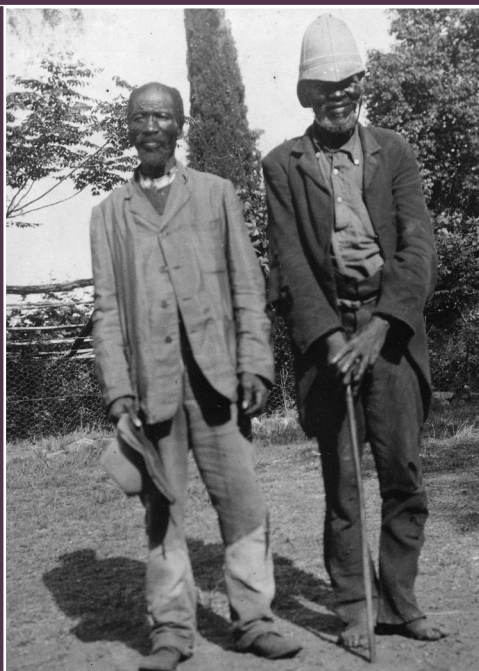


# AFRICAN TEACHERS ON THE COLONIAL FRONTIER



*Tswana Evangelists and Their Communities  
During the Nineteenth Century*

STEPHEN C. VOLZ

*African Teachers on the Colonial Frontier* is an exploration of the profound social and personal changes that accompanied the expansion of European influence in the interior of southern Africa during the nineteenth century, focusing on the role played by Tswana Christian evangelists. Drawing on a wide range of sources and locating African converts rather than European missionaries at the center of the story, this book provides new insights into the development of African-European relations and the impact of colonization. Although Christian missions played an important role in European expansion, this book reveals that during much of the nineteenth century, Europeans had little control over the various ways that Africans interpreted, assimilated, and propagated Christianity, and how Christianity acquired meanings contrary to its presumed role as a vehicle for European imperialism. Africans associated Christianity with Europeans, but the implications of that association changed as relations between Africans and Europeans changed. More influential was the association of Christianity with certain individuals or families and their employment of Christianity as an element of politico-religious authority. Africans transformed Christianity as they were themselves transformed by it, and their efforts were usually motivated by very personal or local concerns, often despite—rather than because of—Christianity's association with foreigners.

Given its broad chronological scope and accessible prose, this book will be useful to undergraduate students studying the history of Africa, religion, or colonialism. The book's detailed references to specific people and places in southern Africa also make it of interest to students and other readers residing in that region with an interest in the history of their churches or particular communities.

**Stephen C. Volz** received a Ph.D. in history from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and he is Associate Professor in the Department of History at Kenyon College. Among his other publications is *Words of Batswana: Letters to Mahoko a Becwana, 1883–1896* (2006), edited and translated in partnership with Part T. Mgadla.

# African Teachers on the Colonial Frontier



Knut Holter  
*General Editor*

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PETER LANG  
New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern  
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Stephen C. Volz

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*To My Father Carl and my Grandfathers Clarence and Oswald*



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

## INSTITUTION ACRONYMS

BDC	Bechuana District Committee (of either the LMS or WMS)
BFBS	British and Foreign Bible Society
BMS	Berlin Missionary Society (German Lutheran)
COE	Church of England (Anglican Church)
CUSA	Congregational Union of South Africa (successor to the EVU)
DRC	Dutch Reformed Church
EVU	Evangelical Voluntary Union (Congregational, in Cape Colony)
HMS	Hermannsburg Missionary Society (German Lutheran)
LMS	London Missionary Society (Congregational)
OFS	Orange Free State
PMS	Paris Evangelical Missionary Society (French Protestant)
SAR	South African Republic
SPG	Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (Anglican missions)
WMS	Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society

## PERIODICAL ABBREVIATIONS

<i>JAH</i>	<i>Journal of African History</i>
<i>SAHJ</i>	<i>South African Historical Journal</i>
<i>HMB</i>	<i>Hermannsburger Missionsblatt</i>
<i>JME</i>	<i>Journal des Missions Evangeliques</i>

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Witwatersrand (9), ELM Archives in Hermannsburg (10), and the London Missionary Society Archives of the Council for World Mission at SOAS in London (11). The cover photograph was provided by the Africana Research Library in Kimberley, and the somewhat out-of-focus two men are identified simply as “elders in Moffat’s church,” illustrating the relative lack of attention devoted to Tswana evangelists in the archival record. The maps were produced with the gracious assistance of Pamela Faust at Kenyon College. Finally, I would like to thank Peter Lang Publishers for making this book a reality.

## ❧ CHAPTER ONE ❧

# Peculiar Strangeness

## African Evangelists and European Colonization

Now I have no hesitation in saying one or two pious devoted native agents are equal if not superior to Europeans in the beginning of the work. The natives look so much upon the Gospel as just ways and customs of white men that little progress is made, but from their fellow natives the truth comes directly in contact with their minds very much diverted of that peculiar strangeness which attaches to foreigners in every country, and they become teachers at a considerable disadvantage to themselves.

