

Converts and Conservatives

Missionary representations of African rulers in the Northern Transvaal, c.1870-1900

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During the second half of the nineteenth century, the Berlin Mission Society made strenuous efforts to convert the rulers of the people in whose areas they worked in the Northern Transvaal. In this they were largely unsuccessful. This raises questions about what forces influenced success and failure, and how the missionaries interpreted this.

In this article, we interrogate the Berlin Missions Society's accounts of the life and death of August Makhahane, a ruler of the Vhavenda who converted to Christianity, against the background of the accounts dealing with Matsiokwane Leboho, a ruler of the Bahananwa who did not convert.¹ Through such a comparison, we aim at exploring the contrasted ways in which the Berlin missionaries reported about the two rulers.

For both rulers, we use the *Berliner Missionsberichte* (hereafter *BMB*) as sources. These are extremely detailed reports of the activities of the mission produced both to account for their activities and to raise funds for further expansion of mission work. In the case of Makhahane, we also use a tract about his life produced by the society to celebrate what they saw as their success. These sources are a treasure-trove for historians exploring this

¹ Local terminology for rulers does not translate well into English. The terms “king” and “chief” do not adequately describe the status and functions of the office referred to the German missionaries as that of a *Hauptling*. For this reason, we use indigenous terminology unless in quotation. Thus, we use the term *khosi* (plural, *mahosi*) for the appropriate Vhavenda leaders, *kgosi* (plural, *dikgosi*) for their counterparts among the Bahananwa, and *bosi* for Tsonga-Shangaan leaders.

period in the history of the Northern Transvaal. Missionaries were the only people keeping sustained written records of daily life and events in those areas not yet fully incorporated into the advancing settler states. In addition, the mission authorities saw the keeping of detailed written records as being of crucial importance for archival, instructional and propaganda purposes. The records available for study are thus voluminous.

Through an analysis of the *BMB*'s representations of the Bahananwa's "heathen" *dikgoši*, we are able to understand why one ruler did not convert while another did. We also come to an understanding of the significance of conversion of *mabosi* to the missionaries and their German readers. The analysis also enables us to engage interesting questions about power – the power of religion, the power of *mabosi*, the power of missionaries, and the power of the written word.

The Berlin Mission

The Berlin Mission Society (as it was known from 1908) had been founded by a group of Prussian notables on 29 February 1824 as the Society to Promote Evangelical (or Protestant) Missions among the Heathen (*Gesellschaft zur Beförderung der Evangelischen Missionen unter den Heiden*). Its mission work was rooted in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Brandenburg. Missionaries in the service of the church obtained their *licentia concionandi* from the Royal Prussian *Konsistorium* of the church. The status of the Berlin missionaries was equivalent to that of pastors in Prussia.²

The first Berlin Mission Station to be established in South Africa was that of Bethanien in the Orange Free State, established in 1834. A station was opened at Cape Town in 1837 to work among the Khoikhoi and slaves. The same year saw the expansion of the society's mission activity into British Kaffraria, with the Bethel Mission station being established to work among the Xhosa. Work among the Zulu began in 1847 with the founding of the Emmaus Mission Station in Natal. Work

² See especially H. Lehmann, *150 Jahre Berliner Mission*, (Ev.-Luth. Mission Erlangen, Stuttgart, 1974), p.9; U. van der Heyden, "The Archives and Library of the Berlin Mission Society", *History in Africa: A Journal of Method*, 23, 1996, pp.411-412; D.W. van der Merwe "Van Paternalisme tot Selfbeskikking: Die Berlynse Sendinggenootskap en Kerkstigting in Transvaal, 1904 – 1962", D. Litt. et Phil. Thesis, University of South Africa, 1980, pp.1-3 and M. Wright, *German Missions in Tanganyika 1891-1941: Lutherans and Moravians in the Southern Highlands* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1971), p.3.

among the Pedi in the Transvaal began in 1860 with the establishment of Gerlachshoop Mission Station. From these original bases, the Mission Society spread out its operations to work in other areas and among other ethnic groups. In spite of closures and movings of some mission stations, there were thirty-one Berlin Mission Stations in South Africa in 1870.³ The society and the scope of its operations continued to grow. Important from our present perspective, Blaumberg was established in 1868, and the Vendaland stations of Ha Tshivhase, Tshakhuma and Georgenholtz were established in 1872, 1874 and 1877 respectively.⁴ Outside South Africa, the Berlin Mission expanded the scope of its operations into China in 1882 and East Africa in 1884.⁵

In a recent work, Kirkaldy argues that, one of the greatest difficulties faced by the Berlin Missionaries in Vendaland during the last three decades of the nineteenth century was that of making, and keeping, a significant number of converts. Between 1874 and 1899, at best, only 0,35% of the African people in the environs of their three mission stations there had formally converted to Christianity.⁶ The figures are comparably low for the Tshivenda-speakers' south-western neighbours, the Bahananwa, who accommodated a Berlin missionary at Blaumberg, the station at the foot of the mountain after which it was named [Map 1].

The missionaries, from their point of departure that *Völker* (peoples), and not individuals, were the primary “units” for conversion,⁷ saw their

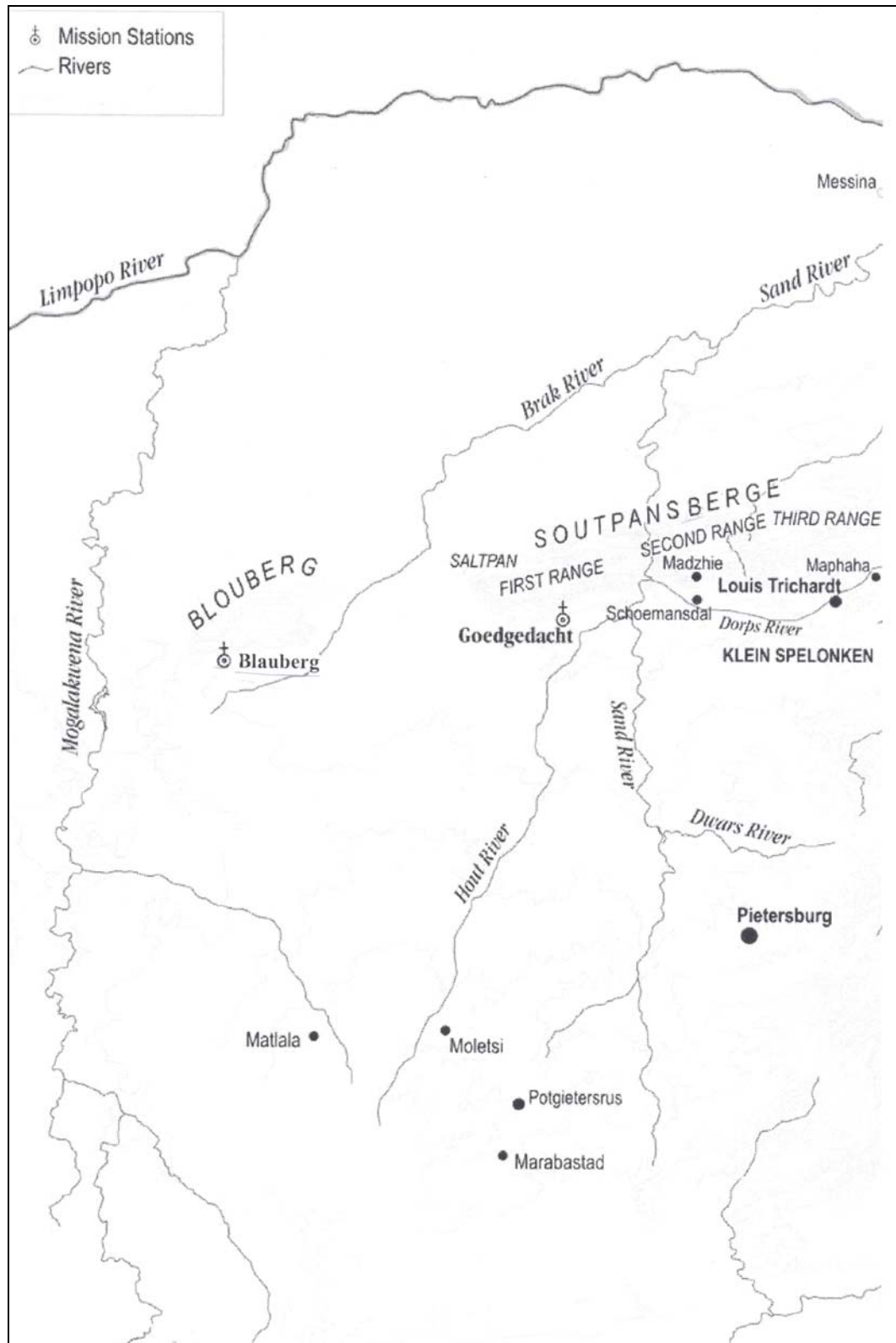
³ These were spread as follows: three stations operating in the Orange Free State, five in the Cape Colony, five in British Kaffraria, six in Natal and twelve in the South African Republic (*BMB*, 1871, pp.185-186).

⁴ Van der Heyden “Archives”, pp.412-413. For the history of the Berlin Mission in South Africa from 1834 to 1914, see D.J. Richter, *Geschichte der Berliner Missionsgesellschaft, 1824-1924* (Buchhandlung der Berliner ev. Missionsgesellschaft, Berlin, 1924), pp.91-318 & 357-418.

⁵ Richter, *Geschichte*, pp.521-631(China, 1882-1922) & 632-694 (East Africa, 1884-1914).

⁶ A. Kirkaldy, *Capturing the Soul: The Venda and the Missionaries* (Protea Book House, Pretoria, 2005), pp.28-29.

⁷ For an assessment of the Berlin Mission Society's take on mission philosophy, politics and theology, see G.J. Jooste, “Ras, Volk en Politiek in die Berlynse Sendinggenootskap,” DD Thesis, University of Pretoria, 1996, pp.20-30.



