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The Bible in the Bush: The First 'Literate' Batswana Bible Readers¹

Musa W. Dube

A storyteller meets storytellers

The title of this chapter is derived from Laura Bohannan's celebrated essay, 'Shakespeare in the Bush'. After briefly summarizing Bohannan's essay, I first consider the issues it raises for biblical translation, and turn next to discuss some of the first written responses of Batswana to Robert Moffat's translation of the Setswana Bible of 1857.² I then consider how the responses of Batswana to this missionary translation represent subversive ways of reading, resisting the colonial perspective, and the wider challenges this poses for biblical translation and the issues of race and culture with which translation is bound up.

In her essay, Laura Bohannan, an American anthropologist from the University of Oxford, describes her second field trip to the Tiv, a Nigerian ethnic group, to observe some of their rare ceremonies. She had, mistakenly, chosen an inappropriate time for field work. She arrived when the swamps were rising, which hindered communication and interaction between different homesteads. Before the swamps dropped and ploughing could begin, the Tiv, hosting Bohannan, amused themselves with drinking beer, telling stories, singing, and dancing. There were no ceremonies performed because the swamps cut communication between various homesteads. So, Bohannan found herself with plenty of time on her hands and very little to do save to read a copy of *Hamlet* that was given to her, following an argument with a friend, who held that Americans tend to misunderstand Shakespeare, 'a very English poet', for they 'easily misinterpret the universal by misunderstanding the particular'.³ Bohannan protested

¹ A longer version of this article was first published in *Translation 2* (Spring 2013): 79–103. This edited version is republished here by permission.

² In this article 'Botswana' refers to the country; 'Batswana' refers to the people of Botswana; and 'Setswana' refers to the language and culture of Botswana. 'Motswana' is the singular of 'Batswana'. The colonial spellings were different: 'Bechuana' for 'Botswana' and 'Sechuana' for 'Setswana'.

³ See Laura Bohannan, 'Shakespeare in the Bush: An American Anthropologist Set Out to Study the Tiv of West Africa and Was Taught the True Meaning of Hamlet', *Natural History* 75 (1966): 28–33, at 28.

against this perspective, holding that ‘human nature is pretty much the same the whole world over, at least the general plot and motivation of the greater tragedies would always be clear – everywhere – although some details of custom might have to be explained and difficulties of translation might produce other slight changes.’⁴ To end an argument they could not conclude, the friend gave Bohannan a copy of *Hamlet* ‘to study in the African bush’, hoping that it would lift her mind ‘above its primitive surroundings’ and that with prolonged meditation she might ‘achieve the grace of correct interpretation’, namely the English one.⁵ The more Bohannan read *Hamlet*, the more she became convinced that ‘*Hamlet* had only one possible interpretation, and that one is universally obvious.’⁶

It happened that one morning the Tiv invited Bohannan to tell them a story. Thinking to herself that ‘here was my chance to prove *Hamlet* universally intelligible,’⁷ Bohannan accepted the invitation to tell a story. And so she began in their own style of telling a story, ‘Not yesterday, not yesterday, long ago a thing occurred!’ Bohannan continued, ‘One night three men were keeping watch outside the homestead of the great chief, when suddenly they saw the former chief approach them.’⁸ Disruption. The Tiv asked, ‘Why was he no longer their chief?’ ‘He was dead,’ Bohannan explained.⁹ ‘Dead?’ Dead people do not walk, according to the Tiv’s beliefs. So one of the elders made a point of correction: ‘Of course, it wasn’t the dead chief. It was an omen sent by a witch. Go on.’¹⁰ Altogether, I counted up to nineteen questions the Tiv posed to Bohannan, besides commentary, suggestions, and co-telling. This was the trend of their listening. They questioned, objected, commented, and provided explanations for the events that motivated the plot, quite freely placing the story within their cultural worldviews and then urging Bohannan to continue with the story. Midway through their active listening and rewriting of *Hamlet* Bohannan writes, ‘*Hamlet* was again a good story to them, but *it no longer seemed quite the same story to me.*’¹¹

Quite shaken by the elder’s self-assured explanation, Bohannan continued, ‘One of these three was a man who knew things.’¹² This was the closest translation that she could find for a scholar, but unfortunately it also meant a witch among the Tiv. When she explained that the scholar associated the appearance of the dead chief with *Hamlet*, his son, the elders disapproved: Such omens were issues to be handled by chiefs and elders not youngsters. They were of the opinion that, at the most, *Hamlet* should have consulted a specialized diviner to seek clarification about the death of his father and then approached elders thereafter for them to handle the case for him. They began to debate among themselves and to provide reasons why *Hamlet* did not follow this path. They concluded that the diviner would have been afraid to divulge information about the most powerful man in the land, King Claudius.

⁴ Bohannan, ‘Shakespeare in the Bush’, 28.