— David Livingstone, 1841

Cruising along the smooth tarmac highway between Gaborone and Kanye in Botswana, if one is not driving too quickly, one can catch a glimpse of the history of Christianity in Africa. Next to the Kolobeng stream as it emerges from a low range of hills into a grassy marsh, hidden behind a thick stand of thorn bushes, can be found the vacant stone foundation of David Livingstone's house. It was the last residence in southern Africa of the Victorian hero who, after ten years of labor and only one baptized convert among the Tswana people, eagerly embarked on his more illustrious career as an explorer, abolitionist and advocate for the spread of "Christianity, commerce and civilization" in central Africa. Although the site has been signposted as a potential tourist attraction, it receives few visitors, and the ruins of other less famous missions in the area are even more neglected and ignored, frequented only by baboons and stray cattle.

Yet Christianity did not fade with the departure of Livingstone and other early European missionaries. It was eventually adopted by many Africans and acquired great influence in their lives and communities. Whether as members of European-founded denominations or African-initiated churches, millions of people in sub-Saharan Africa today are Christian, and the lifeless remains of the abandoned missions provide little indication of how such a legacy was achieved. The primary agents of that growth were not the silent stones of the mission buildings, nor even European missionaries, but Africans who embraced the teachings of Christianity and were best able to explain and demonstrate them to fellow Africans. As argued by the Tswana evangelist Gabriel David in the late 1880s, calling for the ordination of more African ministers, "They know their customs, manners, usages, and lives,

they know their own parables, and proverbs, and their knowledge of God before any missionary appeared to their fathers.”<sup>1</sup> Missionaries introduced Christianity in European form, but it was only on a foundation of African beliefs and personnel that a Christian congregation could be built or sustained.

Given the greater durability of European structures and written texts over the eroded homes and memories of Africans, it is reasonable to focus on the overwhelming impact of European colonization and conclude that the spread of Christianity in Africa went hand-in-hand with the expansion of European rule. Europeans were generally reluctant to cede control of Christianity to Africans, and as the arrival of colonial rule lent them support, missionaries — as well as many Africans and later scholars — came to regard Christianity as inextricably linked with European domination. Such an emphasis on European objectives, however, tends to overlook the more ambiguous situations that prevailed in times and places beyond European control or description. As acknowledged by David Livingstone and other early missionaries in the interior of Africa, the introduction of Christianity relied on a cultivation of mutual trust and cooperation, and Christianity’s “peculiar strangeness” could only be mitigated by the intelligence of curious Africans trying to make sense of its beliefs and practices. The oddity of Livingstone’s rectangular house would ultimately be of less consequence than the relationships that he formed with Africans and that African Christians formed with other Africans.

This study investigates the importance of those early “devoted native agents” by recovering details of their lives within a particular region of Africa and examining various roles that they played in the decades before and during the early stages of European colonization. In doing so, the focus is less on the well-recognized connections that Christianity and African converts had with Europeans and more on the positions that they assumed within African communities. The geographic scope of this study encompasses much of the interior of southern Africa, in areas that were inhabited by Tswana and related peoples, and the chronological scope is most of the nineteenth century, tracing the gradual but profound changes that occurred among Tswana communities between the arrival of the first Europeans in the interior and the eventual formal establishment of European government over the region. As will be shown, until European conquest was completed at the end of the century, Africans remained largely in control of their lives and were able to manage the terms of their engagement with Europeans. How Africans domesticated the “peculiar strangeness” of Christianity and appropriated it for their own needs lies at the heart of that story.

### **Historical Significance of African Evangelists**

In this study of African evangelists, the basic goal is to produce a more detailed and locally-grounded account of the role that Christianity played in the lives of Africans during the nineteenth century. Although scholars have acknowledged the part played by Africans in the spread of Christianity, they have often ignored the specific concerns expressed by converts and have focused instead on broader cultural and political forces. While some scholars have emphasized connections between the spread of Christianity and the spread of European influence, portraying Christianity largely as an alien import imposed upon Africans by Europeans, others have described the adoption of Christianity by Africans as a tool in their struggle against imperialism, paying particular attention to the independent churches that formed separately from mission churches in the twentieth century and which now account for the majority of Christians in Africa.<sup>2</sup> In either case, Christianity has been depicted primarily as an arena of conflict and accommodation between African and European, with events in the nineteenth century regarded merely as precursors to inevitable colonization.

In privileging an epic “clash of civilizations,” there is a tendency to overlook the multifaceted and variable nature of historical encounters between small groups of Africans and Europeans. Many scholars have recognized the inadequacy of a single-minded emphasis on European imperialism and have called for more research on aspects of African Christianity that deviated from European expectations.<sup>3</sup> Recent studies suggest that African appropriation of Christianity during the colonial era was usually motivated by local and personal concerns that only partially coincided with those of one presumed side or the other.<sup>4</sup> This view is most prominent among religious scholars, but it has also received serious consideration by other scholars attempting to understand the varied experiences of Africans.<sup>5</sup> Rather than define their lives primarily in terms of their relations with Europeans, Africans were usually more concerned with affairs within their own families and communities over which they felt some measure of control and responsibility.

Affiliated with European institutions while retaining African identities, African Christians personified the complex reality of African-European relations, and their lives testified to the possibilities and limitations of African efforts to benefit from their encounter with Europeans. This African agency was particularly evident prior to the European “scramble” at the end of the nineteenth century, as many African communities, though increasingly stressed, remained largely intact and expected to continue to adapt to changing circumstances. Africans who adopted the beliefs and practices of Christianity as their own and shared them with others during the nineteenth

century cannot be understood simply as either unwitting accomplices of imperialism or, on the other hand, as proto-nationalist intellectuals, but rather their lives spanned a wide range of motives and circumstances.

