

**Translating *Ngaka*:
Robert Moffat rewriting an indigenous healer**

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Abstract

Ngaka (the indigenous doctor and healer among Tswana speaking people) represented the spiritual priest among the Batswana and hence a great challenge to missionaries of colonial times, whose agenda was to sell a different form of spirituality. That the modern colonial framework dismissed all other forms of spiritual knowledge(s), situated the *ngaka* and *bongaka* (the practice of *ngaka*) at the centre of the colonial missionary displeasure. This article traces and analyses Robert Moffat's rewriting of the concepts of *ngaka* and *bongaka* in his 1842 monumental volume. It analyses Moffat's encounter with the *ngaka*, his characterisation of the *ngaka* and his efforts to translate the *ngaka* from a central social welfare figure among the Batswana to a marginal, if not an outright evil, pretender. The article also traces the resistance Moffat encountered in this specific endeavour. It also examines how the Batswana began to translate Moffat and his books (the Bible) into their own spiritual categories by regarding him as *ngaka* and referring to his books (the Bible) as *bola* (the divination set).

What wisdom, what meekness are necessary to him who proposes to introduce the elements of a spiritual empire, to sweep away any refuges of lies, to prostrate idols and altars in the dust, to abolish rites and ceremonies, to transform barbarous and antiquated judicial systems, and after the apostolic fashion, to turn the world upside down (Moffat 1842:258).

Introduction: translating culture

In the past three decades Translations Studies have undergone major changes, moving away from a focus on the source text and target languages and the

supposedly correct ways of translation (Bassnett & Lefevere 1990; Gentzler 2001). Contemporary Translations Studies now highlight the power relations and ideological positions of translators, publishers, target audiences, patrons and other stakeholders that shape translations (Gentzler 2001:187-203; Arduini & Nergaard 2012:8-15). Translations are also shaped by their intended functions, context and time. The data gathered from various collections of translated documents indicate that they are, more often than not, “appropriations,” “manipulations,” “transformations,” “rewritings” and cultural translations that occur to serve particular purposes (Bassnett and Lefevere 1990:1-13; Gentzler 2001:187-203; Arduini & Nergaard 2012:8-15). Postcolonial analyses of translated data, for example, “questions the Eurocentric perspectives of translation studies,” pointing out that “every translation implies a conflict between dominating and dominated cultures and languages” (Arduini & Nergaard 2012:10-11). As Mojola underlines, “post-colonial approaches to translation [...] are primarily concerned with the links between translation and empire or translation and power as well as the role of translation in processes of cultural domination and subordination, colonization and decolonization, indoctrination and control and the [...] hybridization and creolization of cultures and languages” (2004:101, also see Bassnett and Trivedi 1999). In that regard, translations are transformations.

This emphasis on translation as culture and time-specific rewritings, wedged between power struggles and ideological positions, raises questions about where translation occurs and what constitutes a translation. Translation understood as cultural translation extends the field to include studying documents that are not necessarily drawn from a written source text, as long as they involve transporting one culture to another culture. These include, among many others, such documents as travel writing, anthropological compilations, tourist diaries and missionary narratives. It is the latter that this article seeks to explore by focusing on Robert Moffat’s rewriting of *ngaka*, the indigenous healer-doctor among the Batswana, through examining some aspects of his voluminous *Missionary labours and scenes in Southern Africa*, published in 1842. I seek to explore how Robert Moffat translates *ngaka* from the Setswana cultural understanding and role to his modern colonial Christian missionary understanding of the 19th century. I shall examine the power, ideological underpinnings and functions of Moffat’s translations of *ngaka*. This process is investigated under the following sub-headings:

- *Ngaka* among the Batswana
- Robert Moffat’s background and translation agenda
- An analysis of Robert Moffat’s rewriting of the indigenous healer-doctor
- Conclusions: Batswana translations of Robert Moffat

Ngaka among the Batswana

The Batswana indigenous healer-doctors are often categorised into two: *dingaka tsa dinaka* and *dingaka tsa ditshotswa* (Ntloedibe-Kuswani 2000). The category of *dingaka tsa ditshotswa* consisted of indigenous healers who had extensive knowledge of healing herbs for various ailments. However, they did not use any form of divination. Herbalists assisted consulting clients through face to face examination. Their knowledge of herbs was often passed down through the family or through apprenticeship with an experienced herbalist (Ntloedibe-Kuswani 2000:498-510 & Amanze 2002:88-117).

