# European Missionaries and Tswana Identity in the 19th Century

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### Abstract

*During the nineteenth century, 'Batswana' became used as label for a large number of people inhabiting the interior of southern Africa, and European missionaries played an important role in the evolution of the term's meaning and the adoption of that meaning by both Europeans and Batswana. Through their long years of residence among Batswana and development of written forms of Setswana, missionaries became acknowledged by other Europeans as experts on Tswana culture, and their notions of Tswana ethnicity became incorporated into European understandings of Africans and, eventually, into Batswana understandings of themselves. The development of Tswana identity passed through several stages and involved different layers of construction, depending on the level of European knowledge of Tswana societies, the purposes served by that knowledge, and the changing circumstances of Tswana peoples' relations with Europeans and others. Although Tswana identity has, in a sense, been invented, that identity has not existed in one set form nor has it simply been imposed upon Africans by Europeans. Parallel to European attempts to define Tswana-ness, Batswana developed their own understandings of Tswana identity, and although missionaries contributed much to the formation of 'Tswana' identity, it was not purely a European invention but resulted instead from interaction between Europeans and Africans and their mutual classification of the other in reference to themselves.*

### Introduction

> We call them Becwana, and we call their language Secwana; and these terms are now in common use among the people. But they say they learnt these names from us, and have merely adopted the white man's terminology. But however that may be, the word is now in general use, and is definite enough for all ordinary purposes (Willoughby 1905: 295).

Between the arrival of the first European missionary among Batswana in 1801 and the writing of the above passage by the missionary Willoughby in 1905, 'Becwana' acquired 'general use' as label for a large number of people inhabiting the interior of southern Africa. Although the word 'Batswana' did not likely originate as 'white man's terminology', it is clear that missionaries played an important role in the evolution of the term's meaning and the adoption of that meaning by both Europeans and Batswana. Through their long years of residence among Batswana and development of written forms of Setswana, missionaries became acknowledged by other Europeans as experts on Tswana culture, and their notions of Tswana ethnicity became incorporated into European understandings of Africans and, eventually, into Batswana understandings of themselves. These ideas of Tswana-ness developed during the nineteenth century in several ways, depending on the level of European knowledge of Tswana societies, the 'ordinary purposes' served by that knowledge, and the changing circumstances of Tswana peoples' relations with Europeans and others. As with any other categorization, Batswana were initially identified by missionaries primarily in comparison to others — as not European, not like other Africans and not Christian. As other identities became evident or arose,

however, those distinctions became much more variable, and Tswana identity assumed forms unanticipated by European classificatory schemes.

The 'invention' of Tswana and other ethnic identities in southern Africa by Europeans has long been recognized, from the time of Willoughby up to the present, but the nature and implications of that invention have varied over time. During the early nineteenth century, in developing scientific views of humanity, Europeans assumed the existence of a primordial 'Tswana people' sharing a single set of inherent physical and social traits. Later, during the colonial era, Europeans became more aware of complex divisions among the Tswana and attempted to determine the political lineages and hierarchies of the different 'tribes'. At the same time, by the early twentieth century, anthropologists found that 'Tswana' language and culture were very similar to those previously identified as 'Sotho' and 'Pedi', and they therefore grouped the three together as, respectively, 'Western Sotho', 'Southern Sotho' and 'Northern Sotho'.[1] The existence of shared roots was confirmed by the various groups' oral traditions and described in some detail by historians later in the twentieth century, with archeology providing further evidence of early 'Sotho-Tswana' societies.[2]

In the past twenty years, with the end of European rule in the region, scholars have more critically examined the motives and methods of colonial-era Europeans in their 'creation of tribalism' (Vail 1991).[3] These recent studies have been helpful correctives to earlier notions of 'discovered' primordial identities, but in their efforts to expose the exploitative uses of those inventions, they have sometimes focused too much on the influence of colonial Europeans (Ranger 1993). Tswana identity has been 'invented', but that identity has not existed in one set form nor has it simply been imposed upon Africans by Europeans. Instead, the development of Tswana identity began long before colonialism, and not just in the minds of Europeans but as a product of interaction and changing relationships (i.e. 'negotiation') between different groups of people, both European and African. The meaning of 'Tswana' during the nineteenth century was different from what it was during the colonial era, and, as evidenced by current debates in Botswana over ethnic and national identity, its meaning continues to evolve today.[4] It is the goal of this paper to take a closer look at the early role of European missionaries in that process and, thereby, to reveal how European and African identities have formed in reaction to one another and changed over time.

The missionary societies that worked most closely with those groups identified as 'Tswana' were, first and foremost, the London Missionary Society (LMS) and, secondarily, the Wesleyan Methodists (WMS), Paris Missionary Society (PMS), Hermannsburger Lutherans (HMS) and Berlin Missionary Society (BMS). Accordingly, it is the writings of those missionaries that have served as the main sources for this paper, with particular emphasis on their published works and the public dissemination of their ideas. In order to trace the evolution and influence of those ideas, the writings of some other Europeans will also be explored. Unfortunately, as is so often the case with African history, the voices of 'the Batswana' are usually only heard indirectly through the pen of the European, but perhaps enough of those voices emerge to indicate combined African and European agency in the development of Tswana identity.

