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THE BEGINNING OF AFRICAN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION: THE BIBLE AMONG THE BATLHAPING

ABSTRACT

Prior to the translation of the Bible in Africa, Africans were already engaging with the Bible, initially as an iconic object of power and then as an aural object. In the first section of this article I attempt to detect elements of the early reception of the Bible among the BaTlhaping people. The second section of the article then analyses the theology that lies behind Bible translation, for rendering the Bible into local vernaculars is not a self-evident impulse. The translation of the Bible into local languages must be understood as an aspect of a larger theological project. Finally, the third section of the article reflects on the capacity of the Bible 'to speak for itself', arguing that once the Bible has been translated into a local language it slips, at least partially, out of the grasp of those who translated it.

1. INTRODUCTION

Biblical interpretation has a long history in southern Africa and begins well before the Bible was ever formally translated in a southern African language. More importantly for Africans, most of the earliest engagements with the Bible took place at a time when Africans were in control of their territories. Though those who first brought the Bible among Africans, whether they were traders, explorers, or missionaries, were the forerunners of colonialism, actual colonialism in southern Africa was still some time off. So, for example, when the Bible first found its way to the BaTlhaping,¹ the subject of this article, they were a well-established people fully in control of their borders and territory. This fact is often forgotten in the rush to talk about 'colonialism'. To be sure, colonialism, when it finally arrived, was a devastating reality, forever changing African societies. But, the first encounters with the Bible did not take place under colonialism; they took place under African territorial and political control. Because missionaries were often the vanguard of empire, they worked in areas where the colonial empire had not yet established itself, whether ideologically, institutionally, or militarily. African world-views, African institutions, and African armies held sway.

1 In the remainder of this article I adopt the scholarly convention of omitting the prefix, and so refer to the 'Tlhaping'.

Prior to the translation of the Bible in Sub-Saharan Africa, Africans were already engaging with the Bible, initially as an iconic object of power and then as an aural object. Those who brought the Bible among southern African peoples believed in its power as ‘the Word of God’, and though different missionaries, traders, and explorers may have understood different things by this phrase, what was clear to each of them, and to those Africans who observed them, was that it was an object of power. In the first section of this article there is an attempt to detect elements of the early reception of the Bible among the Tlhaping people, for whom and among whom the Bible would be translated into Setswana by Robert Moffat between 1830 and 1857. The second section of the article then analyses the theology that lies behind Bible translation, for rendering the Bible into local vernaculars is not a self-evident impulse. For long periods of the Bible’s existence it was only accessible in the language of the educated elite, and other sacred texts, such as the Qur’an, are not commonly translated, but remain in the original language. So the translation of the Bible into local languages must be understood as an aspect of a larger theological orientation. Finally, the third section of the article reflects on the capacity of the Bible ‘to speak for itself’, arguing that once the Bible has been translated into a local language it slips, at least partially, out of the grasp of those who translated it.

2. AN ICONIC AND AURAL OBJECT OF POWER

From the beginning, part of the attraction of whites to the Tlhaping

flowed from the mystical qualities attributed to them and their things in a hinterland where raids were endemic and where guns, beads, and tobacco had become prime valuables (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:179).

Among the “goods of strange power” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:182) associated with the arrival of whites in their land was the Bible. However, in studies on the encounter between Africans and missionaries, including studies on the specific encounter between the Nonconformist missionaries and the Southern Tswana — the focus of this article — the Bible tends to be subsumed and assumed under terms like ‘Christianity,’ ‘the message,’ ‘the Word,’ etc. (Comaroff 1985; Comaroff & Comaroff 1991, 1997; Landau 1995). Clearly, the Bible is part of the missionary-colonial package in that it is integral to most if not all forms of Christianity and colonial activity, particularly the Non-Conformist forms that were propagated among the Tlhaping. Here it will be argued that a case can be made for treating the Bible as a separable object of strange power which may have been apprehended by the Tlhaping in ways quite different from its collocations within the missionary-colonial package in which it came.

