


Biblical discourses and compulsory monogamy among the Vatsonga people in South Africa

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The 19th-century missionary-biblical discourses that marked the missionary-colonial project promulgated under the guise of Christianisation and civilisation of the heathens in Africa rendered the recipients as slaves. In Africa, the perpetual legacy of this project still manifests among others by the continued demonisation of African cultural practices. Among the vast South African conventional practices that were frowned upon by the missionaries and continue to be demonised through biblical rhetoric is polygamy. This article investigated how the 19th-century missionaries' biblical discourses promulgated compulsory monogamy among the Vatsonga people in South Africa. It further looked at how the narrative continues to be spread by Christians using biblical discourses in contemporary South Africa. The article argued that this narrative is tantamount to what Wa Thiong'o calls a 'cultural bomb', which uses biblical discourses to eradicate African cultural practices. It further contended that the hegemonic superiority complex of Western epistemologies and cultural practices needs to be problematised. Thus, the article used the desktop research methodology to collect and analyse data. The findings revealed that 19th-century biblical discourses are still used as a colonial tool to disregard the Vatsonga cultural marital practices.

Contribution: This article aims to contribute to the body of knowledge and discourses that address the legacies of colonialism around the coming of missionaries in Africa. Therefore, this task was sought to be completed by the decolonial call to change the narrative.

Keywords: biblical discourses; compulsory monogamy; polygamy; African Cultures; decoloniality; Africanisation; servitude.

Introduction

The 19th-century missionary biblical discourses that marked the missionary-colonial project promulgated under the guise of Christianisation and civilisation of the heathens rendered the recipients as slaves, and it still has a firm grip in Africa (Comaroff 2021; Ndrimanja 2021). These biblical discourses include but are not limited to sermons in the pulpit, Bible studies, Bible lessons, debates around the Bible and the God-talk, sometimes referred to as the 'Thus says the Lord rhetoric' (Shingange 2023:4). In Africa, the perpetual legacy of this phenomenon is manifested among others by the forms of Christianity that uphold the demonisation of African cultures, languages, traditions and religious practices. Mothoagae and Shingange (2024) observe the manifestation of this phenomenon among the Batswana people of South Africa, whom they claim were subjected to the demonisation of their culture and the obliteration of their being.

Indeed, the use of biblical discourses in this fashion that is marked by the demonisation rhetoric did not only affect the Batswana people, but other black South African communities such as VhaVhenda and Vatsonga people were also affected and continue to be affected by the same (Maluleke 1995; Muthivhi 2018; Ndou 2007). In the same vein, Maluleke (1993) observes that among the Vatsonga people:

The founding missionaries had intentions somewhat beyond the mere pitching of a preaching tent. Right from the start, they aimed to establish something that would dig roots into the culture of the people they were going to serve. (p. 239)

Thus, among the vast Vatsonga cultural practices that were frowned upon by the missionaries and continue to be demonised using biblical rhetoric is polygamy. This happens through the enforcement of the hegemonic position of compulsory monogamy within these spaces.

Note: Special Collection: Reception of Biblical Discourse, sub-edited by Itumeleng Mothoagae (University of South Africa, South Africa).

Thus, the author writes from the position of servitude; this is because the author writes as a black South African, Tsonga-speaking theological scholar, whose community continues to be affected by this narrative. This positionality emanates from being at the receiving end of the missionary-colonial projects and the Western-centric theology that not only disregarded blackness but also deemed everything African as non-being, what Fanon (1963) refers to as being pushed into the zone of non-being. Again, this servitude also stems from belonging to a culture that continues to be disregarded and marginalised by biblical discourses that concomitantly promise liberation while enforcing missionary-colonial agendas. This article investigates how biblical discourses hegemonised compulsory monogamy among the Vatsonga people of South Africa and used it as a form of dominance and conquest (Tembo 2022:410). As a point of departure, the article analyses secondary literature to present the background of the Vatsonga people's cultural life surrounding their marital life. Then the article moves further to present the genesis of this phenomenon by discussing the missionary encounters with the Vatsonga people of South Africa. Furthermore, it presents the use of biblical discourses in the enforcement of compulsory monogamy and its enforcement among the Vatsonga people of South Africa. That is followed by the problematisation of the narrative and the call to decolonise the practice.