The category of *dingaka tsa dinaka* also had extensive knowledge of healing herbs. In addition, they used divination sets of various forms to diagnose health conditions of individuals, families and community as well as to prescribe healing herbs and rituals. Under the category of *dingaka tsa dinaka*, there are some specialists such as *ngaka ya moroka* (the “rainmaker” – one who specialised in performing rituals of cleansing the land in preparation for good rainfall), *ngaka ya sedupe* (one who specialised in removing foreign objects from a client’s body). With the growing hybridity among the Batswana speaking ethnic groups, we now have *sangomas* (spirit mediums) and *baporofeti* (prophets) under the category of *dingaka tsa dinaka*. The *sangomas*, initially prominent among the Nguni-Venda-Shona cultural groups, are spirit mediums who use dreams, visions, dance and trance to diagnose the health of individuals, families, communities and their environments. It is common for some of them also to use divination sets. *Baporofeti* are Christian- influenced *dingaka tsa dinaka* since they often use the Bible itself for divination, in addition to dreams and visions.

Indigenous healers in both categories were charged with the health of individuals, families, the communities and their environment. In line with the Setswana philosophy of health, which understands illness as ill-relations, health describes the state of being in harmony with your family members, neighbours, the community, the ancestors and the environment (Ntloedibe-Kuswani 2000:500-501; Dube 2001:179-198). Moreover, health describes the state of being successful in your family and economic endeavours. Ill-health is a case for investigating one’s relationships with the family, neighbours, the living dead and the environment. Righting bad relations becomes the first step towards healing, with medicine coming second. Of course, some ill-health comes from evil sources, *baloi* (witches), who seek to unleash evil on other people. Yet even *boloi* (witchcraft) indicates the same problem of broken relations where, due to jealousy and revenge, people begin to hurt one another. *Dingaka tsa dinaka* therefore use their divination sets to diagnose all the relationships of a consulting client and make prescriptions accordingly. Yet the function of *dingaka tsa dinaka* was also critical in all the key stages

of a person such as birth, outdooring a child, puberty, marriage and death, for they also administered preventative medicine for various stages of an individual's life.

The divination set consist of pieces that are representative of social relationships. For example, adult male and female, young male and female, divine powers, foreign relations, among others, were represented in the divination set (Ntloedibe-Kuswani 2001:78-100; Amanze 2002:106-110). Each consulting client writes her or his story through the divination set for reading and interpretation (the doctor gives the client the small bag where the set is enclosed, whereupon the client blows some breath into the bag to enable the set to capture his/her story). *Dingaka tsa dinaka*, were priestly healer-doctors since they assisted people to connect with the divine community (*Badimo*/Ancestors). The fact that the *Badimo* were important players in the health of individuals, families and the community meant that *dingaka tsa dinaka* were the primary priests in communicating the needs and will of *Badimo* to the living. Through their divination sets they reminded clients the need for venerating *Badimo*. The Ancestors (*Badimo*) too were a positive force, the lever between the Modimo (God) and the community that reminded people the need to maintain healthy and ethical relations between themselves and the environment.

Accordingly, *dingaka tsa dinaka* were key players in public affairs and public health of the whole community (Moffatt 1842:208; Schapera 1948:60-70). Every Kgosi had his own *Ngaka ya morafe* or *dingaka tsa morafe* (the doctor of the community), who assisted in *go bewa ga Kgosi* (the installation of the King-Chief); the ritual treatment of weapons of the army (*go foka marumo*); to purify the whole land (*go thapisa lefatshe*), to declare the start of the ploughing season (*go bolotsa letsema*), preparation of the land for ploughing as well as the treatment of initiation school regiments (*mephato*). Although the Kgosi was the chief authority who sanctioned the public rituals, the relationship between *ngaka ya morafe* and the Kgosi was very close. The Kgosi was the keeper of *dipheko tsa morafe* (sacred medicine of the community), which were used for the general health of the community, such as purifying the land for a successful rainy season (Schapera 1948:70). History shows that in some cases the Kgosi was the principal *ngaka ya moroka* because he was the administrator of rainmaking rituals (Schapera 1948:70). Given the unpredictability of rainfall among the lands of the Batswana, *ngaka ya moroka* was an important figure. In times of drought, he would be called forth to perform further rituals to cleanse the land, community and atmosphere so that the rains could come. Just as Setswana cosmology held that ill-health was caused by unhealthy relationships, drought was seen as ill-health related to human beings' pollution of the environment. It was in this public capacity that *dingaka tsa baroka* were visible forces to