While African evangelists may have been most noteworthy to missionaries for their Christianity, or to later scholars for their ostensible roles in colonialism, they and their communities likely regarded other aspects of their lives as more significant. In addition to working as a teacher, preacher or scribe, each evangelist was also often a healer, advisor, member of a prominent family or a successful farmer, herder, hunter or trader. African evangelists thus served different roles for different people, acting as intermediaries between multiple communities and influencing how each viewed the other. As they earned the trust of missionaries and sought to make the most of that relationship, African evangelists were enlisted to explain African culture to Europeans and European culture to Africans, translating each into terms that the other might understand. As teachers for both Europeans and Africans, they bridged the frontier between the two cultures while ultimately remaining residents of and belonging to Africa.

An investigation of nineteenth-century African evangelists thus raises a number of fundamental questions about the nature of cultural interaction and change. If Africans can adopt certain elements of European culture as their own, making them familiar, what constitutes “peculiar strangeness” in a given set of beliefs and practices, and how might one determine where one culture ends and another begins? Is the interplay of different ideas and behaviors best defined in reference to two opposing cultures as conversion, syncretism and recidivism, or is the new way of life instead a unified, coherent system of its own? As Africans heard about Christianity from other Africans, what would it mean, as put by Livingstone, for it to come “directly in contact with their minds,” as if Christianity could transcend the corporal and temporal limits of a culture? And who or what was in control of the process? Is the spread of Christianity in Africa more accurately characterized as Christianization of Africans or as Africanization of Christianity?

Many books have already been written on these questions, attempting to reconcile the change and continuity that can be found in Christianity’s various manifestations throughout history and to disentangle the threads of myriad cultural influences. From the Celtic holy men of Iona to the populist preachers of the Great Awakening, scholars have identified a recurring pattern of inculturation whereby the basic tenets of Christianity acquire new meanings and expressions in each particular time and place. For Africa, recent scholarship, such as Gerrie Ter Haar’s *How God Became African* (2009), has tended to focus on the rapid growth of African churches during

the past twenty years, but Africa's relationship with Christianity clearly has a much longer history. Foreign missionaries were often important players in that relationship, but the development of African churches over the centuries, whether in Egypt, Ethiopia and Kongo or later under European colonial rule, has demonstrated the ancient and enduring capacity of Africans to make God their own.

One of the earliest studies of colonial-era African religiosity is *Yoruba Heathenism* (1899) by the Nigerian Anglican priest James Johnson, in which he describes the compatibility of some Yoruba beliefs and practices with Christianity, drawing parallels with the persistence of Germanic customs in European Christianity. This view has been echoed more recently by scholars such as Lamin Sanneh in *Translating the Message* (1996), which compares the development of African Christianity to the Hellenization of Christianity that occurred during its initial expansion in the eastern Mediterranean. This general process of inculturation is well-recognized by scholars, but there remains a compulsion to identify either Christianity or its host culture as the dominant actor, while the perspectives of converts at the center of events have continued to perplex and elude categorization.

Study of leading African Christians who became preachers and teachers during the nineteenth century promises to contribute much to our understanding of African history, the impact of colonization and the spread of Christianity. This has already been demonstrated by a few valuable works on colonial African evangelists. In M. Louise Pirouet's *Black Evangelists* (1978), she examines how Christianity, after being adopted by rulers of Buganda in the interior of East Africa, was brought beyond the kingdom's capital to other areas by Africans rather than by Europeans. This expansion took place during the establishment of British indirect rule, but it was shaped by a number of different factors, including not only the association of Christianity with the allied power of Buganda and the British Empire but also the abilities and personalities of individual evangelists and the specific political and cultural contexts of the communities where they preached. In West Africa, scholars have focused mostly on the careers of former captives who, after being liberated by the British and educated in Sierra Leone, returned to their Yoruba homeland as missionaries, intellectuals and, ultimately, progenitors of Nigerian nationalism.<sup>6</sup> Among the most recent and influential of these studies has been John Peel's *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (2000). Drawing on journals written by the evangelists themselves, Peel constructs a detailed and convincing account of how Africans translated Christianity into Yoruba terms while at the same time producing a Christian-inflected Yoruba identity. Studies such as these have been rather exceptional,

however, as the preponderance of attention has remained on European-African confrontations and the role of European missionaries in colonization.

In southern Africa, early African evangelists have largely still escaped the notice of scholars, but there is a growing interest in looking beyond the racial, political and cultural divisions of the apartheid years. Most studies thus far have been concerned with the independent church movements of the early twentieth century, pioneered by Bengt Sundkler's *Bantu Prophets* (1948), while occasional examinations of mission-affiliated Africans have tended to be brief laudatory biographies chronicling the growth of particular church denominations. Since the end of apartheid in 1990, there has been a tremendous expansion of scholarly interest in the history of South African Christianity, recognizing the important roles that its beliefs and institutions played not just as instruments of either oppression or resistance but also more generally as fundamental, ongoing elements of South African society. One recent major work along these lines is Elizabeth Elbourne's *Blood Ground* (2002), a detailed history of Christian missions and Khoisan-European relations in the eastern Cape during the early nineteenth century. Elbourne provides a valuable examination of local complexity, competing personalities, historical change and African agency, yet much study remains to be done on the lives of African preachers and teachers during the nineteenth century, particularly of those who lived on the edges of colonial society.