The Vatsonga cultural marital lives

The extensive discussion of the historical background of the Vatsonga people goes beyond the scope of this article. However, it is worth noting that Maluleke (2017) provides a comprehensive background of the Vatsonga people. In describing this tribe, Maluleke (2017) asserts that they are 'an ethnic group composed of a large number of clans found in South Africa, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Swaziland. He further pointed out that Xitsonga (the language of the Vatsonga) is spoken in all four of these countries. Thus, 'In South Africa alone, Xitsonga is a language spoken by over two million people' (Maluleke 2017:iii). One common experience that the Vatsonga people of South Africa share with other Africans is their experience of servitude embedded in the missionary-colonial [mis]use of the Bible to enforce colonisation and the Western cultural superiority complex. Succinctly put, Tembo (2022:416) argues that 'It is within this Christian conception of slavery as a degraded and debased form of human existence with no social standing that black African slaves were emerging'. Thus, the hegemony of monogamy enforced by the demonisation of polygamy was a form of enslavement of Africans and thus, the Vatsonga people of South Africa. This form of slavery is defined by Mbembe (2001) when asserting that:

Who is a slave, if not the person who, everywhere and always, possesses life, property, and body as if they were alien things? Possessing life and body as alien things presupposes that they are like external matter to the person who bears them, who serves as their scaffolding. In such a case, the slave's body, life, and work may be attacked. The violence thus perpetrated is not supposed to affect the slave directly, as something real and

present. Thus, 'slave' is the forename we must give to a man or woman whose body can be degraded, whose life can be mutilated, and whose work and resources can be squandered – with impunity. (p. 235)

In the backdrop of Mbembe's (2021) assertion, the missionary-colonial attacked the Vatsonga people's cultural marital lives by enforcing compulsory monogamy. The Vatsonga people were made to see their polygamous marriage as vile, something that could deter them from accessing God who was presented as a monotheistic being who used monopoly to enforce monogamy as the only accepted form of marital life (Mothoagae & Shingange 2024). These concepts of monotheism, monopoly and monogamy are problematic as Mbembe (2001:226) opines that 'Christian monotheism based itself on the idea of universal dominion in time as well as in space. It evinced an appetite for conquest, of which conversions were only one aspect'. So, not only monotheism but also monopoly and monogamy were aimed at universal conquest. Thus, it is important to briefly look at the Vatsonga cultural marriage systems to understand how servitude was used to control and modify marital practices.

The Vatsonga cultural marriage systems

The importance of marriage among the Vatsonga people of South Africa cannot be discussed in isolation. According to (Sahaya & Kyomo 2004):

Mogambi sees marriage as a rite of passage together with the others – birth, puberty, and death. He suggests that the undermining of these rites in tropical Africa through colonial and missionary indoctrination has eroded African self-confidence and identity. (p. 4)

Indeed, the understanding of marriage in Africa has been redefined and reconstructed to be aligned with Western conceptualisations. However, the Vatsonga people of South Africa had different cultural marriage practices that were unique identifiers of their existence. Marriage customs were held with high esteem among this tribe Khosa-Nkatini and Khosa (2022:1). Furthermore, Khosa-Nkatini and Khosa (2022:4) maintain that marriage is particularly a crucial step among the Vatsonga people.