*Map 1. Zoutpansberg District*⁸

⁸ Maps are reproduced from Kirkaldy, *Capturing*. We would like to thank Protea for giving us permission to do so.

dismal failure to make significant numbers of converts as being a direct reflection of the power of the *mabosi* – they were simply so powerful, and played such an important religious role that their people had no desire to convert to Christianity. The solution, as they saw it, was to convert a *kbosi*. His people would then follow him into conversion.⁹

In *Kbosi* August Makhahane, they thought that they had found their man. Ruler of the Vhalembetu, one of the smaller and less powerful sub-groupings making up the Tshivenda-speaking peoples, his territory lay at a bend in the Luvuvhu River, in what is today the northern part of the Kruger National Park [Map 2]. They had no such luck with *Kgosǎ Matsiokwane* Leboho, the other main protagonist in our tale, the one who would not convert. Matsiokwane was the paramount ruler not only of the Sepedi-speaking Bahananwa of Blauberg, but also of several other communities in the surrounding area, including the Batau, who customarily performed significant religious duties. Furthermore, Matsiokwane was linked by marriage to the female Modjadji rulers of the Balobedi, famous for their rainmaking powers.¹⁰ In such a powerful position, Matsiokwane was a far less likely candidate for conversion than Makhahane.

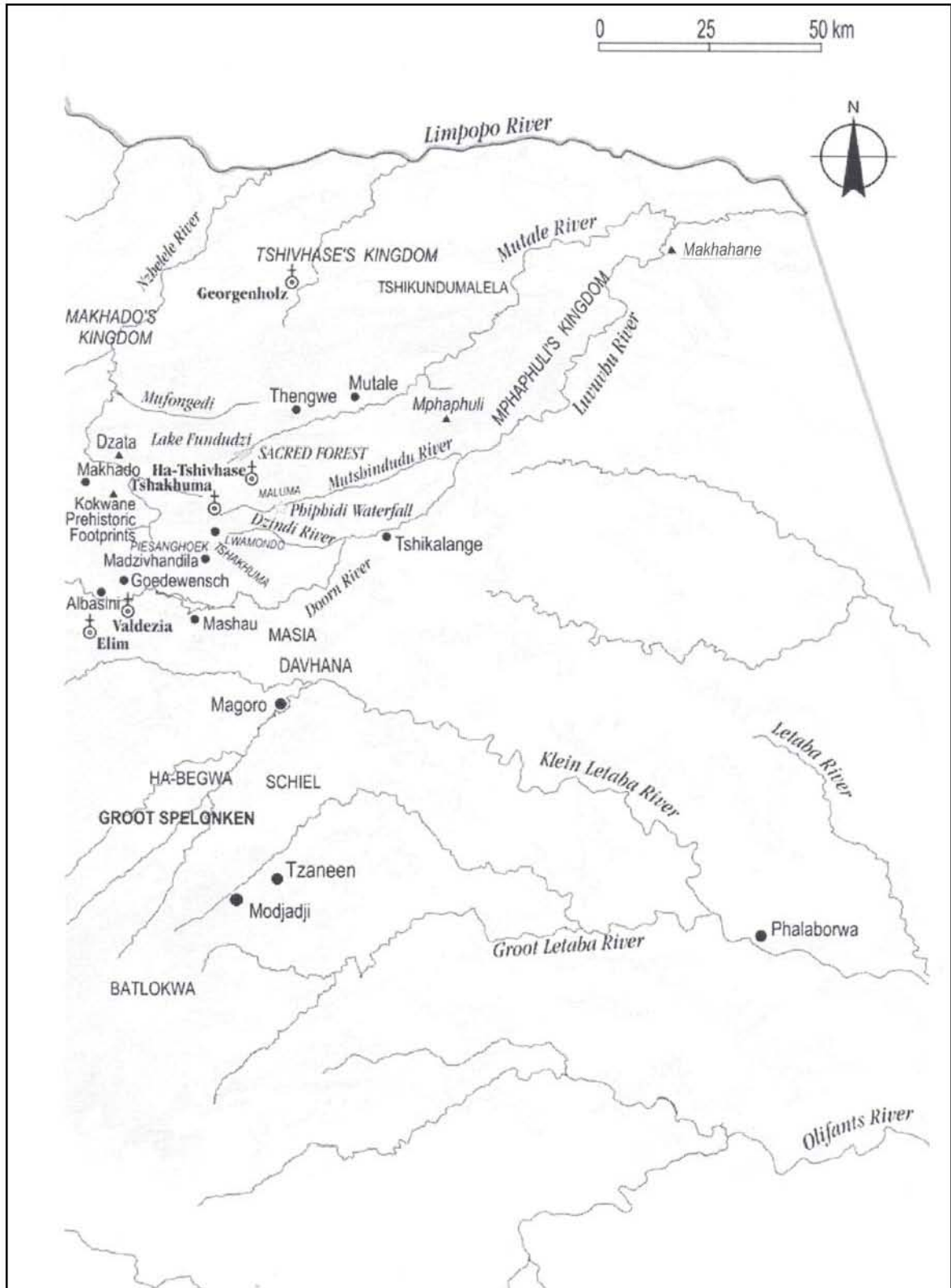
In the course of our argument it will be illustrated, however, that the missionaries' portrayal of the differences between converts and conservatives were rather built on religious arguments of their own making than on an understanding of power relations in the African societies themselves.

Reading the *Missionsberichte*

While, as historians, we tend to study the histories of particular African communities, the missionary sources we consulted were designed in a completely different format. Missionary periodicals were not intended to be read as monographs focusing on particular mission stations or the people of specific regions, their encounters with the forces of modernity and the coping mechanisms they devised. Rather, they were meant to provide broad geographical surveys, a global narrative about battles of good against evil, the light against the darkness, the softening of heathen hearts and the winning

⁹ Kirkaldy, *Capturing*, chapter 8.

¹⁰ T.J. Makhura, "The Bagananwa polity in the north-western Transvaal and the South African Republic, c. 1836-1896", MA thesis, University of Bophuthatswana, 1993, pp.25, 34-35, 53 & 65-68.



Map 2. Vendlan and Surrounds

over of souls. While the historian reads “vertically” into numerous consecutive issues of such periodicals with the aim of forming an impression of the changes a particular person, or community, or place had experienced over a period in time, the contemporary reader, as s/he worked through each periodical as it appeared from the printers once a month, may first and foremost be presumed to have made crossovers in space: China would be covered, then Africa; under Africa the synods from different regions would follow one another; and within each synod the quarterly report of the one mission station followed upon the other.

The extent to which this journey was being orchestrated by editorial activity on the side of the mission society is the topic for a paper in itself. Of course the intended reader could have been expected to trace the development of the situation in a particular area with each consecutive issue, but the reading experience within each particular issue was, in the case of Southern Africa, composed as a journey from the Cape to the Transvaal, and in the Transvaal, from Blauberg to Vendaland. Not so much the individual responses of “heathens” in a particular place would be traced, but the tendency of “heathenish” behaviour from the one mission station to the next. The text was designed in such a way that in the reading experience, Vendaland would always follow after Blauberg, the Bahananwa mission station.¹¹ Blauberg was further towards the south, and the mission stations among the Vhavenda, being the northernmost in the Transvaal, would always be discussed last.

By the time the reader got to the Vhavenda “section” of the publication, s/he would probably already have encountered a few “heathen chiefs”, and may even have come to expect a particular kind of behaviour. Moreover, the narratives of unyielding Bahananwa *dikgoši* persisting in their “heathenish” behaviour, not only preceded the conversion story of a Vhavenda *kbosi* in text and in “reading time”, but also in historic time. *Kgoši Matsiokwane*¹² of the Bahananwa died a “heathen” in 1879 and his succeeding son, Kgalusi, ruled the Bahananwa as a “heathen” until their clash with the Boers in 1894.

Thus, when in the early 1890s the missionaries thought that they had found “their man” in the Vhavenda *Kbosi* August Makhahane, it had most likely been long anticipated by their readers. The conclusion of the

¹¹ See *BMB*, 1878, pp.248-251.

¹² Also spelt Matseokwane.

missionaries in Vendaland, that the only way to evangelise the people would be to convert the *kebosi* first, would have been confirmed by the recorded accounts of other missionaries elsewhere in the Transvaal, and by anyone who had been an ardent reader of these accounts in the *BMB*. It would also suit the expectations of such readers now to elevate the conversion narrative (because it stood out so prominently among the repeated reportage on heathenism) from its single appearance in just another monthly delivery of the *BMB*, and to give it special status in a separate tractate which could be read over and over again.

The tractate obtained its significance in relation to the monthly reports in the *BMB*. It derived its meaning of being exceptional from the regularity of the *BMB*. The contrasts in the *BMB*'s description of the death of yet another heathen and the tractate's description of a Christian departure from this earth, are significant. The latter Christian death fills in on everything that was lacking, despicable and lamentable in the heathen's demise. By drawing lines between these two representations, one can identify the leading motives in the missionaries' rhetoric. It also illustrates how the "Africa" constructed by the missionaries for their readers, had become a better place *through* missionary intervention. The Victorian traveller and explorer, Mary Kingsley, mentioned that the missionaries reported on how the mission field "was getting on towards being what it ought to be"; their published media were also packaged in such a way that it facilitated reading practices through which this future world could be imagined.¹³

The local situation

Just because the missionaries had hoped to achieve the same among the Bahananwa and the Vhavenda does not imply that their actions were interpreted and experienced in the same way by both communities. While there are many resemblances between the Bahananwa and the Vhavenda's encounter with the Berlin missionaries, they were two distinct "polities", each with its own distinct cultural fabric. External factors had also affected the communities in different ways and, accordingly, resulted in divergent responses.

¹³ M. Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*, abridged and introduced by E. Huxley (Phoenix Press, London, 2000), p.12.

The death of Matsiokwane and the succession dispute between his sons coincided with the period of prominent British military intervention in the Transvaal (1879-1880), something which briefly opened an opportunity for the missionaries to apply their whiteness as a force to intimidate the Bahananwa – that is, if the Bahananwa successor had not succeeded in playing even this ploy to his own advantage. As hard as the *Missionsbericthe* tried to give the missionaries the upper hand in the narrative, just as often the reader can imagine the initiative in the encounter actually being in the hands of the “heathen” Bahananwa *Dikgoši*.

While both communities had to reckon with increasing white encroachment on their sovereignty during the 1880s, the Bahananwa rulers encountered a missionary situation rather unlike that of the Vhavenda. Throughout the nineteenth century the Berlin missionaries remained the only denomination active in Vendaland, whereas from the 1880s the Bahananwa were confronted with Wesleyan missionary activity in their region as well. Rather than experiencing this duplication of the Christian onslaught as an increasing threat to their autonomy, the Bahananwa Christians and rulers alike seem to have been quick to discover the bargaining potential the rivalry between these mission societies was posing to the ingenious leader who could manipulate it to his own advantage. In the reports to their readers, however, the rivaling mission societies blamed each other for encroaching on what each believed was *his* mission field.