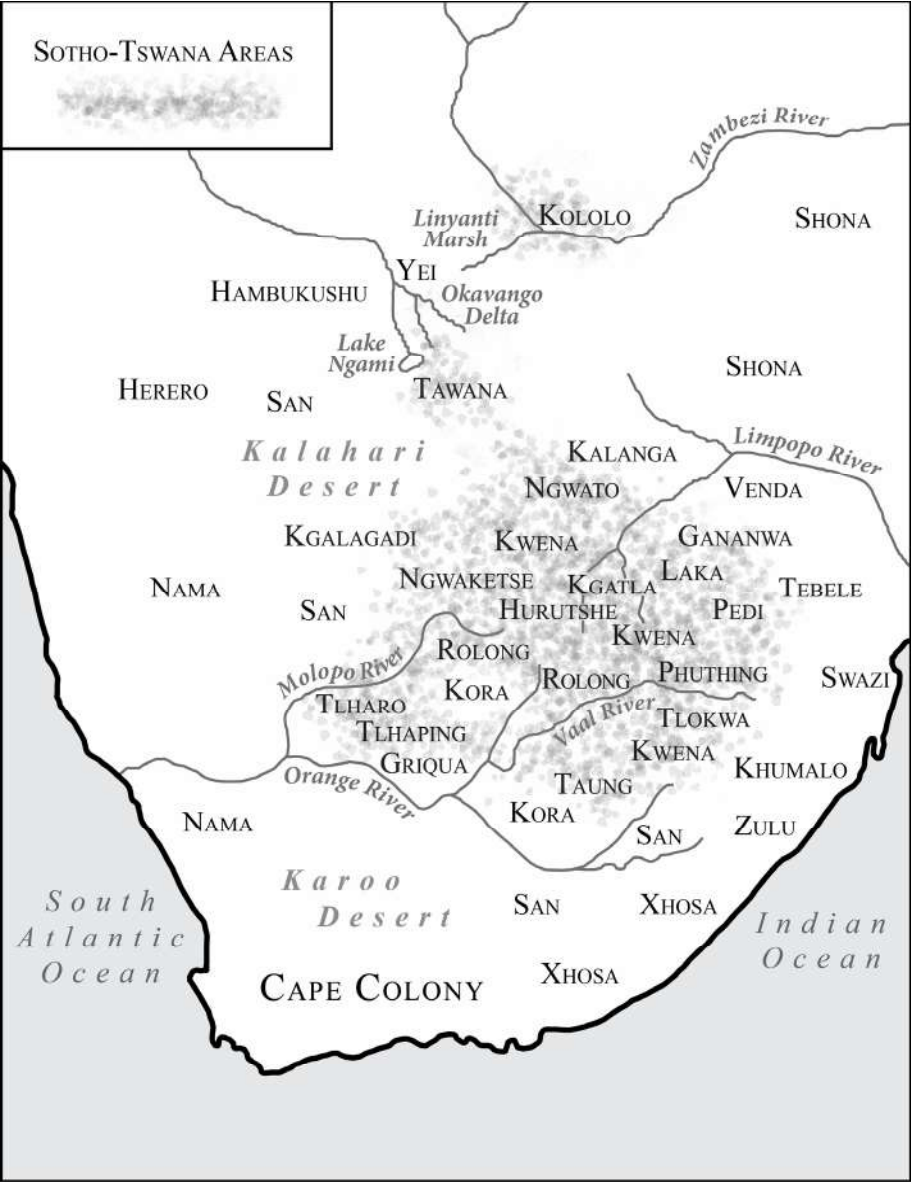
There are several reasons for this lingering gap in the scholarship, but foremost among them has been an understandable emphasis on the twentieth century. European colonization, with its attendant subjugation of Africans, gave rise to a dominant impression that European influence, including the introduction of Christianity, had a coercive and overwhelming impact throughout the history of European involvement in Africa. Enabled by a relative lack of testimony from Africans before 1880 to present an alternate narrative, this view has compressed all the events of the nineteenth century into a uniform moment and grouped people as they were identified at the end of the century, projecting later European power and views back into earlier times. The nature of academic research and popular memory has also played a role, formulating patterns of human behavior and ascribing an anticipated order or moral lesson to disparate situations. However, as demonstrated in the lives of African evangelists, people do not always act as expected, and Christianity assumed many different and complex forms in Africa during the course of the nineteenth century, defying explanation in a single over-arching story.

### **Narratives of Tswana Christianity**

It is a matter of record that the first baptism of a Tswana convert occurred shortly after 1800 and that by 1900 there were thousands of Tswana Christians, many of them asserting independence from European control, but the story of how Christianity shed its “peculiar strangeness” and became an important part of Tswana society can be told in several different ways, depending on who or what are regarded as the central characters in the story. Whether it is prominent individuals such as European missionaries and Tswana rulers or abstract entities such as Christianity and modernity that are imbued with agency and significance, one inevitably gives more attention to evidence that will help explain how those people or things propelled events. The resulting histories of Tswana Christianity have varied significantly, reflecting a range of interests and assumptions about the meaning and importance of “Tswana,” “Christianity” and “history.”