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missionaries and regarded as opponents of the Christian faith. They were seen to reinforce the recognition of *Badimo* instead of the Christian God. Robert Moffat dedicates more than a chapter to *dingaka tsa dinaka*, specifically the *moroka*. It is a full narrative construction with leading, opposing and minor characters with a plot, setting and climax.

Robert Moffat's background and translation agenda

The opening paragraph of Robert Moffat's *Missionary labours and scenes in Southern Africa* highlights the ideological perspectives that inform his cultural translation. He holds that "Africa still presents a comparative blank on the map ..." and "that to this day its interior region constitutes a mystery to the white man, a land of darkness and terror, to the most fearless traveller" (Moffat 1842:2). The rest of the first chapter gives a detailed description of the people of Southern Africa, ranging from the current day Namibia up to Mozambique. Although he characterises the people as "ignorant savages" "barbarians" and "heathen tribes," the land is definitely occupied. How and why then is Africa a "blank map" and why is it a land of darkness and terror? Such characterisation only makes sense in his given elaboration; namely, that it remains unknown to the white man, thereby highlighting that, in his view, what is unknown to a white man, constitutes a blank, darkness and terror.

The characterisation of Africa as a blank map was also an ideological discourse that invited the occupation of Africa by other colonising white men to claim the "supposedly" blank maps for themselves. The darkness metaphor serves, of course, to justify his presence and work as a missionary, namely, to bring light. It also invites other missionaries to bring their missionary lights. Moffat's writing was thus a colonising tract that invited colonising agents to occupy the supposedly blank spaces. The narrative depicts Moffat as a man of his own time – of a colonial context that held a particular construction of Africa and all other non-Western nations. Travel narratives and novels, such as those of Henry Stanley and Joseph Conrad, harped on these images, spinning an ever thickening inter-textual web of repetitive images and metaphors, so much so that they could, of course, no longer see anything else save blank maps and darkness –and themselves the redeeming torch bearers. As Dube (2013:34) points out:

Henry Stanley, a naturalized American, who was commissioned to find David Livingstone, later returned to the continent to explore the rivers and lakes of central Africa. Stanley recorded his exploration in the book, *Through the Dark Continent* in 1877. He published another volume in 1890 entitled *In Darkest Africa: Quest, Rescue and Retreat of Emin*

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Governor of Equitim. The image of Africa as a Dark Continent is thus sometimes associated with Henry Stanley.

Building on the genealogy of Africa as a “blank map,” and evoking the trope of darkness, Joseph Conrad entitled his novel *Heart of Darkness*. He sarcastically referred to it as the biggest blank, featuring one of his characters saying “when I grow up I will go there!” (1902:4). That Moffat’s *Missionary Labours* opens by constructing Africa as blank map and a place of darkness, highlights that his writing is an ideologically driven cultural translation of the Batswana – one that is “embedded in cultural and political systems and in history” (Bassnett & Trivedi 1999:4). Bassnett and Trivedi assert that

translations are never produced[...] untainted by power, time, or even the vagaries of culture. Rather, translations are made to respond to the demands of various groups within that culture [...] A culture, then, assigns different functions to translations of different texts,” and that “function” of translation has very little to do with the transfer of information which is so often claimed to be its one and only *raison d’être* (Bassnett & Trivedi 1999:7-8).