In a tractate, Reinhold Wessmann, the missionary who would preside over Makhahane’s conversion, described the ruler’s Vhalembetu people as: “a lazy and dirty people, who live scattered among the Bawenda [Vhavenda]; in language and habits completely different from them and also oppressed, and [treated with] hostility, by them.” He believed that they were so degenerate that they did not even build proper houses for themselves: “Many ... live in caves, others again hidden away in bushes, some without houses like the wild beasts of the fields.” More correctly, he observed that: “They mainly situate their gardens on the banks of the rivers and live a lot on roots and the fruits of wild trees,” and that “They also practice fishing and hunting. With bows and arrows, now also with fire-arms, the wild animals are hunted, or also caught in traps.”¹⁴ In our reading, this would firmly have established for the mission and lay readers the credentials of the

¹⁴ R. Wessmann, *Der Häuptling August Makhahane, ein Lebensbild aus der Bawenda-Mission* (Buchhandlung der Berliner evangelischen Missions-Gesellschaft, Berlin, 1892), p.2. All translations are by the authors.

entire people as desperately needing salvation – both through Christianity and through the benefits of Western material culture which the missionaries would bring.

There is no reason to suppose that the Vhalembetu were any more “lazy” or “dirty” than any of the other groups in the region, including the Boers. In common with other groups there, they were cattle-keepers and agriculturists, who supplemented their diet by hunting, gathering and trade. As with the other groups, they were not capitalist producers – rather they produced for subsistence, storage for lean times and a surplus for trade. In addition, rather than living “scattered among” the Vhavenda as Wessmann insinuated in the tractate, they were in fact one of the clans which made up the Tshivenda-speaking people. Some of these had been settled in the area since at the latest the Early Iron Age, dated in this area to about 270 ACE. From time to time, these were joined by further immigrants to the area. The last of these groups were the Singo, who migrated from modern Zimbabwe during the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century.¹⁵ Whatever language(s) they may have spoken in the remote past, linguistic evidence suggests that, by the second half of the nineteenth century, the various groups were speaking dialects of the same language : Tshivenda.

The late 19th Century was violent. There were periodic power struggles and conflicts within, and between, the various Tshivenda-speaking groups. There were also raids by Zulu, Swazi and Ndebele war parties from time to time. Boers were encroaching into the northern parts of the country, raiding for forced labour, imposing taxes and labour service by force, and seizing land. The Vhalembetu nevertheless do not appear to have been any more “oppressed” or victimised than other groups in the area, including the Bahananwa towards the west of Vendaland.¹⁶ But it suited the missionaries to portray the Vhalembetu as such, particularly in a narrative designed to lead up to their dramatic conversion. Portraying them in this light emphasised both the misery of their daily life and the supposed physical need for their deliverance by the missionaries.

Thus, missionary accounts emphasised that the unending hostility between the different factions was causing constant, time-consuming

¹⁵ See A. Kirkaldy, “Capturing the Soul: Encounters between Berlin Missionaries and Tshivenda-Speakers in the Late Nineteenth Century”, PhD thesis, University of Cape Town, 2002, pp.57-92.

¹⁶ *BMB*, 1876, p.354 and Kirkaldy, “Capturing”, pp.63, 65-92, 422, 423-425, 431-433, 438, 455-462, 464-465 & 469-475.

disruption. They reported that even drinking water and food had to be carried up to the mountain shelters where the people had been forced to take refuge from the constant warfare. Missionary Martin Baumbach approvingly quoted a local Christian guide on one of his mission journeys in 1875, who stated that the Bahananwa's: "unbelief is the cause of their discomfort. Were they all true Christians, they could all have lived peacefully below in the valley."¹⁷

In the opinion of the missionaries, the "degenerate" nature of the Vhalembetu was also reflected in their religion. There was thus a clear spiritual need for their salvation. Wessmann wrote that:

The religion of these peoples is filled with many superstitions. Through ablutions and dance they serve the powerful spirits. If somebody is ill, all the inhabitants of the village dance, which often lasts right through days and nights. Also the poor sick [person] has to dance with them, to expel the evil spirit from him or until he collapses in exhaustion.¹⁸

As with many other groups in Africa, the pouring of libations to honour the ancestors was a central religious practice among Tshivenda-speakers, emphasising continuity and inter-dependence between the living and those who had gone before. *Malombo* (spirit possession) was a way of dealing with illness induced by a troubled spirit. Initiates, rather than the whole community, danced together with the afflicted person in the manner described until the spirit was forced to identify itself and the victim could gain mastery over it.¹⁹ Following arguments pioneered by Lewis, Kirkaldy has argued that this was a way of manipulating the powerful by women and, to a lesser extent, "downtrodden categories of men" in Vhavenda society.²⁰ However, being men of the nineteenth century and representatives of the competing Christian God, the Berlin missionaries did not develop explanations of this nature. Thus, in common with his contemporaries, Wessmann saw local religious practices in a negative light and used them to

¹⁷ BMB, 1876, p.365.

¹⁸ Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, p.2.

¹⁹ See especially H.A. Junod, "Some Features of the Religion of the Ba-Venda", *South African Journal of Science*, 17, 1920, pp.213-215; Kirkaldy, "Capturing", pp.337-348; H.A. Stayt, *The Bavenda* (Oxford University Press, London, 1931), pp.202, 203-206 & 242-248 and N.J. van Warmelo (ed), *Contributions towards Venda History, Religion and Tribal Ritual*, Union of South Africa, Department of Native Affairs, Ethnological Publications, III, (Government Printer, Pretoria, 1932), pp.141-150, 169, 174, 177-179, 180, 185-190.

²⁰ Kirkaldy, "Capturing", pp.347-348 and I.M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1971), especially ch.3.

typify the “superstition” which, in missionary discourse, characterised African religion.²¹ It is also likely that he would have viewed any attempt by women to usurp power from men in a negative light.

Local beliefs about Khuswane, the Creator, who withdrew after this action, were similarly dismissed:

They also have an idea of the Creator of the World. On one of the mountains at Levubu,²² one sees the footprints of Kusanne (*sic*), who – in the belief of the Bawenda – created the world. After the completion of the world, he sat and rested and did not come back again. But he left his footsteps in the rock in remembrance; so the people’s superstitions report.²³

Numerous reports on superstition, *Zauberei*²⁴ and the belief systems of the Bahananwa confirm the missionaries’ blanket dismissal of all local notions of religion as inferior to their own message of salvation. Indeed, Missionary Carl Stech’s discovery of the inaccuracy of the earlier European notion that the Bahananwa had no “personal God”, was only greeted with interest because it was considered a useful key to uncover the full extent of their elaborate system of “daemonic” superstition. Stech’s further research revealed a Bahananwa equivalent for, among others, the devil, a water god and a dance god.²⁵

Tales of tyranny and violence

For the mission, the people had far worse to contend with than their misplaced beliefs in “superstition”. Wessmann’s account continued by tapping into a notion that would have been all too familiar to faithful readers of the *BMB*, the heathens’ tendency to have no fear of God, but immense fear for their leaders: “Over this people who lived in heathen ignorance ruled as chief the father of August Makhahane, who had his domicile on one of the two high mountains to the right of” the Luvuvhu River. According to the missionary, this ruler, “feared” even by his own people, had achieved

²¹ Cf. *BMB*, 1875, p.446; 1878, p.494; 1879, p.443 and 1897, p.444.

²² The mountains in the vicinity of the Luvuvhu River where the Makhahanes lived.

²³ Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, p.2. For discussion of Khuswane, see *BMB*, 1890, pp.499-500 and Kirkaldy, “Capturing”, p.323.

²⁴ The German word *Zauberei* can be translated as magic, conjuring, witchcraft and sorcery. The missionaries used it to refer to witchcraft beliefs, the activities of traditional healers and diviners and Bahananwa and Vhavenda beliefs in the supernatural in general.

²⁵ *BMB*, 1878, pp.460-461. Also see *BMB*, 1876, pp.359-360: “Astronomische Vorstellungen der Bassuto” and “Der Regengott von Blauberg”.

notoriety through his “bloody deeds” and “extremely tyrannical” behaviour.²⁶ In reporting on this, Wessmann appealed to what the *BMB* readers had come to expect of heathen rulers. When Makeere, a “smaller ruler” under Matsiokwane, considered conversion in 1870, Matsiokwane threatened him with death.²⁷ However, even in this familiar context, Makhanane’s father’s actions seemed excessive compared to those of his contemporary, Matsiokwane. What follows is one of, reportedly, a legion of examples:

When he had slaughtered an ox, four men had to stand opposite each other in the hot sun holding the skin with their teeth until it was dry. When the evening came, the chief took a stick and forcibly struck thereon, to check how dry it was. Whoever let go with his teeth was branded a criminal under sentence of death. On the following day, he was lowered down a steep rock face on a rope with the order to collect bird’s eggs in the holes in the rockface. When he was engaged in this work, they would let go of the rope and the unfortunate [man] would plunge into the depths, to meet his piteous death on the hard rocks [more *infra*].²⁸

Even Makhahane himself was not exempted from the suffering, and he “did not have a happy youth because his father was just as cruel to him as to others”. Some may have seen the solution as lying in the assassination of the tyrannous ruler. While this in fact occurred, it did not bring the sought-after relief. One of the rulers on the Limpopo River was a *gota* named Lalumbe:

[He] had a reputation as a famous dancer. One day, he appeared with a large retinue at Makhahane’s father with the pretence that he wanted to perform a dance before him. Although they did not trust him, they did not stop him and turn him away. Lalombe danced for six days, during which time the Balembetu chief remained hidden out of fear. On the seventh day, he went to watch the dance. Lalombe immediately stabbed him with a long knife that he had been holding in his hands during the dance. “Now you may have peace,” he said to the poor oppressed people of the murdered [man] and then he went away from there. For a time, they had real peace. Then things became otherwise.²⁹

Wessmann recorded that: “After the death of the chief, the Balembetu people could no longer resist the onslaught of their enemies. They were attacked, robbed and scattered in all directions. Everybody looked for a new home for themselves”.³⁰ Both missionary and anthropological literature draw

²⁶ *BMB*, 1869, p.271.

²⁷ *BMB*, 1872, p.311.

²⁸ Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, pp.2-3.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.3. Lalumbe is recorded in mission sources as Lalombe and described as a “chief” (*khozi*). Our changes appear to be more accurate.

