

THE DIVINE NAMES IN THE TSONGA BIBLE

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Introduction

The renderings chosen by the early Swiss missionaries to express the Biblical names and attributes of God in Tsonga seem, at first glance, worthy of but a brief analysis. The circumstances surrounding the choice of these renderings find many parallels in the history of early Bible translations into South-Eastern Bantu languages.

The French-speaking Swiss pioneer missionaries settled in the Northern Transvaal in 1875. Nineteen years later, in 1894, the first Tsonga New Testament came from the press of George Bridel and Co. in Lausanne. It very soon went through a first revision. Thirteen years after this, in 1907, the whole Tsonga Bible was published by the British and Foreign Bible Society, and again printed by George Bridel.

These thirty-two years, from 1875 to 1907, cover a period of patient and arduous translation work, the apparently endless drudgery of drafting, checking, correcting and hand-copying the precious Biblical texts. They were years also of homeric arguments about linguistic problems, mostly of a lexical and orthographic nature. Judging from minutes and letters of the time,¹ the early Swiss translators did not lack opinions, nor the time and energy to defend them forcefully in their conferences. Their scientific qualifications, in both source and receptor languages, appear to have been somewhat uneven, and the outstanding linguists did not always prevail over their more practical colleagues. Yet scholars and Jacks-of-all-trades shared alike in fixing the Tsonga language, with the constant assistance of their parishioners and neighbours. They discovered together the genuine structures of Tsonga; they collected its lexical and morphological treasures; they finally shaped it into a tool for God's self-disclosure to the Tsonga-speaking people, through the written word.

What was even more important was that during those thirty-two years a new language of faith was slowly coming to light: one more voice was joining the choir of human tongues in praising the God of all revealed in Jesus Christ. In these early days of Tsonga Bible translation, certain semantic choices were made, certain syntactical usages established, which were going to condition the Tsonga language in general, as well as the daily speech of a growing Tsonga church in its acts of worship and proclamation.

¹ "Procès-verbaux de la Conférence Missionnaire", 1884–1906. Unpublished manuscript, archives of the Swiss Mission in South Africa, Elim, Northern Transvaal.

Some of these initial choices made by the first translators of the Bible into Tsonga had astonishing implications, even in as limited a field as that of divine names.

A Brief Outline of Divine Names in the Tsonga Bible

Before settling in the Northern Transvaal, the two Swiss pioneers Paul Berthoud and Ernest Creux had spent two years in Lesotho, as the guests of the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society. They learned Southern Sotho in the company of Basotho of the second Christian generation. They were aided by Basotho evangelists during their first years of activity in the Northern Transvaal. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Southern Sotho version of the Bible, published in 1881, had a great influence on them.²

The Lord

The Tetragrammaton was transliterated by *Yehova*, following the precedent of the earlier Southern Sotho version, as well as Xhosa, Tswana and Zulu versions. The Swiss missionaries thus departed from the French versions (Osterwald and Segond), current at the time in their country of origin, in which an attempt had been made to translate the Tetragrammaton by the adjectival noun "L'Éternel" (The Eternal One). H. Rosin has convincingly shown that it should neither be transliterated nor translated. It should be rendered by a substitution, "which means that a title is substituted for a proper name, in order to take the place of this name without superseding it."³

In Tsonga, the proper title should have been *Hosi*, Lord. However, Rule 19c of the BFBS, quoted approvingly by Rosin,⁴ lays down that:

- “(i) Where one usage has become established, no change should be made unless it is supported by the general wish of the Christian community using the version.
- “(ii) Whenever there are languages belonging to the same family and in use side by side, there should be, as far as possible, uniformity in practice.”

If both conditions are to be fulfilled, they obviously preclude the present revisers of the Tsonga Bible from doing away with the transcription *Yehova* and replacing it by the noun *Hosi*.⁵

And yet, the New Testament title of "Kurios" is rendered by *Hosi* in the Tsonga Bible, again following the Zulu "iNkosi" and the Southern Sotho "Morena". The fact that Jesus Christ the Lord reveals the true meaning of the name *Yehova*, and that both Testaments point to the same self-disclosure of the one Lord, is obscured by the double Tsonga rendering *Yehova/Hosi*.

² J. Lenake, *A Short History of the Literature of Southern Sotho*, Limi No. 2, Unisa, Pretoria, 1966.