Moffat’s characterisation of Africa and its people highlights that he writes squarely within the colonising language and ideology of his time. My earlier reading of his travel narrative (Dube 2013:79-103) highlighted that Moffat held that “Satan is obviously the author of polytheism of other nations”,¹ Moffat held that the same Satan “has employed his agency with fatal success in erasing every vestige of religious impression from the mind of the Bechuana, Hottentots and Bushmen, leaving them without a single link to unite them to the skies” (Moffat 1842:244). Moffat held that the Batswana –

religious system, like those streams in the wilderness, which lose themselves in the sand, had entirely disappeared, and devolved on the missionary to prepare for the gracious distribution of the waters of salvation in that desert soil, sowing the seed of the word, breathing many prayers, and shedding many a tear, till the Spirit of God should cause it to vegetate, and yield fruits of righteousness (Moffat 1842:244).

¹ In the write up, Moffat describes mostly eastern religions, highlighting that anything that is not Christianity is relegated to inadequacy.

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As a gardener by training (Doke 1958:85), Moffat had a huge agenda to translate the land, the people, the soil and the spirit of the Batswana into a “spiritual empire” (Moffat 1842:258). To prepare for springs of salvation in the desert land and minds of the Batswana, Moffat summarised his agenda as seeking: “to sweep away any refuges of lies, to prostrate idols and altars in the dust, to abolish rites and ceremonies, to transform barbarous and antiquated judicial systems, and after the apostolic fashion, to turn the world upside down” (Moffat 1842:258). His was a huge programme for the cultural translation of the Batswana that proceeded by dismissing, discrediting and abolishing, what he regarded as lies, barbarous and antiquated social systems of the Batswana and replacing them with a Christian spiritual empire. His translation agenda makes no pretence about faithfulness or fidelity to the source text, in this case, the oral cultures of the Batswana. In line with his ideological perspective of seeing a blank map and darkness, Moffat had to proceed by denying, erasing and naming presence as nothingness. In reading his *Missionary Labours*, one is struck by his repeated denial that the Batswana had a sense of God, which is, ironically, paired with a description of their Modimo (God), *Badimo* (Ancestors) and *Ngaka* (priestly-healer) (Moffat 1842:261). He even writes that in the translation of the Setswana Bible, they decided to adopt the name Modimo to translate the biblical God (Moffat 1842:260-261) – all this is acknowledged while, as said, he continues to emphasise that “Satan has employed his agency with fatal success in erasing every vestige of religious impression from the mind of the Bechuana, Hottentots and Bushmen, leaving them without a single link to unite them to the skies” (Moffat 1842:244)(Emphasis added). Along with characterisations like “savages” and “barbarians,” these are the translational premises for sweeping away native beliefs in order to plant the “Christian spiritual empire.” They are centred on an ideology of blank maps and darkness.

We must not assume, however, that the Batswana were helpless and willing parties in Moffat’s cultural translation programme. Kgosi Mothibi of the Batlhaping, who had said he will receive missionaries and father them, had been quite resistant to welcome them. He finally allowed missionaries to settle in Kuruman, 30 km away from his town, underlining that the missionaries should not teach. Those who attended the services seemed to have been instructed not to believe the missionaries’ teaching. Moffat’s narrative amply attests to Batlhaping’s resistance to the missionary teaching. As Dube (2013:79-103) outlines, Moffat (1842:217 & 221) was often told that his preaching was “*Maka hela*,” only lies and sometimes he was asked if it does not tire the missionaries to keep talking about a certain Jesus (Moffat 1842:220). At other times, he was ridiculed and kindly advised to watch out lest his talk lead people to think he has lost his mind. Moreover, Moffat narrates that “when we attempted to convince them of their state as sinners,

they would boldly affirm ... that there was not a sinner in the tribe” (Moffat 1842:254). The Batswana were not only resistant to the gospel, but they also harboured a persistent suspicion that the missionaries were forerunners and agents of colonial government, sent “to prepare by pacific measures the minds of the natives for the control of a foreign power” (Moffat 1842:236). They were thus watching the missionaries very closely, and one time Moffat and his colleagues were forced to break wooden soldiers featured in the church clock, for its strutting little images were a sure sign that colonial powers were coming to enslave them and that the church itself was “*nlu ea Kholego*,” House of Slavery (Moffat 1842:230). Underlining the resistance of the Batswana to his Christian gospel, Moffat said, “Our labours might be compared to those of a husbandman labouring to transform the surface of a granite rock into arable land, on which he might sow his seed” (Moffat 1842:245).²