³⁰ Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, p.3.

attention to the fact that the death of a *kbosi* was usually followed by a succession dispute among two or more of his sons. These conflicts frequently resulted in warfare between the different contending factions.³¹ This is apparently what happened here. As one of the contenders for the throne, Makhahane was forced by the deteriorating security situation to flee southwards “into the unknown, ...into the land of the Dutch Boers.” Here he worked for some years as a migrant labourer and, in the view of the missionaries, “was protected and could have a rest from all of his torments.”³²

Thus, for the missionaries, there were extremely clear strategic, material, moral, and spiritual signs that they needed to save Makhahane and, through him, his people. Besides these considerations, there were historic signs too. There were previous occasions of succession disputes that did not end in the salvation of the communities involved. After the death of Matsiokwane in September 1879, Missionary Stech claimed a prominent role for himself in averting conflict between the factions supporting each of the two brothers contending for the position of paramount ruler of the Bahananwa. Yet, Kgaluši, the potential convert Stech chose to support, ended up persisting in his “heathenish” ways. In the *BMB* of 1880, the appropriate excerpts from Stech’s diary are introduced by the headings: “*Das ende eines heidnischen Häuptlings*” [“The end of a heathen chief”]³³ and “*Ein heidnischer Regierungsantritt*” [“The induction of a heathen government”].³⁴ In our view,

³¹ See, for example, S.M. Dzivhani, “The Chiefs of Venda”, in N.J. van Warmelo (ed), *The Copper Miners of Musina and the Early History of the Zoutpansberg*, Union of South Africa, Department of Native Affairs, Ethnological Publications, Vol. VIII (Government Printer, Pretoria, 1940), pp.37-40, 42, 44-46 & 49-50; E. Gottschling, “The Bawenda, A sketch of their history and customs”, in *Addresses and Papers read at the Joint Meeting of the British and South African Associations for the Advancement of Science held in South Africa, 1905, III* (South African Association for the Advancement of Science, Johannesburg, 1905), pp.195-221; M.M. Motenda, “History of the Western Venda and the Lemba”, in van Warmelo, *Copper Miners*, pp.54-57 & 59-60; E. Mudau, “The Dau of Tshakhuma”, in van Warmelo, *Copper Miners*, pp.75-76 & 78-79; Stayt, *The Bawenda*, pp.17, 208-209 & 210 and van Warmelo, *Contributions*, pp.6, 12-15, 15-16, 20-22, 24-32 & 35-36.

³² Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, p.3. In a wider context, Kirkaldy has argued that, during the last half of the nineteenth century, migrant labour for whites increasingly came to be seen as an important rite of passage to manhood among Tshivenda speakers. Like Makhahane, a number of these migrant labourers were first exposed to Christianity during the time that they were away. [Kirkaldy, “Capturing”, Chapter 2.]

³³ *BMB*, 1880, p.359.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.369.

Makhahane provided an opportunity to prevent the recurrence of a similar situation.

The run-up to conversion

In the missionaries' reading, God laid the foundations for the rescue of Makhanane through his subsequent conversion during the time of his exile. During the period that he was working for the Boers, Makhahane came into contact with the Swiss Missionaries at Elim mission station (established in 1879). He had moved to a white farm in this vicinity and often heard the church bell calling the faithful to services. In time, he responded to its call.

From the missionaries, "he heard the Word of God for the first time." He also came into contact with "baptised Christians, who told him about God and salvation, which he had sent for all people." He often attended services and enjoyed listening to "the preaching about Christ." "His heart was nevertheless like a field full of thorns. The good seed of God's word was suffocated by the cares and plans surrounding the recovery of his dignity as a chief to which he was entitled." In addition, although he encouraged his son, Mamphwe, to begin Christian instruction, the boy soon "became bored and burned his book with fire."³⁵

After a number of years, Makhahane felt that the situation had calmed enough for him to return home. Here he gathered together a following from among "the subjects of his Late father and settled with them on the mountain to the left of Levubu [Luvuvhu River] opposite the old capital."³⁶ Such actions were common practice in a succession dispute. The various candidates would gather their support bases who would then either try to defeat other claimants or break off to form a new grouping. Moving of the capital or, at the very least, creating a new entrance to the old capital was also the norm. There was a much stronger possibility that other claimants for the throne would go to war if one of their rivals occupied the old capital than if he established a new one which did not have the same emotional focus. This also lessened the likelihood of concealing traitors within the gates. Equally importantly, royal capitals were protected by extremely powerful supernatural forces. Coupled with war *muti*, these medicines were arguably

³⁵ Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, pp.3-4. Missionary sources consistently record the son's name as Mambke.

³⁶ Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, p.4.

the most potent conceived of in the local cosmology. So powerful were they that they required the use of human body parts. Moving the capital or creating a new entrance was designed to prevent these forces from acting against the new ruler.³⁷

Makhahane's new capital was described by Wessmann in a way which emphasised the supposed fear and violence which characterised the everyday existence of Makhahane and his followers:

Surrounded by steep cliffs, this provided a natural fortress. The path to it was very arduous to ascend, often only with assistance of hands and feet. As soon as the sun began to set, they barricaded the small narrow entrance with poles and huge stones against the attacks of their robbing neighbours, but soon the life and property of the Balembetu were again threatened so that Makhahane and his people were again in dire straits.³⁸

The siting of royal capitals high in the mountains, protected by cliffs and with concealed entrances was the norm in nineteenth century Vendaland as much as it was in Bahananwa territory.³⁹ Indeed, the roots of this in the general cultural area may be traced back archaeologically to the closing decades of the eleventh century at the latest. In addition to the obvious defensive role of these settlement patterns, they also had an extremely symbolic dimension, emphasising the secular and religious power of the *mabosi* and their separation from the mundane affairs of life and their people.⁴⁰

Wessmann's account continued by arguing that, because of the dangers and difficulties that he faced in his new capital, Makhahane's thoughts began to return to the Christian God. On his departure from the Elim area, one of

³⁷ *Bawenda-Freund*, 14(54), 1896, p.297; *BMB*, 1890, p.481; 1892, pp.551-553; H. Du Plessis, "Die Territoriale Organisatie van die Venda", *African Studies* (Formerly *Bantu Studies*), 14, 3, September 1945, p.126; T.N. Huffman and E.O.M. Hanisch, "Settlement Hierarchies in the Northern Transvaal", *African Studies Journal*, 46(1), 1987, p.110; Kirkaldy, "Capturing", pp.395-396, 470-471 and R. Wessmann, *The Bawenda of the Spelonken (Transvaal): A contribution towards the psychology and folk-lore of African peoples*, translated from the German original text by L. Weinthal ('The African World', London, 1908), p.83.

³⁸ Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, p.4.

³⁹ *BMB*, 1879, p.404.

⁴⁰ *Bawenda-Freund*, 14(54), 1896, p.288; *BMB*, 1872, p.160; 1873, pp.134-135 & 1874, pp.127-128; E.O.M. Hanisch, "Legends, Oral Traditions and Archaeology: A look at early Venda history", *Lunhona*, Department of Education and Culture, Venda, 3, 4, April 1994, pp.70-71; Kirkaldy, "Capturing", pp.59-60, 241-243, 246, 258, 419, 433-434 and R. Wessmann, *Philippus Thai, ein Treuer Nationalhelfer im Bawendalande*, Missionsschriften für Kinder, 46 (Buchhandlung der Berliner evangelischen Missionsgesellschaft, Berlin, n.d. [1902]), p.2.

the missionaries had reportedly said to him: “My Son, you will stray because you are going back to your old home, where you will not be able to hear God’s Word; but, if God shows his mercy, you will still be able to find the right path.” Reportedly, Makhahane often thought of these words.⁴¹

Mulling over the issues in his mind, Makhahane had a dream. As recorded by Wessmann:

He dreamed that he died and found himself in a long, dark passage, where he soon met two others. They decided to continue their journey together. A shining light in the distance was their goal. However, they soon came to a cross-roads and did not know whether the road to the right or that to the left would reach their destination. But they saw that the one road was frequently used, wide and easy; they followed this. But they found that the clearly-shining light in the distance became darker and darker the further they proceeded. Shortly thereafter, Makhahane noticed that his two companions had disappeared and he was warned that he was standing on the edge of a precipice, over which the two had fallen. He heard their wailing and lamentations and the voices of many, a shrieking of old [men and women], women and children rose bloodcurdlingly upwards from the depths. Then he awoke and also his conscience was awakened; he thought of how the winding path led to God and the wide road ended in the abyss. He had arrived [at the place] referred to by the missionary: “My Son, you will stray”. Oh how he yearned for the Grace of God which would bring him back to righteousness.⁴²

The import of the dream is obvious – Makhahane was being told by God (or, less spiritually, by his subconscious mind,) to follow the winding road. The “Two Roads” – the wide road to hell and the narrow, winding path to salvation – were common themes in evangelical preaching during the nineteenth century. From time to time, one comes across old illustrations of this allegory in people’s homes. As in other African societies, in local cosmologies, dreams have been (and, in many cases, still are) seen as potential messages from supernatural forces or as omens portending good or evil to the dreamer and his or her family or (in the case of *mabosi*) people.⁴³ In addition, Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe have pointed out that, in general, the Berlin Missionaries “did not question the reality of dreams and visions in African conversion and Christian life.” On the contrary, they saw “such experiences as genuine expressions of the work of

⁴¹ Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, p.4.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp.4-5.

⁴³ Stayt, *The Bavenda*, p.362. More generally, see J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Second Edition (Heinemann International, Oxford, 1990), numerous references.

the Holy Spirit, and encouraged their converts to report such phenomena.”⁴⁴ Makhahane was also not the first Vhavenda royal to have a dream of this nature. In 1877, *Khosi* Makwarela Mphaphuli, heir to one of the three great kingdoms in the area, had had a dream with a similar message. The missionaries had thought that he would be the royal to lead his people to salvation. However, they were to be disappointed: like the Bahananwa *dikegoši*, he never converted to Christianity.⁴⁵

In contrast, Makhahane would not close his ears to the call. Soon after *Khosi* Makhahane had had his dream, in September 1889, in what the missionaries interpreted as a divinely-inspired event, several Vhavenda Christians journeyed through the area:

They requested lodging with Makhahane for one night. When he heard that they were Christians, he compelled them to stay with him for some time. They appeared to him like angels sent by God to save him from falling into the abyss. He held them fast for six days, giving them many presents and feeding them plentifully despite his poverty, and eagerly listened to God’s word from them. The other nearby inhabitants also willingly and eagerly listened to this message, but the most zealous was the chief, who regularly held discussions with them in the morning and evening and almost spent the whole day in discussion with them. For their return journey, he provided them with food for the road, gave them a guide to show them the way and pleaded with them to send him a missionary soon.⁴⁶

Missionaries, meetings & power

Georgenholtz mission station, where Wessmann had been stationed since 1888, lay about eleven miles away from Makhahane’s mountain capital. When the returning Christians reported to him about Makhahane’s desire for a missionary, he “did not wait for him to ask twice”. On 2 October 1889, he and several companions set out for the royal village. They reached it “after a tiring journey of two days.”⁴⁷ The *khosi* was obviously pleased to see the missionary. Describing the visit, Wessmann wrote that:

At our entrance, we were received by the chief in a very friendly manner and he shook my hand silently but heartily. After he had shown me to a good place for sitting, he lay down at my feet like an exhausted little dog looking for its master’s

⁴⁴ I. Hexham and K. Poewe, “The Spread of Christianity among Whites and Blacks in Transorangia”, in R. Elphick and R. Davenport (eds), *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social and Cultural History*, (James Currey, Oxford and David Philip, Cape Town, 1997), p.132.

