in SLC MSB 899/1. See also Lokuulo loa Eintla (Hannover: Hermannsburger Missionshandlung, 1891) 7th ed., located in ALK.

36. 26 Mar 1838, MMS SA315/mfl15. Missionary reports during this period usually list the number of students at each school according to what book they are in the process of reading.

37. From Thaba Nchu’s report for the WMS BDC meeting of 12 Dec 1843, in book of minutes, RUC MS 15001.

38. Moffat describes such an instance of preaching in 14 Jun 1845, BSC FC 1845/4, which was also published in Monthly Extracts, 9 (1846) 92-94. Hughes describes the extensive use of scripture in prayers by another evangelist, Makami, in 10 Jul 1847, CWM SAI 23/1/A. Hughes also preached only on passages for which Batswana had acquired translations, as indicated by his list of sermon texts in 8 May 1855, CWM SAI 29/3/A.

39. Most likely Molala, who was a member of the congregation at Bodigelong, as quoted in Moffat, 3 July 1838, BSC FC 1838/4. This letter was also published in Reports of the BFBS, 35 (1839) 55.

40. Edwards reports the arrival of 5,000 New Testaments from the BFBS in 1843, most of which were sold within a few years, in 21 Mar 1843, BSC FC 1843/4; and Giddy reports the printing of 1,000 catechisms in 1849, with a copy included, in 16 Apr 1849, MMS SA315/mfl128.

41. Hughes and Wright, 15 Oct 1841, CWM SAI 18/2/C.

42. 13 Feb 1836, CWM SAI 15/1/B. The four main LMS books available at that time were a catechism, the Gospel of Luke, a collection of scripture extracts and a hymnal.