³ H. Rosin, *The Lord Is God*, Netherlands Bible Society, Amsterdam, 1956, p. 112.

⁴ H. Rosin, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

⁵ There is no apparent wish for a change among Tsonga Christians. *Yehova* or similar transcriptions of the Tetragrammaton are found in the Xhosa, Zulu, Southern Sotho, Venda, Ronga and Tswana Bibles.

Jesus Christ

In the name and messianic title of our Saviour, as in many other Biblical names, the terminative consonants have been dropped, thus giving *Yesu Kriste*. The last syllable of *Kriste* has been vocalized in “e” as in the Northern and Southern Sotho Bibles. Note the initial semi-vowel y in *Yehova* and *Yesu*. Although the prepalatal affricative j does appear in Tsonga stems in an initial position (e.g. *Jaha*, young man; *Jomela*, small calabash), it was systematically avoided in the Tsonga transcription of divine names, as well as other names (Yerusalem, Yeriko, Yordan, etc.). This may have been in an attempt to approximate more closely to the original Greek and Hebrew sounds.

The Holy Spirit

For the Holy Spirit, the expression *Moya lowo Kwetsima* was chosen. *Moya* is of course Class 3 (Meinhof’s classification), and calls consistently for the concord elements of that class throughout the Tsonga New Testament.⁶ As far as the predicate *-kwetsima* is concerned, the Swiss pioneers did not make a very fortunate choice. From their familiarity with Southern Sotho, they could have known better and realized the difference between the Sotho verbal stems “-halalela” or “-kgethwa”, “-kgetheha” (to be holy, sacred), corresponding to *-hlawuleka* in Tsonga, on the one hand; and, on the other hand, the Sotho stem “-kganya” (to be glorious, bright), corresponding to the Tsonga *-kwetsimi*. The Tsonga Bible has *-kwetsima* for both meanings. Three generations of Tsonga Christians have been speaking of the “Glorious Spirit”, and of the *Vakwetsimi* (lit. the Bright Ones) instead of the *Vahlawuleki* (the Saints). At the initiative of the late Rev. P. T. Leresche, this inconsistency is being rectified in the present revision of the Tsonga New Testament. From now on, the Holy Spirit will be *Moya lowo Hlawuleka*.⁷

I wonder, however, whether ecclesiastical usage and the resultant polysemy have not already, as it were, robbed the stem *-kwetsima* of its brightness and thoroughly sanctified it. Any return to a so-called “pre-Christian original meaning” is bound to appear somewhat artificial at this stage in the evolution of Southern Bantu languages (and, indeed, of all Afro-Asian languages in which there have been Bible translation and Christian preaching since the mid-nineteenth century). Such a return tends to ignore the semantic importance of tradition, both oral and written, in the life and language of a Christian community. It overlooks the dynamics of linguistic and cultural contexts, and their transforming influence on isolated words and phrases. The Bible reviser, unlike the pioneer translator, should beware of an etymological or

⁶ Clement C. Doke says that “Using a Class 3 word for the ‘Holy Spirit’ does not prevent that word from signifying personality. Biblical context is sufficient to endow it with personal connotations”. Cf. C. C. Doke, “The Translation of the ‘Holy Spirit’ in Bantu Languages”, in *The Bible Translator*, Vol. 17, No. 1, January 1966, p. 32 ff. The Tsonga usage, though not mentioned by Doke, fully confirms his opinion.

⁷ P. T. Leresche, “The Tsonga Words ‘Ku Kwetsima’ and ‘Ku Hlawuleka’.” Unpublished manuscript.

diachronic approach to his task. He has to serve a living community and use its present vocabulary, not the idiom of a bygone culture. I wonder therefore whether this second-born *Moya lowo Hlawuleka* will really be able to deprive his elder brother *Moya lowo Kwetsima* of the birthright.

Predicates to Express the Attributes and Character of God

The genius of Bantu languages (and Tsonga in particular) for descriptive purposes using nominal, adjectival, verbal or adverbial derivations, was put to full use by the Swiss pioneers.

Nominal appositions, for instance, came in readily and are now used quite naturally. God is *Tatana* (Father), *Muendli* or *Mutumbuluxi* (Creator), *Muavanyisi* (Judge). He is *Muponisi* or *Mulondzovoti* (Saviour), *Muleteri* (Counsellor) and *Muaki* (Architect, Builder). Notice that these appositions fall naturally into Class 1, the so-called class of persons.