⁴⁵ For Makwarela’s story, see Kirkaldy, “Capturing”, Chapter 8 (especially pp.441-445).

⁴⁶ Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, p.5.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

protection. “I am only a small chief,” he began, “I am poor and have very few cattle; but I hope that the Lord God will not reject me. I am like a lost sheep that cries baah baah in the undergrowth.⁴⁸ I have often sat on these stones and called to God for enlightenment and prayed for him to send me a teacher. Now that you are really here, my heart is overjoyed. The day after tomorrow is Sunday, thus we can celebrate the Day of the Lord together!” In answer to my question about how he knew that the day after tomorrow was Sunday, he went into the hut and fetched a beautifully twisted braid in which there were five knots. “See,” he said, “every day I make a knot. On Sunday I undo them all again and then begin afresh on Monday. Today, five days of the week have gone, therefore the five knots!”⁴⁹

Presuming that this account contains more than missionary fantasy,⁵⁰ Makhahane’s actions are extremely significant. His prostrating himself at Wessmann’s feet demonstrates that he had already accepted the Christian God as worthy of great veneration. The position he adopted was that of *ulosha*, the form of polite submission adopted in the presence of royalty or people of vastly superior status. Similarly, the self-demeaning comments and praising of the superior (in this case, God) are reminiscent of etiquette when requesting a boon from a royal or superior. We have not been able to trace a single account of a Vhavenda *kehosi* assuming this position in honour of a white person – in our reading, it was God and not Wessmann whom Makhahane was respecting. The missionaries were extremely scornful of this practice, and the accompanying praises which were usually offered, as a form of greeting for *mahosi*, seeing it as being debasing and indicative of “dog-like submission”. They never even contemplated assuming this position in the

⁴⁸ The sheep imagery is significant in respect to what the *BMB*’s readers had encountered in preceding reports by the missionaries. While trying to convince Makeere to convert, Stech addressed him as follows: “Makeere, my sheep have wandered away and got lost, now I go back and forth to search for them. At first he did not understand immediately, that I was speaking figuratively, but later he did indeed indicate that he himself is one of my lost sheep.” [*BMB*, 1872, p.312.]

⁴⁹ Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, p.6.

⁵⁰ It was, indeed, highly exceptional compared to the “friendly meetings” with Bahananwa *dikgoši* recorded by the missionaries during the 1870s and 1880s. In the accounts of such meetings reproduced in the *BMB*, not even the missionaries were under any illusion that the *dikgoši* and their people were friendly with them for any reason but material and sometimes strategic gain: “The Chief Matseokane presented himself continuously to Brother Beyer in a friendly manner, because he was hoping to procure benefits from him” [*BMB*, 1872, p.309.] Also: “At the most the yes-sayers exhausted the missionary with their heathenish friendliness: ‘Yes, Sir, you are quite right!’ – or: ‘That word is very good,’ or ‘We shall come!’, or ‘You will see us!’ – and with all such deserving Words almost nothing was procured from the missionary, apart from the occasional old shirt, or a spoonful of salt or a piece of tobacco.” [*BMB*, 1876, p.373.]

presence of Vhavenda royalty.⁵¹ However, since it was here offered to God, they found it praiseworthy.

Over the next couple of days, all inhabitants of the village reportedly listened to Wessmann's preaching. He "searched for the most beautiful and best" Gospel texts, prayed earnestly that God would support him "in reaching them powerfully with the sweet truth of the Gospel" and taught them a number of hymns. Makhahane sat at the missionary's side "and sang along lustily." In Wessmann's interpretation:

They all showed great spiritual hunger, that could hardly be satisfied. Makhahane allowed no break and wanted to hear more and more. When, at one stage, I reminded the women about cooking food, Makhahane said that they also had to continue listening, God's Word also makes one replete. These were blessed hours that made an indelible impression on my heart.⁵²

Makhahane reportedly informed Wessmann that, he and his people had already attempted to change their lives "because of the Word". As a result, they had abandoned polygyny and also "broken free from many other shackles that can bind us."⁵³ If this was indeed the case, it was a remarkable achievement. In Vendaland as a whole, polygyny was frequently used as a symbol of problems with accepting Christianity, or as a reason for rejecting the religion, especially by members of the local elite. (The Makeere-Matsiokwane relationship outlined above, indicates a similar situation among the Bahananwa.) Such male elites frequently expressed concern about what would happen to their other wives if they were forced to select just one. Even male commoners used a similar argument, either worrying about sending wives away or about closing off the possibility of marrying more than one wife (however unlikely it was that they would be able to do so).⁵⁴ On the one hand, this perhaps elucidates the crucial role of the system of polygyny in providing ideological scaffolding for the patriarchal social structure. On the other, the elite had the most to lose through conversion. Bearing in mind the status which they had to uphold, and the social and

⁵¹ See, for example, *BMB*, 1874, p.131; 1889, p.546; Kirkaldy, "Capturing", pp.330-333; D. McDonald, "Vendaland", *The Blythswood Review: A South African Journal of Religious, Social and Economic Work*, X, 110, 1933, p.13 and Wessmann, *The Bawenda*, pp.15-17.

⁵² Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, p.6.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp.6-7.

⁵⁴ Among numerous references, see for example: *Bawenda-Freund*, 14(54), 1896, pp.294 & 295 and *BMB*, 1874, p.138; 1875, pp.175, 368, 400, 401-402, 406, 407, 410, 411, 412 & 415-416; 1877, p.484; 1878, pp.488 & 492; 1879, p.413; 1880, p.211; 1881, pp.185 & 358; 1883, p.368; 1886, p.218 & 1888, p.533.

economic role that they were expected to perform, it is unlikely that they could have done this successfully with only one wife.

In Wessmann's opinion:

Makhahane was overjoyed with all that occurred. Completely satisfied, he squeezed my hand many times, called me father and also sought my advice on all sorts of earthly [as well as spiritual] matters. We visited his garden and all sources of daily income. The departure was very hard for the old man. "My father," he said on the morning of [our] departure, "do you now want to go away from us, and when will you come to your children again? Do not throw us away! Do not say the road is too long or the people of Makhahane are too bad".⁵⁵

Based on modern situations, it is likely that in referring to the missionary as his "father", Makhahane was both showing him respect and attempting to flatter him. Today, the term "father" is used outside its strictly kinship sense by Tshivenda speakers to show respect to an older person or, sometimes, one who is able to bestow patronage. For example, students at the University of Venda occasionally resort to this kind of terminology when seeking favours from lecturers which involve a liberal interpretation of university rules! In our opinion, it is unlikely that any deep significance beyond the showing of respect to Wessman as an emissary of God, and a custodian of the pathway to him, may be read into this situation. Given the spiritual dimensions of political power already discussed, it is possible that Makhahane was also attempting to obtain religious and political advice from Wessmann. However, while the *kehosi* may have been recognising the missionary as a religious leader (or advisor), it is unlikely that he was abrogating political power to him.

Makhahane's "blessed passing"

After his return to Georgholtz, Wessmann became involved in the daily administration of his station. "Many months went by." During the periods of summer rainfall, when travel was difficult because of flooded rivers and marshy ground and there was a danger of malaria, contact with the outlying areas was broken. It was only at the end of July 1890 that Wessmann again set out on a mission journey in the direction of Makhahane's capital. He hoped to end the journey, and establish an out-station, there.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, p.7.

⁵⁶ *BMB*, 1891, p.482 and Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, p.7 (quotation). See also *BMB*, 1890, p.229.

On 31 July 1890, Wessmann had crossed the Mutale River and was preaching at *Khosi* Mutele's area. While there, he received a message that *Khosi* Makhahane was extremely ill and needed to see him urgently. Fearing that he was about to die, Makhahane had sent messengers to Georgholtz requesting that Wessmann come as quickly as possible. Were he not available, the messengers were to prevail upon two or three of the elders of the congregation to come in his place. Although the messengers and the missionary missed each other, by sheer good fortune, Wessmann received the news at Mutele and he was able to reach Makhahane far earlier than the *khosi* had expected him, on 1 August. He was devastated by what he found:

What a reunion and what a sad sight! The old chief lay on a mat in the shade of a tree, emaciated to almost a skeleton and close to death. How different our meeting had been a year ago, when he rushed out to meet me and he went all around [his area] with me! With difficulty, he reached out and embraced my feet with both his arms. Then he stretched out to grasp my hands and shook them. Although he was speechless, his eyes shone with visible joy – to such an extent that, during the report-back in the church at Georgholtz, [my Native Assistant] Nathaniel [Lalumbe] said that he had never before seen such love. After this, the old man lay back exhausted, and we sat still and compassionately at his [sick] bed. But after only a short pause, he again reached out, took a large sack and, speaking with great difficulty, said: "Fetch food from the garden for my father, fill this sack to the top." Here it was just the time of the green mealies which had been a rarity for us during the previous season. When we tried to tell him that the sack was too full, it was filled to overflowing; he would brook no argument. He signalled with his hand and the messengers had to leave.⁵⁷

Having no medicine with him, Wessmann gave Makhahane a little sugar. This gave the old man some relief and he reportedly "pointed to his breast and said: 'I have been saved.'" Towards late evening, his condition improved slightly and he began talking about matters close to his heart with Wessmann. "When *Mynbeer* is with me, I will not die," he said. On being introduced to Nathaniel Lalumbe, the future Native Assistant and catechist in his area, "he turned to him and said: 'My child, I will always carry you in [my] hands'."⁵⁸

By this, Makhahane seems to have been telling Nathaniel that he would always care for him. From the perspective of power relations, it is significant to note that while he had previously referred to Wessmann as "father" and continued to call him *Mynbeer*, he addressed Nathaniel as "My child". By this,

⁵⁷ BMB, 1891, pp.484-485 and Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, pp.7-8.