As indicated, many missionary-brought-objects in the encounter between the Tlhaping and missionaries were charged with power. Indeed, in the earliest encounters

The Tlhaping seem to have related to the Europeans as objects, touching and bearing in on them, enjoying a closeness never again permitted by the etiquette of the mission, with its deference to racial separation and the spatial discreteness of person and property (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:182).

But not all objects were charged with the same power, so part of the purpose in this article is to determine what power the Bible was perceived to possess.

Tobacco, along with beads and knives, were prized objects of exchange and trade, obtaining their power both from their intrinsic value to the Tlhaping (whether utilitarian or aesthetic) and the increasingly complex trade transactions the Tlhaping were participating in (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:183-184). Guns, like tobacco, were greatly desired by the Tlhaping, but were much more difficult to extract from missionaries and traders because of their scarcity and reluctance to arm local peoples (unless of course this suited colonial objectives). Though an object of “strange power,” the power of the gun, this “most condensed source of European power” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:201), is easily understood. Besides the obvious killing power of the gun, possessing a gun signalled some contact or alliance with missionary-colonial forces, which association was in itself a powerful protection against attack from neighbouring groups, including other indigenous peoples and white (mainly boer) settlers (Burchell 1824:376-405).

Mirrors, watches, and telescopes are more problematic with respect to determining their power. Missionaries clearly believed that these goods demonstrated the superiority of their culture and civilisation, and so they were either constantly exhibiting or consistently hiding them. While the explorer William Burchell was at pains to hide his telescope, sextant and thermometer, lest the Tlhaping desire them, the missionary John Campbell regularly flashed mirrors and watches in the faces of the Tlhaping leadership. While Burchell was worried that the power of these instruments would not be properly understood by the Tlhaping, Campbell hoped fervently that their power would transform the Tlhaping (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:185). Common to all of these items was glass, a commodity “taken to be the window into a new way of seeing and being” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:185); in the Enlightenment self-conceptions of the missionaries “seeing is believing” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:186). Telescopes and pocket compasses were indispensable instruments with which to survey, civilise, and incorporate the uncharted and chaotic African landscape and peoples, and mirrors both literally and metaphorically showed the heathen “their own likeness in all its imperfection” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:186, see

also 170-197). But quite what the Tlhaping made of these items is less clear from the missionary record. Most missionaries and travellers assumed, like former generations of slave traders, that the “child-like” Africans were drawn to shiny objects. Some, however, were more insightful, recognising that not only was utility highly valued in itself — the Tlhaping were particularly interested in candles and metal-working tools — but that utility was also more connected with beauty for Africans than it was for Europeans (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:184). What is certain is that

none of these objects was introduced into a void, and while they brought novel values into the Tswana world, they also acquired meanings different from those intended by their donors (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:184).

We catch a glimpse of the collision of two very different worlds in the use William Burchell makes of the Bible on a particular day among the Tlhaping people. Though not the first to bring a Bible among the Tlhaping², his visit may well have contributed to Tlhaping understanding of the Bible’s power. While his general use of the Bible was somewhat secretive (West 2004), there was one occasion in which he demonstrated the Bible’s power in a public and dramatic manner.

William Burchell was no missionary. He was an explorer, whose wagons rolled into Dithakong on 13 July 1812. Burchell’s ostensible purpose for being there, as he communicates it to Chief Mothibi of the Tlhaping, is quite different from the missionaries who preceded him and who would follow him. The object of his visit, he says,

was to form an acquaintance with him [Mothibi] and his people, whom I had heard so favorably spoken of at Karrikamma (Klaarwater): that so much had been said in praise of Litakun [Dithakong], that I had been very desirous of seeing his town; that I wished at the same time to hunt the wild animals, that I might be enabled to take home the skins of them to my own country; that I intended to stop with the Bachapins long enough to learn their language, so that I might be able to tell them myself many things which I wished them to know, and that we might by these means understand each other’s sentiments more clearly than they could be explained through an interpreter: and that I hoped we should thus become true friends, that I might at my return home, report of the Bachapins that they were a good people, and that on hearing this, other white-men would visit him and bring abundance of beads and tobacco (Burchell 1824:365).