This same Class 1 provides a natural home for Christological titles, whether transliterated or translated. Our Lord is *Muprofeta* (Prophet), *Muprista Lonkulu* (Great Priest), *Kriste* (Christ or The Christ), *N'wana* (Son, of Man or God). The transcription *Mesia*, also used with the Class 1 concord, appears only in the two Johannine passages where the Greek has "Messias" (John 1:41; 4:25) and in Dan. 9:25, 26 to render "Mashiach". The word for Servant, *Nandza*, though with a plural of Class 6, falls into Class 1 in the singular (*Nandza wa yena*, his servant, not *ra yena*). Hence the Biblical phrase: *Nandza wa Yehova*, the Servant of the Lord.

The Johannine Logos, or "verbum dei substantiale" is rendered by *Rito*, a noun of Class 5, with its concord in *ri-* and its absolute pronoun *rona*. In the relevant passage where the noun *Rito* commands a principal sentence (John 1:1, 14), no attempt has been made at personifying it, either by prefixing the absolute pronoun of Class 1 and adjusting the concord accordingly, as in Northern Sotho, or by prefixing the concord element of Class 1a, as in Zulu.⁸ The present Tsonga Bible says: "Eku sunguleni, Rito a ri ri kona, Rito a ri ri ni Xikwembu . . ." And it goes on using the concord and pronoun of Class 5 in vs. 2-4 and again in v. 14. The interesting point here is that the Southern Sotho does exactly the same: it has established a precedent for the translators into Tsonga to follow. The Tshwa and Ronga Bibles, more recent than the Tsonga version, practise a compromise by using the concord elements of Class 5 in John 1:1 and 14, but going to those of Class 1 in vs. 2-4.

Qualifications of God the Father and God the Son in copulative phrases lend themselves easily to translation into Tsonga. God is *rirhandzu* (love), *ku vonakala* (light). He is *khokholo ra hina* (our fortress). The Johannine "Ego eimi" can likewise be forcefully and adequately rendered by the emphatic copulative construction using the absolute pronoun *hi mina* (lit.: "It is I who am . . ."): *Hi mina vuswa bya vutomi . . . ku vonakala ka*

⁸ The Northern Sotho Bible renders John 1 : 1 by: "Mothomong e a bexo a le xona ke *yena* Lentsu: xomme *yena* Lentsu o be a le xo Modimo", etc. The Zulu Bible says: "Eku-qaleni wayekhona *uLizwi* . . . *uLizwi* wayekuNkulunkulu," etc.

misava . . . *nyangwa ya tinyimpfu* (I am the bread of life . . . the light of the world . . . the door of the sheep. John 6:35; 8:12; 10:7).

As for true adjectival qualifications of God in the source language, they have been expressed either by one of the few proper adjectives which Tsonga possesses (*-nene* for "good", Mark 10:18; Luke 18:19; Ezra 3:11. *-kulu*, *-kulukumba* for "great", Tit. 2:13; Jer. 32:19; Dan. 9:4. *-n'we* for "only", "unique", 1 Tim. 1:17), or by verbal constructions, (*a nga vonaki* for "God is invisible", Col. 1:15, 1. Tim. 1:17. *a nga onhaki* for "He is incorruptible", Rom. 1:23; 1 Tim. 1:17. *wa tshembeka* for "He is faithful", 1 Cor. 1:9. *wa hanya* for "He is the living one", Matt. 16:16; 26:63).

Finally, Tsonga nouns have been used adjectivally with the possessive concord to translate true adjectives in the Biblical source: *-wa tintswalo* for "merciful", Rom. 9:16. *-wa vutlhari* for "wise", Rom.

This inventory could be continued *ad nauseam*: it would yield little more of interest than has already been noticed. The one exception has purposely been omitted: the outstanding feature in the Tsonga nomenclature for God. This will now be studied in detail.

The Tsonga Word *Xikwembu*

The translators faced the crucial task of their undertaking in their choice of a term to render the generic noun "God" ("Elohim", "Theos"). The Zulu controversy around "uThixo" and "uNkulunkulu",⁹ or the Chinese terms question about "T'ien" (Shangti) and "T'ien Chu",¹⁰ may have been known to the Swiss pioneers and have shown them the importance of this matter.