⁵⁸ BMB, 1891, p.485 and Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, p.8.

he made it clear that he saw himself as being in the more powerful position, the dispenser of patronage and protection.

During the course of the following day, Makhahane's condition improved markedly. The two men had wide-ranging discussions. Makhahane explained his spiritual condition to Wessmann by means of an analogy:

He drew a cross in the sand and placed a small piece of wood in the centre of this, pushing two others into the earth to the left and right [of this]. Then he pointed to the piece standing in the middle and said: "That is me, Makhahane! So I stand alone in the middle, on my right Jehovah, on my left Satan. Jehovah remains silent and does not answer me, but Satan tries to lure me to him. "Take many wives", he says, "drink a lot of beer, come to me and I will give you all sorts of pleasures." But I do not go to him, and I cannot go to Jehovah, because I do not have enough strength to do this... "But now God has given me wings, so that I can soon go to him!"⁵⁹

Wessmann spent a lot of time reading to the *kbosi* from the Bible and also reading him the church hymns which Beuster, his colleague at Ha-Tshivhase, had translated into Tshivenda. Makhahane reportedly exclaimed from time to time: "How beautiful it all is." What reportedly worried the *kbosi* the most was the fact that his son was not there to hear all of this. On Sunday morning, this wish was granted for Mamphwe returned to the village in the presence of the messengers who had been sent to call Wessmann, and attended the church service that was held. Wessmann and Nathaniel led the service. Makhahane also gave a long oration but this was largely inaudible as a result of his trembling voice, weakened by sickness.⁶⁰

After the service, Wessmann withdrew himself from the people and went to sit alone in the heights of the mountain to meditate on the position of the *kbosi*. He was faced with a deep inner conflict. It was clear that Makhahane was dying. Lutherans believe that baptism is an essential prelude to salvation through Christ. The question was whether to baptise Makhahane without his having attended baptismal lessons or to wait until Nathaniel had been able to instruct him in the ways of the church (the normal practice). If he took the former course, there was a danger that Makhahane would not be properly prepared for baptism and acceptance into the church. If he did not die, would he later backslide? The Berlin Missionaries in Vendale had come out strongly against the Methodist

⁵⁹ Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, p.8. See also *BMB*, 1891, p.485.

⁶⁰ *BMB*, 1891, pp.485-486 and Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, p.9.

missionaries in Natal for falling into what they saw as just this trap,⁶¹ while the Berlin Missionaries of Blaiberg had to deal with this Methodist challenge in their very midst. In the late 1880s two of the Society's most faithful "native assistants" shifted allegiance to the Methodist Church and took their congregations with them.⁶² On the other hand, Wessmann was worried that, if he took the latter course and Makhahane died without baptism, he would be responsible for the *kebos*'s failure to achieve salvation.

While Wessmann was wrestling with his conscience, he was joined by Nathaniel. The assistant reiterated this dilemma and also pointed out a further difficulty: "If you do not baptise him and the old man dies, then you will bear the guilt ... But, if you baptise him and the old man dies, then those who are ignorant about these things will say that Mynheer has killed him with his medicine, and they will easily be turned away from learning the Gospel."⁶³

When a person is baptised in the Lutheran tradition, water is poured on his head and the sign of the cross is made over his head. In the case of an adult baptism, after this, he or she usually receives communion. This involves the consumption of wafers (symbolising the Body of Christ) and wine (symbolising the Blood of Christ). Is there any wonder that the so-called "Heathens" may have seen a ritualistic element to these actions?

Given his concerns about the possible misinterpretation of the baptism ceremony, Wessmann took Makhahane's son into his confidence. Mamphwe agreed that he "would argue decisively against all the superstitious beliefs of his people with regard to baptism", should this prove to be necessary. He then went and informed his father that Wessmann would baptise him before the missionary himself had a chance to do so. Makhahane's joy was reportedly "indescribable" – "My son has told me all your words, ... Dear Father, do not reject me, your bleating lamb", the old man reportedly exclaimed.⁶⁴ It is possible to interpret this as a reference to the fact that he was always asking to be baptised – always nagging, or "bleating", about it. However, in our reading, this is a reference back to

⁶¹ *BMB*, 1874, p.174 and Kirkaldy, "Capturing", pp.146-147. See also *BMB*, 1891, p.367.

⁶² L. Kriel, "Negotiating identity in contested space: African Christians, white missionaries and the Boer conquest of the Blouberg in late nineteenth-century Transvaal", *Kleio*, 36, 2004, pp.148-169.

⁶³ *BMB*, 1891, p.486 and Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, p.9.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

Makhahane's reported feeling at his first meeting with Wessmann of being "like a lost sheep that cries baah baah in the undergrowth."

Makhahane was baptised late in the afternoon on Monday 4 August 1890. He chose the name August, after August Tshimange, Makwarela Mphaphuli's councillor, who had been among the first converts at Georgenholtz and had been present at the first meeting between Makhahane and Wessmann:

Nathaniel brought along the water in a wooden basin. We cleaned up the place under the leafy trees and put everything ready. The Chief's son, as well as the Chief's top councillor were present, together with my companions. We all knelt down to pray. The old man got up from his mat, while I prayed: "Shepherd, accept your sheep"...

... Everything went quietly and festively; without the pastor's gown and altar. Oh how shabby, and yet how holy, this place was, where one soul, in the middle of the heathen darkness, was led to the Lord.

The proceedings were interrupted once only by the old man who, at the question: Do you forsake Satan... etc., got ready to give a lengthy speech. "Have I not already often told you, that I no longer want any contact with the Devil ..." But at a sign from Nathaniel, he immediately after this answered with a "Yes". May he now, strengthened by his baptism, carry the cross which God has laid on him, with true resignation.⁶⁵

Wessmann further reported: "In spite of enormous external restlessness and agitation, what inner peace came over this old man, and over us all, during this celebration." It should be said that a raid by Shangaan forces from Mzila's country of Gaza, in modern Mozambique, had been expected at any moment. This was the time of the year, just after the dry winter months and before the spring rains, when food became scarce. Wessmann reported that, during the course of the previous night, and during the baptism ceremony, he had "often looked towards the river crossing and was undecided what I should do, should they come." The expected raid nevertheless did not materialise – in Wessmann's view, possibly because of his unexpected presence there. He was thus able to complete the celebrations and return home the following day.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ *BMB*, 1891, pp.486-487 (quotation) and Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, p.10. For the baptism of August Tshimange, see *BMB*, 1880, p.415. Much to the despair of the mission, Tshimange would later defect from Christianity after being appointed as a *gota* by Makwarela. He reportedly found the religious duties of this office, together with the expectation and need to have more than one wife, incompatible with continuing to be a Christian. See *BMB*, 1894, pp.201 & 369 and 1897, pp.90-91.

⁶⁶ *BMB*, 1891, p.487 and Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, pp.10-11.

Makhahane's baptism at first seemed to provide him with a new lease on life. His health seemed to improve remarkably. An out-station of Georgholtz was established on Makhahane's mountain at the end of September 1890. This was under the pastoral care of Nathaniel Lalumbe and was named Gertrudsburg, after a noblewoman in whose name a donation to the mission had been given.⁶⁷

The installation of Nathaniel, on 28 September, was the last time that Wessmann would see the *kebosi*. His apparent recovery had proved to be illusory and he passed away on 11 November 1890. Basing his report on a letter received from Nathaniel, Wessmann wrote that:

On the evening of his death, he called together all of the inhabitants of the kraal. Nathanael and his wife were also there. To those assembled, he said: "My children, you know that I loved the Word of God. It is a good Word. You must also accept it. Now I have to leave you and die. Because of this, I have had you called so that I can see and greet you one last time. Tomorrow morning early, when you get up, it is possible that you will no longer see me. I will be very sad if I go from you without giving you my last words. Now, I beg you once again, remember to love God's Word! And even if you suffer misfortune, hunger and persecution, never flee from it, because God's Word is a powerful thing." To hear once more a good message from the dying [man], Nathanael asked him: "Chief, your eyes are already becoming dark. There are two roads; the one leads to Lord Jesus, the other to eternal ruin. Which road will you now take?" He answered: "I am rushing to Jesus; I have no communion with Satan any more. I have done with him, like a virgin who has refused to say yes to her immature boyfriend." Those were his last words. Nathaniel and a few other people remained behind to keep watch at his bedside that night. Early in the morning, he was called Home.⁶⁸

Death and power

Makhahane's funeral took place on the following day. This was "the first Christian internment here, in the midst of the heathen darkness." It was not achieved without a great struggle between Nathaniel and the Makhahane royal family. Members of the royal family had begun to appear even before the *kebosi's* passing. They demanded that he hand over the body to them so that they could:

bury him according to the customs of their forefathers, carrying him across the Levubu [Luvuvhu] River to their Mountain of the Gods; because Makhahane himself had been a God and had previously made rain. Yes, some even demanded

⁶⁷ BMB, 1891, p.223 and Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, pp.11-14.

⁶⁸ BMB, 1891, pp.487-488 and Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, pp.14-15.

that a *Zauberer* had to be brought to use his dice to determine who had bewitched him and brought about his death.⁶⁹

From the point of view of the royal family, these requests were more than reasonable – it was essential that they be met. The role of the *kehosi* as protector of his community, and final arbiter of its fate, did not stop with his death. It was essential that the requisite rituals be performed with the body so that he could join the ancestors.⁷⁰ Rain-making was an important royal function, with some *mabosi* being more renowned for this than others.⁷¹ Who knew what may happen to the rains if the requisite rituals were not performed on the royal corpse and if he were not laid to rest in the royal grove? It was usual practice to identify the *muloi* responsible for bringing about a death. The *vhuloi* could then be sent back to its source or the *muloi* removed from society. Failure to do so only increased the power of evil.⁷²

Nineteenth century Berlin Mission Christianity was not susceptible to arguments of this nature, or any other form of doctrinal compromise. In response to every new argument by the royal relatives, Nathaniel steadfastly continued to indicate:

that the deceased was a believer and had been baptised; through this he had become *Mynbeer's* (Wessmann's) relative, he also had to be consulted. This he insisted on. Mynbeer was his most important relative. After they had quarrelled around the body for the whole night, eventually with daybreak they allowed the Christians to take the body. In the early morning, Nathaniel blew his horn, and the catechumens appeared to prepare for the burial.⁷³ After this the funeral took place... Nathaniel gave the funeral oration, based on the Gospel (John 11, 25): 'I

⁶⁹ *BMB*, 1891, p.488 and Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, p.15.