⁵ Bohannan, ‘Shakespeare in the Bush’, 28.

⁶ Bohannan, ‘Shakespeare in the Bush’, 29.

⁷ Bohannan, ‘Shakespeare in the Bush’, 29.

⁸ Bohannan, ‘Shakespeare in the Bush’, 29.

⁹ Bohannan, ‘Shakespeare in the Bush’, 29.

¹⁰ Bohannan, ‘Shakespeare in the Bush’, 29.

¹¹ Bohannan, ‘Shakespeare in the Bush’, 32 (emphasis added).

¹² Bohannan, ‘Shakespeare in the Bush’, 29.

In the process of this major retelling of *Hamlet*, Bohannan became quite upset by the Tiv for taking the story from her and telling it in their own way. The point of whether the ghost was an omen or not, whether a ghost or omen can talk, walk, or cast a shadow, was an intense moment of debate between the Tiv and Bohannan. One old man pulled a Kola nut from his pocket, bit it, and gave it to her, thus making peace with Bohannan and asserting that it was not a fight but rather the art of storytelling. The listeners in most African cultures are not passive listeners. They participate, urging the storyteller to go on and providing commentary; indeed, in some African cultures the listeners are so active that they can take the story from the storyteller and tell it in another direction. The storytelling space, therefore, becomes a writerly moment, a moment of public production of new stories through old stories and with various other storytellers. The storyteller does not have the last word, nor does one story exist to the exclusion of others. Rather, a storytelling moment is a space of production of new stories within the existing field of other stories.¹³ It becomes a moment of networking of stories.

1 My response and implications for translations

There is much more that can be said about Bohannan's narrative from various perspectives than I have been able to summarize. Like Bohannan, who had crossed many boundaries to reach the Tiv and found herself hedged by the swampy season, 'the number of borders being crossed in one translation are always multiple'¹⁴ as *Hamlet* in the bush amply demonstrates.

When I first read 'Shakespeare in the Bush', I was highly impressed by the Tiv community. They were an empowered audience, who listened critically, questioning, commenting, making suggestions, thereby rewriting the story within their own cultural worldview. While initially Bohannan thought her task was merely to find some 'equivalent' words such as using 'great chief' for 'king' or 'machete' for 'swords', the task involved much more. As translation studies have underlined, the translation of any work is not just a matter of formal, dynamic, or functional equivalents of words, phrases, sentences, meaning, or effect. Rather, translation work or processes involve 'the translation of cultures,' fully informed by the agendas of the patrons, publishers, and purposes they serve. Consequently, translation studies 'no longer defines translation as an activity that takes place between two languages, but views it as an interaction between cultures.'¹⁵ The Tiv had asked for Bohannan's story and threatened not to tell her any of their stories unless she told them stories from her culture.

For the Tiv, it was an exchange of stories, within their ethnic space, within their cultural boundaries and within their own values. The Tiv acknowledged Bohannan's language limitation, saying, 'You must explain what we do not understand, as we do

¹³ Laura E. Donaldson, *Decolonising Feminisms: Race, Gender, and Empire Building* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 139.

¹⁴ See Edwin Gentzler, *Contemporary Translation Theories*, 2nd edn (Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2001), 203.

¹⁵ Gentzler, *Contemporary Translation Theories*, 190.

when we tell you our stories.¹⁶ As an anthropologist, Bohannan was a story collector. She had not forgotten that, as an anthropologist, she came primarily to collect African stories for a European audience. Thus the moment they said that madness is caused by witchcraft and creatures in the forest, Bohannan reports, 'I stopped being a storyteller and took out my notebook and demanded to be told more about these two causes of madness. Even while they spoke', she says, 'I jotted down notes, I tried to calculate the effect of this new factor on the plot.'¹⁷

It was quite intriguing to me, as an African, that Bohannan reached a point when, while her audience was enjoying the story, to her, it was no longer the same story. At this point I said, 'Laura Bohannan, welcome to the world!' For us Africans who come from largely oral communities, and in a historical context where the first written stories – whether they are cultures, history, religion, language – were written by Westerners, especially during colonial times, it has been excruciatingly painful to read the anthropological record, the travellers' story, the missionary record; for the most part, one cannot recognize herself. It is a different story, precisely because it is an African story that is grafted and interpreted within a Western culture. Unfortunately, the colonial context, which entailed the collection of the stories of the Other, who is different, was a time when the other was already despised. Consequently, the refraction of our stories was informed not only by Western cultures, but also by racism and Eurocentrism.

Similarly, when I first read 'Shakespeare in the Bush' I also wondered what kind of Bible translations would we have if our translators and communities were culturally empowered citizens involved in intra- and intercultural activity where there is more interactive intercourse between the source and the target text, not intercourse in the missionary style where the target culture is supposedly always submissively underneath, receiving male sperms from the source text – the biblical/Westernized cultures – but rather in a more interesting love-making where wrestling turns everybody, up, down, sideways, and all angles. What kind of Bible translations would we have?