They chose the singular word *Xikwembu*, a noun of Class 7, with its marvelous and unavoidable retinue of formatives in *xi-*. In Tsonga, as in other south-eastern Bantu languages, Class 7 plays host to an astonishing variety of concepts. According to P. D. Beuchat, one finds in it manufactured objects (*xibya*, utensil; *xirhundzu*, conical basket), parts of the body (*xivindzi*, liver; *xifuva*, chest), impersonal nouns (*xihoxo*, mistake; *xikambelo*, examination), some animals (*xibodze*, tortoise; *xiphongo*, he-goat). Then, names of languages, ways of doing, customs (*xilungu*, white person's language, manners; *Xitsonga*, the Tsonga language). Most of the diminutive nouns belong to Class 7, usually with a derogatory connotation (*xifanyetana*, small, despicable boy; *ximbutana*, small goat); and many nouns derived from foreign languages (*xitina*, from "steen", brick; *xikolo*, from "skool", school). Finally, Class 7 includes human beings, too, but mostly people with special characteristics, often of a derogatory nature (*xilema*, cripple; *xidakwa*, drunkard).¹¹

Xikwembu (with its Class 8 plural, *swikwembu*, the ancestral spirits) belongs there too! What strange company for what had to become the name

⁹ E. W. Smith, *African Ideas of God*, Edinburgh House Press, London, 1950, p. 102 ff.

¹⁰ H. Rosin, *op. cit.*, p. 167 ff.

¹¹ P. D. Beuchat, "Notes on the Tsonga Noun", Department of Bantu Languages, University of the Witwatersrand, p. 18 ff. (mimeographed).

of God Most High. How could the Lord possibly sit at table with such sinners and tax-collectors as those of Classes 7 and 8? How could he possibly rub shoulders in that way with the ancestors?

“uThixo” may have had an obscure Khoisan origin,¹² but it was at least brought into the class of kinship terms (1 a). The name “Modimo” of the Sotho group, although of Class 3 (plural “medimo”, gods), and used as such in the Bible (formative “oona”, “oa” and not “hae”, “ya”), possesses also a plural in “ba-” referring to ancestor gods. It can be used quite naturally with the concord elements of Class 1 when referring to the Lord. Not so with *Xikwembu* which, like the Sotho “modimo”, refers to an ancestor god, but which could never be used with concord formatives of Class 1: *a, wa, u, o, yena*. The word calls inevitably for *xi, xa, xona*.

Orthography adds to the strangeness of the choice. In the written language, the initial symbol “x” stands for the phoneme ʃ of the singular prefix—a borrowing from Portuguese, which is the only Romance language to use such a symbol for the unvoiced palato-alveolar fricative. Moreover, “x” stands for the lateral click in other south-eastern Bantu languages. A most confusing state of affairs!

Its Meaning

The noun *Xikwembu*, or rather its much more usual plural *swikwembu*, not only refers to ancestors: it constitutes, from an anthropological point of view, the key term of ancestrolatry in Tsonga speech.

According to H. A. Junod, the stem *-kwembu* was traditionally used with its plural prefix and its predicates, to describe the behaviour of the ancestors within the religious system of the Vatsonga.¹³ This is how the doings of the *swikwembu* are still expressed today: they fight (*-lwa*) or quarrel (*-holova*) with the living. They can seize (*-khoma*) or trouble (*-karhata*) their medium. They can make ill (*-vabyisa*) or kill (*-dlaya*), but also help (*-pfuna*) and bless (*-katekisa*). They can grumble (*-vilela*) and manifest their discontent by withholding rain, by causing disease and misfortune. They can speak (*-vula-vula*), inform each other in the realm of shadows about conditions among their descendants (*-byelana*). They can also fail in their endeavours (*-tsandzeka*) and eventually fall down (*-wa*) or come out (*-huma*), yielding to the processes of exorcism.

In terms of religious values, one could not find a more down-to-earth, precise and common word than *Xikwembu*. Duly qualified, it may represent the nearest cultural equivalent of a personal and ever-present pantheon of forefathers; it is, however, the most culturally conditioned, the least neutral name one could have chosen to translate “Elohim” or “Theos”. All the Tsonga people formerly knew the *swikwembu* and dealt with them daily. Would they likewise come to know the living God and his dealings with them? The choice was a risky one. Whether it was done on purpose or not, we do not know. Southern Sotho may have shown the way here again, since

¹² E. W. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

¹³ H. A. Junod, *The Life of a South African Tribe*, Macmillan, London, 1927, p. 371 ff.

the singular “Modimo” was chosen to refer to the Christian God, although “modimo-badimo” also refers to ancestors in that language.