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- 2 For a careful account of the earliest encounters see the detailed account of Johannes T. du Bruyn (Du Bruyn 1982, 1989). For more cursory accounts see Du Plessis (1911:110), and Beck (1997).
 - 3 These shifts of point of view within a sentence are deliberate, a reminder of the multiple levels of representation present.

Burchell (1824:365) then asked Mothibi “whether he thought that what I had said, was good; and whether he approved of my remaining a long time at Litakun”. Avoiding commenting on the substance of Burchell’s speech, Mothibi indicates, through the interpreter, that “I was at liberty to stay as long as it pleased me, or to depart whenever I chose” (Burchell 1824:366).³

As it turns out, Burchell stayed not quite a month, leaving Dithakong on 3 August 1812, hardly enough time to learn the local language and converse in an unmediated manner. But Burchell did cram an awful lot into his three weeks, and his journal is extensive and full of all sorts of observations. My interest, however, is less in his observations, instructive as they are in what they tell of the European gaze and more in trying to interpret what meanings Burchell and his goods of strange power, particularly the Bible, may have acquired in the eyes of the Tlhaping.

Burchell notes, repeatedly, that the Tlhaping are observing him. Following the “interview” with Mothibi recounted briefly above, Burchell goes on to record that

The surrounding multitude were in the highest degree attentive to all we said; the eyes of every individual were fixed upon me, and examined me with utmost curiosity (Burchell 1824:366).

Later, having been gazed at at length by a “curious good-humoured crowd,” he recognises that Mothibi and others from the Tlhaping leadership come to his wagon with “no other object than that of mere curiosity” (Burchell 1824:369).

As indicated, while Burchell (1824) tended to be quite secretive about what he did in his wagon, there was one particular day on which he was not at all secretive, and on which he used the Bible publicly. The occasion for the Bible’s appearance and its use are of substantial importance, I would argue, establishing as they do clues to the white man’s connection of ideas about the Bible.

Burchell’s public use of the Bible is sparked by his decision to discipline one of his employees. Van Roye, one of Burchell’s hired “Hottentots,” had consistently shown disrespect and open defiance to Burchell, refusing to obey legitimate orders.

It became therefore unavoidable, to take serious notice of his conduct; and I immediately ordered all my men to be present at the waggons, and declared that it was now my intention to punish his disobedience; but that I would first hear, in the presence of all, what he had to say in his defence (Burchell 1824:468).

Among those present, besides Burchell's immediate party, were "Mattivi and his chieftains, whose whole attention was fixed on us." Intently observing, Mothibi and the other Tlhaping leadership

were sitting at a little distance: not a word was spoken by anyone; nor was the least sound to be heard in the mootsi. Neither the Chief, nor any of the natives, attempted to interfere with these transactions; nor did they make the smallest remark: all were serious and still (Burchell 1824:468).

Mixing his own and local indigenous signs, and thereby forging novel connections of ideas, Burchell conducts a formal trial of Van Roye at the wagons in Mothibi's "mootsi." Having laid out his pistols and sword on the chest in his wagon — more signs for the Tlhaping to 'conjure' with (Smith 1994) — "to impress more strongly on my people the serious nature of the affair" (Burchell 1824:468), he then "produced a Dutch Testament, and as Van Roye could read tolerably well, I bade him take notice what book it was" (Burchell 1824:470). "With some formality" Burchell uses the Bible in order to administer "the usual *oath* to relate the truth." However, the prevarications of Van Roye push him to expound on the oath-taking ritual just enacted:

Seeing this, I admonished him of the dreadful crime which he would commit by uttering a falsity at the moment when he called God to witness his veracity: I explained to him in the most solemn and impressive manner, the respect which he as a Christian ought to show to that book; and that it was better he should at once condemn himself by confessing his fault in the presence of his companions, than by prevarication and wilful misrepresentation, pronounce his own condemnation in the presence of God, to whom all our actions and thoughts were known (Burchell 1824:470).