One basic issue that must be decided at the outset is how to define the extent of Tswana society. In ethno-linguistic terms, as ancestrally-related groups of people with mutually comprehensible languages and customs, the Tswana — or more broadly Sotho-Tswana — have historically interacted across a very large area bounded approximately by the Drakensberg Mountains, Kalahari Desert, Orange River and Limpopo River. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a few groups in the southwestern part of that region employed a collective label recorded by Europeans as “Bechuana,” and southeastern people adopted the general label of “Basuto,” but as those labels were extended to others during the nineteenth century, each chiefdom and clan continued to identify itself primarily by the name of a ruler or ancestral founder. There were some genuine cultural and historical differences between the groups, but variation occurred more as a gradual continuum from one group to the next than as distinct divisions, and all of them arguably shared the same ethno-linguistic heritage.

Those groups became more rigidly divided, however, by tribal identities and national borders instituted after 1880, giving rise to views of the past that are governed mostly by modern political concerns and ignore the mutability of nineteenth-century chiefdoms. As South Africa today seeks to forge a more united nation, Sotho-Tswana culture is becoming relegated to a distant past or to neighboring Botswana and Lesotho while being marginalized by more dominant Zulu and Xhosa within South Africa. Despite the central roles played by Batswana (Tswana people) in southern Africa, they have come to be regarded as relatively peripheral, with their histories either narrowly focused on specific groups or subordinated to modern national narratives. For this study, I have chosen to focus mostly on people who have



Map 1. Major Groups in Southern Africa c.1820

come to be identified as Batswana or Western Sotho, but, in looking beyond modern boundaries, I also include a few cases from the Basotho, Bapedi and others in recognition of the connected experiences of Sotho-Tswana in the nineteenth century.

An even more contentious issue is how to portray the history of Christianity in Tswana society. The first histories, written by church-affiliated scholars during the colonial era, generally celebrated the spread of Christianity and focused almost exclusively on Europeans and their activities, depicting Tswana Christians as objects of missionary concern or at most nameless assistants.<sup>7</sup> European social scientists responded to missionary proselytism with skepticism that became increasingly critical, resulting in the eventual portrayal of Christianity as a central component of European imperialism. Early anthropologists, led by Isaac Schapera, acknowledged the importance that Christianity had acquired in Tswana communities by the early twentieth century, but they generally preferred to focus on aspects of Tswana culture that appeared less tainted by European influence.<sup>8</sup> Later scholars, in sympathy with African nationalism and the struggle against apartheid, expanded that suspicion of Christianity into a general critique of all European instruments of political and economic control.<sup>9</sup>

Studies of Tswana Christianity by African scholars have followed similar lines, seeking to identify African agency and perspectives during the colonial era. One of the earliest written accounts is Micah Kgasi's *Thuto Ke Eng* [*What is Christian Teaching*], published in 1949 for the benefit of fellow Tswana graduates of mission schools. Paralleling early European-produced mission histories, Kgasi approvingly traces the growth of Christianity in his community, but he portrays it as an African achievement, with Christianity successfully adapted into Tswana terms as an enhancement of their existing values rather than a threat. During the 1970s, this view was echoed in Gabriel Setiloane's *The Image of God Among the Sotho-Tswana* (1976), but it was countered by historians of specific groups, who tended to treat Christianity as a destabilizing element and foreign import.<sup>10</sup> Some studies have been more nuanced in their treatment of Tswana mission-affiliated churches, but others, such as that by James Amanze, have tended to regard the early congregations as primarily European projects, characterized by missionary suppression of Tswana beliefs and aspirations.<sup>11</sup> African scholars have generally been more interested in those Tswana Christians during the colonial era who resisted European rule to form independent "Ethiopian" churches, championing them as proto-nationalists.<sup>12</sup>

Recent studies by American and European scholars on the history of Botswana have given more attention to the views and agency of Batswana

who remained members of mission churches. Historians such as Fred Morton and Jeff Ramsay have included some consideration of early Tswana Christians in their studies of the colonial era, and in *The Realm of the Word*, Paul Landau examines Tswana appropriation of mission Christianity within the Ngwato kingdom of Khama III.<sup>13</sup> Other scholars such as Ornulf Gulbrandsen have similarly questioned the power of European missionaries, and there seems to be a growing interest in looking beyond the victimization of colonial-era Batswana.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, despite greater consideration of African agency, the prevailing emphasis continues to be on the power of rulers and missionaries, with Tswana Christians generally subject to competing political and economic forces beyond their control.

In projecting European intellectual concerns onto Africa, there also arises the fundamental question of the extent to which Christianity can even be regarded as a subject of study, distinguishable from the more evident social, political and economic context in which it is embedded. To view Christianity as a force of its own, spreading as a uniform, unchanging substance rather than as the product of different times and cultures, is supportable more by theology than by social science. Empirical evidence lends itself more readily to economic and political explanations for human behavior, and many scholars have accordingly preferred to describe African adoption of Christianity in instrumental terms as part of a rational effort to gain access to European wealth and power.<sup>15</sup> This interpretation is complicated, however, by observations such as Livingstone's that some African converts became preachers "at a considerable disadvantage to themselves" and by the fact that people's emotional needs and physical needs do not necessarily coincide. Scholars consequently have turned to more psychological and sociological interpretations, but there remains a tendency to employ reified unseen entities — whether God, capitalism or modernity — to explain changes in Tswana society during the nineteenth century.

