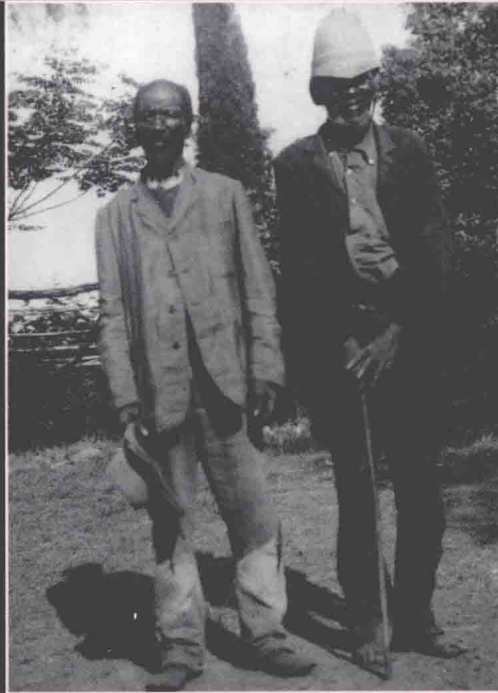


AFRICAN TEACHERS ON THE COLONIAL FRONTIER



*Tswana Evangelists and Their Communities
During the Nineteenth Century*

STEPHEN C. VOLZ

Stephen C. Volz

**African Teachers on
the Colonial Frontier**

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PETER LANG

New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
Frankfurt • Berlin • Brussels • Vienna • Oxford

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Volz, Stephen C.

African teachers on the colonial frontier: Tswana evangelists
and their communities during the nineteenth century / Stephen C. Volz.
p. cm.— (Bible and theology in Africa; v. 9)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Tswana (African people)—Religion. 2. South Africa—Church history—
19th century. 3. Evangelists—South Africa—History—19th century.
4. Botswana—Church history—19th century. 5. Evangelists—Botswana—
History—19th century. 6. Tswana (African people)—Missions—
History—19th century. I. Title. II. Series.

BR1450.V57 266.008996'39775—dc22 2010050485

ISBN 978-1-4331-0949-2

ISSN 1525-9846

Bibliographic information published by **Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**.
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the “Deutsche
Nationalbibliografie”; detailed bibliographic data is available
on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de/>.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability
of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity
of the Council of Library Resources.



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29 Broadway, 18th floor, New York, NY 10006
www.peterlang.com

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Printed in Germany

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would have remained only an idle daydream without the generous support and advice of many different people. First let me thank those who sustained me during my graduate studies at the University of Wisconsin, where much of the work for this project was conducted: Thomas Spear, whose assistance was most instrumental in enabling me to pursue this study, Florence Bernault for her guidance, James Delehanty at the African Studies center for his support, and all of my fellow students of African history.

In Botswana, I wish to recognize first my Tswana host family in Thama-ga, whose welcome into their home many years ago first opened my eyes to the depth and richness of life in Africa. I would also like to thank my friend Lore Bantse for assisting me with interviews and helping me to navigate the labyrinthine paths and relationships to be found in a Tswana village. Among the many scholars who assisted me, I thank Neil Parsons, Jeff Ramsay and Fred Morton for their helpful advice and encouragement and for their example of service and dedication to Botswana. My research was also greatly assisted by Part Mgadla's translation of letters from *Mahoko a Becwana* and Rijk van Djik's help in translating several Afrikaans items, and by Andrea Mignon's transcriptions of German handwritten texts. I also thank current Tswana evangelists, especially Rev. Moiserale Prince Dibeela of the UCCSA, who confirmed the importance and relevance of the topic.

There are a number of institutions and their staff whom I should also recognize. First, let me thank Fulbright–IIE for funding most of my research, as well as Kenyon College for providing time and support to complete the project. In Botswana, I would like to thank the University of Botswana as well as the Kgosi Sechele I Museum in Molepolole for acting as my sponsoring institutions, and I similarly thank the staff of the U.S. Embassy's public relations branch, particularly Angelinah Matenanga, for enabling me to use their facilities. There are too many others whose assistance and hospitality were vital to the success of my research and travels to list all of them here, but I should at least mention Gilbert Mpolokeng at the Botswana National Archives, Lorato Trok and Richard Aitken at Kuruman, Heinrich Bammann in Hermannsburg, and the helpful staff of the manuscripts room at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London and the Botswana Collection at the University of Botswana.