## Early European Visitors' Views of Batswana
Early missionaries formed their initial views of 'the Batswana' in conjunction with other European visitors. The first Europeans to come into contact with those people later identified as 'Batswana' were occasional traders and hunters who ventured north in the

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late 1700s in search of cattle, ivory and other goods to bring back and sell in the Cape Colony. By 1800, a few Dutch and several mixed-race Griqua had settled along the frontier of the Batlhaping, and reports of their wealth instigated a government expedition in 1801 to seek new supplies of cattle for the Cape Colony. Led by Petrus Truter and William Somerville, the expedition traveled as far as the Tlhaping capital, Dithakong, and after a two-week stay returned to the Cape.[5] As they met the Batlhaping, the government agents were accompanied by Jan Kok and William Edwards, two missionaries affiliated with the LMS who had been living with the Griqua (called 'Bastards' at that time) but took the opportunity of the expedition to relocate and start evangelizing further north. In 1805, the German scientist and adventurer Henry Lichtenstein visited the Batlhaping and was aided in his exploration by Truter's journal of the earlier expedition and by the presence of the missionary Kok, who by then had acquired some familiarity with the 'Beetjuana' (Lichtenstein, 1807, 1815). Lichtenstein was followed by William Burchell in 1812 and the LMS missionary John Campbell in 1813, each of whom also gathered information about groups north of the Batlhaping and published accounts of their journeys (Burchell 1824, Campbell 1815). After the establishment of an LMS mission with the Batlhaping at Kuruman in 1817, accounts of early European contact with Batswana concluded with publications by the missionaries Campbell (1822), John Philip (1828) and Robert Moffat (1842).

For early European visitors, the first indication that the Batswana were a 'new' type of people was their physical appearance. At first, they did not seem to fit any of the existing European racial categories of west African 'Negro', southeastern 'Kaffer' or southwestern 'Hottentot' and 'Bushman'. As described by Barrow (1806: 401), 'They are not, like the eastern Kaffers, invariably black; some being of a bronze colour, and others of nearly as light a brown as the Hottentot.' Or, as observed by Lichtenstein (1807: 65), 'Their colour is more brown than black, about half way between the shiny blackness of the negroes and the dullish yellow brown of the Hottentots.'[6] Upon closer examination, however, European visitors recognized some similarities between Tswana and Xhosa, in contrast to Khoisan peoples, and Burchell concluded that 'there cannot be the least hesitation in considering the Bichuanas as Caffres also, although speaking a different language, and following different customs.'(1824: 374) Among the visible aspects of their society that distinguished Batswana from other 'Caffres' was their housing. According to Barrow (1806: 401), 'Their houses are totally different from those of any other tribe yet discovered in Southern Africa.'[7] Impressed by the strength and complexity of Tswana houses, Lichtenstein asserted, 'the great care and exactness with which they are built forms one of the principal features in which these people differ from the Caffre tribes of the east' (1815: 377).[8] Lichtenstein went on to describe numerous other differences between Batswana and the Xhosa whom he had already visited, and other travelers made similar distinctions between Batswana and other Africans, producing progressively more detailed lists of Tswana traits.[9]

This observation of differences between Batswana and other Africans was accompanied by the adoption of a label to identify the 'new' people. The first recorded mention of the people who lived northeast of the interior Khoisan employed the term 'Briqua', which in the language of the Khoi Khoi and Kora meant 'goat people' (Livingstone 1858b: 219, Maingard 1933). This term was adopted by early European travelers and was used for several years to identify the southernmost Batswana.[10] During their 1801 expedition, however, Truter and Somerville were informed by residents of Dithakong that 'though their tribe was by the *Koras* usually called *Briequas*, yet that name

which they bore among themselves was *Booshuanas*' (Barrow 1806: 387). Members of the expedition initially assumed that if the people of Dithakong called themselves 'Booshuana', then other interior groups, such as those identified as 'Barroloos' [Barolong], were something other than 'Booshuana'.[11] After increased contact with the Barolong and other groups, however, Europeans soon applied the term 'Batswana' (with a variety of spellings) to all those interior groups culturally similar to the people encountered by Truter and Sommerville and significantly different from peoples closer to the coast.

One of the principal indicators of internal cultural unity among Batswana was their language. Members of the 1801 expedition were apparently unaware of similarities between the Batlhaping's language and those spoken further inland. Later travelers, however, through interviews and contact with other people in the area, concluded that the language of the Batlhaping was mutually comprehensible with that of the Barolong, Bangwaketse and other groups. Applying the 'se-' prefix signifying language or culture to the root '-tswana', it was called 'Setswana', and each of the visitors compiled a list of Setswana words and phrases that they had gathered from informants and practiced in basic conversations.[12] This perceived linguistic unity was extended to include other shared cultural elements. As stated by Lichtenstein (1815: 409). 'All these tribes speak the same language, and their modes of life, customs, and manners, vary little from each other, as to the most essential points'; or, by Burchell (1824: 375). 'These nations or tribes, as far as we are yet acquainted with them, pursue generally the same mode of life.' For Burchell, the sharing of a common language was also an important factor in the changes of political affiliation that occurred among the different groups. 'The Sichuana language, being common to all these different tribes, seems to unite them into one great nation; and a change of rulers therefore is, to them, little more than a change of persons' (Burchell 1824: 386). To illustrate their observations, European visitors included in published accounts of their travels many drawings of utensils, clothing and houses labeled as examples of Setswana culture, in addition to descriptions of Tswana customs, government and other elements of their society.

In comparing Batswana to other Africans, European visitors invariably also formed judgments about the supposed level of sophistication achieved by Batswana. In general, travelers were impressed by the peace and prosperity of Tswana communities, gained apparently not by force but through mutual cooperation. Comparing Tswana to 'Kaffers', Barrow suggests, 'though they are not by any means so fine a body of men in point of personal qualifications, they seem to have stepped beyond them in the arts and habits of civilized life.'[13] Offering an explanation for the Batswana's advancement beyond the Xhosa, Lichtenstein (1815: 407) argues, 'The nation appears milder and more gentle, or perhaps, we should rather say, that the others from being molested in greater degree by enemies from without, from being less united among themselves, from inhabiting besides, the mountainous regions of the coast, may have imbibed more rugged manners, and have fallen behind them some steps in civilization.' The apparent quality of Tswana life was tied to their environment, with its springs, grasses and wildlife a welcome sight to travelers arriving from the south across the Karoo desert.[14] The greater amount of clothing worn by Batswana, necessitated by colder winters on the highveld, also impressed European visitors as preferable to that of other Africans. As described by Borcherds, 'The costume of the Bushuanahs is superior to that of the neighbouring tribes, covering a greater part of their bodies, according to our notions of decency.'[15] European visitors were also impressed by the large size of Tswana settlements compared with those of other southern Africans,