Further, do we desire this type of translation, or do we build a hedge of theories, intuitions, policies, practices, ideologies, agendas, experts, publications, and cultures that often mute the targeted communities as subjugated 'recipient cultures'? 'Shakespeare in the Bush' posits a model of translation as a public hearing. It posits a model that calls us to regard targeted communities and their cultures as just as sacred as the stories we bring from other cultures, just as worthy of critical assessment for various forms of oppressions as all other cultures. It posits a model where recipient/targeted communities are not the subjugated Other. Reading this story, I became quite interested in those historical moments when culturally empowered communities first heard the Bible and the translations they embarked upon to bring the story home, and how such translational spaces were negotiated – if we can exegete them from missionary narratives. This, of course, leads me to the second part of my essay, namely, the response of the first 'literate' Batswana readers to the Setswana Bible translation. I have placed the word 'literate' in quotation marks to indicate the fact that there is literacy in all cultures outside the Westernized school system.

¹⁶ Bohannan, 'Shakespeare in the Bush', 29.

¹⁷ Bohannan, 'Shakespeare in the Bush', 31.

2 The first Batswana Bible readers

In this section, I seek to tell the story of the translated Setswana Bible and how the Batswana received the biblical story from the earliest translation presented to them. The translation was in stages, stretching from 1830, when the translation of the gospel of Luke was completed, to 1840, when the New Testament translation was completed, to 1857, when the first complete Bible was first printed in Kuruman, located in present-day South Africa. Since it is important to study the translators, their time, context, agenda, ideology, and patrons, a brief background of our Bible translator is in order.

The Scottish missionary, Robert Moffat, who started his work in Southern Africa in 1817, is credited with translating the first Setswana Bible. The academic records of Moffat indicate that he was a gardener, who later trained as a farmer. He joined the London Missionary Society (henceforth LMS) in 1816 and arrived in South Africa in 1817 to start his job.¹⁸ Obviously, Moffat's training was close to nothing – one year or less. As Clement Doke points out, 'Moffat had never trained as a linguist' (nor a biblical scholar, I must add) and 'he came up against intricacies of Tswana.'¹⁹ In addition, Moffat carried out his work and translation during the height of modern colonialism, fully immersed in its thinking and attitudes towards the colonized.

How did the Batswana respond to the translation? To explore this question, I will largely read the letters Batswana wrote to the editor of *Mahoko a Becwana*, a newspaper that was published by the LMS from Kuruman between 1883 and 1896. A number of 'literate' Batswana wrote letters on various subjects, which gives us a window into how they responded to the Setswana Bible translation. These letters were recently collected and made available in the volume *Words of Batswana: Letters to Mahoko a Becwana 1883-1896*.²⁰ I will focus on those letters dealing with correct ways of writing Setswana, since the first written Setswana was associated with Bible translation. Perhaps the reader is wondering how and why *Hamlet* is comparable to the Setswana Bible. Just as *Hamlet* was a work of 'a very English poet', so the Setswana Bible was a work of a Scottish man, who was grafted into his worldview, which, at the time, was that of the British Empire. Would the Batswana readers demonstrate efforts to reclaim the Setswana culture like the Tiv of Nigeria? The analysis of their letters will greatly assist us in answering this question. In reading these letters, I seek to identify ways employed by the earliest Batswana Bible readers to resist colonizing translations and how their resistance was an assertion of their ethnic and cultural identity.

I must admit that comparing the Tiv with Batswana literate writers may be unfair on several levels. First, the Tiv had an opportunity to comment and rewrite the story of *Hamlet* as the story was being told. The Batswana writers were only making comments on a completed written translation – Moffat does not give us an elaborate description of their engagement with the biblical story in the process of translation. Their letters, written between 1883 and 1896, were drafted almost four decades after Moffat's New

¹⁸ Clement Doke, 'Scripture Translation into Bantu Languages', *African Studies* 17, no. 2 (1958): 84–99.

¹⁹ Doke, 'Scripture Translation', 85.

²⁰ Part Themba Mgadla and Stephen C. Volz, trans. and eds, *Words of Batswana: Letters to Mahoko a Becwana, 1883–1896* (Van Riebeeck Society, Second Series 37; Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society for the Publication of South African Historical Documents, 2006).

Testament appeared in 1840. However, since the LMS newspaper allowed them to express their views – it was the first newspaper of its kind among Batswana speakers – we could say that these are the first written responses we have to the translated version, addressed to the missionaries and fellow Batswana. Remarkably, forty years after the first Setswana New Testament publication, the debate was still hot. We may well say that these Batswana writers had been waiting to exhale!

