

## Lecture 21 - The Bible in African Hands

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So far we have dealt with two technologies that were introduced to Africa from outside. In the case of horses, the smaller ones were original to West Africa, but the bigger ones were shown by Fisher to have come from the Levant. In the case of guns, we saw them coming into South-Central Africa (the upper Zambezi area of Zambia) from Angola, thanks to the Portuguese-African trade that began in the 1500s and continued well into the 20th century, fuelled, of course, by the trade in Africans as slaves.

Now, today's lecture/discussion tries to connect horse and gun to a larger discussion of how African leaders (whom we discussed under "indirect rule") and their communities both solicited, deployed, managed, and defined things from means and ways of executing certain self-contrived objectives. Bibles and priests and next lecture books and writings fall nicely into that exposé. I wish to state clearly where the initiative of "technology transfer" –such a bad word! –lay, if such is to be the term to describe it: with Africans themselves, as designers of their own, self-contrived destiny.

Thus Botswana in the lives and times of Bangwato chief Khama and Bakwena chief Sechele might be read as a site where Africans were engaged in defining outsiders and things from outside according to their own strategic interests. What interests were these and how were they met through the bible and its European bringers to Botswana?

**Our source:** J. Mutero Chirenje, "Church, State, and Education in Bechuanaland in the Nineteenth Century," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 9, 3 (1978), 401-418

## European Missionaries among Batswana: An Outline

The earliest missionaries the LMS sent to Batswana in the early were more interested in ivory than in evangelism. By Batswana, I mean different peoples speaking the same language, Setswana –Bathlaping (the fish people), Bakgatla, Bangwato, Bakwena, Bahurutshe, Batawana, and so on. One Setswana speaker is called Motswana; more than one is Batswana. The place that Batswana live is called Botswana.

**1840s:** LMS expansion into northern Tswana chiefdoms

**1841:** Livingstone arrives at Kuruman

**1844:** he opens Mabotsa mission in Kgatla territory with a subsequent station at Chonwane (the Knewa capital)

**1851:** Livingstone leaves to start his expeditions to the Zambezi and Central Africa

No white missionaries replaced him, but from 1857 the German missionaries arrived at the invitation of the Batswana chiefs playing the British off against the Germans and Afrikaners. Hurt by this, the British expanded more rapidly, as most of the British missionaries in Bechuanaland, especially Robert Moffat and John Mackenzie, were strongly committed to extending the British empire.

## Why Did Batswana Leaders Invite Missionaries?

### Technological Reasons

In 1816, Read observes that "the chief is the center of everything done in the [Tswana] tribes. He is the one who can pray to God". Missionaries had the ability to offer Mothibi foreign goods, handkerchiefs, beads, and tobacco, and sent Mothibi and gun. The chief "either breakfasts, dines or sups with me almost everyday" and was fond of bread. He thought of introducing wheat farming as a bait to lure people to the gospel. A special feature of the missionaries' presence among Batswana was that in all but one case, Mothibi's, it

came about at the invitation of the Tswana rulers. And each time the chiefs were impelled less by religious motives than by military and economic considerations. Missionaries were known to procure and repair guns, weapons which had assumed an important role in hunting and warfare. Some chiefs hoped to learn how to manufacture weapons themselves, and other show to “make rain” by using the white man’s method of building dams, an important skill in a semi-arid environment. Little wonder that early missionary reports depict the Tswana as more impressed by the white man’s technology than by his Christian doctrine.

In 1817, Hamilton sinks a well to drive this point home. Mothibi did eventually receive the gun he had been promised. Tswana rulers took considerable pains to provide their new guests with food, shelter, and some amenities. In return they expected to use them as middlemen in acquiring guns and only marginally as teachers. Mission schools taught reading, writing, and arithmetic, with classes conducted in crude buildings constructed by workmen provided by the chief. In more desperate cases wagons, trees, and the chief’s court improvised as classrooms. Pupils used stone walls, planks, and parts of broken boxes to write on. Wives of missionaries conducted sewing lessons in their homes.

### Political Reasons

Livingstone had baptized Sechele in 1848 despite great opposition from Sechele’s subjects, who maintained that baptism would compromise his position and all that it stood for. But Sechele had made up his mind to align his chieftdom with the British, and he was willing to sacrifice some of the metaphysical attributes of his office in return for protection against the aggressive Afrikaners. Sechele had strategic as well as diplomatic problems; chief among them was the incessant menace of the Afrikaners, who poached on Kwena territory and occasionally skirmished with Kwena soldiers. In a shrewd diplomatic move, Sechele sought to neutralize his antagonists by involving them in the religious life of his chieftdom. He asked the president of the South African republic, Andries Pretorius, to provide him with missionaries. Pretorius was flattered; moreover, he saw the request as a perfect means to expand Afrikaner influence and territory in Central Africa. He persuaded the Hermannsburg Society, which had been working in Natal since 1854, to accept Sechele’s invitation, and in 1857 the society sent Schroeder to the Kwena chieftdom; not to be outdone, Chief Sekgoma of the Bamangwato sent a similar plea.

