

Decolonising Tshivenda Bible Translations (1936 and 1998): A Tragic Tale of Vhavenda, A People Whose Concept of God Was and Continues to Be Ploughed Under by the Translated Bibles

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INTRODUCTION

Executive Dean of the College of Human Sciences, Prof Zethu Nkosi

Vice Principal Teaching, Learning, Community Engagement and Student Support, Prof ZT Motsa Madikane

Head of Department Biblical and Ancient Studies and my respondent, Prof Elelwani Farisani
Unisa community

Esteemed guests

I am greatly honoured to address you on this occasion. I dedicate this lecture to mudzimu wanga wa damuni (my mother), Johannah Nditsheni (Sigogo) Ramantswana, who joined her ancestors (vhadzimu vha havho) in January 2022. My mother was my teacher in primary school—she treated me with no favour, was very strict with me, and I can proudly say, “she laid a strong foundation.”

Mudzimu wanga wa thohoni (my father), Nndwakhulu Jack Ramantswana, I thank you for setting an example for me to emulate as a family man, a teacher, a preacher, and a community servant.

A special thanks to my family, my wife Thabelo, who has been with me through thick and thin, and our three lovely daughters Muḍanagundo, Mulindavhawe, and Muendananwi. Vhakomana, vharathu, dzikhaladzi, vhokhotsimunene, vhomakhadzi, vhazwala, mmemuhulu, vhommane, vhomalume, vhalamu ndi a ni livhuwa thuthuwedzo dza vheinwi.

My journey to becoming a biblical scholar that I am today started with the longing to become a pastor, a path that the Reformed Churches in South Africa allowed me to travel. My journey in the church has been fulfilling and also painful. I am grateful to my friends and those who reached out, encouraged, and comforted me during the difficult times. I am also grateful to the church that embraced me and allowed me to continue my passion for church ministry, The Light Reformed Community Church.

The title of my lecture is: “Decolonising Tshivenda Bible Translations (1936 and 1998): A Tragic Tale of Vhavenda, A People Whose Concept of God Was and Continues to Be Ploughed Under by the Translated Bibles”.

The Bible is currently one of the most widely read books in South Africa's indigenous languages. However, the first complete Bible in the indigenous languages was the 1857 Setswana Bible, also known as the Moffat Translation.¹ The complete Bible in Tshivenda dates back to 1936, that is, 87 years ago; however, it has become an icon among the Vhavenda people.² It enjoys a status of privilege within and outside the church. Another complete translation was published in 1998.³ These two translations are having a field day among the Vhavenda people. Most gatherings or functions, whether public or private, are graced by its reading. In this lecture, I take to task the 1936 and 1998 Tshivenda Translations (TT).⁴ I contend that these two texts have ploughed under the Vhavenda concept of God—a tragedy unequalled within the South African context.⁵ I do so by engaging in a decolonial analysis of these texts as ideologically enthused products that deliberately disregarded and undermined the Vhavenda people's concepts of God by adopting and perpetuating distorted and meaningless concepts in the language and culture. Therefore, the two translations are better viewed as colonial language tools that do not serve the culture of the Vhavenda people; instead, they are weapons against them.⁶ The colonial-translated Bibles are language tools that were deployed in the colonisation of the indigenous languages in our African context.

The decolonial approach adopted here can be utilised by drawing on various analytical tools to critically engage or analyse the Bible. In this lecture, I latch on the following analytical tools: representation, delinking, and relinking (to re-exist). I draw these concepts from post-colonial and decolonial scholars such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Anibal Quijano, Walter D. Mignolo, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Valentin Y. Mudimbe, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, and many others, and as a biblical scholar, I draw my inspiration and build on the foundation of Black Theology of Liberation, which the late Vuyani Wellem never seized to show its relevance in our current context, and trailblazing works of biblical scholars such as Itumeleng Mosala, Takatso Mofokeng, Justin Ukpong, David Tuesday Adamo, Musa Dube, Gerald O. West, Madipoane Masenya (Ngwana' Mphahlele), Elelwani Farisani, just to mention a few.

¹ For more on the history of Bible translation in the South African context, see E. A. Hermanson, "A Brief Overview of Bible Translation in South Africa," *Acta Theologica* 2002.sup-2 (2002): 6–18, <https://doi.org/10.10520/EJC111126>; Gerald O. West, *The Stolen Bible: From Tool of Imperialism to African Icon* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2016).

² I draw the concept of the Bible as an "icon" from West, *The Stolen Bible: From Tool of Imperialism to African Icon*.

³ On Tshivenda Bible translations, also see Elelwani B. Farisani, "Kuhumbulele, Divhazwakale Na Mahumbulwa a Thalutshedzelo : U Saukanya Ho Dzhenelaho Ha 1 Dzikhosi 21:1-16 Bivhilini Ya Tshivenda," *Old Testament Essays* 23.3 (2010): 597–626.

⁴ These are not the only Bible translations in the Tshivenda language; the most recent are the Jehovah's Witnesses translations: The 2012 Thalutshedzo ya Shango Liswa ya Mañwalo a Tshikriste a Lugerika (2012 TSLMTL) and the 2019 Thalutshedzo ya Shango Liswa ya Mañwalo Makhethwa (2019 TSLMM). These latter translations will not be the subject of my lecture, yet some of my observations and evaluations of 1936 and 1998 Tshivenda Translations also apply to them.

⁵ The idea of the Bible as an icon, I draw it from Gerald O. West, *The Stolen Bible: From Tool of Imperialism to African Icon*.

⁶ I am indebted here to Musa Dube, "Consuming a Colonial Cultural Bomb Translating Badimo Into 'Demons' in the Setswana Bible (Matthew 8.28-34; 15.22; 10.8)," *Journal for The Study of The New Testament* 21 (1999): 33–58, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X9902107303>.

Representation

The representations of the self and the other are not innocent; they are shaped by ideologies that influence one's view of reality and feed into identity politics. Colonial representations operate at various levels; however, I focus just on two: the representer and the represented⁷

Representer: In analysing colonial-produced texts, particularly those produced by those on the colonising side, it is crucial to consider how the colonisers are represented.⁸ Such texts tend to favour the coloniser in the grand scheme of things. In our case, the colonial-translated Bibles should not simply be viewed as the Word of God in our languages as though they emerge from an innocent process. Bible translations as language tools were instrumental in the colonial project.⁹ The colonisers gained mental and cultural control over the colonised by taking control of their language. They used the language of the colonised to represent themselves, which allowed them to control what was considered knowledge to shape the colonised people's understanding of themselves. Translated Bibles must be examined for any infused colonial ideology, whether published during the colonial or post-colonial period. When the local languages are colonised, they are no longer just carriers of the mother-tongue values based on which their culture is carried, but they also become a carrier of colonial values, which serves to direct the consciousness of the colonised.

Represented: In the colonial texts, the representation of the colonised others depends on what they are intended to serve in the text. The colonial representations tend to denigrate, misrepresent, and cast stereotypes on the other. As a result, binary oppositions are created in which the Euro-West is better than the other: civilised-uncivilised, rational-irrational, virtuous-depraved, mature-childlike, normal-abnormal, etc.¹⁰ As Said argues, in this construction, "the world is made up of unequal halves", the Euro-Western and the other.¹¹

The construction of the other, as Said highlights, rests on the positional superiority of the Euro-Western.¹² From the position of superiority, the Euro-Western gave itself the right to define the other, name, and use the language of the other at will. Therefore, the Euro-West had the privilege to control the narrative. The colonial other may be inferiorised, opposed, a collaborator, a competitor, etc. In the text's representation of the other, sometimes the other is given a voice, silenced, or subordinated.