Robert Moffat’s re-writing of *Ngaka*

Yet the encounter with *ngaka*, especially *moroka*, the priestly-healer-doctor who specialised in rainmaking rituals, perhaps constituted Moffat’s most challenging cultural translational project.³ *Ngaka* was the quintessential rival of the Christian missionary, for he was indeed a healer priest who mediated the welfare of the community with Divine powers through the veneration of Ancestors. Moffat dedicates a full narrative chapter to *ngaka*. He features *ngaka* as the main character with the whole nation as supporting characters, while Moffat, his colleagues and the weather are the opposing characters. The setting is defined as a parched land where persistent drought has lasted too long leaving many cattle dead, while the living ones were just moving skeletons. Here his drama to translate *ngaka* unfolds.

Moffat’s opening of the chapter admits to *ngaka*’s public influence as well as exposes Moffat’s translational agenda. He writes as follows:

² To see a collection that better represents the voices of the Batswana, read P. Mgadla and S. C. Volz (translators/compilers). *Words of Batswana: Letters to Mahoko a Becwaana 1883-1896*. Cape Town: Van Riebeck Society, 2006.

³ The journeys of Scottish men writing about Batswana indigenous-healers continued with David Livingstone, who held a reasoned argument with one of them, arguing that they cannot command the clouds, only God can, and the *ngaka* retorting, “but God told us differently” in J W Parsons. *The Livingstones at Kolobeng*, 1997, (Gaborone: Pula Press), 46-47. The contemporary Botswana-focused and world famous Scottish writer, A MacCall Smith. *No! Ladies’ Detective Agency*, 2002, (New York: Anchor Books), 91, has not stayed away from indulging in Moffat’s legacy by featuring a boy who is to be killed by “a witch doctor for medicine” and stating that “in the late twentieth century...this heart of darkness has thumped out like a drum.”

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In every heathen country the missionary finds to his sorrow, some barriers to his usefulness, which require to be overcome before he can expect to reach judgement of the populace. Sorcerers or rainmakers, for both offices are generally assumed by one individual, are the principal with whom he has to contend in the interior of Southern Africa. They are ... our invertebrate enemies, and uniformly oppose the introduction of Christianity among their countrymen to the utmost of their power ... they constitute the very pillars of Satan's Kingdom, in all places where such impostors are found. By them his (Satan's) throne is supported and the people kept in bondage. The rainmaker is in the estimate of the people no mean personage, possessing an influence over the minds of the people, superior even to that of their king, who is likewise compelled to yield to the dictates of this arch-official ... Each tribe has one and sometimes more (Moffat 1842:208).

The communally influential priestly healer-doctors are, in relation to missionaries, identified as "barriers," principal "invertebrate enemies," which unless overcome, the missionaries will not reach the minds of people, for *dingaka* oppose the introduction of Christianity. There is fierce competition among the priestly guilds.

For the setting, Moffat describes how a severe and persistent drought that went on for several years had devastated the country. In desperation, the Batlhaping sent for a highly reputed "Rainmaker" from Bahurutse, who supposedly had an elaborate career in bringing down the "watery treasures". Approaching the town, the "rainmaker" sent a harbinger to announce his arrival, as well as to instruct that all people should wash their feet. Clouds began to gather, thunder and lightening appeared in the sky and some huge drops of raindrops began to fall down as the famous Bahurutse "rainmaker" arrived. Thrilled multitudes sang and danced, so that the "very earth rang" with joy as they welcomed him. The "rainmaker" supposedly proclaimed to the happy multitudes that persistent drought was from henceforth history, for this very year there would be so much rain, so much so that women should not plant their gardens by the valleys, but by the hillside, lest their crops get water-clogged. After this dramatic arrival, the missionaries supposedly received some visitors from the community, who said: "Where is your God? Have you not seen our Modimo? Have you not beheld him cast from his arm his fiery spears and rend the heavens? Have you not heard with your ears his voice in the clouds ... You talk of Jehovah and Jesus, what can they do?" (Moffat 1842:212).