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and they saw the accompanying social hierarchies and complex political structures as evidence of civilization.[16]

While European explorers and missionaries shared many assumptions about Tswana culture and society, their goals and interpretations also differed in some respects. Lichtenstein, for example, acknowledges his dependence on the missionary Kok for guiding and introducing him to the Batswana, but he is critical of other missionaries for focusing too much on religion and not enough on more practical matters such as the training of Africans to become workers.[17] In reply, the missionaries defend their conversion efforts and dismiss Lichtenstein's claim that Batswana already possessed sufficient morals and civility, arguing instead that some matters were better judged by religion than by science. 'In books of travel it is to be regretted that we seldom find a talent for detail connected with the comprehension of general principles: hence, many to whom science is indebted for the manner in which they have described the productions of foreign countries, have proved themselves most unfit persons to give opinions on the character and institutions of men' (Philip 1828: 137).[18] Though the missionaries' travel accounts employed some of the same terms and categories as other explorers, their primary concern was the establishment of missions. As Robert Moffat (1842: 227) says of Campbell's journeys, 'Mr. Campbell's object was not scientific research. His aim was still higher — the promotion of that cause of which science is but the handmaid.'

The first Europeans to encounter Batswana differed in their interpretations of Tswana society, depending on the preconceptions and purposes served by that knowledge. As Khoi Khoi had identified the 'Briqua' by the goats that they provided, so also European visitors formed impressions of the 'Batswana' that fulfilled their own needs and expectations. Explorers found a new group of Africans awaiting discovery, missionaries found people in need of the Gospel, and traders found suppliers of cattle and wildlife products. At the same time, early European visitors shared an assumption that groups of people could be classified according to certain inherent traits, with lines of demarcation between races, nations and tribes that might be determined through the careful collection and analysis of evidence. People living north of the Orange River were seen as members of a Tswana nation, joined by a common language and other cultural elements that it was assumed could be discovered through further study. Scientific explorers, such as Burchell and Lichtenstein, and traveling missionaries, such as Campbell and Philip, thus responded to and built on one another's findings, and by the time that the first permanent European mission was established among the Batlhaping, a considerable body of material had been collected and theories formed about the identity of the Batswana.

## Resident Missionaries' Views of Batswana

European understandings of 'the Batswana' were formed not just from preconceived notions of 'tribe', 'savage' and 'heathen' but also from experiences gained through living and working in and near Tswana societies. As argued by Philip (1828:137), in criticism of Lichtenstein, 'For the true character of a people, we must not look to the journals of travelers for information which they have picked up during their short visits; but to such as have resided among them, and have made themselves intimately acquainted with their language, their customs, and manners.' Philip is referring to his fellow missionaries of the LMS, who had founded the first lasting mission station among Batswana a few years before Philip's visit and laid foundations for the development of other missions. Rather than simply observe Batswana, resident missionaries formed relationships with Batswana as part of their efforts to secure their own daily needs and to win acceptance of their

message. Rather than depend on translators, like earlier travelers, missionaries worked to learn the language themselves so that their preaching and teaching might be better understood. The knowledge that they gained was often placed in existing categories or served to confirm prior assumptions, but missionaries were also sometimes forced to develop new theories in response to the complex realities of Tswana society.

Early descriptions of Tswana society by resident missionaries often simply supplemented the observations of earlier travelers with information purported to be more detailed and accurate. Rather than challenge the assumption that there was such a thing as a Tswana national identity, they supplied more detailed characteristics of that supposed identity. Included in Campbell's account of his second expedition and in Moffat's memoirs of his first twenty years as a missionary, there are lengthy descriptions of 'Bootchuana manners and customs' (Campbell 1822: 193-222, Moffat 1842: 234-255). These descriptions tend to be somewhat critical, focusing on those aspects of Tswana society deemed to be objectionable 'barriers to the Gospel' such as rainmaking, initiation rites, polygamy and religious beliefs. They are also somewhat anecdotal in their composition, appearing more as separate stories and curious observations than as systematic studies. Unlike earlier accounts that attributed information to various informants, later missionary writings presented information and interpretations as the factual product of the missionary's own experiences.[19] By the middle of the nineteenth century, published accounts by missionaries presented information about Tswana society and customs not as a separate topic or chapter but interspersed with descriptions of their own work and adventures.[20] As missionaries became settled in Tswana communities, they likewise inserted themselves into their depictions as leading actors in Tswana affairs.

As LMS missionaries became more familiar with Tswana societies, one problem that occupied their powers of deduction was determining the geographic extent of 'the Bechuana nation'. They continued to see Batswana as distinct from other African peoples but tried to form more detailed explanations of those distinctions. Early explorers had assumed the existence of a cultural and linguistic unity among Batswana, but resident missionaries, in the course of their itinerant preaching, soon found people that exhibited some characteristics of supposed Tswana identity but not others. Regarding 'Bechuana Bushmen' in outlying areas near Dithakong, Moffat (1842: 10) noticed varying degrees of Tswana-ness. 'The dialects of the Sechuana as spoken by these people, especially in districts remote from the towns, is so different from that spoken by the nation generally, that interpreters are frequently required.' Groups in the desert to the west were called 'Bakgalagadi' by many Batswana, but investigations indicated that racially and linguistically they were more like Batswana than Bushmen. Although Moffat (1951: 80, 124-127) termed them 'poor Bechuana' for their servile status compared to other Batswana, Livingstone (1858b:220) instead extended the meaning of 'Bakalahari' to be an old, collective name for all of the Tswana peoples settled near the desert. Meanwhile, other groups to the north and east with languages similar to Setswana, such as the 'Makololo' and 'Basuto', were also included by Livingstone within the category of 'Bechuana', creating a confusing mix of sets and subsets that led one reader of Livingstone to conclude that even 'the Kafir' and 'the Matebele' were branches of 'the great Bechuana family of tribes' (Monk 1858: 86-93).