Although I have not had access to the Batswana's first oral hearing and response to the biblical story, I have read Moffat's 642-page volume on *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa*, a volume he published in 1842 in London, two years after he published the Setswana New Testament translation. The volume amply indicates that in the first decades Batswana resisted the biblical story, displaying significant indifference, which was frustrating to missionaries. Moffat thus observed that 'although they received much instruction, they appeared never for a moment to have reflected upon it, nor to retain traces of it in their memories, which are generally very tenacious'.²¹ To illustrate the point, he cites two examples: one from his friend and another from his arch-enemy, the rain-ritualist, who is constantly named the rain-maker in Moffat's writing. Moffat describes his friend, Munameets, as a very supportive and intelligent Bechuana man who always travelled with him. Just before his death, however, Munameets rhetorically pleaded incapacity to understand Moffat's teaching due to age, deferring such a task to the future generations. Munameets said, 'Perhaps you may be able to make children remember your *mekhua* (customs)'.²² The second case, involving the speech of the rain-ritualist who received great acclaim, leads Moffat to remark that 'the poor missionary's arguments, drawn from the source of Divine truth, were thrown into the shade'.²³ Moffat narrates, 'When we attempted to convince them of their state as sinners, they would boldly affirm with full belief in their innate rectitude that there was not a sinner in the tribe'.²⁴ And so Moffat laments, 'Oh when shall the day-star arise in their hearts? We preach, we converse, we catechize, we pray, but without the least apparent success'.²⁵

These are largely reported accounts in Moffat's book, but I have not yet come across intense engagement concerning a particular biblical story, displaying dialogue, comparable to Bohannan's encounter with the Tiv.²⁶ The letters to the editors, which began to come in 1883, the year that Moffat died, discussed his Bible translation,

²¹ Robert Moffat, *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa* (London: John Snow, Paternoster-Row, 1842), 244.

²² Moffat, *Missionary Labours*, 246.

²³ Moffat, *Missionary Labours*, 247.

²⁴ Moffat, *Missionary Labours*, 254. See also Robert P. Carroll, 'Cultural Encroachment and Bible Translation: Observations on Elements of Violence, Race, and Class in the Production of Bibles', *Semeia* 76 (1996): 39–54, where he discusses a case of one missionary's attempt to deal with a lack of guilt among his target audience in Latin America by making a translation that said the particular group 'killed Jesus'.

²⁵ Moffat, *Missionary Labours*, 285. See also Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), where they show that, in fact, Batswana were very resistant to Christian conversion, until a time when they realized that they had lost autonomy to the ever encroaching forces of colonialism.

²⁶ See Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 228, attesting that some Bantus' response to the biblical text was to regard it as 'an instrument of divination'.

focusing on the orthography, the various dialects of Setswana, the correct way of writing Setswana and various Christian teachings that clashed with Setswana culture, thus serve as my source for now.

3 Setswana Bible translation: Whose interests are served?

Given Moffat's accounts of Batswana's disinterest and indifference towards biblical teaching, it is clear that they hardly asked for the biblical translation. What was the purpose of this translation, when the community was quite indifferent? Who commissioned it, and who was served by such a translation? We can hardly place it in the hands and agenda of Batswana. As Part Mgadla and Stephen Volz point out:

Most African-language publications in the nineteenth century were produced by European missionaries as part of a larger project to make the Bible and other Christian teachings more widely available to potential converts. This process began in southern Africa in the 1820s and 1830s with the publication of biblical excerpts, catechisms and other materials in Setswana, Sesotho, and Isxhosa. The first complete vernacular Bible was in Setswana, published in 1857 by the LMS.²⁷

The agenda behind the Bible translation lay outside Batswana's interest. It follows that it did not necessarily serve their interest or agenda. Obviously Moffat's Setswana was not perfect when he undertook the translation, and I have yet to discover literature that describes the indigenous people who helped him with the task. In his voluminous book, *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa*, which I, as a native of that region, can only describe as a 'text of terror', Moffat speaks very disparagingly and bitterly of his interpreter for his poor translations, to a point where he holds that

a missionary who commences giving direct instruction to the natives, though far from being competent in the language, is proceeding on a safer ground than if he were employing an interpreter, who is not proficient in both languages, and who has not a tolerable understanding of the doctrines of the Gospel. Trusting to an ignorant and unqualified interpreter, is attended with consequences not only ludicrous, but dangerous to the very objects which lie nearest the missionary's heart.²⁸

4 An English Setswana

And so, Moffat had produced a Setswana Bible translation before he had grasped the language, and with much distrust of the indigenous translators. Five to six decades later, different mission centres had used Moffat's Bible to develop better Setswana, even within the LMS; hymns and other books had appeared with an improved Setswana

²⁷ Mgadla and Volz, *Words of Batswana*, xix.

