

VENDA SEMANTICS—III Rejected transplants

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This is the third and final article in the series entitled "Venda Semantics". It consists of further material which has been abstracted from Dr. van Rooy's doctoral thesis Language and Culture in the Communication of the Christian Message as Illustrated in the Venda Bible and adapted for use in The Bible Translator. Previous articles appeared in Vol. 23 No. 4 (October 1972) and Vol. 24 No. 4 (October 1973).—Editor.

1. The term *tshidzimu* ("a witch doctor's fee") for "an offering"

The stem of this noun is the same as that of *mudzimu*. *Mudzimu* is an ancestor spirit; *tshidzimu* means "a thing connected with the ancestors".

Most informants agree that *tshidzimu* is the beast slaughtered for the ancestors when the *nanga* ("witch doctor") attributes an illness to the displeasure of the *midzimu*. After the patient has been treated by the *nanga* and has been cured, a goat (or very rarely a bull) is slaughtered by the *nanga* as an added propitiation besides the libation offering (*u phasa*), which is in this case regarded as insufficient. Since the *nanga* performs the rites connected with the slaughtering, and gets a big portion of the slaughtered beast, it has come to be regarded as his "fee".

Tshidzimu is also used to refer to the goat slaughtered at *malombo* (possession cult) ceremonies which, of course, are also connected with ancestor worship.

When the uninstructed Venda reader is told in Gen. 4:4, 5 that ". . . the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering (*tshidzimu*), but for Cain and his *tshidzimu* he had no regard", he will naturally try to make sense of it in the framework of his knowledge of *tshidzimu* ceremonies. It implies that both had been ill, the cause of the illness being *Mudzimu*, that both tried to appease *Mudzimu* by gifts but that Cain's *tshidzimu* was not accepted because he did not offer a goat or bull as Abel may have done.

Dr. Schweltnus most likely employed *tshidzimu* on the assumption that, when the term *mudzimu* in the course of time had acquired a new meaning, *tshidzimu* would share in that shift of meaning. So far, after more than thirty years, this has not happened. Even literate church members are sometimes at a loss as to what is meant by *tshidzimu* in the Bible. Schweltnus sometimes, for no obvious reasons, used other Venda terms for translating words which a few verses before had been translated by *tshidzimu*. These terms are *tshipfumelo* ("a gift of reconciliation"), *tshiḡhavelo* ("a beast slaughtered for guests") and *musumo* ("the chief's portion of an ox or cow that is slaughtered"). This shows that he himself was not quite satisfied with this term, but had difficulty in finding a more suitable one.

The Biblical concept of offering

In Israel the offering is the most important act of external worship. It is a form of prayer, a symbolic act, in which God accepts an offering by which communion with him is established and sin is expiated. The offering also

contains the element of a tribute paid to a sovereign as expressed by David in his prayer recorded in 1 Chron. 29:14, "But what am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to give willingly like this? For everything comes from thee, and it is only of thy gifts that we give to thee." God does not need the gift as do the heathen gods, who are even believed to eat the offerings presented to them, but he graciously accepts it and thereby commits himself to fellowship with the person or people bringing the offering.

Of the concepts of tribute, communion and expiation, sometimes this one, sometimes that one predominates in different situations, but rarely with the exclusion of the other elements. "What generally happened was rather that, whenever sacrifice was offered, several motives were involved, and these imperceptibly passed over one into another, with the probable result that one of them became prominent and determinative."¹ It is probably partly for this reason that there is no clearly defined technical terminology for the various offerings, not even in Leviticus. One term is used for various offerings and on the other hand one kind of offering can be referred to by various terms. The authors who deal with offerings are generally vague as to the exact meanings of the specific terms.

We are not interested here in all the technical distinctions between the various kinds of offerings as described in Leviticus, but only in the terms which have been translated by *tshidzimu* in the Venda Bible.

There is very little consistency, if any, in the way Venda terms have been chosen for translating the different Hebrew and Greek terms for "offering". The only term that has been more or less consistently translated is *chattā't*, ("a sin offering"), which is rendered by *tshipfumelo* ("a gift for obtaining reconciliation") in Ezek. 40:39, and elsewhere always by the much less common term *tshipfumelelo*, which means the same. This seems to be an appropriate term.

The term *'āsām* ("guilt offering") is sometimes rendered by *tshidzimu tsha mulandu* ("a *tshidzimu* of guilt" as in Num. 6:12) and sometimes just by *tshidzimu* (Ezek. 40:39). It does not seem to be possible to define the difference between this and *chattā't*. Both are *zhipfumelo* in Venda.