While LMS missionaries entering the interior from the southwest were attempting to determine the extent of the 'Batswana', other missionaries entering from the southeast were engaged in similar efforts to classify the interior peoples. At first, most of them employed the LMS' label, particularly those missionaries working with groups closer to

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the LMS missions, such as the PMS with the Bahurutshe, the WMS with the Barolong, and the HMS with the Bakwena and others. After passing through Xhosa or Zulu territory on their way inland, they noted differences between the 'Batswana' and the Nguni coastal groups, echoing the observations of earlier European visitors from the Cape.[21] Coming from the east, however, many of them also adopted the term 'Sotho', derived from an Nguni term for the interior peoples.[22] The PMS missionary Eugene Casalis initially reconciled this difference by calling the people with whom he worked 'Bassoutos' but their language 'Sechuana'.[23] During the course of the nineteenth century, however, as Moshoeshoe's 'Sotho' kingdom grew and competing European spheres of influence divided it from the 'Tswana' to the west, 'Sotho' acquired general usage as label for the eastern interior peoples and their culture. Similarly, the independence of the Pedi kingdom led its BMS missionaries and other Europeans to classify them as a third group.[24] The process was complete by 1885 with the British colonial separation of 'Bechuanaland' from other Sotho-Tswana areas in southern Africa. In that year, although individual HMS missionaries continued to refer to their Transvaal congregations as 'Betschuanen', official reports began to group those missions under the heading of 'Basuto'. Missionaries thus continued the categorization of African peoples started by earlier visitors, based partly on their own observations and partly in reaction to changing political circumstances.

In their quest to label the groups and subgroups that they encountered, missionaries often adopted names already in use by Batswana and other Africans. Although those names were frequently used by Europeans in ways different from their original intentions, they nevertheless arose from existing African systems of classifying 'the other'. One way that Batswana designated people as foreign was by using the noun prefix 'le- / ma-' (singular / plural), such as with the Makalaka [Kalanga] and Masarwa [San].[25] This prefix also had somewhat derogatory connotations, placing a group outside the 'mo- / ba-' noun class of people and objectifying them as something faceless, undifferentiated and strange. It was therefore reasonably assumed by missionaries that those groups called 'Ma-' were not considered to be fellow Batswana. This label was not limited to those considered inferior or weak but was equally applied to groups such as Makgoa [Europeans], Matebele [Ndebele] and even Sotho-Tswana Makololo [Bakololo] who might be hostile foreign invaders.[26] At the same time, some groups considered by Europeans to be racially and culturally distinct from Batswana might be considered fellow *batho* [people], such as the Batlhaping designation of their longtime Kora neighbors as 'Bakgoto' (Maingard 1933: 599-600). Batswana thus used a variety of names for 'others', subordinate and otherwise, and their labels were often borrowed by missionaries to identify different groups of Africans.

The missionaries' use of 'Batswana' as label for a variety of groups was gradually modified by the social and political realities that they encountered. While earlier missionaries assumed that a large number of people called themselves 'Batswana', later missionaries grew to believe that use of the term was propagated primarily by Europeans. Early visitors recorded the use of 'Batswana' by Batlhaping as a name for those who shared their culture. When Lichtenstein (1815: 396) described Xhosa people to an old Motlhaping man, 'he was much surprised to hear that in manners and customs they were so much like the Beetjuans, yet were not called by their name.' Writing fifty years later, Livingstone (1858b: 219) similarly felt that the collective meaning of 'Batswana' was an indigenous creation. 'Most other tribes are known by the terms applied to them by strangers only, as the Caffres, Hottentots, and Bushmen. The Bechuanas alone use the term to themselves as a generic one for the whole nation.' Thirty years after Livingstone,

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however, Mackenzie (1887: vol.1, 22) concluded that 'Batswana', in fact, was not what the people called themselves. 'The name Bechuana is a word used at an early period by white men to denote the tribes of Batlaping and Barolong, with which they came first into contact. These people do not use this word of themselves, or of one another; nevertheless, they accept of it as the white man's name for them, and now begin to use it themselves.'

Other missionaries writing twenty years after Mackenzie came to a similar conclusion based primarily on their observation of the central importance of the *morafe* [chiefdom or tribe]. European visitors realized very early that the 'Tswana nation' actually consisted of independent groups each governed by a different *kgosi* [ruler], and they called those groups by their own names of Batlhaping, Barolong, Bangwaketse, Bakwena, etc.[27] Resident missionaries such as Moffat, Livingstone and Mackenzie accordingly identified people almost exclusively by their *morafe* or its location, using the term 'Batswana' only when making generalizations about them in comparison to Europeans or other non-Batswana. Europeans noticed cultural and linguistic similarities between the different 'tribes', but they also recognized the primary role of the *morafe* in determining each person's identity. As explained by Willoughby (1905: 295), 'These tribes speak the same language with certain minor differences of dialect, and have substantially the same customs and folklore. But they speak of themselves only by their several tribal names, and have no one name for their language, country or tribal group.' Or, as put by J. T. Brown (1926: 25), 'I have spoken of these people as Bechuana, but when any of them alludes to himself, or refers to another member of the group, the name Mochuana, which is the singular, is never used. It is always the tribal name that is used, and no native ever calls himself by any but this tribal name.'

During their years of residence in various *merafe*, missionaries grew to recognize both unity and diversity among Batswana. These competing understandings of Tswana identity were reflected in missionaries' speculations about the meaning of the term itself. While some thought that 'tswana' derived from the verb *tshwana* [be alike, similar] and indicated 'people like or equal to each other', others thought it came from *tswaana*, the reciprocal form of the verb *tswa* [come from], and thus described 'people separated from each other'.[28] Ultimately, missionaries held to both meanings of the term, insisting on the cultural unity of Batswana while simultaneously acknowledging significant differences between the *merafe*.