Sensing that these admonitions had "had their proper effect upon him" and that "a few words more would decide him to confess that he was blameable" (Burchell 1824:470), Burchell reiterates his use of the Bible as symbol by asking Van Roye to once again "lay his hand on the book," but this time only "after repeating to him the substance of several passages in the New Testament" (Burchell 1824:471). These acts and exhortations had the desired effect, and Van Roye confessed that his conduct had not been "influenced by the spirit of obedience which that book taught and commanded a servant to show to a master" (Burchell 1824:471).

His own men, Burchell writes in his journal, "had received a useful lesson" (Burchell 1824:471); but what lesson had Mothibi and the Tlhaping learned? Unusually, Burchell is so consumed with establishing his authority among this own men that he neglects to comment on the impact of this incident on those sitting "at a little distance," those "whose whole attention was fixed on" the proceedings. Those who sat silently watching would have seen remarkable

things. They would have seen the Bible used both as a closed object of power and as an opened object with particular things to say. As a closed object the Bible could be used by someone who controlled it to compel others to speak the truth and do their bidding; as an opened object the Bible contained knowledge that was of use in a context of contestation. The Bible, it would seem, shared certain features with the sword and the pistol. Clearly these and a whole host of connections of ideas were set in motion by Burchell's use of the Bible. The Bible was now one more idea/object with which the Tlhaping had to transact, and transact they would, for this was clearly a significant item/object of power. Furthermore, whatever the associations and collocations of these signs in the perceptions of the Tlhaping, and this analysis is suggestive rather than definitive, they would have formed the foundation of their biblical interpretation for when next they encountered the Bible.

Some years later the Tlhaping were to encounter the Bible again, this time in the hands of missionaries. John Campbell, a director of the London Missionary Society, had been commissioned and sent to the Cape in 1812 in order "to survey the progress and prospects of mission work in the interior" (Campbell 1815:178). Campbell made his way from mission post to mission post in the Colony, and when he came to Klaarwater, which was then some distance north of the boundary of the Cape Colony — though the boundary was to follow him some years later (in 1825) almost as far as Klaarwater — he heard that Chief Mothibi of the Tlhaping people, a hundred miles further to the north, had (allegedly) expressed some interest in receiving missionaries (Campbell 1815:178). With barely a pause in Klaarwater, spending no more than a week there, Campbell and his party set off for Dithakong ("Lattakoo"), then the capital of Chief Mothibi, on 15 June 1813 and arrived on 24 June.

Having waited for a number of days for Chief Mothibi of the Tlhaping to return to his city, Dithakong, Campbell and his associates had become frustrated. The Tlhaping leadership had refused to allow them to "instruct the people". So, while they waited for Mothibi's return, they proposed to visit a large village further to the north. Learning of this, Mmahutu, senior wife of Mothibi, visited their tent on 30 June and said that she "was averse" to their "going any where till Mateebe came", and that at the very least they should leave part of their wagons and party behind if they did go, being fully aware that they would be too fearful to venture forth without their full complement. Entering into a process of negotiation, and using her reluctance to have them leave as a lever, the missionaries told her that they would never have thought of leaving Dithakong "even for a day before Mateebe's return" had they "been permitted to instruct the people; but that having nothing to do," they wished to visit that village and hunt. However, being in control of their immediate situation, Mmahutu insisted they remain. Having been persuaded by Mmahutu, the missionaries then "endeavoured to convey some information" to her (Campbell 1815:199).

What follows is a remarkable exchange, capturing as it does the Bible as iconic object of power and aural text of power. Campbell (1815:199) records this encounter with the Bible as follows:

We explained to her the nature of a letter, by means of which a person could convey his thoughts to a friend at a distance. Mr. A. Kok showed her one he had received from his wife, by which he knew every thing that had happened at Klaar Water for two days after he left it. This information highly entertained her, especially when told that A. Kok, who brought it, knew nothing of what it contained, which we explained by telling her the use of sealing wax. The bible being on the table gave occasion to explain the nature and use of a book, particularly of that book — how it informed us of God, who made all things; and of the beginning of all things, which seemed to astonish her, and many a look was directed towards the bible.