'ōlāh ("burnt offering") is rendered by *tshidzimu tsha u fhiswa* ("*tshidzimu* for burning") in Gen. 8:20. In Ex. 29:42 and Ezek. 40:39 it is rendered by *tshihavhelo* ("an animal killed for a guest"), and elsewhere by the usual *tshidzimu*, e.g. in Gen. 22:2; 1 Sam. 7:9; Ps. 51:19; 2 Kings 16:13; Lev. 4:24.

The inconsistency of translation is even more obvious when we come to the terms *qorbān* and *minchāh*, translated in the LXX by *dōron* and *thusia* or *prospora* respectively. Both have been translated quite arbitrarily by *tshidzimu* or *musumo* in different places. *Musumo* is the part of a slaughtered animal that is given to the chief.

Qorbān, the most general term for an offering, which in Greek is rendered by *dōron*, is translated in Venda by no less than four different terms. It is rendered by *musumo* in places such as Num. 5:15 and Lev. 1:2ff; by *tshidzimu* in Lev. 27:11; Num. 9:7; and Mark 7:11; by *musumo wa tshidzimu* ("a *musumo* consisting of a *tshidzimu*") in Lev. 1:10; and by *tshifhiwa* ("gift") in Heb. 5:1; 8:3; 9:9.

¹ Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1 English ed., p. 255.

Prospora is rendered by *tshidzimu* in Acts 21:26; 24:17; Rom. 15:16; and Heb. 10:10, 14, 18. Yet in the same chapter of Hebrews (10:5, 8), as well as in Eph. 5:2, it is rendered by *musumo*.

Thusia (Greek translation of *minchāh* or *zebach*) is translated by *tshidzimu* in Gen. 4:3ff; Luke 2:24; 13:1; Rom. 12:1; Eph. 5:2; Phil. 4:18; Heb. 5:1; 8:3; 9:9; and by *musumo* in 1 Sam. 2:17; and 2 Kings 16:13.

The confusion in terminology becomes evident when we compare the translation of the two terms *thusia* and *prospora* in Ps. 40 and in Hebrews. In Ps. 40 they are rendered by *zwiṭhāvhello na zwifhiwa* ("animals killed for guests and gifts"), whilst in the parallel place in Hebrews 10 the same two terms are rendered by *zwidzimu na misumo*.

In the light of the discussion above it does not seem necessary to distinguish in Venda between the terms *qorbān*, *minchāh* and *zebach*, with their Greek equivalents *dōron*, *thusia* and *prospora*.

Comparative analysis of the Biblical and Venda terms

"I will acclaim him with sacrifices before his tent" (Ps. 27:6 NEB).

Diagnostic components

sacrifice	<i>tshidzimu</i>
1. giving of valuable object for failures or benefits	1. propitiation
2. man to God (lower to higher)	2. to spirits (lower to higher)
3. allegiance	3. involves magical techniques
4. communion	4. communal meal

The only common component is that of "lower to higher".

Terms for "offering" suggested instead of *tshidzimu*

There are several terms reflecting the custom of giving gifts or tributes to chiefs.

The first is *tsumbavhulo*. It refers to the pot of beer taken to the village head (*mukoma*) when a man has brewed a quantity of it. Here the emphasis is not on allegiance or subjugation, but on sharing. This term does not seem to be suitable.

Another pair of terms is *mutendelo* or *madzimba*. Both refer to the beer taken to a chief by the commoners who have been allotted fields for ploughing. This beer is made with the crops harvested from those fields. The emphasis here is on reciprocity. Benefits are returned for benefits received. The problem is that the element of subjugation is rather weak here, and that this term is only used in connection with beer, not with other gifts.

Another term which may be considered is the term which Schweltnus himself used in many places as alternative for *tshidzimu*, i.e. *musumo*. This is the part that is given to one's chief or father when one kills an ox or cow. It should be one of the hind-quarters. The word also sometimes refers to any other material benefit one shares with a superior, thereby acknowledging his claim to possess it all, but it is first and foremost associated with the hind-quarter of a head of cattle. This term seems to be more suitable than any of the others considered so far.

The term we would like to suggest is *nduvho*. It is derived from the verb *u luvha* (“to pay homage to . . ., to acknowledge the superiority of . . .”, at the same time usually asking for a favour). It is sometimes used as a synonym for “asking something from a chief”, e.g. “*Ndi luvha ndimo*” (“I ask for a field to plough”). The noun *nduvho* means “a gift of allegiance”, which corresponds closely with Köhler’s translation in his “Lexicon”, of *minchāh* (“offering of allegiance”). Schweltnus often translates the Greek *dōron* (as rendering for *qorbān*) with *tshifhiwa* (“a gift”). But a gift to a chief is never called *tshifhiwa*, it is called *nduvho*.