## Development of Written Setswana
One of the principal spheres in which LMS missionaries insisted on Tswana unity was that of language. The extension of their missions and the spread of Christianity depended on the missionaries' ability to preach and teach in the local vernacular, and it was their fervent hope and expectation that the language spoken by the Batlhaping in Dithakong might also be understood in every other 'Tswana' *morafe*. As expressed by Campbell after his first visit, 'a missionary, learning the language of Lattakoo [Dithakong], will be able to converse with the people of many other nations, and to translate portions of the Scriptures, which the young people of Lattakoo, when taught to read, could communicate to various nations, thus preparing them to receive missionaries' (1815: 189). This optimism was shared by Philip a few years later. 'The prevalence of the Bechuana language over a vast portion of the continent of Africa, is a circumstance which adds greatly to the importance of this mission' (1828: 142-143). It was particularly important to the missionaries that they develop a written form of Setswana in order to produce a translation of the Bible. Reflecting the beliefs of the eighteenth-century Protestant revival movement in Europe, the

LMS envisioned their missions in Africa as being free from the hierarchical authority structure found in the Catholic Church, with each individual having access to God's saving grace through prayer and, more importantly, through the ability to read the Bible for one's self. Accordingly, the first LMS missions among Batswana spent much of their time creating a Setswana translation of the Bible and teaching Batswana how to read it.[29]

The first task faced by LMS missionaries was to reduce the language of the Batlhaping into a written form that made sense to Europeans. After several years spent learning to speak the language, they assigned various Latin letters to each of its sounds. Burchell already suggested a possible orthography after his 1812 visit, but it was Robert Moffat's orthography that served as the basis for the LMS version of written Setswana.[30] Moffat's own inconsistent spelling in his early letters indicates that it took several years to develop his system, but he soon felt confident about his written form of Setswana and became critical of others' spellings. 'It is . . . difficult to explain why persons associating with the Bechuanas, should write Bootshuanas, Boschuanas, Botchuanas, and Moschuanas; Lattakoo for Lithako; Krooman for Kuruman; Mateebe and Matevi for Mothibi; and Bachapins and Machapis for Batlapis; and Bacharaquas for Batlaros, etc.' (Moffat 1842: 225-226). By 1826, Moffat had published a spelling book and catechism, and by 1860 a number of other missionaries had produced Setswana grammars, including a forty-page booklet by Livingstone written specifically for members of his Zambezi expedition to give them some familiarity with one of the languages of the African interior.[31]

After developing a written form of Setswana, Moffat focused on producing a Setswana translation of the Bible. He began with the Gospel of Luke in 1829 and, with the help of another missionary, William Ashton, completed the rest of the New Testament by 1839 and the Old Testament by 1857. Using a printing press at Kuruman, they published hundreds of Setswana Bibles, as well as hymnbooks, grammars and spelling books, for distribution to Batswana attending the mission schools and churches. Ashton also edited a Setswana-language newspaper, the *Mokaeri oa Becuana* [Instructor of the Batswana], in 1857-58, and another LMS newspaper was published from 1883 to 1896, *Mahoko a Becwana* [News of the Batswana]. The LMS missionary John Brown compiled a dictionary that was first published in 1876, enlarged and revised in 1895, and revised again in 1925 by J. Tom Brown. Increasing numbers of grammars, spelling books and readers were produced by various missionaries after 1875, and by the end of the nineteenth century, a single, standard written form of Setswana had become well-established by LMS missionaries for use in all of their schools and churches, regardless of the *morafe* in which they were located.[32]

This development of written Setswana involved some controversy, both within the LMS and with other missionary societies. Moffat held early leadership in the translation work, but by the late 1840s other missionaries began to demand a role, particularly in the publications of the Kuruman press, which was a major supplier of books at that time not just for the LMS but for other missions as well. In 1847, the PMS missionary Prosper Lemue submitted translations of Isaiah, Psalms and Proverbs for possible inclusion in the upcoming Kuruman Old Testament.[33] While two of the LMS missionaries, Roger Edwards and Walter Inglis, supported Lemue's efforts and were critical of some of Moffat's work, others supported Moffat, who proceeded to produce his own translations of those books.[34] In 1858, Ashton noted that Joseph Ludorf of the WMS had complained that the Barolong of his mission 'do not understand <u>our</u> books on account of the difference of dialect' and announced his intention to write a 'Serolong' translation

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of the Bible.[35] Yet, although Ludorf had already started his own newspaper for the Barolong, *Molekoli oa Bechuana* [Visitor of the Batswana], that did not stop a Morolong WMS member, Tsabadira, from writing to Ashton approving of the LMS newspaper.[36] By the 1860s, most mission societies were publishing their own hymnbooks, catechisms and school materials, but most also continued to use the LMS-produced bibles with Robert Moffat's orthography.