These general political and intellectual concerns have had similar influences throughout Africa on how histories of Christianity have been written, but Tswana history also presents some relatively unique characteristics. Two aspects of Tswana Christianity in the nineteenth century that distinguished it from contemporary cases in West Africa and later cases elsewhere were the early translation of the Bible into Setswana (Tswana language) and the location of many congregations within Tswana communities. Completed in 1857, the Setswana Bible was the first translation of the entire scriptures in a sub-Saharan African language, giving Batswana early access to the teachings of Christianity beyond the reach of missionary instruction. Also influencing Tswana adoption of Christianity was the establishment of most congrega-

tions not at separate European-run mission stations but rather within Tswana communities under the patronage and governance of Tswana rulers. Batswana thus first encountered Christianity within the context of their own society, several years before the arrival of colonial rule, and by the end of the century, as in Nigeria and Uganda, they resented European attempts to exert control over a faith that by then had become their own.

While equipped with Setswana Bibles and based primarily within African communities, Tswana evangelists also cultivated ties with Europeans that varied in their nature and intensity, giving rise to two different models of early Tswana evangelism. The first type of evangelist was a member of a prominent family who employed Christianity and its connections with Europeans to enhance his status and that of his family, asserting control over Christianity as a potential source of wealth and power within his community. The second type of evangelist was a member of a subordinate family who became Christian while taking refuge in a European mission station or town and subsequently used his mobility, foreign connections and esoteric knowledge to gain employment as a translator, advisor, trader and religious specialist for a Tswana ruler. The prevalence of one type of evangelist or the other depended on the level of Tswana or European control exercised over a region, but Tswana communities remained the primary spheres of evangelism throughout the century.

The story presented here will illustrate the significant variation and African agency that accompanied the introduction and adoption of Christianity among Batswana. In spanning most of the nineteenth century, that story includes several decades when Europeans were still rather peripheral to Tswana society and Christianity carried other meanings in addition to its association with European wealth and power that would later become so prominent. By including many different Tswana groups, it also becomes clear that while their cultures and connections extended over a vast territory, sharing many similarities, Tswana experiences also varied considerably depending on the abilities of their rulers and their proximity to particular resources and rival groups. Finally, in making Tswana Christians the protagonists and attempting to portray events from their perspective, Christianity does acquire a certain force of its own, but that force is manifested in Tswana terms and wielded by Tswana hands, resulting in a narrative that may seem “peculiar” to scholars in search of European imperialism but which likely made more sense in the minds and orations of Tswana evangelists.

### **Locating Tswana Evangelists at the Center of the Story**

The focus of this study is the Batswana who converted to Christianity and then assumed leadership of congregations, encouraging other Batswana to adopt the faith and giving direction to those who had already become believers. Though identified in various ways by Europeans (e.g. native teacher, catechist, local preacher) and usually called “*baruti*” (teachers) by Batswana, for the sake of clarity I will call them “evangelists” and European evangelists “missionaries.” I have chosen to focus on nineteenth-century Tswana evangelists because of the central roles that they played in defining and mediating the impact of Christianity on Tswana communities and as cultural brokers on the frontier between Batswana and Europeans, teaching each about the other. As Christian Africans beyond the reach of European government during much of the century, they transcended the dichotomy of colonized and colonizer, and research on their lives reveals more complex and varied African perspectives than have thus far appeared in most studies.

This study most directly confronts the influential work of the anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff. Their initial research on the Tshidi Barolong of South Africa, focusing on the role of Christianity in their society, expanded to include the general historical development of Tswana Christianity, resulting in the rich and detailed *Of Revelation and Revolution*.<sup>16</sup> In that study, emphasizing the dialectic construction of competing perceptions of reality, their primary objective is to explicate the ways that European subjugation of Batswana was manifested in Tswana adoption of certain elements of European culture. They acknowledge Tswana involvement in that process, but the views of Europeans — and scholars — dominate their portrayal of events, with Batswana drawn into European modes of discourse by virtue of their engagement with missionaries. The sources and subject matter of this study overlap considerably with theirs, but the questions and conclusions presented here are significantly different.

Much of what distinguishes this study from that of the Comaroffs can be attributed to disciplinary differences between history and anthropology. The Comaroffs convincingly demonstrate how language, clothing and other quotidian elements of culture are imbued with power and significance, but it remains debatable whether those elements are more subconscious determinants or conscious products of people’s ways of thinking. As viewed by many historians, it is individuals and their communities that ultimately drive events, not abstract cultural forces, and Tswana appropriation of Christianity in the nineteenth century did not constitute a “colonization of consciousness” but a deliberate attempt to reconcile old and new ideas.<sup>17</sup> Rather than seeking to trace the roots, development and effects of European domination that

culminated in the apartheid state, this study instead focuses on instances of African self-determination that persevered in areas beyond direct European control and which are now re-emerging in the new South Africa. In doing so, I propose that the primary discourse of nineteenth-century Tswana Christianity was authored not by European missionaries but by Tswana evangelists, accommodated on their own terms, expressed in African idioms and manifested in their relationships with others.