Representation of the other as an analytical tool can be productively mobilised to understand the translated Bible as a product in which the translators control the narrative. During the colonial period, the missionaries had positional superiority over the people and the language of those they reached. From this position, they colonised the languages of local people, manipulated those languages, and distorted the cultural features of those they reached. Having colonised the local languages, the missionaries transferred concepts from one language to another, even setting the local languages against each other. Even if the colonial-produced translation of the Bible is viewed as a positive contribution, it does not escape the colonial matrix of "speaking for" and "speaking over" the peoples whose identities and culture is linked with those languages.¹³

⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978).

⁸ Said, *Orientalism*.

⁹ Dube, "Consuming a Colonial Cultural Bomb Translating Badimo Into 'Demons' in the Setswana Bible (Matthew 8.28-34; 15.22; 10.8)."

¹⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, 40.

¹¹ Said, *Orientalism*, 12.

¹² *In this process emerges what decolonial scholars call the "coloniality of being", that is, the effects of the hegemonic relations on the lived experience of the colonised and their languages (see Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept," Cultural Studies 21.2-3 [2007]: 242).*

¹³ I am indebted here to Spivak, highlights that knowledge production is not innocent. For Spivak, even the works that seem to be produced with the concern of the colonised other tend to silence the other. For Spivak, even

Delinking and Relinking

Towards the conclusion of the lecture, I will draw on two decolonial concepts, delinking, as the learning to unlearn, and relinking, as the learning to re-learn, by centring the issue of decolonising epistemology. As Mignolo highlights, “decolonizing epistemology means, in the long run, liberating thinking from sacralized texts, whether religious or secular.”¹⁴ I now proceed to my engagement of Tshivenda translated Bibles as language tools.

THE TRAGIC REPRESENTATION OF VHAVENDA: 1936 AND 1998 TSHIVENDA TRANSLATIONS

The translation of the Bible in Tshivenda goes as far back as the beginning of the Christian mission by the Berlin Mission Society (BMS) in Venda.¹⁵ The 1936 TT was the apex of a process that began on 30 October 1872 with the arrival of two Berlin Missionary Society missionaries, Carl Beuster and Christian Stech, at ha Tshivhase.¹⁶ These missionaries’s work included, among other things, producing written materials in the local languages, such as the Bible, Catechisms, hymn books, and school books.¹⁷ The production of the written materials required the BMS missionaries to learn the local language and understand the culture of the people.

The BMS placed the task of translating the Bible on the shoulders of Carl Beuster. By 1897, Carl Beuster had translated the Gospel of John, the Epistle of John, several Psalms, Primer/First (ABC) Reader, Pericopes (scriptural texts prescribed for reading on Sundays of the year), Hymns, the Small Catechism (the shortened Luther’s Catechism).¹⁸ In 1899, the BMS published *Spelboek ea Tšewenda*, which included, mirero (proverbs), a translation of the book

Western writers, such as Marx, Foucault, Deleuze and others, whose works may be regarded as progressive in the way they talk about oppressed groups, there is a sense these texts claim to produce objective knowledge about “the other”, while they speak “over the other”. The Euro-Western intellectuals regard themselves or are regarded as authoritative voices through whom the voices of the subaltern or the oppressed are represented (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 64–111).

¹⁴ Walter D. Mignolo, “Decolonizing Western Epistemology/Building Decolonial Epistemologies,” in *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy*, ed. Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 25–26.

¹⁵ It should be noted that before the commencement of the BMS mission in Venda, there was some faint understanding that the Tshivenda language also had close affinities with Tshikalanga/Thishona. The initial view by the Berlin Mission Society of the Vhavenda people was that “they are not real Basotho or Beuchuanas [Tswanas]” and that their language is “as different from SeSotho as Zulu is.” The language of the Vhavenda people was viewed to be related to the “languages of those in tribes living more to the north” (H. I. Giesekke, “An Informative Translation of the Berliner MissionBerichte (The Berlin Mission Reports) Concerning Venda” [Unpublished, 2006], 3, UNISA Archives.). For more on the Berlin Mission Society in Venda, see Alan Kirkaldy, *Capturing the Soul: The Vhavenda and the Missionaries, 1870-1900* (Pretoria, SA: Protea Boekhuis, 2005).

¹⁶ Beuster and Stech arrived at king Tshivhase’s land on 30 October 1872 accompanied by vice-superintendent of the BMS Grütznert and Beyer. The possibility of starting in the Venda area were started already in 1870, with chief Madzhe and subsequently with king Mphephu. However, the plans to establish a mission station in king Mphephu’s land did not yield the desired results.

¹⁷ Gunther Pakendorf, “A Brief History of the Berlin Mission Society in South Africa,” *History Compass* 9.2 (2011): 106–18, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-0542.2009.00624.x>; Karla Poewe and Ulrich Van Der Heyden, “The Berlin Mission Society and Its Theology: The Bapedi Mission Church and the Independent Bapedi Lutheran Church,” *South African Historical Journal* 40 (1999): 21–50.

¹⁸ Giesekke, “Informative Translation of the Berlin Mission Reports,” 641. In the 1897, BMS Report 7&8, it is noted that “a whole list of books have now already been completed to proclaim their salvation to the Vhavenda, in their own language. A considerable amount of preparation work has already been done towards the translation of the whole New Testament.”

of Genesis, portions of Exodus, selected passages from the Gospel (Luke and Matthew), and a few hymns.

In his translations, Beuster needed to have concepts for God in Tshivenda. However, the two key concepts for God that Beuster used in his translations are “Modzimo” and “Yehova”. The concept “Yehova”¹⁹ is obviously not native to the Tshivenda language as it is a transliteration of the Tetragrammaton.²⁰ For Beuster “Yehova” was just a mere following tradition in the German Bible; it does not reflect an effort to find a more appropriate concept that was more in line with the local language.

The term “Modzimo” as a concept for God raises questions: Is it a Tshivenda concept or not? When Beuster engaged in his translations, he used the Sotho or Lepsius orthography that used "o" and "u" for "u".²¹ If we presume that Beuster had opted for a Tshivenda word, then the meaning of the word in Tshivenda is “ancestor”. However, it is highly unlikely that Beuster's word choice was based on the meaning. As some have noted, the use of "Modzimo" as a concept for God was most likely influenced by the Sepedi concept of "Modimo"²² or, as van Rooy suggest, Beuster was following an established tradition in the church considering that the concept “Modimo” was used in Sesotho and Setswana Bible translations.²³ If such is the case, it implies that the choice of the word “Modzimo” has nothing to do with its meaning in Tshivenda—it is a case of transference of a concept from one local language to another. This implies that Beuster and other BMS missionaries clustered the Tshivenda language with Sepedi, Sesotho, and Setswana.

In the Sepedi, Sesotho, and Setswana languages, the term "Modimo" refers to God in Bible translations, with the word "medimo" invented as its plural and classed in the mo- (singular) / me- (plural) class of nouns, a class of impersonal nouns.²⁴

Tshivenda (1890)		Sepedi (1904)		Sesotho (1909)		Setswana (1890)	
Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
Modzimo	medzimo	Modimo	medimo	Modimo	medimo	Morimo	merimo

This usage of terms standardises these languages based on European languages like English and German, rather than reflecting the languages themselves. This pursuit of standardisation aimed to bridge the conceptual difference between African and European languages. As the Comarrofs highlight:

¹⁹ See particularly the translations of the Psalms, Carl F. Beuster, *Dziefistola Na Dziefangeli Dza Dzizondag Na Dza Votambo Dza Moaha Oqte* (Unknown: Unknown, 1891).