In 1869, however, as Moffat was about to leave for retirement in England, younger LMS missionaries assumed greater control over the translation work and decided to implement a new orthography. Led by Roger Price, they wanted to introduce new letters and spellings that they thought would more accurately reflect the sounds of Setswana, particularly as spoken by groups further north in its more central or 'pure' form. Their changes were opposed by Moffat and his supporters in England, and by many missionaries from other societies, who wrote letters to the LMS missionaries in protest.[37] Heinrich C. Schulenburg of the HMS, for example, expressed concern that new uses of the letters d and h would cause unnecessary confusion, 'and what shall I say to the w, it seems to me it is the best way to get a polnisch orthography.'[38] In response to mounting criticism, the LMS missionaries agreed to some compromises, but by then it appeared to be too late. As Karl Hohls, the superintendent of the HMS in South Africa, wrote in 1871, 'We sincerely wish to have one Bible together with the London Mission Society but we are compelled to cut off the question.'[39] In order to continue as the main supplier of bibles for the HMS and other Tswana missions, the LMS and their main publisher, the British and Foreign Bible Society, finally relented, and their bibles continued to employ Moffat's old orthography and translation into the 1880s. When Price maintained that certain phrases in the LMS bible did not make sense in Setswana, the London publisher insisted 'that the Becwanas must be educated in the idea & their language made to convey the idea.'[40]

The debate on Setswana translation generally divided over the basic question of whether local languages were mutually comprehensible dialects of a larger language that could be served by one orthography, or whether they were in fact separate languages each requiring a different orthography. The development of written Setswana partly followed both directions. Although 'Setswana', 'Sesotho' and 'Sepedi' were, arguably, dialects of a single language, European and African political divisions led them to be classified as the languages of separate groups. Even among the people generally recognized as 'Batswana', LMS attempts to standardize a written language met with competition from other European missions. Nevertheless, the different *merafe* with which they worked were still seen as 'Tswana', reflecting European assumptions about the categorization of people into races and cultural groups, and their languages, though written in different ways, were all assumed to be the dialects of a more widespread Tswana nation.

By 1890, the written Setswana used by the LMS was no longer accepted by many of the other missions, particularly those from countries that spoke languages other than English. They had devised orthographies more reflective of their own European languages, and their Setswana pronunciation, vocabulary and idioms were usually those of the primary *merafe* with which they worked. Thus, French Setswana was that of the Bahurutshe (or of the Basotho), German that of the Bakwena and Balete (or of the Bapedi), and Dutch that of the Bakgatla. There were further differences between missions from the same European country, such as the British WMS that worked with the Barolong versus the LMS Tlhaping mission, and the German HMS north of the Vaal River versus the BMS south of the Vaal. Each developed different 'Setswana' hymnbooks, catechisms and newspapers, using slightly different orthographies. In 1910, most of the mission

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societies officially agreed upon a standard orthography, but that agreement was ignored by many local missions, which by then had become committed to their own systems.[41] The situation was further complicated by the work of professional linguists who used numerous diacritic marks and characters other than those found in the Latin alphabet, but their opinions usually had more influence within universities and government offices than in the mission-run schools that were chiefly responsible for the spread of literacy.[42]

As missionary societies grew divided in their constructions of written Setswana, their disagreements did not go unnoticed by Batswana Christians, who were quite capable of judging the different translations and did not necessarily accept whatever systems the missionaries devised for them. As stated by Edwards in 1849:

> That the natives do think & talk too among themselves about the translations, & the missionaries, & observe who does, or does not read & speak in strict accordance with what is printed, & take the gage of each missionary's Sechwana, who can deny or prevent. They are not less observant in these matters than Englishmen wd. be if Foreigners, not masters of English were placed over them as instructors.[43]

Batswana in the mid-nineteenth century judged the written word according to how well it agreed with the spoken word, and while debates over orthography were very important to the missionaries, they were probably less so to Batswana at that time, who continued to think of their language primarily as spoken, not written. With this in mind, Schulenburg of the HMS expressed concern in 1870 that, although a new orthography might help missionaries, 'I think we do not write books for sense [of] 40 or 50 missionaries who have to study the words as well as the pronunciation but for the natives, and every native if he at all understands what he is reading, will of course pronounce the word right enough.'[44] Schulenburg, like a number of other missionaries at that time, opposed any radical changes in the orthography, suspecting that while such changes might make sense to literate Europeans they would only confuse any Motswana still learning how to read with the former system.

Attempts by Europeans to create a standardized written Setswana eventually met with some criticism from literate Batswana, who were frustrated by European assumptions of a Tswana unity as well as their imposition of different orthographies. This frustration surfaced in a series of letters written to the editor of the LMS Setswana newspaper *Mahoko a Becwana*. In the first issue, an anonymous writer to the editor asks, 'in whose language will the newspaper of the Batswana be printed? Realize that, although Europeans group us together as 'Matswana', we are ourselves a variety of different nations and languages.' While apparently accepting 'Batswana' as a label for 'us', the writer is also critical of the subordination or 'ma'-ness implied in the European use of the term. The writer then gives numerous examples of linguistic differences between the *merafe*, but, after citing different ways of spelling, he concludes, 'I say that only one language should be used for printing, not the mixture that people use when writing by hand. And, since books began among the Batlhaping, should not the language for printing be that one in which books began?'[45] In subsequent letters and editorial responses, the LMS missionaries generally favored a standardized, Setlhaping version of Setswana, but most of the Batswana letter writers, particularly non-Batlhaping, advocated the use of multiple forms of writing reflecting their different spoken dialects.[46] The editors eventually attempted a compromise, using the newer LMS orthography of Roger Price for most of the newspaper but printing letters from Batswana with whatever spelling or vocabulary that the writer had used. The debate was revived in 1889 when the newspaper began to use the older

orthography that had become standard in the HMS and other missions, but after an outpouring of letters from Batswana – mostly against the change – the editors returned to their former practice.[47]

The use of multiple orthographies, however, remained a problem for literate Batswana. As Sol Plaatje complained in 1916, 'It is hard to see how the Bechuanas, who do not number much more than a quarter of a million, can be benefited by learning to write their language in five different ways' (1916: 14). Plaatje thus advocated the use of a single writing system, but several years later he was critical of the South African government's Orthography Committee for not having adequate representation from Batswana or missionaries. 'Only one man, therefore, is capable of determining the spelling of this language. That man is the Native. And when the Bechuana themselves have decided upon an orthography more suited to the euphony of their idioms, language reformers may rest assured that it will not differ very materially from the missionary spelling which has served us so usefully for upwards of a century.'[48]