²⁸ Moffat, *Missionary Labours*, 294.

orthography. So by 1883 there were varieties of written Setswana, Robert Moffat's Bible translation being the crudest of all. As the number of educated Batswana rose, they became dissatisfied with Moffat's translation, as their letters to the editor of *Mahoko a Becwana* attest. The debate regarding the correct way of writing and pronouncing Setswana became heated as soon as the newspaper (*Mahoko a Becwana*) was launched. Many Batswana writers insisted that Robert Moffat's earliest translation clearly indicated that he did not understand the language. They preferred the latest forms of writing and pronouncing Setswana.²⁹

Since better ways of writing Setswana had been developed over the years, most Batswana readers also insisted that the latter should be adopted as the standard for the newspaper. At the centre of the debate were the letter *d*, which was translated with *l* or *r*; the consonant *w*, which was written as *oe*; and the letter *t*, which in some words needed to appear with *l* (*tl*), in some words with *h* (*th*) and in others with *lh* (*tlh*) together. If *l*, *h*, or *lh* is left out of the letter *t* where they need to be included, it creates different meanings than the intended. A good case in point is the verb 'created' in Gen. 1.1. When *h* was left out of *tl*, the verb was written as '*tlola*' ('jump') instead of '*tlhola*' ('create'). The Moffat Bible thus read: 'In the beginning God jumped the heavens and the earth,' instead of 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.'³⁰

Another debate centred around the vowels *e* and *o*, whether they should be written plainly or with an accent and a macron, respectively (i.e. *è* and *ō*). In each case, using or not using the letters *d*, *w*, or the accented/marked *e* and *o*, not only changed the pronunciation of the Setswana word, in some cases, it also changed the meaning, as elaborated above. In his letter to the editor, dated December 1889, Sekaelo Piti captures and illustrates the general concern. He wrote:

We have complained much about our language in the books, because they have not been representing true Setswana but rather Setswana and English – an English Setswana – that is read as only a reminder of the real thing.³¹ For example, '*go diha*' [to make] has been written as '*go riha*', '*didimala*' [be quiet] as '*ririmala*' or '*lilimala*', also '*Modimo*' [God] as '*Morimo*', and '*legodimo*' [heaven] as '*legorimo*'. But when we saw hymn books in the year 1883, we were very happy because a missionary had arrived who speaks the language of our mothers and who speaks proper Setswana. He says, '*Yesu kwana ea Modimo*' [Jesus lamb of God] and not '*Yesu koana*' or '*kuana*'. This missionary also printed a spelling book in the year 1885. He is the one who knows the true language of Setswana.³²

²⁹ See Mgadla and Volz, *Words of Batswana*, 7–42.

³⁰ Mgadla and Volz, *Words of Batswana*, 29.

³¹ This writer was spot on, for indeed when Moffat discusses how he designed the written Setswana, it is clear that he based it on Western languages and sounds. Giving guidance of how to pronounce Setswana, he says, 'Ch [is] represented in Bechuana by the Italian c, is sounded like ch in chance ... tl, like the Welsh ll, preceded by a t; ng, which is represented in the written language by the Spanish ñ, has the ringing sound of ng in sing. This outline will enable anyone to read the language with tolerable correctness'; Moffat, *Missionary Labours*, 226. He goes on to discuss how the word Botswana was spelt differently among the Dutch or English, depending on whether they found an equivalent sound or not in their own languages.

³² Mgadla and Volz, *Words of Batswana*, 31.

These concerns were quite legitimate for in some cases the changing or leaving out of one letter dramatically changed the meaning of the verses. For example, changing the *w* in *kwana* to a *u* created verses that, instead of reading 'Jesus the lamb [*kwana*] of God', or 'behold the lamb of God', actually read 'Behold the hat [*kuana*] of God.' If 'go *diha*' is used for the verb 'to make', it would easily be heard and understood as 'to drop something down' instead of to make or create. Going back to Gen. 1.1, suppose the translation chose the missionary spelling of 'to make' (that is used go *diha*) for 'to create', the Setswana translation could read: 'In the beginning when God dropped (*diha*) the earth and the heavens,' instead of made (*dira*). In other cases, the translation created meaningless new words, such as '*ririmala*' for '*didimala*' (be quiet). The new word, *ririmala*, could possibly be read as referring to a hairy stomach, if it signifies anything at all.

In the same letter to the editor mentioned above (December 1889), Gomotsegang Magonaring provides a number of examples to illustrate how replacing the consonant *d* with *r* created new unintended meanings. For example, exchanging an *r* for the *d* in the word for 'thundering' or 'sounding' (*duma*) produces the word *ruma*, which means 'to devour'. With the *d* replaced with *r* in the verb *duela* (to pay), one reads *ruela*, which means 'to keep, domesticate, or possess something for someone'.³³ One can imagine that if a verse said Jesus paid (*duela*) for our sins it would now be read to mean *he kept* (*ruela*) our sins. Similarly, the word *dumela* – which is used in Setswana as a greeting – meaning 'let's agree' or 'peace among us', written with an *r* instead of *d* would read *rumela*, which now means 'send'!

