

The Contested History of *Modimo*  
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**FOREWORD:**

I am a historian, not a theologian. The question of “whether *Modimo* is God” is, in the strict sense, a question in theology rather than in history. However, it is a question which may be informed by historical data. The following paper is an attempt to review the historiography of the question of what *Modimo* “originally meant” in a way that may be of interest to religious scholars. My approach assumes that, although the world-views of Christianity and pre-missionary Tswana were different, comparisons are possible. That is, although categories such as “religion” and concepts such as “God” cannot be translated exactly or unproblematically between societies, I do not agree with the view that translation and dialogue between cultures is impossible or meaningless.

**THE HISTORY OF “MODIMO”**

Early European visitors to Southern Africa were puzzled by what seemed to them to be an absence of religion. Europeans were familiar with several religious systems: the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and “Paganism”. The concept of paganism was based primarily on their own pre-Christian ancestors, and involved polytheism, idols, and ceremonies such as sacrifices. Some of the religious systems they encountered as they began to explore and conquer other parts of the world seemed to fit this fairly well. Hinduism was at first classified as a sort of paganism (when Europeans arrived in India they found Muslim rulers, and assumed that Islam was the dominant religion) though by the end of the eighteenth century scholars were discovering its complex philosophical element.

In Southern Africa, however, no such “religion” was apparent to Europeans. Initial impressions of other parts of the world had also sometimes been of this nature, but in Africa the impression seemed to last longer and was not so quickly dissolved by the first steps in cultural understanding. This was a cause of considerable vexation to early missionaries, who felt that while it would be relatively easy to proceed from one religion to a better one, they were in the position of having to introduce the concept itself. Over time, however, attitudes changed, and Europeans began to identify concepts of religion, and even of God, in African cultures. This process seemed easier the further north they went.

In the case of the Sotho-Tswana, the word *Modimo* (also *Morimo* and *Molimo* according to dialect<sup>1</sup>) was eventually accepted as the translation of “God”. However, this was by no means a

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<sup>1</sup> The difference between *Modimo* and *Molimo* is simply Tswana versus Sotho orthography. *Morimo*, the form first recorded among the Tswana, appears more like modern SeKgalagari than modern Setswana: this is true of many words recorded by early visitors (notably *Kalahari*, the modern SeKgalagari *Kgalagari* rather than the Setswana *Kgalagadi*).

straightforward or uncontested process. The question of the “original” meaning of the word (that is, the meaning at the time of European contact) is still being debated.

The word *Modimo* is a noun with the root *-dimo*, which is derived from the Bantu root *-dzimu* (spirit). There are a number of Setswana words with this root, notably *badimo* (ancestral spirits, no singular). More problematically there is a word *modimo* with plural *medimo*, with a range of meanings including “spirit” and “demigod”. This *modimo* is a homonym of the *Modimo* which has been used to translate “God”,<sup>2</sup> leading to questions about which word was intended by speakers quoted in early reports. Sometimes *modimo* simply referred to a living chief.<sup>3</sup>

Several of the earliest European visitors reported that there appeared to be some concept of a God or gods. These visitors were hampered by the need to use interpreters as well as by the general unfamiliarity of the culture they were meeting for the first time, and so their accounts were tentative. The word *Modimo* was usually mentioned. One of the clearest of these early accounts was that of the German visitor W.H.C. Lichtenstein, published in 1807, who found that *Muhrimo* (which he connected etymologically with *morena*, king or lord) was a deity apparently indifferent to, or beyond, good and evil.

The Beetjuanas recognize an invisible being as the cause of natural phenomena and as the donor of both good and evil. They call this entity *Muhrimo*.... Their attitude toward this being is one more of fear than of love. They believe that in this entity rests power and mercy. They are not sure if it is more pleased by good or by evil, if it wills good luck or misfortune.<sup>4</sup>

William Burchell, in 1812, reported that *Muliimo* was apparently a bad deity. His interpreter had translated it as equivalent to the Dutch word for “Devil”, and all bad events were attributed to it.<sup>5</sup> He referred to some idea of a Supreme Being, but if the Tswana recognized a good god, they did not worship it.<sup>6</sup>

John Barrow, in 1801, found that more attention was given to the “evil spirit” than to the good spirit, though he was not clear whether these were two gods or two aspects of one.<sup>7</sup>

Robert Moffat, who began his work in the 1820s, produced a report which—despite his long residence among the Tswana—most subsequent writers have felt must be based on misunderstandings. *Modimo*, he concluded, was a malevolent being living in a hole. It was in no sense God, but was rather like the malevolent versions of fairies in European folklore; a thing

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The general practice in Botswana is to include the prefixes when writing names, i.e. Basotho rather than Sotho. However there is a problem with *Batswana*, which can mean either “Setswana-speakers” or “inhabitants of Botswana”. I therefore use *Tswana* for “Setswana-speakers”.