Here the missionaries draw Mmahutu's attention to the power of the letter in at least two respects. First, an object like this can represent "everything" that happened in a place in a person's absence. Second, an object like this can be made to hide its message from the bearer and reveal its contents only to the intended receiver. Turning from the letter, to a quite different genre of text (from the perspective of the missionaries), the Bible, but here conflated with the letter (from the perspective of Mmahutu), the missionaries use the interest generated in their exposition of the letter to return to their preoccupation with the contents of the Bible, particularly the matter of origins:

The Bible being on the table gave occasion to explain the nature and use of a book, particularly of that book — how it informed us of God, who made all things; and of the beginning of all things, which seemed to astonish her, and many a look was directed towards the Bible (Campbell 1815:199).

In a letter written to a friend, Mr David Langton, some days later (27 July), Campbell explains more fully what took place during this encounter in their tent. Following Mmahutu's "astonished" look at the Bible, "Mr Read's eye caught a verse very suitable to our situation in the page that was lying open, viz. Math. 4:16" (J. Campbell, Klaarwater, 27 July 1813 [CWM. Africa. South Africa. Incoming correspondence. Box 5-2-D]). What Mmahutu would have heard is this: "The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up". To which she responded by asking, "'Will people who are dead, rise up again?' 'Is God under the earth, or where is he?'" (Campbell 1815:199). Her question is not self-evident from the context provided by Campbell's letter or journal entry, indicating that her questions had their own internal 'African' logic. Her questions do not seem to deal directly with the passage read. The passage clearly makes sense to the missionaries, being made to bear the full weight of English missionary images of Africa (see Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:86-125).

However, such allusions are probably absent from Mmahutu's hearing of this sentence from the Bible. Whatever she hears, and it may be the word "death", prompts her to bring her own questions to the text/missionaries. Perhaps prior missionary talk of the resurrection had disturbed her, for there is evidence that missionary talk of people rising from the dead worried southern African clans who feared that their slain enemies might arise (Moffat 1842:403-405; Comaroff & Comaroff 1997:342). Whatever the logic of her questions, what is clear is that Mmahutu brings her own questions to the Bible.

Already we see emerging evidence from this very early encounter of recognition that the Bible is both an iconic object of power and an aural text which communicates. What is also clear is that the Bible is both power and knowledge for those who control it. Further, we see signs that it is beginning to be prised from the hands of the missionaries by indigenous questions. Finally, there is even a suggestion that the bearer of the Bible, like the bearer of the letter, might not fully know the power and knowledge it contains. Perhaps the missionaries are not fully in control of this object of strange power — the Bible — they carry; perhaps others — the Tlhaping — might access its mysterious power?

The instructions in the missionaries' tent are not over, however. For having "answered her [Mmahutu's] questions", though we are given no hint of how her questions were answered, and having heard and accepted her concerns that they not leave the city until Mothibi's return, the missionaries show her (and her companions) a watch, "which both astonished and terrified them." Commenting on this reaction to the watch, Campbell says:

On observing the work in motion, they concluded that it must be alive, and on offering to put it to their ears, to hear it sound, they held up their hands to drive it away as if it had been a serpent (Campbell 1815:200).

Their interpreter also comments on this encounter with the watch, in the vernacular, saying "something to them which made them laugh immoderately." But what he actually said was probably hidden from the hearing of the missionaries and so from us, for when translated, the missionaries "found he had said, that before he went to Klaar water [*sic*], he was as ignorant as they were, but there he had been taught many good things, which they also would be taught if Mateebe permitted missionaries to settle among them". How this could have caused Mmahutu and her companions to "laugh immoderately" is difficult to imagine! But the missionaries did not bother to probe any further, for they had heard what they wanted to hear.