Second, Batswana were unhappy because, through translation and the written books (hymns, spelling books, dictionaries, Bible), their language was now infused with English and effectively an English version of Setswana. Piti called it 'an English Setswana – that is read only as a reminder of the real thing'.³⁴ As Banani Diphafe would state in his letter of January 1890, 'I see us becoming confused, only parallel to the language and speaking it like a white person who is just learning Setswana. He says "*Modimo*" [God] as "*Morimo*", and "*dilo*" [things] as "*lilo*." Speaking with a "*d*" sounds right but "*l*" is ridiculous'.³⁵ In Setswana only little children, who are learning to speak, are expected to be unable to pronounce words and say things such as '*lilo*', instead of '*dilo*'. Moffat's translation thus introduced changes that made readers sound like stuttering and stammering little babies who are still learning how to talk when they read the now Anglicized version of their own language. The translation had infantilized them. Hence each time they had to read the Bible they had to put on the persona of infants. Age among Batswana is traditionally an important social marker, far above gender, in fact; failing to recognize an elderly person and to treat them as a child is regarded as greatly disrespectful and insulting. Naturally Batswana readers would be upset by their Bible-reading experience, which, to them, sounded like children learning to speak.

³³ Mgadla and Volz, *Words of Batswana*, 31.

³⁴ Mgadla and Volz, *Words of Batswana*, 36.

³⁵ Mgadla and Volz, *Words of Batswana*, 35.

In a letter dated 6 June 1883, the missionary editor (Alfred Gould), though patronizing, acknowledged that, indeed, the issue of the correct way of writing Setswana needed to be attended to.³⁶ He then promised to refer the issue for consideration by the General Missionary Council. This he did, although not until three years later. On his return, he reported that the Missionary Council had voted to return to the most 'original' written Setswana – one that was consistent with the earliest Bible translation of Robert Moffat, and to suppress the newer ways of writing, which were more appreciated by Batswana. This meant the retention of the most corrupted written Setswana. The report on the response of missionaries, dated 2 September 1889, is worth quoting at length:

In March this year, missionaries of the LMS who teach in the language of Setswana gathered at Kuruman. As they met, they took up the issue of the letters that are used for printing and writing. Many missionaries of other missions oppose some of the letters with which they have been writing. They reject them because they have never liked them. They reject the letter *d* and they reject the letter *w*. These missionaries like the old way of printing, the one that is still used today for the Bible and the Testament. They also argue that the old printing is known by many more people. So, these things were discussed, and it was agreed that those letters should not be changed, and that writing and printing should be done only with the old letters. Now *w* has been dropped so that it will be written '*banoe*' (others) not '*bañwe*' and it will be written '*rumela*' [greet] not as '*dumela*', and '*Morimo*' God not '*Modimo*', and '*lilo tse di thata*' [difficult things] not '*dilo tse di thata*'. It was agreed that *è* and *ô* should be changed and instead put as plain *e* and plain *o*. Some letters will for the time being still be published as they are. The letter '*h*' will be used to differentiate '*tlala*' [hunger] from '*tlhala*' [divorce].³⁷

The report indicates that one little but significant victory was won, concerning the inclusion of *h* in the syllable *tl*. This meant that at last Gen. 1.1 could be read as, 'In the beginning God created (*tlhola*) the heavens and the earth,' instead of, 'In the beginning God jumped (*tlola*) the heavens and the earth.' Indeed, Alfred Wookey's 1908 revised version of the Setswana Bible did just that.

The report from the missionary council meeting, however, had more bad news than good. The overall concerns with other central consonants and vowels such as *d*, *l*, *w*, *ô*, and *è*) were rejected. The reasons given are quite telling and patronizing, to say the least; the views and feelings of the missionaries were all that mattered. It was what they liked that would stand. The prevailing or current and better ways of writing, appreciated by Batswana speakers, were to be reversed. The protests of Batswana about their distorted, meaningless language, which was now reduced to 'an English Setswana – that is read only as a reminder of the real thing',³⁸ did not matter, 'for these missionaries like the old way of printing'.³⁹ The report goes on to say, 'So these things were discussed, and

³⁶ Mgadla and Volz, *Words of Batswana*, 15–16.

³⁷ Mgadla and Volz, *Words of Batswana*, 27.

³⁸ Mgadla and Volz, *Words of Batswana*, 29.

³⁹ Mgadla and Volz, *Words of Batswana*, 27.

it was agreed that those letters should not be changed, and that writing and printing should be done only with the old letters,' that is, the Robert Moffat Setswana Bible translation. The missionaries preferred the English Setswana and insisted that it should be the standard way of writing. Their response assists us to answer better the question about whose agenda is served in the translation process.