This view of history assumes that texts and contexts can be distinguished from one another, and that events are not necessarily ordered in the same way as words in a sentence. I do not presume to recover some lost African narrative but rather to relate the circumstances that seemed most influential in the careers and communities of Tswana evangelists. As John Peel argues, in critiquing scholarly viewpoints such as those of the Comaroffs, "While it is true that human beings cannot be agents, or create the social forms through which they live, without continually representing their lives and actions to themselves and others, it remains the case that life and society, unlike stories, are not works of art."<sup>18</sup> The story offered here cannot speak on behalf of nineteenth-century Batswana, but it presents actions and words of theirs that have been absent thus far from most scholarly narratives.

This study's emphasis on Tswana agency shares some common ground with the work of the historian Paul Landau, but its broader chronological and geographic scope includes cases that do not necessarily follow the same model as that presented in his *Realm of the Word*. Many Tswana rulers, such as Khama of the Bangwato, were certainly able to manage the impact of Christianity in their communities, employing both European missionaries and African evangelists in support of their rule, but that control varied considerably over time and in different locations. Christianity could contribute to the success or failure of a government, but other political and economic factors usually played more important roles, and promulgation of Christianity was as much a personal or family concern as it was the state's. The ability of African evangelists to gain the trust and respect of other Africans did not arise, as asserted by Livingstone, simply from being "fellow natives," but rather the nature and extent of their affinity varied depending on whether they were members of the same ethnic group, chiefdom, clan, ancestral lineage or family.

Central to this study is an emphasis on the local and personal, examining the attitudes and actions of individuals in their relationships with those closest to them. During most of the nineteenth century in the interior of southern Africa, before the discovery of valuable minerals and European conquest, both Batswana and missionaries operated within the social context

of Tswana lineages, which were clustered in separate communities and distantly connected with one another via ancestry and long journeys. Tswana knowledge was also oral-based, and, in the absence of mass media, communication reached only as far as one's voice could be heard and one's message remembered. Along these lines, Christianity did not spread on its own as a disembodied abstract entity but as the stated beliefs and practices of particular people, and the influence of missionaries and evangelists cannot be understood separately from their personalities and positions within specific communities.

Another way in which this study frames events differently than prevailing scholarly views is in reconfiguring the relationship between politics and religion. Rather than distinguishing between political and religious motives, or expanding politics to explain religion in materialist and instrumental terms, I allow for an expansion of religion's scope as a means for understanding politics.<sup>19</sup> Religion is fundamentally based on an acute awareness of the persuasive power of ideas and emotions, and submission, devotion and allegiance are as much religious phenomena as they are political. This fact has long been recognized by philosophers, from the biblical story of the tower of Babel to Thomas Hobbes' description of the state as a "mortal god," and it can also be found in the Tswana proverb, "*Kgosi ke kgosi ka morafe*" (A chief is chief by the tribe). A Tswana ruler derived his authority not from coercive control over land and resources but from people's collective approval, united in their belief that the *kgosi* (chief/king) was endowed by his ancestors and other invisible forces with the ability to meet the needs of their community. Accordingly, I use the term "politico-religious authority" in describing Tswana rulers, reflecting nineteenth-century Tswana views of both government and Christianity as part of an all-encompassing spiritual world rather than as separate, formally-distinct institutions.

At the same time, adopting an arguably Christian perspective, I regard religion not merely as an instrument of group identity but also as an individual experience. As Batswana incorporated Christianity within their existing communal notions of politico-religious authority, Tswana converts simultaneously challenged those notions by seeking individual salvation apart from the group. Biblical teachings question the ephemeral value of political power, wealth, education and social status, and though pursuit of those goals might coopt the moral authority of Christianity, a believer ideally is liberated from such worldly attachments.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, it is from the collective fears, desires and beliefs of individuals that those idols are created. As Martin Luther puts it, "Whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is truly your god."<sup>21</sup> Or as observed by Fyodor Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor,

“There is nothing a free man is so anxious to do as to find something to worship.”<sup>22</sup>

Yet, as envisioned by Dostoevsky and the mystic traditions of Christianity, personal Christian faith also depends on the freedom to doubt and can act as a defense against the temptations of logical certainty and social conformity. In this sense, Christian faith conceivably operated within Tswana society not as an ideological vehicle for European imperialism but rather as a means by which Batswana might discern and critique cultural influences, whether Tswana or European. Christianity’s claim to be an acultural, existential meta-narrative — in the world but not of it — lies beyond the scope of this historical study, but perhaps it at least can be considered as transcultural, as evidenced by twenty centuries of translation and expansion throughout the world. Tswana adoption of Christianity was accompanied by modification and rejection of some former beliefs and practices, but those changes did not necessarily come at the cost of submission to European rule. Batswana did not adopt Christianity and all European ways as a single cultural package but were able to distinguish between various elements, exercising individual initiative and choice in their Tswana-ization of Christianity as they were themselves Christianized.