However, the understanding of marriage among the Vatsonga people did not carry the notion of compulsory monogamy. Their understanding of marriage was entrenched in indigenous knowledge systems, words of wisdom and proverbs. For instance, Chauke (2022:69) maintains that to encourage polygamy, the Vatsonga people used among other sayings the proverb that says '*Wanuna i nhwembe loko yi kula ya nava*', simplistically translated in English as 'a man is like a pumpkin plant that spreads along as it grows, this means that men must marry as many wives as they can'. Thus, Baloyi (2013:164) argues that monogamy in most African societies including the Vatsonga people has been associated with people of lower social status. This notion was also observed by West and Morris (1976:106), who assert that Polygyny was permitted among the Tsonga and the preferred

choice for a second wife was the first wife's younger sister' (West & Morris 1976:106). Chauke (2022:69) maintains that the first wife would prefer that her husband marry her younger sister to be loved more by her husband. Thus, according to Junod (1977:37), *Matshengwe* [Polygamous marriages] were common among Vatsonga people, and men were encouraged to have more than one wife; it was only incest that was abhorred among this tribe.

In the same vein, Ngoben (2019:6), Khosa-Nkatini and Khosa (2022) concur that the Vatsonga people embraced polygamous marriages among other reasons for the growth of their families. Again, polygamy assisted clans to have extra pairs of hands to work in the field and to look after their livestock (Baloyi 2013:171). Another reason for polygamy among the Vatsonga was when a woman was unable to bear children. In such cases, families and relatives would plan for a second wife, usually someone from the family to come and bear children for her sister (Magubane 1998). However, Weeks (2021) asserts that:

When Vatsonga men decide to do so, they must inform their first wife of their intention; it is expected of the first wife to agree and assist in the ensuing process, leading to the further marriage; if she does so, harmony is promoted between all concerned. (p. 21)

Therefore, polygamous marriages were done by the husband and wife and the entire family was part of the process. However, the coming of the missionaries in Africa that led to their encounters with the Vatsonga people of South Africa altered the Vatsonga cultural marital lives and identity.

The missionary encounters with the Vatsonga people of South Africa

The missionary encounters with the Vatsonga people of South Africa were marked by the missionary-colonial desire to first alter the receptor's (African) languages to be able to control the discourse and eventually biblical discourses. In the same vein, Gilmour (2007) maintains that:

Missionary linguists, operating from within a nineteenth-century European worldview which dictated a vision of 'language' and 'nation' as isomorphic, had created rather than reflected a unified Tsonga ethnolinguistic identity. Their assumptions and prejudices led them 'to order the African world in their own image. (p. 1767)

Lamentably, missionaries considered African languages as backward, something that needed to be civilised, and they considered their image as worthy to be emulated. Therefore, it is imperative to look at missionary-colonial projects to understand the impact of Christianity and biblical discourses on the Vatsonga cultural marital lives to understand how this narrative played out. Resane (2020:30) opines that 'it is impossible to reflect on the history of Christianity among the Shangaan (Vatsonga) people without a reference to the Swiss Mission in South Africa'. Although, the broader historical missionary encounters with Africa are critical in understanding the missionary encounter with the Vatsonga people of South Africa, the scope of this article cannot

accommodate its broader discussion. A brief historical background will suffice to provide a glimpse of missionary encounters with the Vatsonga people of South Africa.

Maluleke (2003) aptly articulates the role of Swiss missionaries working among the Vatsonga people in South Africa since 1875. In the same vein, among the missionary mandates that these missionaries carried was the establishment of Mission stations that were set in different parts of the former Gazankulu (Manganyi 1992). As an example, in 1886, a mission station was founded at Shilubane in the district of Tzaneen in the North-Eastern Transvaal under the Reverend and Mrs Eugene Thomas. Also, in 1897, another mission station was founded at Mhinga in the far Northern Transvaal under the Reverend and Mrs Rosset (Manganyi 1992:41). These mission stations were instrumental in the translation of the English Bible to vernacular Bibles (Gilmour 2007) and later in the use of biblical discourses under the guise of evangelisation and the spreading of the gospel. Amina (2020) observes these tendencies when opining:

Missionaries came to Africa under the concept of civilization; they considered African people as savage and inferior to whites. Missionaries came to spread Christianity at first, but they had hidden intentions. (p. 3)

These intentions entailed propagating the colonial agenda under the guise of the gospel and the salvation of sinners.