I am also indebted to the archives and libraries that provided illustrations for this book: Oberlin College Library Special Collections (1), Moffat Mission Museum in Kuruman (2 and 12), Botswana National Archives (5 and 8), Historical Papers Archive of the Cullen Library at the University of

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.

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❧ 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.”¹ 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.² 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.³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.

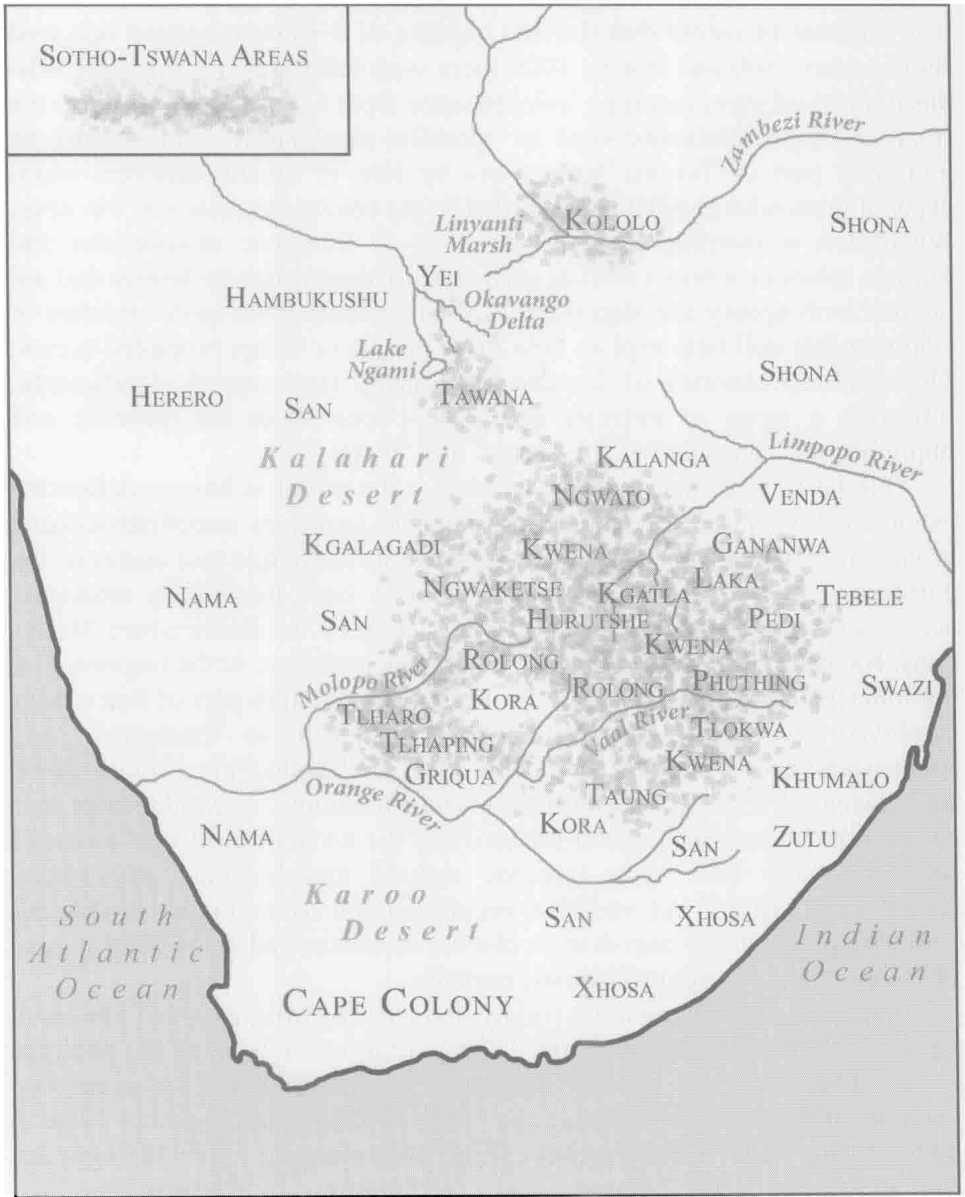
There are several reasons for this lingering gap in the scholarship, but foremost among them has been an understandable emphasis on the twentieth century. European colonization, with its attendant subjugation of Africans, gave rise to a dominant impression that European influence, including the introduction 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹

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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.¹²

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