²⁰ Tetragrammaton means "four letter word", consisting of YHWH, pronounced "Yahweh" following its vocalisation in the Masoretic Text.

²¹ Matshaya Edward Razwimisani Mathivha, “A Survey of the Literary Achievements in Venda” (University of the North, 1972), 14.

²² Mathivha, “A Survey of the Literary Achievements in Venda.”

²³ J. A. Van Rooy, “Language and Culture in the Communication of the Christian Message as Illustrated in the Venda Bible” (Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education/Northwest University, PhD Thesis, 1971), 31.

²⁴ Andries Albertus Odendaal, “The Translation of the Name of God in Southern Sotho,” *Missionalia* 1.3 (1973): 138–42; Bruce Bennett, “The Contested History of Modimo,” 2002; Van Rooy, “Language and Culture in the Communication of the Christian Message as Illustrated in the Venda Bible.”

In this respect, linguistic classification and translation were metonyms of an embracing process of conversion: the process of making differences into similarity, or reducing the lower order diversities of the ‘non-European’ world to the universalistic categories of the West.²⁵

Language	Singular	Plural
English	God	gods
German	Gott	götter

Vhavenḁa, Bapedi, Basotho, and Batswana all believed in the Supreme Being, and pluralizing of such the concept was inconceivable. The pluralisation of the God concept was intended to convey the ideas of multiple gods, foreign deities, and idols. The concept “medzimo” in Tshivendḁa and “medimo” in Sepedi, Sesotho, and Setswana, once introduced into these languages it was in turn used to heathenise their cultures.

I should highlight Beuster’s choice of the “Modzimo” was not because there were no concepts in the language, which could have been used. Beuster knew the concepts such as Raluvhimba,²⁶ Khuzwane,²⁷ Nwali,²⁸ Thovhele, and Muhalimuhulu²⁹ as concepts used by the Vhavenda people for God. To quote Beuster, he states regarding these concepts for God among the Vhavenḁa people:

The most important god is **Raluvhimba** i.e. the Father of Holiness or Father. Many of this nation falsely identify him as Satan. Furthermore, he is creating and maintaining god through whom the trees, shrubs and everything else were created and are maintained even now. He once lived in this country but has now moved away to a place several days away travel from here, in the land of the BaKalanga were the people call him **Muhalimuhulu**. He is generally known by these names amongst the Vhavenḁa. The mountain on which he lives is called Mubvumela. His praise names are: Muhali-muhulu, Phanda ha ndou; Mukokoto o nga lutombo!” i.e., Muhali-muhulu! Surpasser of elephants! Immortal/indistructible like a stone! . . .

Another god who is often mentioned, is Khuswane. One man called him the Father of Raluvhimba -- and this is generally found when one tries to establish the difference between him and Raluvhimba. The creation of the world is namely also ascribed to him, especially in this way : That he created everything that is pleasant and beautiful ; that he taught the people all the vital crafts/skills. After he had completed his work, he withdrew himself -- he has no abode/home amongst the people and has become an unknown god. . . .

The opinion that **Khuswane** is the father of **Raluvhimba** is also often refuted/contradicted. Yet another name of a god exists: the name Thovhela: The BaSotho call Thobebe and his brother the ancestors of the ruling families of the BaKhale and the Batsoetla with whom they were earlier united; i.e. all the tribes who salute their chief as : Thobebe or Thobebe oa batho There is even less known/clarity about him than there is about **Khuswane**. Many reckon it is the name of an old king ; but most of them decided to also call him a god. The ruling kings are called by this name. [emphasis added].³⁰

²⁵ Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution, Volume 1: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 1:221.

²⁶ Spelt as “Ralovimba” by the BMS missionaries.

²⁷ Spelt as a follows “Kozane” in by the BMS missionaries. The idea that this should be rendered as Khuzwane may be a stretch considering that in Wessman, it is spelt: Kusane. We may have here a case of the exact pronunciation lost.

²⁸ Spelt as Mwali in BMS reports and diaries.

²⁹ W. Gründler, *Geschichte Der Bawenda Mission in Nord-Transvaal*, Buchhandlung der Berliner evangelischen Missionsgesellschaft (Berlin Mission Society, 1897), 5–6; Giesekke, “Informative Translation of the Berlin Mission Reports,” 54,149-151, 283, 297, 298, 331, 333, 428, 537.

³⁰ Giesekke, “Informative Translation of the Berlin Mission Reports,” 149–51.

Therefore, the implication is that Beuster deliberately disregarded Tshivenḁa concepts for God and regarded them as heathen concepts or medzimo (foreign gods), and rather opted for the word “Modzimo”, which should be viewed as a Venḁalised Sepedi word. Therefore, the word “Modzimo” was a meaningless concept in Tshivenḁa; its only meaning was that which Beuster and the other BMS missionaries gave to it. By the turn of the century, the concepts “Modzimo” and “Yehova” were enforced into the people’s psyche by codifying them and their continual use in preaching, evangelisation, and teaching. Consequently, those who accepted the Christian faith and had acquired the skills to read and write would continue to pass these concepts to subsequent generations as Vhavenḁa’s concepts for God.

1936 Tshivenḁa Translation: Canonising the Berlin Mission Society Missionaries’ Distortions

At the beginning of the 20th century, Tshivenḁa orthography saw gradual improvement thanks to the work of the Schwellnus brothers, George A. Theodor Schwellnus and Paul Erdmann Schwellnus. However, it was Paul E. Schwellnus who played a pivotal role in translating the complete Bible into Tshivenḁa, building on the foundation the earlier BMS missionaries laid. His publications include among others *Ewangeli na Mishumo ya Vhaapostola* (1920),³¹ *Testamennde Ntswa* (1925),³² *Dzipsalme* (1929).³³ His most important achievement was the complete Tshivenḁa Bible (*Bivhili*) in 1936.

In the 1936 TT, the concepts mainly used for God are “Mudzimu”, “Yehova”, and “Murena”. These concepts are distributed as follows in the 1936 TT:

1936 Tshivenḁa Translation Distribution of the Two Concepts for God		
	Old Testament	New Testament
Mudzimu	2693	1512
Yehova	6754	0
Murena	14	602

The basic and fundamental question to be asked is: Are these concepts for God in the Tshivenḁa language? Therefore, to answer this question, we need to delve into each of these concepts:

Mudzimu: Whose Concept of God Is It?

It is necessary to highlight how the term “Mudzimu” found its way into the 1936 TT. As I have already pointed out, by the end of the 19th century, the concept of “Modzimo” was used in early Bible translations and in preaching. When the new Tshivenḁa orthography was introduced in the early 20th century, the word “Modzimo” came to be spelt as “Mudzimu.” The word “Mudzimu” means “ancestor.” Schwellnus would have known the word's meaning because he worked on Tshivenḁa grammar and Bible translation. Furthermore, he would have been familiar with some of the Vhavenḁa concepts for God given that he was the son of a BMS missionary who worked in Venḁa and was born there.

In my view, Schwellnus, in opting for the concept “Mudzimu”, was not so much concerned about the meaning of the word in the Tshivenḁa language; rather, for him, it was the meaning given to the word by the BMS missionaries that triumphs. For the earlier BMS

³¹ P. E. Schwellnus, *Ewangeli na Mishumo ya Vhaapostola* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1920).

³² P. E. Schwellnus, *Testamente Ntswa* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1925).

³³ P. E. Schwellnus, Isaak Mulandzi, and Fineas Mutsila, *Dzipsalme* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1929).

missionaries, the concept of "Modzimo" belonged to the mo-/me class of nouns, a view that was carried over into Schwellnus's translations. Thus, "Mudzimu" for Schwellnus belongs to the mu- (singular) / mi- (plural) impersonal class of nouns, such as "muri," which becomes "miri" in the plural. This is why the concept "Mudzimu" in the 1936 TT still goes along with the plural "midzimu."