5 Decolonizing the English Setswana: Subversive ways of reading

Following this report, the letters to the editor indicate that many Batswana objected to this decision and others pleaded for the decision to be reconsidered, to no avail. They were, in fact, protesting about something that had already been concluded, a non-negotiable issue – until such time that it pleased the missionaries to reverse it. Shot down, forced to write and read Setswana according to the stuttering tongue of a child, forced to read and write in English Setswana, the Batswana were, nonetheless, not helpless. In fact, they had already developed strategies of reading that circumvented the imposed discourse of the 'English Setswana'. They had hoped it could be corrected, but now they had been informed that what would be maintained as the standard way of writing the Setswana language was what the missionaries liked. Consequently, the Batswana readers fell back upon their strategies of reading as resisting readers. Dikokwane Gaboutlwelwe, who wrote in response to the report using the example of Genesis 1, illustrates the point:

I see the old written Setswana in the Bible as we read in Genesis, chapter one. There we find it written like this: '*Morimo o lo ua tlola magorimo le lehatsi mo tsimologong*' ... but when we read it aloud we say, '*Modimo o lo wa tlhola magodimo le lehatshe mo tshimologong*.'⁴⁰

Gaboutlwelwe reveals that their reading strategy overlooked the colonial missionaries' constructed English Setswana language. Instead they read the Moffat Bible from their oral base, putting back all the excluded consonants *d*, *h*, and *w*, and ignoring the new creations of *r*, *l*, and *ua* that infantilize readers, create confusion or meaningless words and induce wrong meanings. So, in fact, even if the verse said 'In the beginning God jumped [*tlola*] the heavens and the earth,' they read it as 'In the beginning God created [*tlhola*] the heavens and the earth.' This reading strategy is further confirmed by Sebotseng Loatile who also responded to the missionary's report:

I am very happy to receive the newspaper and to hear the words that I have been hearing. I hear news about other nations and the word of God. But about the letters that have been taken out, I am very concerned. I assumed that our Bible was printed as it is because the missionaries had not quite grasped our language. But

⁴⁰ Mgadla and Volz, *Words of Batswana*, 29.

now they understand our language and they speak it very well. So I am surprised they are removing core letters [*d*, *w*, *ō*, and *è*]. Here everyone who reads books is not happy about the removal of the letters that have been removed. *You should know that when we read our Bible we change the letters with our mouths.*⁴¹

This strategy of reading from the base of the oral tradition is quite significant. What is in the oral base is the whole culture, another canon, embodied by the community. The refusal to change what was overtly wrong assisted Batswana readers to openly assert their oral tradition and understanding as the main reference point rather than to take the English Setswana Bible as the final authority on their culture. This was crucial because the English Setswana translation of the Bible involved more than just the replacement of key consonants and vowels with newly created (*li ri*) ones. It also included changing the Batswana spiritual world from sacred to evil in order to supplant it with Christianity. An excellent example of this, which I have previously examined, is the translation of *badimo* as 'demons'.⁴² I re-narrate my encounter with this translation in order to illustrate how the Batswana ways of reading from the Setswana oral tradition base subverted the colonial discourse of darkness and heathens.

6 Reclaiming *Badimo* as sacred figures: Batswana reading strategies

In 1995 I carried out fieldwork research, seeking to read Mt. 15.21-28 with Batswana women. In the process, I discovered something else: That 'demons' had been translated as 'ancestors' in the Alfred Wookey revised Setswana Bible of 1908.⁴³ I did not have access to Robert Moffatt's original Bible of 1857 to verify where this use of 'ancestors' for 'demons' originated. Where in Mt. 15.21 the woman says, 'My daughter is severely possessed by demons,' in the Setswana translation it reads, 'My daughter is severely possessed by *badimo*/ancestors.' Where Jesus casts out demons in the original, Jesus casts out the *badimo*/ancestors in the translation. I was so shocked by this translation that I pored over all the other New Testament passages where Jesus casts out demons to verify my stunning discovery.

And I discovered a very sad story: The word 'demons' had been consistently translated as 'ancestors' in the Setswana Bible. It was shocking. Almost desperately, I turned to Mark 5, where Jesus casts out the legion of demons that possessed and maddened a man in Gadarene. I discovered that in the Setswana Bible of 1908 Jesus cast out the legion of *badimo*, who ran into the sea and were buried beneath its waves. It was a textual burial of *badimo*/ancestors. I was virtually trembling, shocked that Batswana who first read the so-called word of God were made to discover that those they venerated as sacred figures were, in fact, just demons. Ancestors – the extended

⁴¹ Mgadla and Volz, *Words of Batswana*, 33 (emphasis added).