43. Hamilton, Moffat and Edwards, 15 Jun 1837, CWM SAI 15/4/D.

44. Wangelmann 1876, 15-16.

45. As recorded in Moffat, 22 Nov 1846, BSC FC 1847/1; and published in Reports of the BFBS, 43 (1847) 128.
46. See, for example, Sykes, 20 Sep 1861, CWM MI 1/1/D.
47. 3 Mar 1840, CWM SAI 17/1/B. One of these evangelists, Makami, was later
described by Hughes as a good 'Exhorter' but unable to write, in 19 Nov 1846, CWM SAI
22/1/B. As late as 1848, of the six Tswana evangelists affiliated with Kuruman, only
two were able to write, and one of the most respected, Sebubi, was unable to read or write, as
described in Ashton, 20 Apr 1848, CWM SAI 23/4/A. A few years later, however, interest
in writing increased, such as a 'writing mania' at Gamohana mentioned in Ashton, 24 Sep
1849, CWM SAI 24/1/B.
48. 12 Nov 1853, CWM SAI 28/1/C. For mention of some other examples, see Moffat,
23 Nov 1836, CWM SAI 15/2/D; and 1 Jun 1848, CWM SAI 23/4/A.
49. 20 Nov 1836, in Reports of the BFBS, 33 (1837) 85, as reprinted from BSC FC
1837/2. Hughes makes similar observations in 3 Nov 1837, CWM SAI 4/110. The first
items printed by Giddy at Thaba Nchu were a few translations of parables, in 26 Mar 1838,
MMS SA315/mf115; a copy of Giddy's Serologong translation of 'The Prodigal Son' is
included in his 8 Oct 1840, MMS SA315/mf117.
50. 26 Nov 1846, CWM SAI 22/1/B. However, in that same letter, Hughes mentions
that several Batswana were learning Dutch in order to gain access to other parts of the Bible
not yet translated into Setswana.
51. As recorded in Moffat, 14 Jun 1845, in Monthly Extracts, 9 (1846) 93, reprinted
from BSC FC 1845/4. The Setswana word mahoko can be translated as 'news' or 'words'.
52. Mackenzie 1871, 79.
53. As recounted by James Hepburn in the first part of his journal from the trip, 16 Nov
1877, CWM SAI 39/1/C.
54. Ledimo cites the example of the number seven being sacred, in Hepburn, 30 Oct
1880, CWM SAI 40/4/B.
55. April 1887, in Quarterly Paper of the Bloemfontein Mission, 77 (Jul 1887) 143.
56. Mahoko, 56 (1889) 7. David Livingstone remarks on the theological significance of
the lizard story forty years earlier in 16 Mar 1847, Schapera (ed.) 1951, vol. 1, 192-193.
57. Seven students at the Tiger Kloof seminary wrote the essays as assignments, which
were then apparently used by Willoughby in his publications and lectures on Tswana
culture. The original Setswana notebooks are in WUB DA49/1/2/602 (WCW 709), and
typed English translations of the essays were cut into pieces and arranged by topic in the
various files of WCW 770 and WCW 775.
58. Helmore, 10 Oct 1849, CWM SAI 24/1/B.
60. For scholarship that has emphasized congruence between modimo and God, see, for
example, Setiloane 1976 and Nkomazana 2002.
61. During Lichtenstein's 1805 visit to the Batlhaping, he evidently gathered most of
his information from his host and interpreter Jan Kok, including a description of 'Muh-
rimo', as recorded in his 1807 article 'Uöber der Beetjuaas', 72.
62. Read, 12 Jul 1820, CWM SAI 8/2/B, especially pages 10-14; R. Hamilton, 28 Feb
1822, CWM SAI 8/4/B and 4 Sep 1834, CWM SAI 14/2/F.
63. 16 Mar 1847, Schapera (ed.) 1951, vol. 1, 192-193. See also H.C. Schulenberg,
HMB 7, 11 (1860) 174-175.
64. 24 Jul 1848, CWM SAI 23/4/B. See also Mackenzie 1871, 394-395.
65. See for example Moffat (tr.) 1830, verses 4: 40 and 5: 31.
66. Moffat, 14 Jun 1845, Monthly Extracts, 9 (1846) 93.
67. Hamilton, Moffat and Edwards, 10 Sep 1838, CWM SAI 16/2/E.
68. Twana medicine and its relationship with European medicine are discussed in greater detail in Mackenzie 1871, 381-388; Setiloane 1976, 108-112, 135-136; Landau 1995, 10-29 and chap. 5; Comaroff 1997, chap. 7; and Dennis 1978.
70. The lives of early Pedi evangelists are described in Wangemann 1876, 7-84; Delius 1984, 108-125; and Van der Heyden 2004.
71. The information for this section is taken primarily from an interview with Maphakela’s grandson Lawrence Lekalake on 19 Jul 2002 and Maphakela’s autobiographical accounts of June 1910 in WUB DA49/1/2/697 (WCW 804/3) and of 1932 in TKM 312, the latter of which was used as the basis for Jennings’s 1932 article on Maphakela’s life.
73. Hamilton, Moffat and Edwards, 10 Sep 1838, CWM SAI 16/2/E. The recorded words in Setswana were, ‘thuto ya molete wa molelo’ (teaching of the pit of fire), ‘pit of fire’ being the phrase for ‘hell’ introduced by missionaries.
74. The food controversy is discussed in Hamilton, 19 Jun 1839, CWM SAI 16/5/E; Wright, 14 May 1840, CWM SAI 17/1/C; and Hughes & Wright, 31 Jul 1840, CWM SAI 17/3/D.
75. Charles Williams, 20 Dec 1872, CWM SAR 1/7.
76. Ashton criticizes such ‘new lights’ in 17 May 1866, UWC A75/A/87, implying that Twana evangelists had employed the term in defense of their teachings.
77. Wright, 14 May 1840, CWM SAI 17/1/C, in reference to debates among early Christians recorded in Acts chapters 15-20 and I Corinthians chapter 10.
79. Mackenzie 1871, 106. Most scholars have unquestioningly accepted the dominant missionary characterization of Sechele as a ‘backslider’, but early German missionaries and some LMS missionaries, as well as many Twana Christians, regarded Sechele as a devout Christian. For more discussion of Sechele’s Christianity, see Volz 2001.
80. Hepburn, journal entry of 14 Sep 1886, CWM SAI 44/2/B. Moremi’s initial interest in the thuto is described by the evangelist Khukhwi Mogodi, as reported to Hepburn in Jun 1880, CWM SAI 40/3/C and published in Maboko a Becwana, issues 1, 2 and 3 (1883).
81. See also Landau’s account of this confrontation between Hepburn and Moremi in 1995, 144-145.
83. The first quote is from Mackenzie, 24 Jun 1862, CWM SAI 32/5/A, and the second is from Ludorf, 29 Jun 1863, MMS SA322/mf531.
87. Sechele, 11 Jan 1884, Mahoko, 16 (1884) 5-6, in response to ‘The Flood’ in Mahoko, 12 (1883) 3, 6. See also H. Mapalatsebe, 23 Feb 1884, Mahoko, 16 (1884) 6 and ‘The Flood’, Mahoko, 16 (1884) 3.
88. Mahume Kalaota, 22 Feb 1892, Mahoko, 87 (1892) 31-32 and B.D. Tlhalogang, 21 Jan 1893, Mahoko, 93 (1893) 55, in response to earlier letters and articles regarding a lunar eclipse in issues 83 and 85.
89. Ezekiel Tlomere, 1 Jan 1891, Mahoko, 75 (1891) 126-127.
90. Michael Tshabadira Moroka, 28 Apr 1891, Mahoko, 77 (1891) 143.
91. Morolong Monnaakanye, 13 Oct 1883, Mahoko, 13 (1884) 5 and Oganne Keaokopa, 30 Jan 1884, Mahoko, 15 (1884) 5, with letters in successive issues by other Tswana. Wookey’s article ‘Bridewealth’ appeared in Mahoko, 10 (1883) 5, and the newspaper editor published a cover story on the subject in Mahoko, 17 (1884).
92. John Brown, 4 Dec 1885, CWM SAI 43/2/C.
93. Maakabalwe Tshabayagae, 16 January, 1893, Mahoko, 94 (1893) 77. The newspaper’s missionary editors frequently urged greater Tswana interest in books, such as in 11 (1883) 4, 52 (1887) 25 and in response to Maakabalwe in 94 (1893) 77-78.