1936 TT: Mudzimu / Midzimu (Mu- / Mi -)	
<i>Mudzimu</i>	<i>Midzimu</i>
4205	360

It is interesting to note that the word "vhadzimu" is present in the 1936 TT, but its meaning differs from that in Tshivenda culture. In Tshivenda, "vhadzimu" refers to ancestors, whether alive or deceased, and its singular is "mudzimu" (ancestor). This implies that the word "vhadzimu" belongs to the mu- (singular) / vha- (plural) class of nouns, like "muthu" in the singular and "vhatu" in the plural, which is a personal class of nouns.

In the 1936 TT, the concept "vhadzimu" appears six times (Pss 58:1; 82:6; Dan 3:25; John 10:34, 35; Acts 14:11). In these passages, it is used to translate the Hebrew, *elohim* (Ps 82:6), Aramaic, *elahin* (Dan 3:25), Greek, *theoi, theou* (John 10:34, 35), and Greek *hoi theoi* (Acts 14:11). Instead of referring to ancestors, "vhadzimu" in these passages has the connotation of "elevated beings" or "godlike status." Therefore, the 1936 translation gives "vhadzimu" a different meaning from its usual usage in Vhava culture and language.

The question becomes, with which class of nouns should the word "mudzimu" be classified? Does it belong in the mu-/mi- class (impersonal nouns) or the mu-/vha- class (personal nouns)? For Schwellnus, the word "mudzimu" would fall in both classes of nouns. As a concept of God, "Mudzimu" would belong to a personal class, but as a concept to refer to things, "mudzimu" then falls into the impersonal class of nouns. Therefore, for Schwellnus and other missionaries, "mudzimu", when classed with impersonal nouns, would then refer to foreign practice.³⁴ Essentially, Schwellnus and the BMS missionaries wanted to have their cake and eat it. In so doing, they distorted the meaning of the word by fabricating the idea that it belongs to the mu-/mi- impersonal class of nouns, yet still turn and use the concept to refer to God, who in their theology embodies personal characteristics.

Yehova and Murena: Whose Concepts of God Are These?

The use of the two concepts, Yehova and Murena, in 1936 TT warrants attention as it reflects confusion in the highest order on the part of the translator, and, moreover, brought into the Tshivenda further distortions of the concept of God.

As already noted, the concept, Yehova, for God is a transliteration of the Hebrew Tetragrammaton. Schwellnus's use of this concept should be viewed as simply a continuation of the tradition of transliterating YHWH, which his predecessors had done following the European Bible translations. The use of a transliteration also introduces another problem. It implies that the name Yehova is confined to the Old Testament, and, therefore, does not feature in the New Testament. However, such use of Yehova does not reflect an understanding of the New Testament writers. In the New Testament, the Greek term *kurios* is used in keeping with Septuagint's translation of the Tetragrammaton. It implies that for the New Testament writers'

³⁴ With the missionaries distortion, things such as domba came to be regard as "mudzimu" by which the missionaries meant "foreign practice."

use of *kurios* does not necessarily have to be viewed as a discontinuation but rather as a continuation in keeping with the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures of the time.³⁵

Schwellnus's use of the concept "Murena" for *kurios* in the Old and New Testament is problematic. In the 1936 TT "Murena" appears 602 times, compared to the 717 appearances of *kurios* in the Greek New Testament. In addition, the concept "Murena" only appears fifteen times in the Old Testament, specifically in the book of Psalms, where it translates the Hebrew concept Adonay.³⁶ Adonay is another Hebrew concept used for God, which the 1936 TT translates as *Muxe wanga* in all the other occurrences. It is unclear why the concept "Murena" is introduced into the Old Testament.

More importantly, Schwellnus gives *kurios* a connotation that it does not have in the Tshivenda language by translating it with the term "Murena" in the New Testament. The word "Murena," as used by Schwellnus, was derived from the Sepedi word "Morena," in which case it functions as an honorific title. However, the word "murena" in Tshivenda is not an honorific term; rather, it is used by equals to refer to each other or by an older person to refer to a younger person.³⁷ Giessekke notes the following regarding the use of Murena as a concept for God:

In the New Testament, "Lord" when referring to Jesus Christ has been rendered by *Murena*. This was introduced, as far as can be determined, by the first missionaries. They already knew the word from N. Sotho, and when they met it in Venda they concluded that it had the same meaning. This also happened with other words, which Schwellnus removed.

Through the years, *Murena Yesu Kristo* for "The Lord Jesus Christ" has become firmly rooted in the vocabulary of the Church. If this borrowing had replaced the original meaning of *Murena* in Venda, and acquired the meaning it has in the Sotho languages, there would be no ground for objection.³⁸

This implies the use of the concept "Murena" as a concept for God was on the basis of transference of meaning from one language to another, whereas the word means something opposite in the other language. Moreover, if Giesseke is correct that the first missionaries introduced the term without the consideration of the meaning in Tshivenda language, it further supports my earlier argument that the concept Modzimo in Tshivenda had nothing to do with its meaning in the Tshivenda language. Schwellnus in his use of the concept Murena stand in continuity with what Beuster and other BMS missionaries introduced into the Tshivenda language.

Therefore, we can draw that the *modus operandi* of the BMS missionaries, including Schwellnus, was transferring concepts and meanings between languages without considering whether proper terms in the target language may hold different meanings. Giesseke's justification that the Sepedi meaning of the word "morena" replaces the original meaning in

³⁵ The Old Testament text was composed in Hebrew and some portions in Aramaic, whereas the New Testament is written in Greek. The Greek Old Testament text, commonly known as the Septuagint (LXX), is in continuity with the New Testament text. As a result, the Greek texts use the concept *kurios* to translate the Hebrew concept YHWH, and the concept *theos* to translate the concept Elohim. In some instances in the New Testament, the two concepts are used together, such as *kurios theos* or *theos kurios*, which express the same idea as YHWH Elohim or Elohim YHWH.

³⁶ Pss 22:30; 44:23; 55:9; 57:9; 59:11; 68:19, 22; 69:6; 78:65; 79:12; 90:1; 109:21; 110:1, 5; 130:2.

³⁷ N. J. Van Warmelo, *Venda Dictionary* (Pretoria: Van Schaick, 1989), 232.

³⁸ D. W. Giessekke, "Venda Names for God," *The Bible Translator* 21.4 (1970): 182, <https://doi.org/10.1177/000608447002100406>.

the Tshivenda language speaks to the dynamic of power in language translation. The BMS translators created a hierarchisation of local languages with Sepedi considered superior to the Tshivenda language, and therefore, Sepedi words and their meanings could be imposed into Tshivenda.

In addition, Schweltnus would have been aware of the concepts of God in Tshivenda language but deliberately chose to ignore them. Giesekke, in his defence of why concepts for God in the Tshivenda language could not be used, argued that names like Mwali, Raluvhimba, or Khuzwane were inappropriate because they are associated with ancestors in the Vhavana worldview.³⁹ This is a ridiculous argument considering that the word “mudzimu” in Tshivenda means “ancestor”. The association of Vhavana’s concepts for God was manufactured by BMS missionaries themselves in their heathenisation of those concepts. It is absurd to suggest that the Vhavana people only worshipped ancestors when even the missionaries acknowledged that terms like Raluvhimba and Nwali referred to the Creator God. In opting to use “Mudzimu” and “Murena” for God, Schweltnus deliberately furthered the distortion introduced into the language by predecessors by canonising it in his translation.