This term *nduvho* has in it the elements of subjugation, of reciprocity (asking for a favour), of being taken up into the same community as the chief in allegiance to him. Only the element of expiation is missing. *Nduvho* seems to us to be the most suitable term to be used as a generic term for “offering”.

2. The terms *u rerela* and *u rerelela* for “to pray”

The Venda terms *u rerela* and *u rerelela* mean “to communicate with and propitiate the ancestor spirits”. They are derived from the verb *u rera* which means “to discuss formally” or “to state a court case”. From this verb is derived the noun *murero*, “a proverb”. *U rerela* might be the applied form of this, in which case it would mean “to speak formally for a purpose”, or it might be a contraction of the intensive form, *u rerelela*, which means the same as *u rerela* and is the more common form.

U rerelela is infrequently and irregularly practised. It is usually occasioned by a specific need, such as illness or some misfortune, or the desire to take revenge on one’s enemies by witchcraft. It is usually of a preventative nature, since it is mainly intended to prevent the resentment of the spirits. The spirits are regarded as a nuisance and *u rerelela* is the only way to get rid of them. *U rerelela* consists of some verbal communication accompanied by a token offering, usually in the form of some water or beer which is spilt on the ground. Usually it is explicitly stated that this is done in order that the spirits should protect the family and stop causing illness among the grandchildren.

U rerelela usually points to the activity of a group of which one person speaks on behalf of others, the only exceptions being that of persons living by themselves, and of people practising *vhuloi* (black magic). The most senior person present usually performs the rite.

There is usually no trace of reverence in this rite. Sometimes it is even called *u sema midzimu*, “to scold the spirits” (i.e. for failing to perform their duty and for making a nuisance of themselves).

Biblical terms for prayer

There are three Hebrew terms that are translated by *u rerela*. The first is *brk* in Dan. 6:11, 12. In this context the Hebrew term means “to kneel and praise God”. We do not intend discussing this further, since this is the only instance where this term has been translated in this way, and there are obvious better renderings which are employed elsewhere.

In Zeph. 3:9 the Hebrew term for “to call upon the Name of the LORD” (*qr’ bēšēm*) is translated by *u rerela*.

The other term rendered by *u rerela* is *pll*, which is generally used for “to pray” in the Old Testament. This term, *pll* is usually rendered by *u rabela*,

which we shall discuss shortly. In some places, especially in the later books of the Old Testament, which were the last to be translated by Dr. Schweltnus, for no apparent reason the term *u rerela* was used instead. Such places are, Jon. 2:1; Jer. 32:16; and Neh. 1:4 (whereas in Neh. 2:4 the term *u rabela* is used for rendering the same Hebrew term).

The term *pll* is the most important and frequent term for referring to prayer in the Old Testament. Its meaning is determined by the Old Testament teaching of the God of the covenant who is faithful, righteous, full of constant love, but also holy. In prayer the believer approaches him as one person to another, yet he realizes that he is the sovereign Lord who must be approached with due respect.

Prayer in the Old Testament is not highly formal. The contexts in which the term *u rerelela* occurs in the Old Testament is one of informal personal prayer. Jonah was in no position to perform prayer rituals in the belly of the fish. Prayer is here, as so often in the Old Testament, essentially what Hannah says (1 Sam. 1:15)—it is “pouring out one’s soul before the LORD”. What Moulton² says of prayer in the New Testament, that it is basically “speaking to God”, is also true of prayer in the Old Testament.

The basic elements of the Lord’s Prayer of the New Testament are all present in the Old Testament. There are psalms of submission (Ps. 2), of praying for material needs (though this is not prominent, and is never isolated from spiritual need, e.g. Ps. 38), for forgiveness (Ps. 51), for protection from evil (Ps. 52). Doxology forms a prominent element (Ps. 118).

Comparative analysis of *u rerela* and “pray”

“I mourned for some days, fasting and praying to the God of heaven” (Neh. 1:4).

Diagnostic components

pray	<i>u rerela</i>
1. verbal communication directed to God	1. verbal communication directed to <i>Mudzimu</i>
2. submission	2. ritualized
3. confession	3. for benefits expected
4. intercession	

The person to whom the *u rerela* is directed is in this case determined by what the receptor understands when he hears *Mudzimu* in connection with the verb *u rerela*. The analysis is somewhat difficult in the case of *u rerela*, because the whole concept does not fit into the context in which it is used here. Submission, confession and intercession are prominent in Nehemiah’s prayer, but these are no elements of *u rerela*. *U rerela* is to ask favours, often in a rude way, in return for offerings.