Seeing that the priestly-healer doctor is his arch-rival and barrier, Moffat thus begins his translation project of rewriting *dingaka* from their positive role in the society to a negative one. Under the power of his pen the influential, revered priestly healer-doctors are rewritten as “sorcerers,” “rainmakers,” “impostors,” the pillars of Satan’s Kingdom, supporters of Satan’s throne, who keep their communities in bondage. Their herbal knowledge, which had sustained communities from time immemorial, are suddenly categorised as “nostrums” (Moffat 1842:218). In Moffat’s rewriting, the healer-doctors no longer serve the positive role of keeping the society healthy in relations to one another, their environment and divine powers (Ntloedibe-Kuswani 2000). Indigenous healer-doctors have been instantly translated into the realm of evil – Satan’s kingdom.⁴ Such a translation did not even pretend to be faithful to its source culture, rather it was driven by its agenda, seeking to “overcome” the “barriers”. This cultural transformation is a violent act of rewriting the Other from a Christian and Western worldview.

Moffat’s narrative chapter then describes the various rituals undertaken by the community to receive rain under the leadership of the priestly “rainmaker.” They constitute a plot with several tensions and a climax. These included asking everyone to wash their feet; asking women not to plant lest they scare the clouds away; asking women to collect certain herbs that the rainmaker burnt on top of the mountain; complaining that instead of being rewarded with goats they should reward him with ox and they will get “ox-rain”; instructing people to bring him an unblemished baboon for his ritual, upon failure he asked them again to bring a lion’s heart for the clouds required a strong medicine (Moffat 1842:216). According to Moffat, the “rainmaker” sometimes instructed that a dead person should not be buried but dragged and left in the open,⁵ while in another incident, he instructed that a three weeks old corpse should be exhumed, for it was buried with insufficient purification rituals.⁶ While outlining the rituals and activities of the “rain-

⁴ In accordance with the spirit of the time, the relegation of African knowledge and worldviews to evil was widespread. Paul H. Gundani, “Views and Attitudes of Missionaries toward African Religions in Southern Africa During the Portuguese Era” in *Religion and Theology* 11/3&4, 2004:298-312 and Marku Hokkanen, “Scottish Missionaries and African Healers: Perceptions and Relations in Livingstonia Mission, 1875-1930,” *Journal of Religion in Africa*. Vol. 34, 2004:320-347.

⁵ This is quite a problematic documentation, since the priestly healer-doctor, who presided over rainfall rituals focused on cleaning the land from all forms of pollution. Amongst the acts of purifying the land included searching the land for all unburied bodies and burying them, since exposed bodies were regarded as an offence to the *Badimo*, Ancestors, who could then withhold the blessing of rain.

⁶ See Janet Wagner Parson, *The Livingstones at Kolobeng 1847-1852*, 1997, (Gaborone: The Botswana Society and Pula Press), 46-47, who reproduces Moffat narrative plot in a different context of the Bakwena.

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maker,” Moffat punctuates his activities with weather reports of rain clouds either coming by, with scattered thunder and lightening and passing by without a drop of rain, or not coming at all. Once the rain came, but it was way too insufficient to make a difference in the severely parched earth.

As all the rituals seem to fail, Moffat highlights how the interrogation of the conscience of the community was intensified: Neighbouring Bushmen are blamed for cutting particular trees that should not be cut, and the missionaries were seen as the causes of unanswered prayers and were subjected to interrogation. Consequently, church bells, prayers, Moffat’s long beard, missionaries’ gaze into the empty sky were evil portents preventing rain – and the Batlhaping were told that they need not expect rain as long as the missionaries are in their country (Moffat 1842:219). Tension and confrontation between the community and missionaries grew; and a face to face confrontation between the Moffat and the Bahurutse occurred. Finally, Moffat writes, the community lost its faith in the “Mohurutse rainmaker’s rituals and sought to kill him, but he Moffat, pleaded that his soul should be spared. So he was expelled from the village and ended up among the Bangwaketsi of the warrior king, Makaba, who supposedly killed the famous “rainmaker” and gave his wife to his son (Moffat 1842:221).