<sup>2</sup> In modern Setswana *Modimo* God is a class 1 noun while *modimo* spirit is class 3, but in early Setswana the word is always class 3, so that the two are, if not the same word, homonyms.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. David Livingstone, *Missionary Travels* [1857] Project Gutenberg Electronic Text, ch. 8.

<sup>4</sup> W.H.C. Lichtenstein, *Foundation of the Cape & About the Bechuana* trans. O.H. Spohr (Cape Town: A.A. Balkema, 1973) p. 72. *About the Bechuana* was first published as *Ueber der Beetjuanas* in 1807.

<sup>5</sup> William J. Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa* (New York: Johnson Reprint, 1967) (reprint of London 1824) p. 550.

<sup>6</sup> Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa*, p. 427.

<sup>7</sup> John Barrow, *A Voyage to Cochinchina* (Kuala Lumpur: OUP, 1975) p. 400.

which came out of its hole and killed people and cattle.<sup>8</sup> This image is not consistent with other accounts, and in fact sounds more like a *dimo* (SeSotho *lelimo*), a quasi-supernatural ogre.<sup>9</sup>

Moffat however also recorded a few other ideas about *Modimo* which are clearly inconsistent with his own theory but agree better with other sources. Perhaps most interestingly, he records a detailed conversation in which a man told him that *Modimo* had come out of a hole in the ground together with the first ancestor and the animals. This man offered to show Moffat the site, where the footprints could be seen—*Modimo*’s being distinguished by having no toes.<sup>10</sup> This version of the Lowe/Matsieng story may possibly indicate some overlap or uncertainty between the High-God and First-Ancestor concepts, though Setiloane states that all other recorded versions attribute the toe-less footprint to Lowe,<sup>11</sup> suggesting that this may simply be an error by Moffat.

Moffat, then, clearly saw himself as *appropriating* the word *Modimo* and giving it a new meaning. There was precedent for this in earlier Christian history: for example the word *god* among the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxons meant merely a supernatural being like Thor or Loki, and certainly did not mean “God” in the Christian or Platonic sense.<sup>12</sup> When rain-makers argued that they too were communicating with *Modimo*, Moffat saw this as evidence that they were *re-appropriating* the term, rather than evidence that there might have already been some shared concept.<sup>13</sup>

It is worth noting, however, that according to Mackenzie it was not Moffat who first identified *Modimo* with God, but the interpreters used by the first missionaries: “The invariable equivalent for *God* in Dutch, given by all the interpreters, was *Morimo*. It was no suggestion of the missionaries...”<sup>14</sup>

In Lesotho, however, the French missionaries did accept that there was a concept of God already present. Eugene Casalis, who arrived at the court of King Moshoeshoe in 1833, clearly identified *Molimo* as “God” (“the Lord”) but thought that *Molimo* was conceived as being remote from most aspects of life. *Molimo* was apparently responsible for death by lightning. Also, Casalis recorded a version of the “Lizard and Chameleon” story<sup>15</sup> in which *Molimo* sent the message of

<sup>8</sup> Robert Moffat, *Missionary Labours and Scenes in South Africa* (London: John Snow, 1842) p. 261.

<sup>9</sup> A *dimo* is a cannibalistic giant, appearing in many folk-tales. In Lesotho the equivalent word *lelimo* was applied to the cave-dwellers who actually resorted to cannibalism during the *disaqane*.

<sup>10</sup> Moffat, *Missionary Labours*, pp. 262-3.

<sup>11</sup> Setiloane, *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana*, p. 471n.22.

<sup>12</sup> See Bruce S. Bennett, “Slow Cooking: Some European historical parallels for the adaptation of Christianity in Africa”, in *Theology Cooked in an African Pot* (eds) Klaus Fiedler, Paul Gundani, Hilary Mijoga, (Zomba: Association of Theological Institutions in Southern and Central Africa, 1998) pp. 120–141.

<sup>13</sup> David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996) p. 194.

<sup>14</sup> John Mackenzie, *Ten Years North of the Orange River: A story of everyday life and work among the South African tribes from 185969* (2nd ed., London: Frank Cass, 1971) (first published 1871) p. 394.