This subjectivity and capacity to consider multiple perspectives were not simply the result of exposure to Europeans but already existed within Tswana society. There was a long history of cultural interaction in the interior of southern Africa, stimulated by trade, pastoralism and periodic migration, and complex social philosophies were reflected in a large store of metaphors, puns and ambiguities found in Tswana proverbs. As one proverb states, “*Moremogolo go betlwa wa taolo, wa motho o a ipetla*” (As the senior divination die is carved, so a person carves himself). Or, expressed more prosaically, even the best medical treatment requires a patient’s consent and participation in order to be effective. This is commonly interpreted as a call for greater personal responsibility, with each person in control of their own destiny, but it is also based on an awareness that ritual objects and other elements of culture, while wielding influence over people, are also ultimately shaped by people.

My emphases on Tswana individuals, communities and religious perspectives are part of a general attempt to acknowledge African agency in the decades of African-European interaction that preceded the establishment of formal European rule. Rather than regarding European domination as pervasive and inevitable, I assume Africans to be in control until proven otherwise. At what point do a few Europeans scattered over an immense territory constitute a cultural influence or, further, a political threat? I argue

that there was no certain or steady progression from one stage to the other, and that in the fractious, uncertain times of the nineteenth century, both Batswana and Europeans found themselves pulled in multiple directions as they sought purchase on shifting social terrain, heightening the importance of individual agency and the malleable nature of culture.

In exploring the role that Tswana evangelists played in their communities as agents of Christianity, I also consider the various social, political and economic changes that Tswana communities experienced during the nineteenth century, and their overlapping stages serve as the chapters of this book. I start with an examination of “native brethren” in the early development of Tswana-Khoe-Griqua-European relations beyond the frontier of the Cape Colony and then explore the roles that Tswana evangelists played as “influential young men” in the reconstruction of southern Tswana communities after the social upheavals of the 1820s. In middle chapters, I consider the participation of evangelists and their “wagons of god” in the trade boom that developed during mid-century, and I describe religious conversion in Tswana society as being “smeared with chalk.” I then conclude with the “ecclesiastical tyranny” that accompanied European colonization and eventually provoked the formation of independent African churches.

### **Constructing a History of Tswana Evangelists**

There already has been considerable study of colonial-era Tswana Christianity, but scholars thus far have given virtually no attention to the Tswana evangelists who played central roles in the decades of Tswana-European interaction that preceded colonization. There are a few unpublished theses on mission history that include information on Tswana evangelists, and several published works, but they are all rather limited in scope and intended audience, focusing on a particular individual, region or mission denomination.<sup>23</sup> Joan Millard’s *Malihambe* (1998) provides valuable biographical information on a wide range of evangelists, but the descriptions are very brief and include only a few Batswana, and only those who were based in the Transvaal. For other areas, Landau focuses on those who worked in the northern Bechuanaland Protectorate, and J. Mutero Chirenje includes a few references, but Isaac Schapera’s short notes in his editions of Livingstone’s writings provide the only glimpses thus far of pre-colonial western Tswana evangelists.<sup>24</sup>

The main difficulties in conducting research on nineteenth-century Tswana evangelists are the lack of concentrated evidence and the location of much of that scattered, limited evidence in the writings of missionaries. In order to overcome the first difficulty and gather enough information to

produce this book, I visited more than twenty archives and libraries in five different countries, examining the documents of six mission societies and numerous colonial agencies, in five different languages. I also collected information from a variety of other sources, including periodicals, traveler accounts and some oral and written testimonies by Batswana, but, at least prior to 1880, the most detailed evidence generally appeared, albeit infrequently, in the letters of missionaries.

My attempt to focus on African agency and amplify African voices might appear to be severely compromised by dependence on sources authored mostly by Europeans, but careful consideration of each source's specific circumstances can lend meaning and value to the words beyond those perhaps intended by the author. For example, when missionaries mention Tswana evangelists, it is often in exaggerated reference to some behavior considered to be either commendable or objectionable, cited by the missionary as proof of his own efforts or difficulties, but as long as one recognizes such patterns and contexts, one can weigh the words accordingly. Although I make frequent use of quotations in this study, particularly from Batswana as translated and recorded by Europeans, they are understood only to be indicative of attitudes and events, not definitive or comprehensive.

One general evaluation that I made of missionary sources was that the further away, in both time and distance, the author and reader of a document were from Europe, the more helpful and informative the source was. During a missionary's first few years in the field, he tended to be concerned primarily with his own welfare and ill-informed about Tswana affairs, but as he became more familiar with his surroundings and attentive to Batswana, their names and the details of their lives appeared more frequently. Similarly, the further removed missionaries were from colonial settlements and attitudes, the more dependent they were on Batswana and the more likely to acknowledge their work. Personality also played a role, and those more humble, such as Isaac Hughes, or more curious and observant, such as David Livingstone, wrote in greater detail about Tswana evangelists than other missionaries did. Letters between missionaries and their family members, with shared experiences living among Batswana, are perhaps most instructive and indicative of Tswana agency. They frequently described the personal lives of Tswana individuals known to both parties and employed Setswana phrases, as well as admitted their own weaknesses and frustrations, things not usually included in reports sent to Europe, which tended to emphasize the achievements of missionaries and their European employers.

A number of other European-authored sources add important information and alternate perspectives to those found in missionary writings. Among