⁷⁰ For Vhavenda mortuary practices, and also conflicts between rulers and the missionaries over the so-called "holy forests" (burial grounds of the *mabosi*), see Kirkaldy, "Capturing", pp.326-330 and 393-399; Gottschling, "The Bawenda", p.208; Stayt, *The Bawenda*, pp.206 & 207; and van Warmelo, *Contributions*, pp.134-140.

⁷¹ *Bawenda-Freund*, 14(54), 1896, p.293; *BMB*, 1882, p.437 and Kirkaldy, "Capturing", pp.445 & 451.

⁷² *BMB*, 1873, pp.469-470; 1880, pp.3-4 & 403; 1885, pp.407-408; 1886, pp.414 & 416-417; 1887, p.485; 1889, pp.547-548; 1893, p.270; Gottschling, "The Bawenda", p.207; Kirkaldy, "Capturing", pp.351-363; Stayt, *The Bawenda*, pp.280 & 291 and Wessmann, *The Bawenda*, pp.84-85. Locally, no distinction is made between witches, wizards, warlocks and sorcerers. They are all described as *vhuloi* (singular, *muloi*). Similarly, witchcraft and sorcery are both described as *vhuloi*.

⁷³ There must already have been several people who wanted to be baptised and were attending Nathaniel's baptism classes. They now came to help him prepare for the funeral.

am the resurrection and the life”,⁷⁴ which made a great impression on the heathens. Not a single contradiction was heard from the side of the heathens. Not a single thing was done which reminded one of heathendom. Before the funeral, Makhahane’s son had expressed the wish to at least be permitted to accompany the singing with his enormous cattle horn, so enabling him to express his sorrow. But Nathaniel did not even allow this wish to be fulfilled.⁷⁵

The reference to Makhahane having become Wessmann’s relative was a direct assertion of rights over the remains of their deceased convert by the senior local representative of Christianity (acting in the name of the white missionary). Determination of the source of the *vhuloi* which had caused death and control of the funeral arrangements was the sole prerogative of senior relatives of the deceased. The wider royal family were not Christian and clearly intended to bury Makhahanae according to local rites. Thus, without this assertion of kinship, the Christians would have had no right to bury the *kehosi* according to their rites. Moreover, royal interments were performed by senior members of the royal family at night and in secret. Without claiming these rights, the Christians would not have been able to participate in the funeral at all, not even as spectators.

The references to horns are more complex. The missionaries used western musical instruments, including horns and violins to play sacred music as aids to worship. In the absence of church bells, they also used them to call the faithful to prayer.⁷⁶ Traditionally, the *phalaphala* was a horn made from kudu, sable or gemsbok horn, or wood. It could also be made from a large cow horn. The instrument was owned by a village, rather than an individual. It was used by the envoy of the *kehosi* to call subjects together for meetings, call dancers to perform the *tshikona* dance in praise of the *kehosi*, or summon warriors to assemble. It was also used to announce the first sighting of *Mafafe* (Sirius), the morning star, in winter. This announced to the *kehosi* and the village that harvesting was about to begin. Lastly, the death of a *kehosi* was usually kept secret from the community for up to a year. Special horn calls were used to announce his death only to the initiated.⁷⁷ Horns

⁷⁴ “I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet he shall live.”

⁷⁵ BMB, 1891, p.488 and Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, p.15.

⁷⁶ [Anon.], *Dietrich Baumböfener, ein Missionar aus dem Ravensburger Land*, Neue Missionschriften, 18 (Buchhandlung der Berliner evangelischen Missionsgesellschaft, 1890), *passim*; BMB, 1889, pp.539-540 and Kirkaldy, “Capturing”, pp.290-291.

⁷⁷ Dzivhani, “Chiefs”, p.35 and L. Levine, *The Drum café’s Traditional Music of South Africa* (Jacana Media, Johannesburg, 2005), p.201.

were thus intimately bound up with expressions of the power of *mabosi* and had ritual uses, including the secret announcing of royal deaths. Thus, in preventing his son from blowing his large cow horn, Nathaniel was apparently avoiding even the possibility of linking Christianity and its mortuary rites to local practice. In an effort to prove themselves as having been reborn in Christ, so-called “Native Assistants” or Evangelists were often even more doctrinally inflexible than the (extremely rigid) missionaries themselves.⁷⁸

Leboho’s “dreadful demise”

The significance of reporting the Christian death of Makhahane to readers in Berlin comes to the fore much more clearly when contrasted against the previous reportage in the *Missionsberichte* of the dreadful demise of heathen *dikegoši* such as Matsiokwane.

To both “Christians” and “heathens”, funerals were occasions ascribed with much symbolism. This was the time to facilitate the protector of society’s return to the ancestors for his continued role in their well-being. To the Christians, however, when a *kegoši* died a “heathen”, a very prominent and supposedly exemplary life was lost to Satan. The Lutheran missionaries in South Africa at this time subscribed to the African conviction that a *kegoši/kebosi* was responsible for the fate of the greater community. As we have argued from the outset, they in fact capitalized on this assumption to the extent that “targeting” rulers for conversion had become their strategy.⁷⁹ While there was still life, there was still the possibility to be saved from eternal damnation. However, the wrong direction in which a whole community was heading was never illustrated so vividly than when a “heathen” *kegoši* died and, as the missionaries believed, went to hell.

⁷⁸ See Kirkaldy, “Capturing”, Chapter 2, especially pp.289-297 and 307-314.

⁷⁹ In accordance with the mission theology of *Volkschristianisierung*, “peoples”/“nations”/ communities were seen as the “units” of conversion ; see footnote 7. Note that the legal position of the Berlin Mission Society within the Transvaal as a Boer Republic may also have encouraged the missionaries’ “chief”-centred approach. The laws of the Transvaal determined that mission stations could only be established if proof could be offered that the local African ruler had made an explicit request in this regard. See the discussion of *De Locale Wetten der Z.A.R., 1849-1885*, “Maatregelen van voorsorg tegen bedrog en misleading by de uitbreiding van het Evangelium onder de Heidenen, pp.143-4, in D.W. van der Merwe, “Die Geskiedenis van die Berlynse Sendinggenootskap in Transvaal, 1860-1900”, *Argiefjaarboek vir Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedenis* 46 I (Government Printer, Pretoria, 1984), p.14.

One has to contemplate the dreadfulness of a “heathen” *kgosǀ*s death in Berlin Mission Society terms in order to try and appreciate what a remarkable experience it must have been for a missionary to report on the Christian funeral of a converted ruler like Makhahane. In the quotations that follow, one notices how Missionary Stech tried to turn the death of Matsiokwane into an opportunity to reach his people, but he himself had to admit the futility of his efforts to transform what he himself represented as a calamitous state of affairs into imagery that would encourage the Bahananwa to convert. When comparing the case of Matsiokwane with that of Makhahane, it begins to make sense why Wessmann’s tractate was popular enough to be reprinted three times.

Under the heading “*Das Ende eines heidnischen Häuptlings*” [“The end of a heathen chief”], Stech recounts how he visited Matsiokwane when he heard about his illness, only to find that the Bahananwa had already accepted the inevitability of his death and had lain him aside to die. He seriously reprimanded the inhabitants of the *mosate* for their behaviour, not understanding how Matsiokwane could be treated so inhumanely in illness, while in health, he was represented as a “*Gottmensch*” from whom the Bahananwa presumably received everything – rain, life and food:

“Yes, I know you have no idea what love is. Love lives in illuminated hearts which know the light of God, but you are children of the dark!”

Then Stech stepped over all the magical horizontal poles that were intended to keep intruders away from the *kgosǀ*s secluded dying place...

and sat down next to the deadly-ill chief. The Chief recognized him and stretched out a weak hand in greeting. “Oh what is this sad story we hear,” the missionary started. “Yes,” replied the King, my life has died!”

“Here on earth you will only have a few days of living left. If you can believe in Jesus, our Saviour and Messiah, who has also died for you for the forgiveness of your sins, when your life dies, he will give your soul eternal life, where you can eat the best sugar all the time and won’t feel any pain any more and have everything which a person without sin can ask for. Is that not beautiful?”

“Yes indeed, that is very beautiful”

The conversation was penetrating and deep, the king answered as good or as bad as one expected of him, but of actual penetration of the Word in his heart and his conscience, of recognition of sin and a desire for salvation, Stech did not discover any trace.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ *BMB*, 1880, p.360.

Aftermath & lessons of Matsiokwane's death

After Matsiokwane's death, his son Sekete secretly visited the mission station to ensure the missionary's support for his claim to succession over his brother, Ramalao, who had the support of Matsiokwane's old rival, Machore (Kibi). It is fascinating to follow Stech's changing approach to the unfolding events as represented in his diary. This contrasts starkly with a tractate, like the one composed by Wessmann on Makhahane's life, which provided the author (who had the advantage of hindsight) with an opportunity to plot the story line from the outset and to make all the events inserted in the narrative serve the fixed purpose of the publication.

In his diary, Stech (and this even shines through in the edited version of his diary in the *Missionsberichte*) seems to have apportioned significance and meaning to the events as they happened. He saw Sekete's secret visit as the beginning of a positive alliance between the missionary and a young new *kgosi* still interested in the gospel. Eager to ensure his successful ascendancy to the throne, Stech claimed a prominent role for himself in Sekete's victory at the ensuing *pitso*. Stech made his horse available to Sekete to enter the meeting – a typical royal pose that would have been all too familiar to the Berlin Mission Society's Prussian readers. The result was positive in the eyes of both missionary and prospective *kgosi*. Sekete's grand entrance on Stech's steed, with the missionary as eager leader of his entourage, seemed to have created the impression among the Bahananwa that Sekete enjoyed the white government's support as his father's successor – no mean thing in 1879, the year in which the Mmaleboho of the Bahananwa was officially proclaimed a Government subject by the British authorities in Pretoria.

Already at this point it is possible to speculate that Sekete may have been manipulating the missionary and not the other way around. Sekete "posed" dependency on the white missionary to ensure his successful ascendancy to the throne. Stech only realized that things were not going his way when the Christian Bahananwa returned from the *pitso* days later with news that Sekete had had his rivals, Machore with his brother and his mother, strangled. Sekete's unchristian action is presented to the German reader as an unexpected and disappointing about-turn in what was a promising trajectory towards a Christian chieftaincy. We cannot help but wonder whether Sekete had not masterminded the whole sequence of

events in advance and played the missionary's eagerness to impress the would-be *kgosi* to his own advantage.⁸¹

In sharp contrast with the disappointing last days of Matsiokwane and first days of Sekete, the blessed death of August Makhahane a decade later, gave the mission the opportunity to propagandise on the life of, and example set by, Makhahane as a means of raising support in Germany for the work of the Berlin Mission in general and its Vhavenda mission in particular. With the conversion of the ruler of such a close-knit community (in which the role of the leader was seen as crucial for its well-being), it was possible to begin to imagine the community as a whole, as Christian. There was reason for patrons in Germany to support missionaries working there. It was possible to use the foothold the missionaries had gained in his area to build a significant presence among Makhahane's people.