The arrival of German Lutherans incensed British missionaries, and in 1857 Robert Moffat asked Sechele if the Germans were evangelizing in his country and the chief pleaded ignorance. But a few years later, Sechele concluded that an alliance with the British was more useful than one with the Afrikaners in preserving a measure of his sovereignty, and he mounted a campaign to expel the Hermannsburgers and to restore the LMS. Sechele and his brother Kosidintsi wrote to the LMS directors in London: “we do not desire the teaching of the Germans and will receive the teaching of the English alone.” The LMS dithered, and Sechele persisted in his requests for an English *moruti*.

### Why Were African Leaders Wary of European Missionaries?

Yet despite these technological feats, the Tswana remained indifferent to Christianity. In 1822 Hamilton reported, “I would be very glad if I could inform you that God’s work is going forward in this place, but I must write nothing but the truth. So far as I know, no one of these heathens are seeking after God.” Below the outward show of friendship lay an iceberg of resentment. Mothibi was afraid Christians might undermine his authority. Many kept from coming to hear the gospel, and children were kept from school. He was afraid that sooner or later the missionaries would usurp political power; this is what the church did, seeing strong state power as an obstacle to evangelism.

At Shoshong, the rift between the traditionalist Chief Sekgoma and his Christian sons, Kgama and Kgamane, culminated in the civil war of 1866, one of the most tragic encounters between Christianity and traditional religion in Tswana history. Although the balehuku party lost to Sekgoma, LMS agents subsequently supported Kgama in a plot to depose the Ngwato chief, Macheng, which was successfully carried out in 1872.

## The Bible in African Hands

### Sechele, Bakwena, and the Bible

African rulers combined their secular duties with preaching. Moreover, he described himself as specially suited to teach because he knew the scriptures well. Sechele in particular mastered the alphabet in just one day and became an eager student of the scriptures, who then went on to interpret them, rather masterfully, in like of the experience of his own Bakwena people. He read the Bible exhaustively, and raised some rather uncomfortable questions for the missionaries. For example, in 1854, Robert Moffat could not readily answer Sechele's challenge that he explain to the Kwena "why the missionaries had made him discard all but one of his wives, while Solomon and David had so many wives and concubines, and were still 'men after God's own heart.'" Sechele grew so dissatisfied with the educational opportunities in Bechuanaland that he proposed to study theology in England, a scheme he shelved owing to his shortage of funds. Several pupils were repelled by the doctrinal assumptions in the Congregational and Lutheran creeds as well as by inept teaching. Several catechists complained to the missionaries that they closed their eyes and tried to talk to Jesus without success.

Several traditionalists maintained that the Tswana needed no such instruction since they had evolved their own methods for communicating with God. A Kwena rainmaker rejected Livingstone's homily that Christ alone could provide rain. "But God has told us that there is only one way by which we can pray to him acceptably: viz., by Jesus Christ," Livingstone said.

And the rainmaker said: "Truly. And he has told us differently. God has been very good to both white and black. To the white he has given the knowledge of guns, gunpowder, horses, and many other things which we know nothing about. He has given you wisdom too. We see it. To us blacks he has not been so liberal, but he has given us the knowledge of rain-making; you have it not. Now we don't despise those things God has given you, though we are ignorant of them. Nor should you despise what he has given us, though you don't know or understand them."

In 1897, fifty years after his first encounter with Christianity, Sechele's elder Kosidintsi still refused to get converted, "No, Monare [sir], I can not allow it – I shall die as I have lived, and God who knows my reasons will judge me righteously." And the priest, the Reverend Williams, was impressed: "Nothing could move him, and we came away admiring the old man for his consistent attitude." And of Sechele, the departing Reverend Price could only say, with resigned admiration: "I shall feel in parting from him that I am parting from one who has on the whole treated me with much kindness and generosity."

### Kgama and the Bible

As we saw, Kgama's ascension to the Ngwato throne owed to a clash between *balehuku* (children of the book) and *balechulo* (traditionalists). Kgama assumed the office with messianic pretensions bound to impinge on the white missionaries' clerical role. For example, in 1890 Kgama warned a missionary not to meddle in Ngwato politics, saying: "Now I am chief of the country. You are a teacher. I cannot allow any teacher to act and speak as if he was a chief of my town – The Lord Jesus Christ who made you a teacher has made me a chief, and He knows how I try and have always tried to rule my people for their good."

There were serious conflicts between Kgama and Reverend James D. Hepburn in 1891, which revolved around whether the chief or the missionary should have ultimate control where secular and Christian prerogatives overlapped. Hepburn asserted that he was the spiritual leader of the Ngwato church, while Kgama maintained that as a Christian head of state – he was baptised into the Lutheran church by German missionaries in 1860 – he was responsible for constructing new school buildings, as he was for any public work. But Hepburn refused to yield, and according to some Ngwato informants even fomented sedition. For example, when his communicants asked him, "Should the chief call out our regiment as usual, are we to obey the chief to go and do whatever he asks?", Hepburn is reported to have replied, "No – you must not obey the chief; you are the servants of Christ, and you must obey Christ alone." Kgama saw himself as Christ's

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representative at Shoshong. Yet Kgama, whom whites had lavished with praise for his Christian leadership, felt he had sufficient credentials to lead the church, and in consequence transferred all LMS church meetings to his court. To Hepburn, this move was the height of interference in church affairs, and his temperamental character could not bear it. he left abruptly for Cape Town for good in December 1891.

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