Furthermore, the same narrative was also observed by Tembo (2022) when maintaining that:

The colonisation of Africa in the nineteenth century was mainly motivated and directed by secular imperial power and justified with secular terms such as progress, which was a new word for an old view called the history of Christian salvation or soteriology. (p. 422)

Succinctly put, the missionaries and the colonialists pushed the same enslavement agenda under the guise of Christianisation and civilisation. The gist of the role played by missionary stations and missionaries in this agenda was captured in an interview that Maluleke had on July 30:1995 with a member of the Zion Christian Church at Valdezia mission station, situated in the Soutpansberg District to the south-east of Makhado in the Limpopo province of South Africa (Maluleke 2003:171). This member asserted that 'The Swiss Mission is trying to wish our existence away' (Maluleke 2003:171). It is my view that by using the term 'wishing our existence away', the interviewee implied the eradication of their cultures and beings. This could have also meant that the missionaries did not recognise African belief systems and that they thought that it was their duty to convince Africans that their customs and cultures were not good for them.

Therefore, the 19th-century missionary encounters with the Vatsonga people have sought to modify and erase most of their cultural life including polygamy, which was held in high esteem among the Vatsonga people (Mhinga 2012:43). Succinctly put, Schapera (1937) argues that:

... the structure of the family has been considerably modified by the decay of polygamy. The missionaries from the first resolutely

opposed it and refused to extend church membership to men with more than one wife. (p. 380)

Therefore, compulsory monogamy became the prerequisite for baptism; the neophyte was compelled to abandon his other wives and remain with but one to qualify for baptism (Mothoagae & Shingange 2024). Indeed, Mwambene (2017) sums up this narrative when asserting:

Christian colonials were determined to replace polygamy with monogamy. In their attempt to replace polygamy with monogamy, they gave preferential treatment to monogamous men. For example, some Christian missionaries refused to accept polygamists and their families into the church. In some cases, upon conversion to Christianity, polygynous husbands were required to choose one customary wife with whom to contract a Christian marriage and abandon the rest, leading to 'the discarded wife syndrome' on the continent. (pp. 5–6)

Against the backdrop of Mwambene's (2017) assertion, compulsory monogamy was set apart as a prerequisite for church membership. Therefore, compulsory monogamy became an instrument of power wielded against Africans and the Vatsonga people in South Africa. Foucault (1982) defines this form of power as 'Pastoral power'. According to Foucault, this form of power is pastoral because it is a fundamentally beneficent power to which the duty of the pastor (to the point of self-sacrifice) was the salvation of the flock (Golder 2007:165). In the same vein, missionaries used 'Pastoral power' to shepherd the Vatsonga people and take them away from perceived darkness to the light of the gospel. This happened with the promised light denoting among others the disregard of African cultural practices and the acceptance of compulsory monogamy. To achieve this goal, the missionaries used biblical discourses to convince the Vatsonga people that compulsory monogamy was the will of God.

Biblical discourses among the contemporary Vatsonga people in South Africa

Biblical discourses on compulsory monogamy emanated from Western perspectives of marriage and have been in existence for ages and it continues in the contemporary South African context. According to Baloyi (2013:172), 'Throughout the centuries, the teaching of the Christian church about marriage has emphasised monogamy'. In most cases, biblical discourses surrounding compulsory monogamy are often based on the notion that monogamy, not polygamy is God's design for humanity (Schlehein 2013:18). According to Baloyi (2013:166), the colonial church fought against polygamy on the basis that it is incompatible with the Bible. This notion still exists even in today's South African church context. Therefore, compulsory monogamy was imposed upon Africans by the missionary-colonial enterprise, and it continues in contemporary South Africa under the guise of preserving the moral fibre of society. Kenyon and Zondo (2011:54) opine that 'The imposition of monogamy was facilitated by the way that Medieval Christendom was turned into a highly collectivist'. Thus, the

same collectivist mentality pushes the narrative that propels the universal form of marital practices. Lamentably, this collectivism and universality disregards African customs and cultural marital practices as barbaric and worse demonic (Mothoagae & Shingange 2024).