Its Immediate Popularity

One thing is certain: this choice met with an immediate success. We are left with the task of analyzing this hit-parade-like popularity, and of pondering on its possible deadly results in terms of syncretism.

How did the word prove so unquestionably acceptable? The Tsonga people never seem to have queried or resented its use in Bible translation. The term successfully resisted any attempt to withdraw it from Christian speech or writing. In fact, no such attempt was made for twenty years.

The earliest minutes of the missionaries' conferences date from 1884, ten years before the publication of the complete New Testament in Tsonga. In those early days, the young Tsonga church possessed its precious *buku*, the first book ever printed in Tsonga, composed of a harmony of the Gospels and a few hymns. The *buku* already used the word *Xikwembu*. Through all the preparatory work prior to publishing the New Testament, numerous points of orthography and vocabulary were raised by the translators in their meetings. They hesitated, for instance, on the correct rendering in Tsonga for baptism (*-tsakamisa* or *-khuvula*), for truth (*swinene* or *ntiyiso*), and for hosts in the expression “Lord of hosts” (*tinyimpi* or *mavandla*). The records of these discussions never mention any doubt about *Xikwembu*, the actual word for God.

Shortly after the publication of the New Testament, the translation of the Old Testament got under way. At that stage the translators working in the Northern Transvaal appear for the first time to have had second thoughts about *Xikwembu*, possibly at the suggestion of their colleagues in Lourenço Marques who had decided to prepare a separate Bible in the Ronga dialect of Tsonga. A circular was sent to all the Tsonga congregations asking whether it would not be better to use *Tilo* (heaven, heaven god), or *Nkulukumba* (the Great One), or *Gwambe* (proper name of the mythical ancestor of the Tsonga people), or *Muendli*, *M'endli* (Creator) rather than *Xikwembu*. Unfortunately, we no longer have the answers to this circular, but probably the large majority pleaded for the retention of *Xikwembu*, for the 1907 Bible kept the term, and so did the 1929 revision prepared by the Rev. R. Cuenod.¹⁴ Today one would not dream of removing the word from the Tsonga Bible. *Xikwembu* has become a part, not only of the language of faith, but of the daily speech of Tsonga people at large.

Changes in its Meaning

One can refer to an individual ancestor in the singular as a *Xikwembu*, or to a very old and sick person as a potential *xikwembu*. But the plural *swikwembu* is by far the most usual way of mentioning or addressing the departed

¹⁴ The Ronga version prepared in Lourenço Marques tried to reach a compromise: it translated “Elohim-Theos” by *Xikwembu Nkulukumba*, followed by the concord elements of Class 1.

ones. This was, of course, even more the case at the turn of the century, when Junod began to record Tsonga ancestrolatry and its various rituals. Junod's informants spoke almost exclusively of *swikwembu*, the collective sets of gods, on the father's or the mother's side.

Nowadays, although one still hears about the *swikwembu* and their doings, the use of the singular form *Xikwembu* has become firmly established. Christians and non-Christians alike use expressions like these: *Xikwembu xi kona* (God is here, present); *i ntirho wa Xikwembu* (it is God's work); *i ku rhandza ka Xikwembu* (this is his will, referring to death or to some unnatural event); *swi tiva hi Xikwembu* (God only knows); *Xikwembu xi hi kukumetile* (God has thrown us away, rejected us), etc.

It would be extremely interesting to record systematically all the passages in contemporary Tsonga usage where *Xikwembu* is mentioned in these or similar phrases. This would involve recording conversations, speeches, prayers, and analyzing the operational meaning of *Xikwembu* in such utterances, measuring it in terms of its predicates and context. It is highly likely that the scientific conclusions thus reached would confirm the general impression of a thoroughly accepted speech-form in contemporary Tsonga culture. The correctness of the translators' early choice would thus be demonstrated: the pioneers would have found the true, natural equivalent, the adequate symbol for a new yet familiar referent.

But did they really make the right choice? It is possible that the popularity and general acceptability of *Xikwembu* for "Elohim-Theos" contains a blessing in disguise. Has the word become thoroughly converted? Has it assumed a new semantic dimension? Does it convey today the correct information on the divinity, the sovereignty, the mercy of the only God, revealed in Jesus Christ according to the Holy Scriptures? Has it become part of a genuine language of faith, successfully conquering the religious language of bygone days? Has the process of acculturation been successfully accomplished, from a Christian point of view? Have the *swikwembu* actually been dethroned by the true God?