Results in the Church of using this term

The use of this term in the Bible can be expected to strengthen the association with ancestor spirits when addressing God. We have already mentioned that an alternative form of *u rerelela* is *u sema midzimu* (“to scold the spirits”).

These associations with prayer are present in the mind of many Venda, and they are strengthened by the use of a term like this one in the Bible. The

² Moulton, H. K. *The Nature of Prayer in the New Testament*. Bible Society of S.A., 1967.

prayers of Venda Christians often show very little respect. They tend to dwell on trivialities and often become casual and long-winded discussions, with God in the role of an unimportant and patient listener. Sometimes, when the praying person is really in earnest, his prayer follows the pattern of increasing in volume, and ending in shouts and shrieks directed to God—a mode of behaviour that is extremely rude by all accepted Venda standards of politeness. A Venda sometimes shouts at his wife when he is drunk or when he is annoyed with her, or he might shout at another person during a quarrel when he completely loses his self-control. But this is frowned upon as very undignified behaviour. One would never shout in this way when speaking respectfully, as when addressing a chief.

Yet this way of praying is the rule rather than the exception with most of the independent “Zionist” churches in Vendaland. We have heard other Christians deriding Zionists at prayer with the words of Elijah in 1 Kings 18:27, “Cry aloud . . . perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened!”

Terms suggested instead of *u rerela*

The terms *u rabela* (“to pray”) and *thabelo* (“prayer”) are the ones generally used for referring to prayer in the Venda Bible. They have been introduced from Sotho *go rapela*, (“to plead”), which is the generally accepted term for “prayer”. This set of terms has also been accepted by the Venda people, but unfortunately it has acquired a restricted and formal range of meanings, as would be expected of a borrowed term. Actually it usually refers to a church service rather than to spontaneous individual prayer. It is not readily associated with informal forms of prayer, whereas in the Bible prayer is in the first place personal and informal.

The use of this term discourages spontaneous personal communication with God. It was illuminating to hear the objections of an educated church member against discarding *thabelo* and *u rabela* for “prayer”. When the alternative *u hambela* (Venda for “to ask”—as a request) was suggested, his reaction was, “It is better to stick to *rabela*, as *u hambela* appears to be more personal and there is a possibility of refusal while in *rabela* we don’t think of refusal.”

When the form *u amba na Mudzimu* was suggested, he wrote, “*U amba na Mudzimu* means a dialogue with God, but God does not speak, he listens. (“We cannot converse with a person who does not speak.”)

This man, a well-instructed church member, has inferred from the terms used and from his experience with prayer in the Church that it is not personal, that it is a monologue, and that it is not possible for God to refuse our requests! Unwittingly he provided a strong argument against *thabelo* etc. by emphasizing the associations it conveys with an institutionalized (i.e. formalized, specialized, ritualized) form of prayer.

A term which is often used spontaneously by the Venda themselves is *u hambela* (“to ask as a request”). This usually refers to informal personal prayer. It is noteworthy that in the Greek-speaking Christian Church of New Testament times there was a tendency to move away from very ceremonial terms such as *proseuchomai* etc. to more everyday terms such as *deomai*, *aiteō* and *erōtaō*, all of which can be translated by the Venda *u hambela*. In the Gospel of John *proseuchomai* is entirely discarded.

Another possibility which has been exploited in our Bible school at Sibasa, with very satisfactory results, is *u amba na Mudzimu* ("to converse with God").

Other suitable terms are *u luvha* ("to pay homage and at the same time ask a favour or gift") and *u losha* ("to greet politely by clapping the hands, also for expressing thanks"). *U losha* is especially suitable for prayers of thanksgiving, since this is the original Venda term for expressing thanks.

By using terms such as these, if not to the exclusion of *thabelo*, at least sometimes as alternatives for it, the spontaneous, informal and personal character of Biblical prayer will be accentuated.

3. The term *u fhatutshedza* for "blessing"

This term is included because it is a glaring example of certain terms carried into the Venda Bible for the purpose of rendering Biblical terms to which they are not even remotely related.