The multiple layers of language and translation clearly offered fertile ground not only for accidental misunderstandings but calculated misunderstandings, as the theoretical work of the Comaroffs (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:13-39) and James Scott (1990) on hegemony, ideology, and resistance amply demonstrate.

Language in these early encounters was an obvious site for “infrapolitical” exchanges, “a politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view, but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity [and/or ideology] of the actors” (Scott 1990:19). Misunderstanding and misconceptions, as elementary forms of infrapolitics, are integral to the “long conversation”, “a dialogue at once poetic and pragmatic” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:171) that took place between the Tlhaping and their missionary visitors. In the words of Burchell, such encounters were characterised by “each party using his own language and comprehending very little of what was said by the other; and talking probably on subjects widely different” (Burchell 1824:433).

Exactly what Mmahutu made of the Bible and the watch, juxtaposed as they were in Campbell’s tent, we will never know. The logic by which the missionaries would link the Bible and the watch, namely as signs of the superiority of western knowledge, may not have been the logic of Mmahutu’s apprehension of these signs. But what is clear is that the Tlhaping took careful notice of both Burchell’s and Campbell’s uses of the Bible.

3. TRANSLATED TEXT

While the Bible would remain an iconic object of power for the Tlhaping, the translation of the Bible into their own language and their own ability to read the Bible would substantially accelerate their ownership and control of the Bible.

This does not imply, however, that the Tlhaping were not in control of their early encounters with the Bible. They were very much in control. The incidents which Burchell and Campbell recount occurred in a time and place under Tlhaping control. The Bible arrives among the Tlhaping at a moment when they are in control – if not fully, then at least substantially. Although represented by the texts of European others, the context was controlled by the Tlhaping. Of this the journals of Burchell and Campbell are absolutely clear!

In the long history of Mmahutu and her people, the Bible is just one more feature of their changing context that they have to deal with. ‘Colonialism’ is still some way off. It will be many years before the pressures of colonial expansion will force Mothibi to move his settlement towards the missionary location on the banks of the Kuruman river (to which he had banished them). Even then, Mothibi takes the initiative to align his people with the missionaries for his own purposes. During all this time the Tlhaping will dictate how they will transact with the Bible.

But the translation of the Bible does make a significant difference. During the visit of Campbell in 1813 it was already clear that translation of the Bible was a central concern (Campbell 1815:192). Robert Moffat’s arrival in 1821 gave substance to Campbell’s promise to Mothibi that the Bible would be translated

into their language (Campbell 1815:208-209). A London Missionary Society visitor to Kuruman in 1849 comments in a letter that “Mr. Moffat’s time seems mainly occupied in translation of the scriptures” (cited in Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:214).

Moffat’s dedication to the translation of the Bible into Setswana was predicated on two related convictions. First, in the words of Rev. Hughes, cited by Moffat, that “the simple reading and study of the Bible alone will convert the world”, for which it was required of the missionary “to gain for it [the Bible] admission and attention, and then let it speak for itself” (Moffat 1842:618). Second, in the words of Moffat himself, that this one language, Setswana, “with slight variations, is spoken as far as the Equator” (Moffat 1842:618). So that once the Bible was translated and once the Tlhaping were taught to read, they and then the chain of “scattered towns and hamlets” towards the interior would have

in their hands the means not only of recovering them from their natural darkness, but of keeping the lamp of life burning even amidst comparatively desert gloom (Moffat 1842:618).