<sup>15</sup> Versions of this story are widely distributed in Southern and Central Africa. Two messages are sent to humanity, one (usually the first) that people will die but then live again, the other that they will die for ever. The first message is sent by the Chameleon, who is overtaken by the swifter Lizard bearing the second message. As it is received first, it is the one that takes effect. In Malawi the Chameleon plays a role in many other myths of origin; see J.M. Schoffeleers & A.A. Roscoe, *Land of Fire: Oral Literature from Malawi* (Limbe: Popular Publications, 1985) pp. 17–38.

death and rebirth, while an “evil agent” sent the message of death for ever.<sup>16</sup> This appears to be related to the version recorded by Livingstone in which the message of death for ever is sent by *Matsien* (=*Matsieng*).<sup>17</sup> In at least some versions of the story, the First Ancestor is the sender of one or both messages;<sup>18</sup> this may be an example with *Matsieng* in this role.

David Livingstone challenged Moffat’s theories on Tswana religion. While Moffat was inclined to attribute any ideas of *Modimo* as God to missionary influence, Livingstone cited the evidence of old Batswana informants, whose memories went before Moffat’s time. These informants were clear that there *was* a concept of “a supreme being who made all things, and to whom all events not clearly traceable to natural causes were uniformly ascribed... A character both of malignity and benevolence was ascribed to Him.” Livingstone illustrated this last point by citing two Setswana sayings: “God has no heart” and “How good God is”.<sup>19</sup> This concept of *Modimo* is strikingly similar to that described by Lichtenstein. In *Missionary Travels* (1857) he wrote that

On questioning intelligent men among the Bakwains [Bakwena] as to their former knowledge of good and evil, of God and the future state, they have scouted the idea of any of them ever having been without a tolerably clear conception on all these subjects.<sup>20</sup>

Livingstone concluded that the absence of formal public ceremonies had misled observers into the error that the Batswana had no religion.<sup>21</sup> In the same book he gave a fascinating sample dialogue with a rain-doctor, in which the latter explained how he too was approaching God, though with herbs rather than verbal prayers.<sup>22</sup>

All these observers, when they addressed the question, agreed that *Modimo* belonged in the impersonal *mo/me-* noun class (that is, class 3 in modern Setswana grammar). Setiloane still classified *Modimo* as class 3 in 1975,<sup>23</sup> but recent works place it in the personal noun class 1.<sup>24</sup>

In reviewing these ideas, it is worth noting the historical theory of religion held by the early missionaries. African religion used to be described as “primitive”, the idea being that religion followed a natural path of development from some basic starting-point (often “animism”), and that African religion was “primitive” in the sense of not having progressed beyond this first stage. Other religions might be more “advanced”, to varying degrees. Such views were held by

<sup>16</sup> Eugène Casalis, *The Basutos* (Morija: Morija Museum and Archives, 1997; facsimile of London: James Nisbet & Co, 1859) p. 242.

<sup>17</sup> David Livingstone, “Letter to the Directors of the London Missionary Society”, *The British Quarterly Review*, XIV (1851), reprinted in *David Livingstone: South African Papers 1849–1853* ed. I. Schapera (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1979) p. 101.

<sup>18</sup> S. M. Molema, *The Bantu—Past and Present* (Cape Town: C. Struik, 1963; facsimile of Edinburgh: W. Green & Sons, 1920) p. 174.

<sup>19</sup> Livingstone, “Letter to the Directors of the London Missionary Society”, p. 101.

<sup>20</sup> David Livingstone, *Missionary Travels* [1857] Project Gutenberg Electronic Text, ch. 8.

<sup>21</sup> Livingstone, *Missionary Travels* ch. 8.

<sup>22</sup> Livingstone, *Missionary Travels* ch. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Gabriel Setiloane, *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana* (Rotterdam: A. A. Balkema, 1976) p. 77.