Writing in the *BMB*, Wessmann commented thus:

August Makhahane has struggled right through all the darkness of his heathen surroundings and has clutched God's Kingdom close to him, with all his might. He remained true and faithful right up to the hour of his death. For three short months only, he was allowed to enjoy the reprieve of grace brought about by having been baptised. His faith put to shame many Bawenda [Vhavenda] Christians who have been baptised for a long time already. It also often put me to shame, who served him in my weakness. The Good Shepherd has found his bleating, baa-baa calling, sheep – like he called himself at my first visit there – and has gathered it up in his flock. I certainly would have wished that for a long time still, he would have, through his example, served to lead others to the right way of living. Yet, we comfort ourselves with the words: "What I am doing, you do not know now, but afterwards you will understand" (The Gospel of John 13: 7).

His life was like a raging river which plunges over rocks and down precipices, and then to finally discharge itself in the quiet sea. At first many a doubt tore at his heart, but his life's boat finally entered the quiet harbour where Jesus is. Daily he was surrounded by the enemy, who threatened now, and at other times physically attacked. Yet these circumstances kept him constantly alert and in prayer. The feeling of Jesus' omnipresence gave him the wings of an eagle after his baptism. As he himself once said: "God has now given me wings", so that he can fly high above all the billowing waves and storms.⁸²

The message of Makhahane's conversion and death was also summed up in the opening of the tractate about his life:

⁸¹ *BMB*, 1880, pp.358-369. The information gathered by Tlou Makhura from interviews with the Lebogo family in the early 1990s differ significantly from the version in Stech's missionary diary. See Makhura, "The Bagananwa polity", pp.114-116.

⁸² *BMB*, 1891, pp.488-489.

Under the different sheaves that are gathered together in the Mission-fields, there are some that are carried to the heavenly barns long before they have even ripened. The sinner often seeks God's mercy at the eleventh hour and, like the thief on the cross, is carried to Paradise. One such [person] was August Makhahane. He was only allowed to enjoy his state of grace for a few months after he sought Holy Baptism before God called him to the congregation above. In spite of this, in the short time of his new life, God clearly worked through him to call him from under the authority of darkness to his wonderful light. For the heathens in his vicinity, his departure was too early and this was painful to us, but when we look back at his death and burial our souls are filled with praise and thanks.⁸³

Some idea of the popularity of this message may be gathered from the fact that, as we have already seen, after its first publication in 1892, a second edition of the tractate was produced in 1897, and a third in 1903.

After Makhahane's death, Nathaniel continued to run the out-station of Gertrudsburg. The position of the mission in the area had nevertheless changed. After succeeding to the throne, Makhahane's son, Mamphwe, spent a period considering his options. It was not automatic that he would follow the reported wish of his father and convert to Christianity. In fact, it was extremely likely that he would have realised that his power would then be subservient to that of the Christian God – more particularly, his representatives on earth, the missionaries.⁸⁴ Thus, in the annual report for the year 1891, the *Missionsberichte* reported that he “has not yet experienced the need to turn to Christianity, but at least he is not preventing the people from attending baptism classes.”⁸⁵ The new *kebosi* reportedly also said to the believers: “Just pray for me... If it is God's will, I will convert.” Now that Christianity no longer enjoyed the same degree of royal favour, a number of those being prepared for baptism withdrew from the classes, but others – mostly young people – started to attend.⁸⁶

With the changing situation, the hidden “division between the believers and the heathens was brought into the open”. Nathaniel and his family, together with the twelve catechists and their relatives, left the royal capital at

⁸³ Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, p.1.

⁸⁴ Kirkaldy has noted elsewhere that, given the dominant racial ideologies of the settlers (including the missionaries), against a background of encroaching white settlement and erosion of independence, and given the control that missionaries expected to exert over the lives of their converts, any conversion by a ruler in the late nineteenth century Northern Transvaal would have resulted in a significant loss of political, as well as spiritual, power to the white missionaries [“Capturing”, especially Chapter 8].

⁸⁵ *BMB*, 1892, p.273.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.571 and Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, pp.15 & 16.

the height of the mountains and established themselves lower down, roughly half-way up on the road from the foot of the mountain to the capital village. The mission tried to make the best of this by arguing that: “Here they were more protected from the fever and it was also easy for the inhabitants of the capital village to come down to them” and that “Also the children gathered regularly for school. To protect them against wild animals, a fence surrounded their village.”⁸⁷ This nevertheless very clearly indicated a diminution in status and influence. Within two years of Makhanane’s death, this tension was to give way to outright hostility.

In March 1891, *Hosi* Mhinga, the Tsonga-Shangaan ruler, concluded an agreement of friendship with Nathaniel and the mission. By military defeat and numerous raids, he had long enforced his dominance over the Makhahanes and received tribute from them. At this time, he had recently been withdrawn from the supremacy of Mzila, and he and his vast territory placed under the nominal authority of the Transvaal Government, through a treaty signed with the Portuguese. In concluding the agreement of friendship, Mhinga’s messengers reportedly informed Nathaniel that their *bosi* had stated that:

“You are *Mynbeer*’s child and my nephew, ... in winter (that is, in July,) you must visit us. We are pleased that *Mynbeer* does not scorn our land. The teachers are our friends and protect the land and offer protection to the people against scattering.”⁸⁸

Cementing this friendship with a visit to Gertrudsburg, Mhinga was reportedly extremely impressed with the work there and became “the patron of the catechumens” there. “He then ordered Mambke [Mamphwe] not to hinder Nathaniel’s work in any way, or he would have to face Lotsinga’s [Mhinga’s] wrath.” For some time after this, “the Christians were left in peace.” However, this situation did not last.⁸⁹

During the first half of the following year, 1893, the situation reached breaking-point. Ntshetshange, an *induma* of *Hosi* Mhinga, had converted to Christianity and been baptised, taking the name of Samuel. There had long been tensions over disputed boundaries between his area of jurisdiction and the lands of the Makhahanes. Demonstrating the degree of the rift which had by then opened between the Christians and Mamphwe, the *Missionsberichte* reported that Samuel’s conversion:

⁸⁷ Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, p.15. See also *BMB*, 1892, pp.570-571.

⁸⁸ *BMB*, 1893, p.571 and Wessmann, *Der Häuptling*, p.16 (quotation).

⁸⁹ *BMB*, 1893, p.571.

again fanned up the flames of hatred of the hostile Chief Mambke of Gertrudsburg. The Chief armed a large commando, to murder Samuel. The warriors raved and shouted: “Blood ! We want blood!” But they were forced to return without any success, because Samuel had not been there. He had gone hunting. The matter was brought before the Upper-Chief Lotsinga [Mhinga], who punished Mambke with a cattle-fine and expelled him out of the country. Those of his people who remained behind, gathered around our Assistant Nathaniel.⁹⁰

With their ruler exiled, the Christians moved from Gertrudsburg to Ha-Mhinga, the area which had been allocated to *Hosi* Mhinga by the ZAR government. The congregation here consisted of forty-nine members in 1894. Royal conversion had not continued, and the Makhahane community had been rent asunder, but the basis of a Christian community had been established. The name Gertrudsburg (later reverting to Gertrudsburg) was adopted by the fourth Berlin Mission Station, established in the lands of the defeated *Khosi* Makhado in 1898.⁹¹

Conclusion

Drawing on reports from neighbouring mission fields, we have used Berlin Mission representations of the Bahananwa “heathen” *dikegoši*, in particular those of *Kgoši* Matsiokwane Leboho, to come to an understanding of the significance of the conversion of the Vhavenda *Khosi* August Makhahane to the missionaries and their German readers.

For these actors and readers, rulers who persisted in their “heathenish” behaviour reaped the hardships and sufferings that they deserved. While he would not live long after his conversion, Makhahane had – in their interpretation – reached a state of grace and was assured of his place in paradise. In missionary thinking, not only was he a shining example for others to follow, his life history and death were also strong indicators of the necessity for the continued support for mission work in the area. Only through the continued efforts of missionaries, native evangelists and true converts could the “heathens” be saved from themselves, and the consequences of their actions. Rulers such as Makhahane would be the key to achieve this.

The missionaries thought that their reports and their widely-distributed tracts provided an account of their activities, and the people amongst whom

⁹⁰ *BMB*, 1894, p.373. Ntshetshange also appears in the mission records as NeTshikalange.

⁹¹ *BMB*, 1895, p.192; 1896, p.214; 1897, pp.109 & 114; 1899, p.327 and 1900, p.306.

they worked. They also hoped that they would provide a justification for, and raise the necessary funds for, their activities, and illustrate the power of God. They did not realise, or they chose to ignore, the fact that they also provided a discourse on other forms of activity, interaction and power relations. These include local manipulations of secular and ritual power, the power of the missionaries in the light of increasing settler penetration, and the power of the literate to control what will be remembered.

Because his conversion was seen as warranting the publication of a tractate on his life, we have been able to build a far more nuanced picture of *Khosi* August Makhahane than that of *Kgoši* Matsiokwane Leboho. However, a close reading of both the *Missionsberichte* and the tract reveals that local rulers, and the wider community (including the missionaries themselves), operated in a far more dynamic world than static oppositions of “Christian” and “Heathen”, or “light” and “darkness”, allowed for. Accepting or rejecting Christianity was the result of a range of spiritual, social and political decisions. August Makhahane and Matsiokwane Leboho’s decisions about conversion were as much reflections of their relative power and status as of their personal convictions. Rulers, or contenders for power, could also treat the missionaries as pawns to be manipulated in the quest for, or the maintenance of, power. Both Sekete, the son of the “unrepentant heathen”, and Mamphwe, the son of the “blessed” convert, did just this – and ended up rejecting Christianity.

Life was much more dangerous, much more complex, and much more vibrant, than the pages of missionary reports and tractates could cope with. And yet regardless of, or perhaps because of, the very nature of their shortcomings, these sources provide us with fascinating insights into the thinking and actions of both missionaries and the local African population in the Northern Transvaal during the late nineteenth century.