If 1936 TT is anything to go by, then we can expect the concept of God embedded in this text to be corroborated by other writers during the time, who were not necessarily missionaries. In this case, two books are of note: Wessmann’s *Bawenda of Spelonken*⁴⁰ (1908) and Stayt’s *The Bavenda* (1931).

In his book, Wessmann mentions the following concepts for God among the Vhavana people: Kusane, Ralovimba, Thovele (these somewhat following the early orthography). Nowhere, in his book does Wessmann suggest that Vhavana used the concept “Mudzimu” for God. In this book, Stayt makes some noteworthy comments. For instance, in his discussion of the officials in the king's service, he mentions messengers called vhadinda and notes that "Some chiefs have a hereditary mudinda who visits the god Mwari."⁴¹ In his chapter on "Religion," Stayt lists several concepts for God among the Vhavana people, including Raluvhimba, Mwari, Khuswane, Thovela, and Tshishongo. However, Stayt only uses the word “mudzimu” in reference to ancestors, human or living, and nowhere does he suggest that the word “mudzimu” was used for God.

The 1936 TT is, in some quarters, presented as a text that followed a literalistic approach in its following of source text phraseology.⁴² If my mind serves me well, a literal approach should involve using the correct corresponding terms in the target language to which the text is translated, not a free infusing of meanings that the terms do not carry in that language. How can a text that Vandalises another local language be considered literal? Additionally, the use of concepts such as Mudzimu and Murena in the 1936 TT does not find support from other writers who studied the Vhavana people during that time. Instead, the text canonized concepts already introduced in the language by the BMS missionaries. Therefore, it is not a representation of the Tshivenda language as spoken by the Vhavana people, but rather an

³⁹ Giesekke, “Venda Names for God,” 184.

⁴⁰ R. Wessmann and Leo Weintal, *The Bawenda of the Spelonken (Transvaal) : A Contribution towards the Psychology and Folk-Lore of African Peoples* (London: Pub. by “The African world”, Ltd., 1908), <http://archive.org/details/bawendaofspelonk00wess>.

⁴¹ Hugh A. Stayt, *The Bavenda* (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), 200–201.

⁴² Van Rooy, “Language and Culture in the Communication of the Christian Message as Illustrated in the Venda Bible,” 30. See also the statement on the Bible Society of South Africa website regarding this translation.

achievement of the BMS missionaries in reshaping the language through their distorted concepts for God. As a result, the 1936 TT became the church's most authoritative and influential text, shaping the language of the Vhaventḁa people with its distortions.

In 1970, Giesekke indicated that a revision committee had been established, which determined that the 1936 TT should be revised.⁴³ However, a revision team was not established to revise the 1936 TT until 2018. This project is proving to be more of a complete overhaul because the committee comprises biblical scholars and linguists who speak Tshiventḁa as their mother tongue and are competent in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. It is unclear whether the 1936 TT can be salvaged or not.

The 1998 Tshiventḁa Translation: The Perpetuation of the Distortion

A second complete Tshiventḁa Bible was published in 1998. The translation team was well aware of the short-comings of the 1936 TT, and I would like to believe that the translation team would have wanted to address and overcome those shortcomings; however, it is also possible that, as Giesekke noted in 1970, the 1936 TT had “an established tradition to cope with.” As I will, highlight, for the translators of 1998 TT, the established tradition was not something to be overcome but to be defended.

The 1998 TT project was led by Koos van Rooy, who, considering his scholarly credentials and experience in the mission field among the Vhaventḁa people, was deemed a good fit for the project. In 1971, he obtained his Ph.D. on the topic of "Language and Culture in the Communication of the Christian Message as Illustrated in the Venda Bible." He studied the 1936 Bible translation for several years and explored the relationship between language and culture. Additionally, from 1966 to 1972, he served as a missionary among the Vhaventḁa people. Van Rooy's PhD thesis laid the groundwork for the 1998 TT project.

In the “Introduction” of his PhD thesis, van Rooy captured the problem of Tshiventḁa Bible translation as follows:

In the course of my work as a missionary and Bible translator, I have noticed how Vendas often find it difficult to grasp the meaning of the biblical truths, seemingly because certain key terms in the Venda Bible do not convey notions they are intended to communicate. As I examined some of those terms closer, I was surprised to see how radically different their meaning was from the biblical terms they were supposed to translate.

To mention just three examples: The biblical term “God” is rendered by the Venda term Mudzimu, which means “ancestor spirit”. Now using this term for referring to “God” is looking for trouble, since the traditional Venda religion is entirely centered on ancestorolatry, and the Creator hardly plays any part in it. One could therefore expect the Venda, on first hearing the Christian message, to confuse the Creator with an ancestor spirit, and that is what has happened in many cases.⁴⁴

This statement by van Rooy needs careful examination as it reflects the ideology that influenced the 1998 TT. Van Rooy's view of translation is concerning. For him, translation focuses on "biblical truths." The idea of “biblical truths” in translation speaks to the idea of theology shaping the translation. The problem with this view is that translation is not about an attempt to render a text written in a different language in a manner that the new text

⁴³ Giesekke, “Venda Names for God,” 180.

⁴⁴ Van Rooy, “Language and Culture in the Communication of the Christian Message as Illustrated in the Venda Bible,” 1–2.

communicates effectively to the audience. In my view, for Van Rooy, a Bible translation project is primarily aimed at promoting Christianity, which results in imposing a particular Christian interpretation on the translation.

Van Rooy's view of the Vhavenḁa religion is flawed. He believes that their religion is based on "ancestrolatry," which means that the Vhavenḁa people worship their "ancestral spirits" ("midzimu" as they would be called in the fabricated terminology of the BMS missionaries). Van Rooy's translation of "mudzimu" as "ancestral spirit" suggests that it only pertains to the deceased. *Pace* van Rooy, the word "mudzimu" in Tshivenda can be used to refer to the living or the dead, and its plural form is "vhadzimu" not "midzimu". The idea of "midzimu" as already highlighted in the previous sections, stems from the attempt to standardise Tshivenda, Sepedi, Sesotho, and Setswana by introducing a concept of medzimo/midzimu or medimo. Van Rooy's idea that the Vhavenḁa religion revolves around ancestor worship is based on a misconception of Vhavenḁa culture. Van Rooy also embraced the idea that rituals like domba and malombo are "mudzimu," "midzimu," or "zwidzimu." This misconception also influenced Van Rooy's translation of the Bible.

Van Rooy acknowledged that using the term "Mudzimu" in the 1936 TT was a mistake and even regarded it as "looking for trouble". He argued that the translation of the concept "God" should be guided by a theological understanding of God in the Bible. In his view, the translator of 1936 TT and the earlier BMS missionaries approached it from a devotional angle (prayer and meditation) rather than a theological one. For van Rooy, the God of the Bible is distinct from whatever is found in the Vhavenḁa belief system. At the same time, van Rooy admitted that the term "Nwali" would have been a better choice, yet he contradicted himself by proposing that the term "Mudzimu" be retained.⁴⁵ He argued that the Vhavenḁa people, Christian and non-Christian people, had become accustomed to the term and that it now carried new meaning. This new meaning rendered it a personal noun, thereby giving the term characteristic it did not originally have. If this is anything to go by, it implies that the Bible translators felt empowered to switch nouns from one class to another based on the new meanings they give to the words. Van Rooy believed that replacing the term would result in negative reactions and that for Christians, "Mudzimu" represented the Father of Jesus Christ. He emphasized that the other "midzimu" were not true gods and that the "midzimu" of the heathen were nonexistent.⁴⁶ He also goes on to say:

There is some consolation in the fact that the term mudzimu may have apologetic value. When the Venda are told by the Bible that they may have no other midzimu beside God, this also becomes an unambiguous condemnation of ancestor worshi.