Thus, although Hayes (1971) argues that the role of the Bible has a profound impact on practically every facet of Western culture in the 20th century, its impact on Africa has both positive and negative elements. Against this backdrop, Mawere et al. (2021) have aptly captured the negative role played by biblical discourses in the demonisation of African cultures. These scholars assert that:

[D]uring the colonial epoch, the missionary churches misrepresented African indigenous people they were attempting to preach to in various manners. One such way is the cultural debate and African cultural practices. For instance, the subject of polygamy among the local people in South Africa *was and is considered problematic*. (p. 80 [author's own emphasis])

This is highlighted by the fact that to enforce compulsory monogamy, Baloyi (2013) observes that:

... some churches are reluctant to allow women or the wives of polygamists to occupy prominent positions within the church, and others are reluctant to permit a polygamist to occupy a church leadership role. (p. 165)

These restrictions indicate that compulsory monogamy is the only accepted marital relationship in contemporary South African Christian churches of Western descent.

Furthermore, biblical discourses continue to be used within these spaces as instruments of demonising the Vatsonga cultural practices. According to Resane (2020):

The Bible message that was preached and practised by missionaries labelled cultural practices by natives as demonic and barbaric. The colonisers understood the Indigenous people who practised their culture as being of lesser intelligence and incapable of apprehending reality correctly. (p. 36)

In the same vein, Mbiti (1969:229) opines that 'Some independent churches are very strict, forbidding their members to eat pig meat, drink alcohol, have more than one wife'. The forbidding of polygamy by the proponents of Christianity does not take cognizance of the value and significance of these practices among the Africans and the Vatsonga people.

This tendency equates to the marginalisation of indigenous knowledge and cultural practices, something that Adam (2020:4) calls 'epistemicide'. Indeed, the Vatsonga cultural practices were wiped out through the disregard of their knowledge systems and the value they had on their cultural practices. Succinctly put, this is what Resane (2020:36) means when asserting that 'The goal was to destroy the 'heathen' culture and replace it with a Western Christian civilization'. Indeed, polygamy was seen by the missionaries as a heathen culture and practice.

Problematising the hegemony of compulsory monogamy

The hegemonic position awarded to monogamy through biblical discourses is problematic because it reinforces servitude. This is not only because the Bible was misused to enforce the epistemic privileges and supremacy of Western cultures, but it was also used to erase blackness and Africanism. In the same vein, however, to the extreme, John Calvin insisted that monogamy was prescribed by natural law (Baloyi 2013:166). Thus, breaking this law would be equated to breaking the law of nature. Therefore, such statements contributed to sustaining the erasure of African cultural practices. It was for similar reasons that Wa Thiong'o (1981) argues that:

The biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance [of the colonised] is the cultural bomb. The effect of a 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. (p. 6)

Therefore, compulsory monogamy became an instrument of imperialism and colonisation, it also became an instrument of enslavement. This is as Mbembe (2001) argues:

First, the African human experience constantly appears in the discourse of our times as an experience that can only be understood through a negative interpretation. Africa is never seen as possessing things and attributes properly part of human nature. (p. 1)

Thus, the missionaries pushed the compulsory monogamy agenda under the impression that the Africans and the Vatsonga practices of polygamy were unnatural and thus were animalistic. Again, this is problematic not only because of reinforcing colonisation, however, also because of the selective use of biblical passages of scripture to push the wrong agenda. For example, although this article is not about biblical exposition, it is important to cite a few examples of polygamous marriages in the bible that the missionaries overlooked in their promotion of compulsory monogamy in Africa.