⁴² See Musa W. Dube, 'Consuming a Colonial Cultural Bomb: Translating *Badimo* into "Demons" in the Setswana Bible', *JSNT* 73 (1999): 33–59.

⁴³ For the original description see Dube, 'Consuming a Colonial Cultural Bomb', 37–42.

memory of the families and ethnic groups with their departed members – could not be reduced to demons without reducing everyone to the same. What a perfect way of proving that Batswana were helpless heathens lost in the darkness.

For more than 150 years Batswana Bible readers consumed this colonial bomb, planted to explode their cultures away, and they could not read Greek for themselves to check if this was representative or the closest 'equivalent' term. I was deeply shaken. But that was before I discovered that the first Batswana readers had long learnt to read the Bible from their oral cultural base rather than the missionaries' perspective of heathens in the darkness. As expressed by Gaboutlwelwe and Loatile: '*You should know that when we read our Bible we change the letters with our mouths.*'⁴⁴ But how would they reinstate the demonized *badimo*?

Again, this was a separate but pleasant surprise and discovery. In the process of reading the Bible with non-academic women, who were church leaders in African Independent Churches, I found out that they read/use the Bible as a divination set. Now, divination among Batswana involves consulting *badimo* about all situations of concern for the living and finding useable solutions. It involves recognizing *badimo* as mediators between the living, the dead, and God. So, far from *badimo* functioning as demons in the service of negative power, in the Batswana ways of reading, *badimo*, together with Jesus, were divine forces of positive power. I could not have imagined this U-turn. This strategy of resistance depends on reading the Bible with and through Batswana oral cultures. It depends on using the authority of African traditions rather than giving the English Setswana Bible the final word. It is comparable to the strategy of the Tiv, taking a story that conflicted with their values and retelling it such that to them it was 'a good story again', although to Bohannan 'it no longer seemed quite the same story'. Like Bohannan, the travelling anthropologist, Bible translation and translators have long crossed many boundaries; they are already perched among elders and communities who seek to hear more stories told according to their own cultural terms, even if the story may no longer seem quite the same story to its bearers.

In the field of biblical translation we have a particularly rich archive for the study of cultural interaction. As Philip Noss writes: 'No other book has been translated over such a long period of time, portions of no other literary work have been rendered into many languages, and no other document is today the object of such intense translation activity as the Bible.'⁴⁵ By studying the first literate Batswana readers' response to the Moffat translation, we observed cultural interaction between the globalizing agents of mission and the inhabitants of the local context. To digress a little, as a biblical scholar, I think we have underutilized this major archive, since most of the time translation is not part of our biblical and religion departments, save for the exercises of those learning Greek, Hebrew, Syriac, French, German, and Spanish. It is good that there are independent schools of translation, but how did Bible translation as an area of study become so marginal from the academic studies of the Bible, given the record that Noss highlights? How did the theories of translation in the past six

⁴⁴ See note 41.

⁴⁵ Phillip A. Noss, ed., *A History of Bible Translation* (History of Bible Translation 1; Rome: Edizione di storia e letteratura, 2007), 1.

decades become propounded largely among linguists, with a marginal participation of biblical scholars? Although we may be touching here on the power, patronage, agenda, and ideology of translation houses and their structures,⁴⁶ I still cannot explain why academic departments of the Bible and religion do not have full-fledged programmes on translation. In the light of what Noss tells us, it is a major gap. In a recent article I have argued for a curriculum shift in biblical studies in favour of studying the language of the first translated Bible in one's particular region.⁴⁷ That is, instead of Two-Thirds-World biblical students being required to learn two more European languages on top of Greek and Hebrew, as is the standard requirement, they should rather learn and pass a language that was used to translate the first Bible translation in their region.

The preceding study of the battles over the translation of the Bible into Setswana illustrates how translations are embedded in wider cultural conflicts, bound up with ideologies of empire and race. The translation wars highlight that translations are informed by racialized constructions of different ethnicities. Bible translations are not neutral towards various ethnic identities, cultures, and their religions but often embody the power and interests of one group over against another. The ways in which Batswana readers resisted the imposed translation, and found ways to construct and sustain their own community readings, provides one model of how decolonizing readings might be developed. Such decolonizing community rewritings are long overdue.

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⁴⁶ Gosnell L. O. R. Yorke, 'Bible Translation in Africa: An Afrocentric Interrogation of the Task', in *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations*, ed. Musa W. Dube, Andrew M. Mbuvi, and Dora R. Mbuwayesango (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 157–69.

⁴⁷ Musa W. Dube, 'The Scramble for Africa as the Biblical Scramble for Africa: Postcolonial Perspectives', in *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations*, ed. Musa W. Dube, Andrew M. Mbuvi, and Dora R. Mbuwayesango (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 1–26, at 11–15.

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