It could be that the traditional religion of the Vatsonga, far from yielding to the proclamation of the Gospel, has reacted by effectively assimilating its would-be conqueror. It may have appropriated part of the Christian vocabulary, notably the singular form *Xikwembu*, and made it simply one new element of its old and basically undisturbed structures.¹⁵ In this case, God would have become the Great Ancestor, the Supreme One, but he would still "behave" like the forefathers: he would kill and make alive, be angry or pleased, hungry or satisfied. He would still need intermediaries and necessarily react to their incantations. Only a systematic analysis of the present use of *Xikwembu* in Tsonga proverbs, novels, poetry, daily conversation, sermons and prayers can prove whether this is the case. If it is, then the new wine of the Gospel, stored in old hardened wine-skins, would be lost; the new

¹⁵ Something similar happened in the second and third centuries of the Christian era, when the Gnostic language successfully appropriated Biblical terms and used them with a new, Gnostic meaning, within the utterly unbiblical structures of Hellenistic and oriental speculations. See S. Laeuchli, *The Language of Faith*, Abingdon Press, New York, 1962.

patch of material would have left the old garment as torn as ever (Matt. 9:16).

My conviction is that the risk, the possibility of such a misuse of *Xikwembu*, had to be faced and accepted from the outset of Christian proclamation among the Vatsonga, and that the choice of the early translators was correct.

In fact, this choice strikingly illustrates one of H. Rosin's main conclusions: "No analogue to God, but the analogue to the word 'Elohim' must be discovered in other religions and languages; within the Biblical context the term will obtain the definiteness it needs; related to the NAME, it will come to express what it has to express in this new context."¹⁶ In other words, "Elohim-Theos" should be rendered by the most common and generic term for God in the receptor language. This is precisely what the choice of the Swiss translators and its acceptance by Tsonga Christians amounts to. They left it to the unspeakable Name to fill its predicate *Xikwembu* with a new content: The Lord is God, *Yehova-Hosi i Xikwembu*.

Possible Avenues of Further Investigation

This inquiry has so far been conducted in a practical way on three different levels: those of culture (seeing how deeply the word *Xikwembu* was rooted in the traditional religion of the Vatsonga), linguistics (noting a clear semantic shift in the word and its predicates), and theology (following Rosin in his theology of the Name). The analysis could be continued and broadened at the cultural and linguistic levels.

In the field of anthropology, Junod would provide a most adequate starting point. For the famous ethnologist, the whole success of the word and concept *Xikwembu* in Christian proclamation comes from a sudden combination in the Tsonga mind of two cultural elements, two sets of religious beliefs formerly unrelated. These are the belief in the active presence of ancestors, half-divine and half-human; and the belief in a heaven god, *Tilo*, vague and transcendent.

"It is wonderful to notice how easily the idea of the Christian God is accepted by the Bantu . . . It seems as if one were telling them an old story, with which they had been quite familiar, but had now half forgotten. In regard to the Thonga (*sic*), I believe the psychological process to be as follows. When they hear of the *Shikwembu* (*sic*) who is in Heaven, there at once takes place in their mind a coalescence or reunion of the two main characteristics of their two religions; their *Shikwembu* is personal, but not transcendental; their Heaven is transcendental but not personal. God, the real God who is preached to them, is both personal and transcendental; it is as if two different kinds of electricity suddenly came in contact with each other in their mind and produced a flash of light . . . My last observation has shown the caducity of Thonga religion. It is not able to stand before the advance of the higher revealed religions, Mohammedanism and Christianity."¹⁷

¹⁶ H. Rosin, *op. cit.*, p. 61 f. The word "Elohim" . . . "represents in the Scripture the cause of human religion . . . all that may be considered an object of religious veneration". *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁷ H. A. Junod, *op. cit.*, p. 449 f.

One can forgive Junod for sharing the diffusionist ideas of his time, namely the theories of the German school of historical anthropology, which paid much attention to diachronic studies and looked for isolated cultural remnants (or traits) as proof of concentric diffusion of past cultures. The word and concept *Tilo* would be such a remnant of a former, now half-forgotten, monotheism. Such reconstructions are, however, largely conjectural and do not lead far.