However, unfortunate the choice mudzimu has been, it seems to have come to stay, and to fill the need for a Christian term for calling upon God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁴⁷ (emphasis in the source)

⁴⁵ Van Rooy, "Language and Culture in the Communication of the Christian Message as Illustrated in the Venda Bible," 156.

⁴⁶ Van Rooy states: "To them it means the Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and nobody else. The other midzimu, they feel, are no mudzimu; they have usurped God's title. There are no midzimu. The midzimu of the heather are midzimu i siho, "non-existing midzimu" (emphasis in the source)" (Van Rooy, "Language and Culture in the Communication of the Christian Message as Illustrated in the Venda Bible," 159).

⁴⁷ Van Rooy, "Language and Culture in the Communication of the Christian Message as Illustrated in the Venda Bible," 159.

For van Rooy, replacing the term Mudzimu with a different term in the Tshivenda language was unnecessary. Therefore, in his thesis, van Rooy assumed the posture of a spokesperson of the Vhavana people, believing he knew what was best for them.

Regardless, it is important to examine the concepts for God used in the 1998 TT, as van Rooy's stance may have evolved. In the 1998 TT, we pay attention to the following concepts used for God: Mudzimu, Yahavee, Muṅe washu.

1998 Tshivenda Translation			
<i>Source Text</i>	<i>Translation</i>	<i>Old Testament</i>	<i>New Testament</i>
Elohim (OT) / Theos (NT)	Mudzimu	3629	2300
YHWH (OT)	Yahavee	1096	-
YHWH (OT) / Kurios (NT)	Muṅe washu	6087	550

The 1998 TT uses the concept “Mudzimu” to translate Hebrew, *Elohim*, and the Greek, *Theos*. The Tetragrammaton is translated using either “Yahavee” or “Muṅe washu”. It is surprising that there is this inconsistency in the translation of YHWH. Furthermore, it is unclear what criteria were used to determine when to use Yahavee and when to use Muṅe washu. Notably, the concept of “Murena”, which in 1936 TT was used to render kurios in the New Testament, does not appear. The exclusion of the concept “Murena” is welcome as it was an imposition of a Sepedi meaning on the Tshivenda term that meant the opposite.

The continuing use of the concept Mudzimu in the 1998 TT is not surprising, considering that the coordinator of this project already had a position that the concept was there to stay. It should be clear that the continuing use of the concept “Mudzimu” should be viewed as a deliberate undermining of the language and the people whose culture the language is supposed to carry. The option to continue to use the concept “Mudzimu” speaks to a deliberate attempt to preserve the language of the BMS missionaries who deliberately distorted the language and the culture of Vhavana. Therefore, in its continuing use of the concept “Mudzimu”, the 1998 TT does not represent the people whose culture the language is supposed to carry.

The use of Yahavee and Muṅe washu in the 1998 TT does not accurately reflect the language and culture of the Vhavana people. In Tshivenda, Yahavee and Yehova are both meaningless concepts. The choice between rendering YHWH as Yahavee or Yehova is not related to the Tshivenda language, but rather a matter of biblical Hebrew language. The Hebrew scriptures originally had no vocalisation—the insertion of vowels was a later development. Furthermore, there may even be other proposals of how YHWH should be rendered in the future. Whether YHWH is rendered Yahavee or Yehova or Yahveh or Yehvah or Yihveh it remains a biblical Hebrew issue, not a Tshivenda problem. Transferring biblical Hebrew vocalisation challenges to the Tshivenda language serves no purpose. In the modern Rabbinical Jewish culture, YHWH is not supposed to be pronounced, and therefore, when the Tanakh is read, Adonay is used. It is a Jewish culture, and they are faithful to it. However, when it comes to our African languages, we are coerced to follow Euro-Western fashions to render the concept. Continuing the trend of chasing the heels of Euro-Western translators does not serve our languages; rather, it speaks more to our being colonial subjects, who prefer to mimick the standards of the Euro-Western translators than develop our own translation standards.

The rendering of YHWH as Muṅe washu is indicative that a different concept can be used for the Hebrew concept. There is nothing in the word itself, which renders it untouchable. However, the following question should be asked of the 1998 TT: Is Muṅe washu a term that

resonates with the culture of the Vhaventḁa people? In terms of language, Muḁe washu conveys the idea of “our Lord”. However, this is not the natural way of expressing “vhuḁe” (ownership/possession) when engaging with those in a position of power such as the chief or king. The natural expression in Tshiventḁa is “vhaḁe vhangḁa”, which is an honorific expression. However, the expression “vhaḁe vhangḁa” would better render the Hebrew concept Adonay. More fitting in rendering this divine name would be to use a name in the Tshiventḁa language. As already noted, the Tshiventḁa language has ample concepts to refer to God, such as Nwḁli, Raluvhimba, and Khuzwane, and honorific titles such as Thovhele and Muhalimuhulu. The most common concepts before the disruption of our culture by colonial-Christian missions were Nwḁli and Raluvhimba. Therefore, rendering the concept YHWH with the concept Raluvhimba would be more meaningful. Contra to the claims that the Vhaventḁa people’s concept of God was deist, Raluvhimba was not a far-removed God who did not care about the people. Raluvhimba was believed to appear or manifest his presence from time to time.

In my view, the 1998 TT authorised the word “Mudzimu” as a concept for God in Tshiventḁa language. This the translators did while fully aware that they should not have been used in the first place. The distortion has become so ingrained that it has become a part of everyday language and religious practices to refer to God as “Mudzimu”. The use of Yahavee and Muḁe washu to refer to God does not reflect Tshiventḁa language. Therefore, the 1998 TT, just like its predecessor, contained no concepts from the Tshiventḁa language to refer to God. These two translations have served to undermine the Vhaventḁa people’s language and culture, and they are scorn to the people as these served to exorcise or ostracise concepts for God while presenting them with distorted concepts. Therefore, continuing to use concepts such as Mudzimu, Yehova, Murena, Muḁe wanga, Yahavee, or Muḁe washu to refer to God is to endorse the distortion. This serves as an erasure of Vhaventḁa concepts of God by making them a wasteland. This is a tragic tale unlike any other within the South African context, and if not, it is symptomatic of the damage done even to other indigenous languages and cultures.

DEALING WITH THE TRAGEDY DECOLONIALY: LEARNING TO UNLEARN AND LEARNING TO RELEARN

While identifying a problem may be straightforward, finding a solution can often be challenging. To effectively address the negative impacts of the two Tshiventḁa translations, I propose that we find decolonial alternatives that will enable us to challenge and counter the ongoing devaluation of our African knowledge systems, language, and culture. Decolonial alternatives require epistemological resistance premised in our own languages and cultures as divine gifts and not on the theological foundation of the Euro-West. Therefore, I propose two decolonial options to address the continuing epistemicides of African knowledge systems:

Delinking: Learning to Unlearn the Distorted Concepts for God in Translated Bibles

We decolonise by learning to unlearn the false concepts of God embedded in the Tshiventḁa translated Bibles. In their book, “Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and the Americas”, Tlostanova and Mignolo define the idea of learning to unlearn as “to forget what we have been taught, to break free from the thinking programmes imposed on us by education, culture, and social environment, always marked by the Western imperial reason.”⁴⁸ The “learning to unlearn” is what Mignolo also refers to as “epistemic delinking,” which

⁴⁸ Madina V. Tlostanova and Walter D. Mignolo, *Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and the Americas* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012), 7.

requires epistemic disobedience.⁴⁹ Epistemic disobedience is the refusal to conform to the patterns and dictates of modernity that negates and subordinates others and other forms of knowledge.