In his conclusion of the chapter, Moffat writes that “It is a remarkable fact that a rainmaker seldom dies a natural death” but constantly falls prey to their employers, who “first adore, then curse, and lastly destroy” him (Moffat 1842:221). Moffat’s detailed description of the “rainmakers” fame, impact, rituals, failure and death serves to underline that the *ngaka* is an imposter, his medicine nostrums, he is a barrier to the gospel and, indeed, the pillar of Satan’s Kingdom. Moffat thus performs a narrative castration of the “rainmaker’s potency and elimination of a barrier by way of translation. While Moffat admittedly wished for the removal of the indigenous healer-doctors, the death of the rainmaker is safely placed in the hands of the warrior king, Makaba. Such an erasure was an instant success in Moffat’s mighty pen than in concrete terms in the minds of the people, hence Moffat is forced to admit that although “his removal afforded us the sincerest gratification ... the public mind was opposed to our residence in the country. It was in vain that we appealed to the injunction of Jesus our Lord and Master: every argument was always met with vehemently savage vociferations of “*Maka hela,*” lies only” (Moffat 1842:221).⁷

⁷ To see a collection that better represents the voices of the Batswana, read Mgadla, P. and S. C. Volz (translators/compilers). *Words of Batswana: Letters to Mahoka a Becwana 1883-1896*, 2006, Cape Town: Van Riebeck Society.

Batswana translation of Robert Moffat

As indicated above, the Batswana of Robert Moffat *Missionary Labour* were resisting hearers of the Christian gospel. While Robert Moffat was translating the Setswana medical guild into the realm of evil, they were translating Moffat into their own cultural worldview. This applied to how they viewed Moffat's books (the Bible); how they viewed Moffat himself and his own medicine and, lastly, how they understood the Jesus that he was introducing to them. While in all these cases we have to rely on Moffat, we still have to try to hear the voices of the Batswana behind his voice.

To begin with Moffat's books (the Bible), they were often a subject of much curiosity, given that the mysteries that he sought to teach were drawn from them. The divine powers that Moffat and his colleagues were eagerly selling were based on them. On his visit to Bangwaketsi, for example, Moffat (1842:258) says, "My books puzzled them; they asked if they were my *bola*, prognosticating dice". The books were regarded as part of a white men's power. Consequently, one Kgosi asked him, "What, is it the precepts of that book?" pointing to the gospel of Luke which I held in my hand, "which has made you what you are, and taught white people such wisdom; and is it *mahuku a molemo* (good news)?" (Moffat 1842:258).

While Moffat dismissed the indigenous healer-doctors, the Batswana were increasingly integrating him within their category of healer-doctors. His Bible was after all his divining set. The overall goal of the Christian gospel as the art of improving people's lives, in connection with divine powers, was heard as a role of the *ngaka*, who connects with the *Badimo*, the intermediaries, on behalf of the welfare of the community. On one such occasion, Moffat observes, that "When I introduced Divine subjects, man's misery, and man's redemption, he looked at me with mouth dilated and asked "*A ha u morihi wa Pula?*" Art thou a rainmaker?" (Moffat 1842:311). Notably Moffat does not dispute or approve this characterisation – indicating that he wishes to occupy this cultural space, as part of displacing the indigenous healer-doctors from their priestly duties. That Moffat sometimes administered medicine to several people also increased his image as *ngaka* among the Batswana. One such person was the wife of the famous Mohurutse rainmaker. She got healed by Moffat's medicine. The rainmaker supposedly began to display some respect for Moffat. Trusting or testing Moffat as one within his own league, the Mohurutse rainmaker consulted him when women refused to follow rituals that involved them. Moffat, however, displayed open hostility and rivalry saying, "confess you have been lying" and continued to say, "wait till we missionaries get the women on our side as they are now on yours and there will be no more rainmakers in the country" (Moffat 1842:218). The famed Mohurutse rainmaker responded, "May that time never

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arrive” (Moffat 1842:218). He departed and intensified the war against Moffat and his colleagues throughout the community. Moffat also used his administration of medicine to collect intelligence against his arch rival, for he could visit his patients to check on them in order to collect public news.