<sup>24</sup> James Amanze, *African Christianity in Botswana: The case of African Independent Churches* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1997) p. 4; *Setswana-English-Setswana Dictionary* 4th ed., compiled by Z. I. Matumo, (Gaborone: Botswana Book Centre, 1993), p. 247 (“Modimo”). This dictionary gives *modimo* class 3 as a separate word, meaning “demigod”.

many later missionaries. The early missionaries, however, did *not* hold this view; rather they assumed that all peoples must have started out with some knowledge of God—being all the descendants of the sons of Noah—and that this original knowledge must have been *lost* or *corrupted*. Thus, the missionaries in Lesotho regarded the word *Molimo* as a *relic* of an earlier and better form of religion; in appropriating it they were merely restoring its old meaning. Casalis derived *Molimo* from *holimo* sky, with the sense of “he who is in the sky”. He readily agreed that this heavenly concept of *Molimo* did not fit very well with current Sotho-Tswana ideas, but in his view the sense of a heavenly (rather than subterranean) God must be the original:

There is an obvious contradiction between the language and the received ideas; in spite of a universal perversion, which probably dates many centuries back, truth has reserved itself a witness in the vocabulary of these people. The missionaries have not hesitated to adopt this venerable word, which seemed, as it were, only to await their arrival to reascend to its source...<sup>25</sup>

It might be objected that “heaven” was for European Christians a symbolic rather than a literal location, and so why was identification of God with the sky so crucial? Probably Casalis would have replied that the symbolism of heaven was in the Bible and hence should be regarded as part of the original religious knowledge of humanity which the Basotho had largely lost. Setiloane later wrote that *Modimo* is associated both with sky and earth.<sup>26</sup>

Opinions differed as to the origins of the Bantu-speakers of Southern Africa. It was suggested that they might derive from the Lost Tribes of Israel, or from the Arabs.<sup>27</sup> Alternatively, it was suggested that the totem system might derive from the sacred animals of the Ancient Egyptians.<sup>28</sup>

In the early twentieth century, S. M. Molema concluded that there had been an idea of God, but a very hazy one.

This god, however, was more of an absent god; he lived retired on high, took no interest in what was going on, and although the author of Nature and more powerful than the spirits, he was inactive.<sup>29</sup>

Livingstone and Molema are particularly weighty sources. Livingstone had lived immersed in African society for years at a time, and his writing shows an unusual ability to get to grips with what he called the “remarkably acute” reasoning of traditional doctors whom he engaged in debate.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore he was able to identify occasions when the word *modimo* was being used in other senses.<sup>31</sup> His account of what old Batswana told him about the ideas current in their youth thus is likely to be reliable. S. M. Molema was writing later, but had the advantage of

<sup>25</sup> Casalis, *The Basutos*, p. 248.

<sup>26</sup> Setiloane, *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana*, p. 82.

<sup>27</sup> Setiloane, *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana*, pp. 105-6.

<sup>28</sup> David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996) pp. 202-3.

<sup>29</sup> Molema, *The Bantu—Past and Present*, p. 166.

<sup>30</sup> Livingstone, *Missionary Travels*, ch. 1.

<sup>31</sup> Livingstone, *Missionary Travels*, ch. 8.

combining an insider's oral knowledge with western education. Both point to a remote High God, somewhat detached from ordinary life.

Let us move on now to the mid twentieth century. Christianity had become well-established in Southern Africa, while traditional belief was increasingly recognized by scholars as "African Traditional Religion" (ATR), a religious system which like Hinduism contained much variation but was a recognizable entity. African Traditional Religion included a concept of a "High God". Many Christians and ATR adherents agreed that this High God and the God of Christianity were one and the same, even though the concepts differed in some ways.

African theologians were now critical of the early missionaries who had not recognized the High God. Gabriel Setiloane argued that the Sotho-Tswana concept of *Modimo* was if anything a more robust concept of God than that found in recent Christianity.<sup>32</sup> *Modimo* was according to Setiloane impersonal in the sense of belonging to an impersonal noun-class, though he argued that this should be understood as indicating something larger than a personal concept rather than inferior to it.<sup>33</sup>

Although Setiloane's work is not ahistorical to the degree of that of, for example, John Mbiti,<sup>34</sup> he seems to proceed rather directly from the concepts of *Modimo* familiar to him from his own knowledge of his society to attribute these concepts to the Batswana who first encountered the missionaries. That is, he seems to assume that the concepts have not changed. But what if, in fact, Tswana ideas have *not* remained totally static in the past 200 years? Other writers suggested that ATR had evolved and developed over time. Some (such as Schapera) asserted that the Christian concept of God had largely replaced the original concept of *Modimo*,<sup>35</sup> about which was very difficult to recover reliable information.<sup>36</sup> Others (such as V.G.J. Sheddick) argued that the High God was not really an original feature of Sotho-Tswana religion, but was a new concept, not indeed taken from Christianity but developed in response to it.<sup>37</sup>

When we say "evolved", we can of course imagine this in a variety of ways. It could be "influence" or "adoption", or "development of a new concept". But we could perhaps also consider the processes by which the early Christian Church clarified its doctrines, or Newman's ideas on the development of the Catholic faith: it is quite possible to admit that there has been *development* without having to admit that one's beliefs have *altered*.