Learning to unlearn is to recognise how we, our languages and cultures, have been misrepresented by the Christian missionaries. The missionaries, their teachings, and the texts they produced undermined our African knowledge systems by instilling in our psyche an inferiority complex while they toyed with our languages by rendering us a people without knowledge of God. Therefore, as a people without knowledge of God, we were turned into empty vessels on which foreign and distorted concepts of God can be dumped using our languages as weapons against us. For the Vhavenda people, their language was weaponised against them.

The concepts for God, which were fabricated by the BMS missionaries in the Tshivenda language, have enjoyed a position of privilege for 150 years. Epistemic disobedience is the refusal to privilege any longer the knowledge produced by the German missionaries and perpetuated through the translated Bibles. Learning to unlearn for the Vhavenda people will include the following among others:

First, desisting from using distorted concepts for God. This implies stopping with immediate effect the use of concepts “Mudzimu”, “Murena”, “Yehova”, “Yahavee”, “Muxu washu” to refer to God. These concepts took root among the Vhavenda people because they were taught to use them in their daily lives and religious lives. Stopping to use these words is to “silence” them in the homes, churches, gatherings, social medias, Radio waves, and so on. The silencing of these concepts in turn implies that they will not be transferred to the next generation. The translated Bibles will remain, but the concepts for God that they use will no longer be perpetuated by lips of Vhavenda people.

Second, it is the refusal to make Christianity the determining factor of the meaning of words in our languages. Our local languages and Christianity as a religion should not be equated. When the two are equated, as the BMS missionaries did, the Christian meanings become the determining factor of how words are used in our languages. Our African languages existed before the advent of Christianity in our part of the world and should continue to be meaningful, with or without Christianity.

Third, it is necessary to guard against our spoken languages being overtaken by obsolete or ancient languages under the guise of sophistication. Even though languages like Biblical Hebrew, Aramaic, and Koine Greek have historical importance, incorporating their concepts of God does not enhance our African languages. In fact, it may contribute to the agenda of those who want to enforce biblical terminology on all cultures and languages, which could result in the destruction of our living concepts for God. There is nothing inherently special in biblical Hebrew or Greek terminology requiring us to use them as concepts for God instead of our own concepts.

⁴⁹ Walter D. Mignolo, “Delinking,” *Cultural Studies* 21.2–3 (2007): 449–514, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162647>; Walter D. Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 29.7–8 (2009): 159–81; Walter D. Mignolo, “Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality,” in *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*, ed. Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar (New York: Routledge, 2013), 303–67.

It will be difficult to unlearn the concepts for God as presented in translated Bibles, especially in the absence of alternative translations available for reference. However, this does not imply that there are no other sources upon which to rely. As Masoga highlights, African concepts for God can still be found in African people's memories and oral traditions.⁵⁰

Relinking: Learning to Re-learn to bring back to re-existence the Vhavenda Concepts of God

The learning to unlearn opens room to relearn.⁵¹ Learning to relearn is to regard our languages and cultures as resources of knowledge, not as wastelands. Therefore, we learn to relearn to relink (or reconnect) with our African knowledge systems in order to bring back to re-existence those concepts of God that the translated Bibles served to undermine and plough under. The “re-learning” implies a deliberate option not to let die or fade our histories/herstories, languages and cultures, much of which lies under the rubble following the colonial assault. As the late Ghanaian Philosopher Kwasi Wiredu reminds us, the maxim of our time should be: “African know thyself.”

In the process of relearning, it is important to begin with our African knowledge systems. The Bible was written in other languages and in (a) culture(s) different from our own. Therefore, it is the Bible that has to incarnate in order to speak our languages and be sensible in our cultures. Rendering the Bible in our languages is not a theological process as it was made out to be the colonial missionaries. The Bible like any other Book is translatable; therefore, translation of the Bible should not be confused with Christianisation. Christianisation is the use of the Bible as a book of faith. Therefore, the Bible can be translated without faith commitment and it can be made available to people without demanding a faith commitment. The commitment required in translation is to do justice linguistically and culturally.

Therefore, in dealing with concepts of God, it is necessary to recognise that the Tshivenda language is rich with concepts. Therefore, those concepts of God have to be brought back into existence in order to correct the distortions that were made in the Tshivenda translated Bibles. In so doing, the language in which the Bible is translated will be represented properly, and so will the people of that language.

The concepts for God in Tshivenda, which have been ploughed under, include the following:⁵²

⁵⁰ Mogomme A. Masoga, “Memory, Orality and ‘God-Talk’ in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 78.3 (2022): art. 3, p. 7, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i3.7716>.

⁵¹ Tlostanova and Mignolo, *Learning to Unlearn*.

⁵² For more information regarding the concepts for God, see Wessmann and Weinthal, *The Bawenda of the Spelonken (Transvaal)*; Stayt, *The Bavenda*; A. G. Schutte, “Mwali in Venda: Some Observations on the Significance of the High God in Venda History,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 9.2 (1978): 109–22, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1581392>; Muthuphei Rufus Ndou, “The Gospel and Venda Culture: An Analysis of Factors Which Hindered or Facilitated the Acceptance of Christianity by the Vhavenda” (University of Pretoria, PhD Thesis, 2000); Ndwambi Lawrence Khorommbi, “Echoes from beyond a Pass between Two Mountains (Christian Mission in Venda as Reflected in Some Contemporary Tshivenda Literature)” (University of South Africa, 1996); Alidzulwi Simon Munyai, “The Tenacity of African Traditional Religion in Venda Christianity: A Missional Investigation” (University of Pretoria, 2017); Alidzulwi Simon Munyai, “Understanding the Christian Message in Venda: A Study of the Traditional Concepts of God and of Life Hereafter among the Venda, with

The Creator God:

- **Ŋwali:** The concept of Ŋwali is not exclusive to the Vhaventḁa people. It exists in other languages, albeit with variations in spelling and pronunciation according to the respective cultures. Ŋwali is believed to be the creator and sustainer of the universe, revealing himself to people through his appearances on mountains.
- **Raluvhimba:** The concept Raluvhimba is unique to the Vhaventḁa people; however, the meaning is unclear. According to Carl Beuster, it could mean "Father of Holiness" or simply "Father." In the Tshiventḁa language, the prefix Ra- represents fatherhood, making Raluvhimba the creator and sustainer of the universe.

The understanding of the concept may also come from the two components of the word, Ra- and luvhimba. Luvhimba is Peregrine falcon or eagle,⁵³ which is the fastest creature on earth. Considering the speed of this bird, Raluvhimba was associated with astronomical activities such as the shooting star, thunder, comets, lightning.⁵⁴ Additionally, the term "vhimba" refers to towering clouds that precede a storm. If we link Raluvhimba to this concept, it would also be associated with storms, effectively making Raluvhimba a storm God.