Three things are clear from Moffat’s commitment to the translation project at Kuruman. First, there was the basic assumption that translation could indeed take place. So, for example, in the case of the Tlhaping most of the earliest ‘conversations’ took place through the mediation of Griquas, operating between English, Dutch, and Setswana, and with a less than fluent grasp of any. In addition to the constraints of the actual languages themselves, there was also the constant presence of cultural ‘noise’. None of the actors in these early encounters were neutral; all had something to gain from the encounter (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:216). Yet despite these very real limitations, Moffat ‘believed’ that communication of the most vital and sacred matters could take place. Second, because of these constraints in conversation, Moffat was committed to learn Setswana for himself. And while many missionaries held naive views about the ‘simplicity’ of African languages, Moffat was aware of just how difficult it was to learn the language proficiently (Schapera 1951), but he was determined to do so. An additional factor in Moffat’s pursuit of proficiency was his conviction that “[a] missionary who commences giving direct instruction to the natives, though far from being competent in the language, is proceeding on 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”. He goes on to say that “Trusting in an ignorant and unqualified interpreter, is attended with consequences ... dangerous to the very objects which lie nearest the missionary’s heart” (Moffat 1842:293-294). Third, though Moffat was disparaging about the linguistic and theological competence of the Tlhaping themselves, he did not question “the potential of

their language to bear the meanings that civilization [and particularly the Gospel] might demand of it" (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:217).

While Moffat, like most of the missionaries, was a product of the prejudices of his people, his translation project did allow Africans to engage with the Bible on their own terms. The Bible would "speak for itself", but like the letter Campbell showed to Mmahutu, the Bible would not always speak as the ones who carried it anticipated.

4. SPEAKING FOR ITSELF

Moffat himself had minimal theological education (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991: 82-83; De Gruchy 1999), and like many of the Nonconformists readily assumed that the Bible had a self-evident message. However, once translated into the African vernacular the Bible has shown a quite remarkable capacity to find its own voice, even when translated by missionaries like Moffat who had very deliberate ideological agendas and imprecise mastery of the language they were translating into. Not only does the Bible not have only one message, as modern biblical scholars know only too well, the very act of translating the Bible in the colonial encounter produced "a hybrid creation born of the colonial encounter itself" (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:218).

Because, argues Lamin Sanneh, "language is the intimate, articulate expression of culture," the missionary adoption of the vernacular

was tantamount to adopting indigenous cultural criteria for the message, a piece of radical indigenization far greater than the standard portrayal of mission as Western cultural imperialism (Sanneh 1989:3).

In a detailed and wide-ranging argument, which roots itself in a theological exegesis of the Pauline mission to the Gentiles, Sanneh sees "translation as a fundamental concession to the vernacular, and an inevitable weakening of the forces of uniformity and centralization". "Furthermore", says Sanneh,

I see translation as introducing a dynamic and pluralist factor into questions of the essence of the religion. Thus if we ask the question about the essence of Christianity, whatever the final answer, we would be forced to reckon with what the fresh medium reveals to us in feedback. It may thus happen that our own earlier understanding of the message will be challenged and even overturned by the force of the new experience. Translation would consequently help to bring us to new ways of viewing the world, commencing a process of revitalization that reaches into both the personal and cultural spheres" (Sanneh 1989:53).

In short, and this is very short given Sanneh's detailed and careful arguments, the inherent translatability of the Bible — in both a narrow technical sense and in a more profound theological sense — provides the potential for the revitalisation of both the biblical message and receptor culture. From the beginning of the Tlhaping encounter with the Bible there was something about the Bible that drew their attention. First, it was the Bible as an iconic object of indeterminate power; second, it was an aural word that resonated with their world, at least partially; and third, once translated and read by themselves, it was a source of cultural revitalisation and a message which went well beyond the imaginations of those who brought it among them. In the words of the Ghanaian scholar Kwame Bediako, translation enabled the Bible to become “an independent yardstick by which to test, and sometimes to reject, what Western missionaries taught and practised” and in so doing “provided the basis for developing new, indigenous forms of Christianity” (Bediako 1994:246).

Bediako's analysis identifies the key role of African agency in the translation process. Missionaries were entirely dependent on Africans for the translation process, though the African presence was not usually acknowledged in the official missionary record (but see Mojola 2000a, 2000b). In picking up on the important role of Africans in the translation process — in both of the senses employed by Sanneh — Bediako reminds us again how important the formative periods of engagement with the Bible were in Africa.

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