The meaning of *u fhatutshedza* can best be explained by describing the ceremony it refers to. When a person who has had some possessions dies, some time is allowed to pass after the burial, in order to consult a diviner as to the cause of the death. After this has been ascertained, the relatives gather at the door of the deceased person's sleeping hut. A witch doctor, *nanga*, or the senior family member present then smears white ashes or the dung of the fish eagle (*khuwadzi*) beneath the eyes of those present at the ceremony, in order that their eyes may be opened to "see" the possessions left by the deceased. This ceremony is called *u fhatutshedza* or *u tona phatutshedzo*. Its purpose is to prevent the jealousy of the deceased's spirit from causing them harm when they divide its possessions among themselves.

The verb *u fhatutshedza* is the causative of the applied form of the verb *u fhatuwa*, "to open one's eyes on awakening". It therefore means "to cause to open the eyes to the possessions".

The Biblical concept of blessing

"The term, to bless, *barak*, means to communicate one's strength, one's vitality, one's self to another, to enable another to achieve his aims, to give him the capacity to be vigorous, effective—in brief, to be with him. Blessing belongs to the relations between persons. On the other hand, to curse . . . in Hebrew means to withdraw one's support from another, to leave him alone or desert him, so that he becomes weak, directionless, and so loses weight, cracks up and is destroyed. To paraphrase, then, Genesis 12:2, 3: 'I will be with you and will support and strengthen you, so that you can support and strengthen others. I will strengthen those who acknowledge and accept your strength, and he who refuses to have fellowship with you, who turns away from you, who treats you with contempt, I will abandon him and let him perish. Through you all the families of the earth will find their true being and strength! In a word: 'Through you I will fulfill the purpose of man's creation'.⁸ In these rather "animistic" terms Philip Potter describes the meaning of *barak* in the Old Testament. We would say that "to bless" means that the power of God is active in the broadest sense on behalf of the blessed.

⁸ Berkhof and Potter, *Key Words*, pp. 28–29.

In the Bible the source of blessing, the one who really blesses, is always God. Even when a father blesses his child, like Isaac blesses Jacob, he says, "May God give you . . ." (Gen. 27:28). The same applies to priestly blessings, e.g. Num. 6:23-7, "They shall pronounce my name over the Israelites, and I will bless them."

In the later stages of Israel's history the act of blessing tended to take on cultic forms and became centred in the temple and priesthood.

In the New Testament the most important new element in the concept of blessing is the emphasis on salvation which it acquires (e.g. Gal. 3:8ff; Acts 3:25ff; Eph. 1:3) in connection with the work of Christ. The blessing of Abraham is also interpreted in this light. But that does not mean that the emphasis is now exclusively on future salvation. The element of God's powerful presence in his Church in this world is also emphasized, for instance in Rom. 15:29 ("I know that I shall come with a full measure of the blessing of Christ").

Where Jesus himself is the one who pronounces the blessing, the meaning is very close to its Old Testament concept (e.g. in blessing the children, Mark 10:13-16, the bread, Luke 9:16 etc., and the disciples, Luke 24:50).

In some places the blessing refers to eternal salvation (e.g. in Matt. 25:34, 1 Pet. 3:9).

A radically new Christian element is the admonition to bless those who curse one (Matt. 5:44; Rom. 12:14; 1 Cor. 4:12; 1 Pet. 3:9), by which act the power of the curse is broken by blessing.

A comparative analysis of the Biblical and Venda terms

There is no need to present a schematic analysis of these two terms. Nobody seems to know why the term *u fhatutshedza* was chosen. The Venda in general fail to grasp its meaning in a Christian context. It is a testimony to their infinite patience that they accept this term in the Church and even sometimes use it themselves out of loyalty to their teachers.

Terms suggested to replace *u fhatutshedza*

Venda Christians seem to prefer the term *mashudu* ("good fortune") when referring to "blessing". The verb formed from it, *u shudufhadza* ("to make fortunate"), is used for "to bless".

This is a very well known and frequently used term in Venda. Many children are named *Mashudu*. *U na mashudu* means "he has good fortune", "he is lucky". It can also refer to the possession of desirable characteristics, especially generosity, in which case the expression is used, "*Ndi mashudu awe-who*", "He is blessed with a generous character".

The Venda say that no person on earth can bestow *mashudu*. Some even say that the ancestor spirits cannot send *mashudu*, only Mwali can do so. It cannot be procured through magic techniques, but there seems to be no objection among our informants to the thought that it can be asked from God, the Creator.

It also cannot be used when inanimate objects are blessed. In that case derivative forms such as "to cause to bring *mashudu*" will have to be used.

In a few instances this form is used in the Venda Bible, e.g. in Num. 6:24, 27 (whereas in v. 23 the term *u fhatutshedza* is used, for no apparent reason).