The Old Testament presents numerous cases of patriarchs who were in polygamous marriages; however, God continued to use them. Abraham who is considered 'The father of faith' (G1 3–6) was in a polygamous relationship (Gn 25:1), and David who was said to be 'A man after God's heart' (Acts 13:22) also had many wives (1 Sm 25:43). Again, the enforcement of compulsory monogamy is also problematic because it justified the superiority complex of the Western cultural practices. This is like what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015:30) means when asserting that 'The colonised African people were forced to lose their African subjectivity as they were reproduced by the colonial paradigm as objects'. Thus, in the same vein, the Vatsonga people became objects of the colonial rule. Their marital practices were subjected to the dictates of the missionary-colonial masters. Indeed, the Vatsonga people became slaves who could not exercise their rights to decide what was best for themselves.

The call to decolonise the narrative

To problematise the missionary-colonial tendencies of misusing biblical discourses is not the final stage. However, there is also a dire need to further transform the status quo through decolonising the narrative. This will mean among others African Christians must have the will to challenge and dismantle the ideological frameworks and structures that justify and maintain colonial power relations (Maldonado-Torres 2016). The colonial power relations to be challenged are embedded in the notion of Western supremacy. Again, the need to decolonise the past and the current misuse of biblical discourses is motivated by the discourses about Africa including biblical discourses that are always deployed in the narrative that equates African life with those of the beasts (Mbembe 2001:1). In other words, African life and cultural practices are portrayed in terms that equate them to animal instincts.

This narrative calls for decoloniality that according to Grosfoguel (2011):

Seeks to dismantle relations of power and conceptions of knowledge that foment the reproduction of racial, gender, and geopolitical hierarchies that came into being or found new and more powerful forms of expression in the modern/colonial world. (p. 1)

The same move is referred to by Mignolo (2007:459) as 'to change the terms of the conversation, and above all, of the hegemonic ideas of what knowledge and understanding are'. Thus, the decolonial change of the terms of the conversation will also mean changing the subject and those who control it.

Again, to decolonise the servitude narrative propelled by the misuse of biblical discourses that enforced compulsory monogamy among the Vatsonga people of South Africa, there is a need to change the terms of the conversation. This will mean among others that the Vatsonga should take destiny into their own hands and define their own identities and what they deem to be accepted cultural marital practices. This move can be a way of the removal of boundaries that prohibit polygamists from being members of the church. This prohibition further hinders the message of the gospel from being inclusive because compulsory monogamy is presented as a condition for baptism and church membership.

Conclusion

This article argued that the 19th-century missionary biblical discourses that marked the missionary-colonial project were promulgated under the guise of Christianisation and the civilisation of the heathens in Africa. Therefore, in Africa, the article argued that the perpetual legacy of this phenomenon was manifested among others by the forms of Christianity that uphold the demonisation of African cultures, languages, traditions and religious practices. The same phenomenon was observed among the Vatsonga people of South Africa where the missionary-colonial projects and the proponents of

Christianity continue to frown upon and demonise the Vatsonga marital practices using biblical rhetoric. It was further argued that this happened through the enforcement of the hegemonic position of compulsory monogamy and the demonisation of polygamy within these spaces. The article then investigated how biblical discourses hegemonised compulsory monogamy among the Vatsonga people of South Africa and used it as a form of dominance and conquest. It analysed the background of the Vatsonga people's cultural life surrounding their marital lives and presented the genesis of this phenomenon by discussing the missionary encounters with the Vatsonga people of South Africa. Then the hegemonic position awarded to monogamy through biblical discourses was problematised because it reinforced servitude. It was further deemed as 'the cultural bomb' that was set to annihilate African cultural practices. Finally, a call to change the terms of the conversation, and the hegemonic ideas of what knowledge and understanding are. This would be a way to decolonise the servitude narrative propelled by the misuse of biblical discourses that enforced compulsory monogamy among the Vatsonga people of South Africa.

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