- **Mutumbukavhathu / Musikavhathu / Goko Musikavhathu:** The concept can be rendered "The Creator of Human Beings." Thus, the Vhaventḁa people celebrated Ŋwali, Raluvhimba, as the creator of human beings. Such a view goes beyond just seeing Ŋwali as only the God of the Vhaventḁa people but as the God of humankind.
- **Khuzwane:** It is probable that Khuzwane is a dialectic concept for God in Sepedi that likely became associated with the Vhaventḁa people.⁵⁵ In Sepedi, the term Khuzwane is related to names such as Kgobe, Kgobane, Hubeane, and Hwebeane, which are dialects variations according to the clans.⁵⁶ The name Khuzwane, if indeed a mere dialect variation of Kgobe, is a concept to refer to God as embodying integrity.⁵⁷

God of Fertility and Holy Presence

- **Ramakole or Ralukole:** These concepts express the idea of God who sustains creation through rainmaking. The Vhaventḁa, as an agricultural society, relied on farming and animal husbandry; thus, rain was crucial. The lack of rain also brought a lot of suffering to the people, so they called upon Ramakole or Ralukole for rain.⁵⁸

Reference to the Impact of These Concepts on the Christian Churches" (University of Pretoria, Dissertation, 2009),.

⁵³ Van Warmelo, *Venda Dictionary*, 158.

⁵⁴ Stayt, *The Bavenda*, 230.

⁵⁵ Lucas Mogashudi Ngoetjana, "A Critical Comparison of the Concepts of Modimo [God] in Sotho Traditional Religion and the Concepts of the Christian God: A Missiological Problem" (University of Natal, 2002).

⁵⁶ Ngoetjana, "A Critical Comparison of the Concepts of Modimo [God] in Sotho Traditional Religion and the Concepts of the Christian God: A Missiological Problem," 266–72.

⁵⁷ Ngoetjana, "A Critical Comparison of the Concepts of Modimo [God] in Sotho Traditional Religion and the Concepts of the Christian God: A Missiological Problem," 267–68.

⁵⁸ During the 1896 drought, Beuster reported the following regarding the Vhaventḁa people: "During this year/1896, the drought was coupled with the terrible destruction brought about by locusts. The heathen Vhaventḁa at first hoped that their God Raluvhimba – who had once upon a time given them animals/locusts to them as food – would take them away again. Of course, when this hope of theirs was not fulfilled, it in no way led them to believe in the God of the Christians. Because: 'Are your gardens/fields not also destroyed by the locusts?' – that is how they prove their point" (Giesekke, "Informative Translation of the Berlin Mission Reports," 537).

- Gole: The word "Gole" means "cloud". The idea of God being represented by a cloud often indicates a holy presence. For example, when a thick cloud is at the top of the mountain, there is a Gole, which points to the glory of God.

God of the Sky:

- Nyadenga: In Tshivenda the prefix “nya-” expresses motherhood. When a woman bears her first child, then the prefix “nya-” is attached to the name of the child. For example, if the child is called “Masindi”, then the mother becomes “Nyamasindi”. Therefore, the concept Nyadenga is a combination of the prefix “nya-” and noun “denga”, which is “sky”. The concept Nyadenga implies bearer of the Sky. This name is also used among those in the Shona people.⁵⁹

God as King:

- Thovhele: The term "Thovhele" is used to refer to God as a king. This acknowledges God's role as the ultimate ruler. Human kings exercise their power under the kingship of God and are referred to as "mutuka wa Nwali" which means "son of Nwali."

God as a warrior

- Muhalimuhulu: The concept of Muhalimuhulu means “Great Warrior”. The Vhenda people revered God as a warrior God who leads them in the battles. The concept of God as Muhalimuhulu was also related to the drum Ngomalungundu.⁶⁰

The BMS missionaries and the translators of the 1936 and 1998 TTs deliberately ignored these available concepts in the language. The concepts Nwali, Raluvhimba, and Khuzwane are not human names of some ancestors from long ago, as the BMS missionaries speculated; rather, they are concepts of God. By defaming Vhenda concepts for God, the BMS missionaries controlled the narrative to project the Vhenda as people without knowledge of God.

CONCLUSION

The 1936 and 1998 TT are not innocent texts that should simply be viewed as translations of an the Scriptures or, in sweet terms, ‘just making God’s Word available in the Tshivenda language’. These texts operate within the “colonial matrix of power”. The 1936 and 1998 TT are atomic “cultural bombs” that have gone off, destroying, disfiguring, and ploughing under the Vhenda culture and knowledge systems, and many continue to succumb to their radiation poisoning. This is a classic case of “outright epistemicide” through indigenous language colonisation, cultural manipulation and distortions.

The 1936 TT, in as much as it is a Tshivenda text, it does not represent the Vhenda people; rather, it is a text that misrepresents them conceptually. This text is best understood as

⁵⁹ Canisius Mwandayi, *Death and After-Life Rituals in the Eyes of the Shona: Dialogue with Shona Customs in the Quest for Authentic Inculturation*, Bible in Africa Studies 6 (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2011); Dorah Mbuwayesango, “How Local Divine Powers Were Suppressed: A Case of Mwari of the Shona,” in *Other Ways of Reading the Bible: African Women and the Bible*, ed. Musa W. Dube (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001).

⁶⁰ Magdel Le Roux, “Ngoma Lungundu: An African Ark of the Covenant,” *Old Testament Essays* 22 (2009): 102–25; Magdel Le Roux, “The Lemba - ‘Angel-Stars’, Ngoma Lungundu and Ancestors,” *Pharos* 102 (2021): 1–7; H Von Sicard, *Ngoma Lungundu: Eine Africanische Bundeslage*, Studia Ethnographica V (Uppsalla: Almqvist & Wiksells Boktrycker, 1952).

a colonial text perpetuating a missionary understanding of the Vhavenda language and culture or a Vhavenda people of their own imagination. The ideology behind this text was not to best present the text in the Tshivenda language; rather, it was to solidify the distancing of Vhavenda from their religio-cultural worldview by furthering the distortion of the earlier BMS missionaries.

The 1998 TT promotes the flawed ideas of the 1936 TT. Even though it was published in the post-colonial, post-apartheid era, it is not an improvement. Instead, it should be considered a colonial missionary-translated Bible, which continues to uphold the colonial ideology of ploughing under the Vhavenda concepts for God. Even where it attempts to correct the 1936 TT, it adds other distortions.

The Vhavenda concept of God was not just distorted through the 1936 and 1998 TT; it was ploughed under by these texts. The fact that these texts have succeeded in standing for so long among the Vhavenda people speaks to the continuing colonisation of the “black” mind. The magnitude of the colonisation of our minds is further elaborated by the perpetuation of distortion in the Church across denominations—be it those whose lineage is in Europe Catholic, Anglican, Protestant, Reformed, Presbyterian, Methodist, etc., the African Initiated Churches, be it ZCC or Apostolic, and neo Churches be it Pentecostal, Charismatic, or neoProphetic.

The Vhavenda people’s continuing use of concepts Mudzimu or Yehova or Yahavee or Muṅe Washu referring to God reflects the tragic impact of colonialism on their language and culture. Some particularly pastors and church structures, may advocate for continuing with these concepts as they are now widely used. The same advocate repentance and resurrection as core to the Christian message, but yet would want to cling to the distorted language. If the church truly values the concept of repentance and resurrection, it should be readily practised even at this level.

Between the 1936 and 1998 TT, to use a Vhavenda saying, “a huna nnda, a huna gayi, zwoṅhe ndi zwilumi” (literally rendered, there is no lice, there is no fleas, both are parasites). These two texts do the same thing—they plough under the Vhavenda concept of God and render them to be people who had no knowledge of God. Furthermore, the Tshivenda language of these texts does not represent the Vhavenda people, rather it represents Vhavenda of the missionary imaginations—a heathen nation that can only know God through superior white people, who have the knowledge of God, and the power to make up that knowledge for others.

However, Nwali, Raluvhimba, Muhalimuhulu, Vhane vhashu, refuses to be forever buried by these texts. It is up to us to unlearn the distortions in Tshivenda Bible translations, and relearn our language to bring back to re-existence Nwali Raluvhimba.

Thank you for listening.

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