<sup>32</sup> It is not quite clear whether Setiloane is criticizing the Christian concept of God as such, or the versions of it expounded by 19th century missionaries and 20th century theologians. "Theo Sundermeier... has pointed out that Setiloane's thesis was written during the brief popularity of 'death of God' theology: this illuminates his stance vis-à-vis European theology." (John Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) p. 73n.70.) Thus his critique can be seen as a response to a European theology that was apparently failing to uphold God and perhaps needed to be reminded of the more robust belief of *Modimo*.

<sup>33</sup> Setiloane, *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana*, p. 84.

<sup>34</sup> See e.g John Mbiti's survey *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1970).

<sup>35</sup> I. Schapera & John L. Comaroff, *The Tswana* rev.ed., (London: Kegan Paul, 1991) p. 55.

<sup>36</sup> I. Schapera, *Tribal Innovators* (London, 1970) p. 129; cited in Paul Landau, *The Realm of the Word: Language, gender and Christianity in a Southern African kingdom* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995) p. 5n.7.

<sup>37</sup> V.G.J. Sheddick, *The Southern Sotho*, (London: International African Institute, 1953), cited in David Chidester, Chirevo Kwenda, Robert Petty, Judy Tobler, & Darrel Wratten, *African Traditional Religion: An annotated bibliography* (Westport Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997) pp. 278 & 366.

However, while we cannot simply *assume* that there has been no change in Sotho-Tswana thought, the theory that the concept of *Modimo* is a new one also presents problems. The concepts of *Modimo* put forward by Setiloane, who undoubtedly writes from a deep understanding of his own culture, are clearly not identical with the concepts of God presented by the missionaries or later Christian teachers.<sup>38</sup> If the original concept of *Modimo* has been replaced by a Christian one, how are these differences to be explained? Surely they must come from somewhere. This question is a part of a larger question; if Christianity (or indeed Islam) *replaced* ATR, why do we not find total adoption of the new religious system, but rather a selective adoption?

In 1971 Robin Horton published a highly influential article in which he suggested a model for historical change within ATR.<sup>39</sup> Horton began with a model of the “typical traditional cosmology”, in which there were two tiers: the lesser spirits, linked to the microcosm of local community, and the supreme being, underpinning the macrocosm of the world as a whole. In pre-modern society, most attention focussed on the microcosm and the lesser spirits, while the supreme being was remote. Now, Horton proposed a “thought experiment”: imagine modernization (greatly improved communications “with accompanying economic and political developments that overrode the boundaries between the various microcosms”—but without the presence of Christianity or Islam.<sup>40</sup> The significance of the supreme being would greatly increase, as people increasingly lived in a wider macrocosmic world. As the new larger world required a more universal moral code, the supreme being (as the underpinner of the macrocosm) moved from “moral neutrality” to “moral concern”. Horton argued that Christianity and Islam had acted as *catalysts* to a process which had causes other than the presence of missionaries; hence the fact that only *some* aspects of the new religions found ready acceptance. Horton’s model was essentially theoretical, but was soon explored in specific studies by others.<sup>41</sup> Many historians found Horton’s ideas very useful, though it was pointed out that the rise of the High God was not the only possible response to the widening of scale.<sup>42</sup> The historical challenge to ideas of a “timeless” African religion had already been launched by the 1970 Dar-es-Salaam conference on the historical study of African religion.<sup>43</sup>

Southern African historians such as Neil Parsons were also thinking along similar lines. It was suggested that there had been a historical trend, around the time of European contact, towards increasing the prominence of the High God in Southern African ATR. This process would have been accelerated by the upheavals caused by the Europeans and the *difaqane*. The old order was collapsing, and established groups were being broken up or submerged in new larger units, while European-connected trade opened up wider horizons: in such a context the High God, with His/Her/Its universal scale, seemed more relevant and important. Later, the stimulus of

<sup>38</sup> John Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) pp. 77ff.

<sup>39</sup> Robin Horton, “African conversion”, *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* vol. XLI no. 2 (April 1971) pp. 85–108.

<sup>40</sup> Horton, “African conversion”, p. 102.

<sup>41</sup> See e.g. Edward A. Alpers, “Towards a history of the expansion of Islam in East Africa: the matrilineal peoples of the southern interior”, *The Historical Study of African Religion* (eds) T.O. Ranger & I. N. Kimambo, (London: Heinemann, 1972) pp. 172–201.