By 1930, the written languages developed by missionaries had won acceptance by many as 'Setswana'. The orthography recommended by the South African government was rejected by most *dikgosi* in favor of the different ones they had learned in mission schools. The main concern of the *dikgosi* was not the existence of the term 'Tswana' but control over its definition and use. Batswana intellectuals saw value in having a unified written language, but adoption of European-made Setswana did not necessarily include acceptance of other European notions of Tswana identity. As noted by Willoughby and J. Tom Brown in the early twentieth century, 'Batswana' continued to identify themselves more often as members of different *merafe* than of a single Tswana nation. The apparent ambivalence of accepting written linguistic unity while rejecting other claims of cultural or political unity can partly be explained by the limited spread of literacy. Literate Batswana recognized that the strength of a written language lay in its ability to carry messages across a wide area and that a standardized orthography could best serve that purpose. However, as long as orality remained the most common form of communication, local spoken dialects and their associated *merafe* continued to be seen as the 'real' languages and communities of Batswana. The development of standardized Setswana by missionaries was guided by European assumptions regarding Tswana cultural unity and the requirements of conversion, but until a significant number of Batswana became literate in the twentieth century, written Setswana had limited impact on Africans as a unifying marker of Tswana identity.

### Conclusion

By 1930, the missionaries' emphasis on Tswana unity and Batswana' emphasis on divided *merafe* had reversed positions, and Batswana intellectuals began to insist on the collective identity of Batswana in opposition to European indirect rule of the separate *merafe*. Although within South Africa this differentiation of 'Batswana' from others eventually played into the hands of the apartheid regime, culminating in the creation of the Bophuthatswana 'homeland', elsewhere it contributed to the formation of the independent nation-states of Botswana and Lesotho.[49] The standardization of Sotho-Tswana orthography was similarly resolved along national lines, with Botswana, South Africa and Lesotho each adopting slightly different writing systems. The development of Tswana identity thus passed through several stages and involved different layers of construction, depending on the purposes of those making the distinctions. Early European visitors and missionaries defined Batswana as racially and culturally distinct from Europeans and other

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Africans, following the nineteenth-century European practice of dividing people into separate 'stocks', 'tribes' and 'nations'. Resident missionaries defined Batswana more in linguistic and religious terms, insisting on a common language and primordial heathenism that, respectively, enabled and justified the conversion of Batswana to Christianity. Under colonialism, Batswana were further defined as needing to be governed by Europeans, though separately from other African groups. Thus, in the development of their notions of Tswana identity, Europeans also formed ideas of who they themselves were and what they were doing in Africa.

Parallel to these European attempts to define Tswana-ness, Batswana developed their own understandings of Tswana identity. Although during the nineteenth century people identified themselves primarily as belonging to different *merafe* and not as 'Batswana', overlapping ancestries and periodic reconfigurations of *merafe* had nevertheless produced a common culture and numerous political and other ties between their members. This shared sense of Tswana-ness was reflected in the mutual comprehensibility of their languages and the designation of most Batswana as 'ba-' and most non-Batswana as 'ma-'. Through their greater contact with others that accompanied the economic and political changes of the nineteenth century, Batswana increasingly identified themselves in contrast to Europeans and other Africans, culminating in the development of Tswana nationalism during the colonial era. Therefore, although missionaries contributed much to the formation of 'Tswana' identity, it was not purely a European invention but resulted instead from interaction between Europeans and Africans and their mutual classification of the other in reference to themselves.

## Notes

[1] Lestrade (1929: 8) and van Warmelo (1935: 96ff), as cited by Schapera (1953: 9).

[2] For oral histories, see Schapera (1954) and Breutz , various studies in the 1950s published by the South African Government and later summarized by the author (1989). Oral traditions were examined with other evidence by Legassick (1969), Ngcongco, (1979) and Lye & Murray (1980). For archeological evidence, see for example Mason (1983) and Evers (1984), as cited in van Waarden (1998).

[3] For Tswana in particular, see Comaroff 1991 & 1997, especially 1997: 387-395. For colonial, and neo- colonial, 'invention' in general within Africa, see Ranger (1983) and Mudimbe (1988).

[4] For a good overview of changing understandings of 'Setswana' language from the nineteenth century up to the present, see Janson & Tsonope 1991. Examples of the current debate in Botswana can be found in Mazonde 2002.

[5] Using Truter's journal, John Barrow gives an account of the expedition in 1806: 361-437. Petrus Borcherds. who was a 15 year-old 'assistant secretary' on the expedition, adds his own recollections in 1861: 41-108.

[6] See also Burchell 1824: 395-396.

[7] See also Burchell 1824: 315-316.

[8] See also 1807: 69-70.

[9] See, for example, Burchell 1824: 360-422, and Campbell 1822: 193-222.

[10] Saunders 1965, as cited by Parsons 2001, finds written use of 'Briqua' by Van Riebeeck already in 1661 and 'Moetjoaana' by Robert Gordon in 1779. Many early European visitors used variations of the terms Briqua, Batswana and Batlhaping interchangeably. See for example, Borcherds 1861: 72, 77. Lichtenstein 1807: 63, 1815: 295, and Burchell 1824: 195, 393.

[11] Barrow and Borcherds each make a distinction between the 'Booshuana' of Dithakong and the 'Barroloos' further north, in, respectively, 1806: 403-404 and 1861: 132-134.

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[12]As claimed by Burchell, 'The Bachapings call this language the *Secuana*' (1824: 211). For examples of early word lists, see Borcherds 1861: 131-132, Lichtenstein 1815: 478-488, Burchell 1824: 410-412, and Campbell 1815: 221-222.

[13]Barrow 1806: 401. Burchell (1824) describes the Batlhaping Batswana as 'a timid race of men' (393) but also 'exceedingly well-ordered' (389).

[14]See for example, Barrow 1806: 386-388, Lichtenstein 1815: 361-362, and Burchell 1824: 209.

[15]Borcherds 1861: 123. See also Lichtenstein 1815: 411, and 1807: 67-68.