The Batswana also began to liken Moffat’s favourite person, Jesus, to the *ngaka*, given the numerous attestations of his healing powers in the book, Luke’s gospel. One such interesting occasion was during Moffat’s first visit to Makaba, the warrior King of Bangwaketsi. He had visited at the invitation of Makaba, who had other interests at heart. Moffat, instead, was delivering his favourite subject, namely Jesus. Kgosi Makaba, seated with his elders and *dingaka*, was visibly bored with the subject that he picked his knife and resumed working on a jackal skin while humming a native tune. Moffat continued preaching and mentioned that Jesus also raised a dead person. One elder, struck by Jesus’ power over death, exclaimed, “What an excellent doctor he must have been to make a dead man alive.” Jesus was thus perceived as a powerful *ngaka*. Moffat did not dispute the characterisation of Jesus as *ngaka*. Rather, he carried on. As he says, “This led me to describe his power and how the power would be exercised at the last day in raising the dead” (Moffat 1842:271). Kgosi Makaba was roused from his boredom by the subject of Jesus raising all the dead. “All”? asked Makaba, “including all those who were eaten by lions, hyenas, crocodiles would be returned to live?” (Moffat 1842:271). Moffat confirmed. The idea sounded gross and alarming to the warrior King Makaba – that one day he might face all his enemies combined! After inquiring with from his elders if they ever heard such strange news and receiving a resounding “no”, Makaba, with his hand on Robert Moffat, said, “The dead cannot rise! The dead must not rise!” (Moffat 1842:271). The Christian resurrection was unacceptable and repealed. Jesus, the powerful *ngaka*, who raised and who would raise all the dead, was as gross and unacceptable to Makaba as when Moffat heard the famous Mohurutse *ngaka* asking the Batlhaping to exhume a corpse and purify it. Inasmuch as the Batswana began to integrate Jesus into their own worldview, regarding him as *ngaka*, he was also received critically according to their own understanding. The concept of an afterlife was known and accepted as represented by *Badimo* (Ancestors) who were regarded as the living dead. The concept of a mass resurrection as biblically described is rejected, however: Jesus must not rise!⁸

The project of writing Jesus as *ngaka* did not end with the Bangwaketsi of Makaba. In 2000, Seratwa Ntloedibe-Kuswani published an article entitled, “*Ngaka* and Jesus as Liberators: A Comparative Reading.”

⁸ See Bohannon, Laura. (1966). “Shakespeare in the Bush,” *Natural History*, August-September, who tells a story about the Tiv of Nigeria, who received the Hamlet by translating the story into their own cultural understanding.

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She argued that there was no inherent conflict between *ngaka* and Jesus since they are both concerned with the welfare of people in their connection with divine powers. Insofar as both figures fight oppressive powers over the lives of people, *ngaka* and Jesus are comrades in the struggle for liberation!

Conclusion

In this article, I sought to explore how and why Robert Moffat, a missionary in the modern colonial context, translated *ngaka*, the indigenous healer-doctor from his or her position as a central figure in the welfare of the Batswana, to the very opposite position – namely, that of a sorcerer and a pillar of Satan’s kingdom (Moffat 1842:208). I have regarded the oral cultures, of Setswana speaking people as source texts, which Moffat’s writing translated in his *Missionary Labours* of 1842. Moffat’s translation of Setswana indigenous knowledge and worldview was a rewriting and a manipulation project that served the purpose of displacing the oral culture through viewing all presence and knowledge as absence – blank spaces and darkness – while all people became “ignorant heathens,” “savage people” and barbarians.” Moffat’s rewriting of Setswana culture is consistent with the modern colonial rewriting of the Other (Stanley 1890; Conrad 1902 & Hegel 1956). An African indigenous scholar, reading these colonial translations is in a unique and terrible position, for they are reading a text about themselves, which is not written for them (Dube 2000:121-124). It was white people writing about Africa, for their fellow white people – the modern colonial agenda of colonising and converting the Other. Modern colonial writers hardly imagined they will be a day when black Africans would read these cultural translations. Reading the colonial archive, as an indigenous African, is therefore, a position of eavesdropping; a position of finding colonising constructions about yourself. The worst part of this reading experience, however, is encountering how the colonial translators have rewritten you (the black African), your people and their worldviews as ugly, ignorant, blanks, darkness and pillars of evil. They are texts of hate, “texts of terror” – colonising texts. What colonial cultural translations of the Other seek to do is best summarised by Ngugi wa Thiongo, who names them as cultural bombs. Ngugi (1986:3) maintains as follows:

The biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against a collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one

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wasteland of non-achievement. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves.

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