We certainly cannot endorse Junod's statement on the caducity of African traditional religion, nor can we share his optimism regarding the triumph of Christian proclamation in writing and preaching. The Tsonga popular language of today and its use of strange, sometimes utterly unbiblical, predicates with the noun *Xikwembu* seems to prove that the old immanent gods are not dead in the minds of the people. The mission of the Church in depth has only just begun.

Moreover, modern studies of culture change and its dynamics would make little use of the so-called "psychological miracle" by which Junod tries to explain the overwhelming acceptance of the word *Xikwembu* by his contemporaries. In the process of culture contact and conflict, much more was involved than a mere "coalescence in the mind".

Similar criticism could be made of the already quoted book *African Ideas of God*, edited by E. W. Smith. In their most readable and full account of African religion, Smith and his collaborators are systematically searching for the "Logos spermatikos" in the African mind and culture, beyond animism and the social regard for ancestors. Such a search is fully justified and highly interesting, but its theological application can hardly satisfy us. Hendrik Kramer and Karl Barth have taught us to beware of natural theology, to beware especially of such *a priori*s as those of E. W. Smith, who sees in certain names of high beings (*Leza*, *Nyambe*, etc.) and their attributes a transcendental African theology or philosophy which could serve as a point of contact for Christian proclamation.

Moreover, our age has grown sceptical about words and symbols. Words merely stand for something, that something being a set of ideas or of linguistic usages, but not necessarily for the thing itself, the object, the referent. What happens when that thing or object or referent is precisely *not* a thing or object or idea alongside others, but the *subject par excellence*, namely the living and sovereign God? How can we apprehend him, know him, refer to him adequately, with our feeble words?¹⁸

At the linguistic level, the name *Xikwembu* could profitably be investigated with the tools of modern semantics. This would involve asking such questions as the following: Does the novelty of the noun *Xikwembu* reside entirely in the singular morpheme *xi-* as opposed to the plural *swi-*? Would etymology yield any result in our particular inquiry? Has the root *-kwemb* any parallel in *-nyamb*, *-gwamb* or other similar Ur-Bantu roots? In the famous triangle of Ogden and Richards, where does the person of God stand as a "component

¹⁸ Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, the early Protestant theologians, all speak of the "incomprehensibilitas Dei". cf. K. Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* II/1, Zurich, 1946, p. 220 ff.

of meaning"?¹⁹ Where would a referential definition of meaning place the Biblical attributes of God-*Xikwembu*, as compared with those of gods-*swikwembu*? Do they share one single semantic field, overlapping in the minds of speakers and hearers? If so, semantics would have analyzed for us one of the battle-grounds of syncretism.

Or again, one could try to measure the meaning of the word *Xikwembu* with methods such as that of Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum: the verbal or adjectival connotations of the name *Xikwembu* and their incidence in actual Tsonga usage, written or spoken, could be recorded and duly tabulated.²⁰ What are the laws, if any, governing the changes of meaning noticed in Tsonga speech as it passed from *swikwembu* to *xikwembu*?

Conclusion

All this lies beyond our present scope. We can, however, guess that these avenues of investigation and their specific methods, however illuminating, would not empty the mystery of God's self-revelation through human language. They could measure the process, record its manifestations, but never explain it in purely cultural or linguistic categories. Anthropology and semantics bring us to the door of the mystery, they point towards it; they do not exhaust it.

How can the Vatsonga mean the Triune God when they say *Xikwembu*, unless God himself steps in; unless he uses our human words, the Biblical words and their equivalents in our languages, to reveal himself to us today, in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit? Only God can and does speak well of himself. Only God can turn the old wine-skin of *Xikwembu* into a worthy vessel for his Gospel.

We are thus brought back to theology. Our words are not holy words, but human words, no more and no less so than the words of the Biblical writers. They are only symbols for the great acts of God. We are all struggling with the deceptive sets of phonemes, words and phrases at our disposal; struggling, as translators, with our dictionaries, drafts and stencils.

What an impossible, even futile task, if we were not, together with the receptors we serve, constantly loved, chosen, called and guided by the living God, through the Incarnate Word.

We therefore respond to him in faith and hope, trusting him to turn our old words into a new language—and the divine names of the Tsonga Bible into worthy servants of his Name.

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¹⁹ S. Ullmann, *Semantics*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1964, p. 34.

²⁰ S. Ullmann, *op. cit.*, p. 68.