[16]See for example, Burchell 1824: 209, 248, 360-367, and Lichtenstein 1807: 78.

[17]Lichtenstein 1815. Regarding Kok, see 297-298, 363ff; regarding other missionaries, see 230-235, 308-311.

[18]For other missionary reactions to Lichtenstein, see Campbell 1815: 396-397, and Moffat 1842: 253-254.

[19]Compare, for example, Campbell 1815: 213-222 and 1822: 171-192 with 1822: 193-222.

[20]See for example Livingstone 1858b, Schulenburg 1860, Broadbent 1865, and Mackenzie 1871.

[21] See for example, Behrens 1864 and 1879.

[22] Endemann 1874: 16, as cited by Monnig 1967: 11. Also Ellenberger 1912: 34, and Legassick 1969: 95.

[23] Casalis 1841, as cited in Cole 1955: xxiii-xxiv.

[24] Harries (1988) describes the efforts of European missionaries to define the northeastern limits of Sotho-Pedi culture.

[25]The missionary J. T. Brown describes the use of 'le- / ma-' in 1926: 24. People other than ethno-linguistic  groups can also belong to the 'le- / ma-' noun class, such as 'magodu' (thieves), 'makgarebe' (young unwed women), and, in recent years, government-employed 'masole' (soldiers) and 'matitshera' (teachers).

[26]'Makgoa' was apparently used very early as a Setswana term for Europeans, but its original meaning is uncertain. Neil Parsons (1997) estimates no less than ten different theories but suggests its probable origin as a term for traders from the eastern coast.

[27]See for example, Lichtenstein 1807: 64, Burchell 1824: 216, 375, and Campbell 1815: 213ff.

[28]Livingstone 1858b: 218; J. T. Brown 1926: 25-26. The Motswana scholar David Ramoshoana (1927-1929) dismissed each of these explanations, suggesting instead a possible origin in the Xhosa term 'Abetswana'.

[29]For a more detailed theoretical analysis of the development of written Setswana by LMS missionaries and the connections between literacy and European influence, see Comaroff 1991:213-230.

[30]Burchell describes his system in 1824: 210-212, 219-221; and Moffat describes his in 1842: 226.

[31]The LMS missionary Isaac Hughes produced an unpublished  grammar between 1828 and 1858 for the training of new missionaries, and J. Archbell published a grammar in 1838. The French missionaries E. Casalis and J. Fredoux published grammars in 1841 and 1864, respectively, for use in their own missions. There is a summary of Livingstone's grammar (1858a) in Monk 1858: 106-125. The grammar written by the Anglican missionary William Crisp (1886) was adopted by later LMS missionaries as a standard text for learning Setswana.

[32]For a more comprehensive account and list of Setswana-language publications by the LMS, see Bradlow 1987, and Peters & Tabane 1982.

[33] Lemue had already published a few tracts at Kuruman and co-authored a hymnal with Livingstone (Peters & Tabane 1982: 61, 66, 71).

[34] As described in letters from the LMS missionaries, found in the Council for World Mission archives in London at the School of Oriental and African Studies. Most of the letters cited in this paper are located in the file titled, 'South Africa, Incoming Letters', in a specified box-folder-jacket (e.g. 23-1-A) followed by author and date. Examples of the above-mentioned letters are: 23-1-A, Helmore, 12/3/47; 23-4-A, Solomon, 19/5/48; and 23-4-B, Edwards, 12/7/48. Moffat's 1847 publication of Isaiah, Ecclesiastes and Proverbs is listed in Peters & Tabane 1982: 15.

[35]31-1-B, Ashton, 10/10/58

[36] Ashton published Tsabadira's letter in the May, 1858 issue of *Mokaeri*.

[37] 35-2-D, R. Moffat, 22/4/69, and 36-1-B, Price, 30/11/70. HMS missionaries such as Schulenburg expressed the most concern. Among the other missionaries who sent letters were James Scott of the WMS, William Crisp of the Anglicans, and Henri Gonin of the Dutch Reformed Church.

[38] 10/11/70, enclosed with 36-3-C, J.S. Moffat, 3/2/71.

[39] 26/6/71, enclosed with 36-3-D, J.S. Moffat, 18/9/71.

[40] CWM.Africa.Personal. Box 2, Folder 4. Price, 8/2/76.

[41] An example of the orthographic changes that took place over the course of a century can be found in a letter written by the Kwena *kgosi* Sechele to Robert Moffat in 1852, as it appears in two forms in Livingstone 1960: 85-90. Sandilands offers a side-by-side comparison of three different orthographies in 1953: 319-322.

[42] For Setswana phonetic systems in the early twentieth century, see for example Jones & Plaatje (1916) and Tucker (1929). For a critical analysis of the development of those systems, see Moloto 1964.

[43] 24-1-B, Edwards, 4/9/49.

[44] 10/11/70, enclosed with 36-3-C, J.S. Moffat, 3/2/71.

[45] Anonymous, *Mahoko a Becwana* 1 (1883) 2-3; my translation, with some reference to Jones 1972.

[46] In *Mahoko* 3 (1883) – anonymous; in 6 (1883) – J. Brown, anonymous and Kgabo Tebele Motswasele; in 8 (1883) – A.J. Wookey and Morolong; in 10 (1883) – anonymous; and in 12 (1883) – Moitsedilo.

[47] See for example, in *Mahoko* 58 (1889) – Dilokwane Gaboutlwelwe; in 59 (1889) – Mayang Hatlhabe, Gomotsegang, Magonaring and Sekaelo Piti; in 60 (1890) – Sebotseng, Bannani and Mothooagae; and in 62 (1890) – Korenelio Gaboutloeloe, Michael T. Moroka and Molema J. Moshoela.

[48] Plaatje 1996: 402, as reprinted from 1931.

[49] On the appropriation of Tswana ethnicity by the government of Bophuthatswana, see Lawrence & Manson 1994.

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