<sup>42</sup> T.O. Ranger & I. N. Kimambo, “Introduction”, “, *The Historical Study of African Religion* (eds) T.O. Ranger & I. N. Kimambo, p. 16.

<sup>43</sup> This conference led to the important *The Historical Study of African Religion* (eds) T.O. Ranger & I. N. Kimambo, (London: Heinemann, 1972).

Christianity pushed the process further, but in a direction it was already taking; in some cases Christianity and the *Mwari* cult were in competition to occupy the position being created.<sup>44</sup> In the case of Southern Africa, an extra North-South dimension was suggested. It is noticeable that the concept of the High God seems to have been clearer in the north than in the south.<sup>45</sup> Among the Nguni-speaking Xhosa and Zulu, the overlap between the High God and the First Ancestor seems to have been considerable.<sup>46</sup> Among the Sotho-Tswana the two were more readily distinguishable, with the High God being fairly easily identified by at least some early European visitors. But further north, the High God occupied a much more central place in religious life. The southern cultures also may have shown less “cultic” activity; or, at any rate, their cultic activity was more closely incorporated under the civic activity of the *kgosi*. In Central Africa there is evidence of a higher level of cultic activity, with High God cult centres older than, and often somewhat of, independent of, royal power.

We can also note that Horton’s model would seem to fit quite closely the evidence for *Modimo* having originally been seen as remote and morally neutral, but having become more prominent and morally concerned over time. Such a development would be of the organic type that would explain why Setiloane and other Tswana writers interpreting their own culture’s historical memory did not find any *discontinuity* between old and new concepts of *Modimo*.

For a cross-cultural comparison, it may be interesting briefly to consider the development of religion in the Roman Empire—a historical context which offers a number of odd parallels to “modernization”. Horton’s model stands up remarkably well. The widening of scale which can be seen in the ancient Mediterranean world was indeed accompanied by some decline in local and particular religious systems, with a trend to wider-scale systems, often though not always leaning toward monotheism, with personal commitment and universal morality far more prominent than in the old local systems. Christianity was the ultimate winner, but it is important to note that the “Paganism” over which it triumphed was no longer merely a matter of local agricultural cults but was itself increasingly monotheistic (either in philosophical Stoic style or in imperial Sun-God style).

Returning to Africa—if there *was* a concept of God present, why did so many early European visitors have trouble recognizing it? The simplest explanation is linguistic incapacity, though this has to be qualified to explain why Lichtenstein could identify a High God on a short visit while Moffat could not in a long residence. Moffat was of course influenced by strong and rather narrow opinions as to what a “real” concept of God would look like. A related explanation is unwillingness on the part of Africans to discuss such matters with outsiders until they were well acquainted, coupled perhaps with a style of courtesy which, for missionaries not familiar with it,

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<sup>44</sup> N. M. B. Bhebe, “The Ndebele and Mwari before 1893: a religious conquest of the conqueror by the vanquished”, unpublished paper, in “Conference on the History of Central African Religion: Lusaka, August 30th – September 8th 1972” (collected papers, copy in University of Botswana Library); “Notes on oral presentation by Q. N. Parsons”, *ibid*.

<sup>45</sup> This was pointed out by Livingstone, who was able to make a direct comparison: David Livingstone, *Missionary Travels* [1857] Project Gutenberg Electronic Text, ch. 8.

<sup>46</sup> David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996) pp. 160–3.

could lead to mistakes going uncorrected. It has also been suggested that there was a strong taboo on speaking directly of *Modimo*.<sup>47</sup>

Coming closer to the present, we find that religious history, loosely understood, has received greater academic prominence in general scholarship. John and Jean Comaroff's on-going study of mission among the Southern Tswana accepts the idea that the original *Modimo* was a remote force, beyond the natural world. They note that Africans often seem to have thought that the God of the missionaries must be a different sort of entity, asking questions such as "Does God have hair?" which they never asked about their own *Modimo*. These questions were apparently prompted by the missionaries' insistence that God was personal, active, immediate and open to direct communication. But since the questions are obviously based on a serious misunderstanding of what the missionaries actually meant to convey, it is not clear that they prove anything beyond the poor communication skills of the missionaries.<sup>48</sup> The question is further complicated by the fact that *modimo* seems to cover a range of meanings. Nor is there anything surprising about this. Imagine that an explorer-missionary from Botswana had arrived in early-modern England: what would he have made of words like "ghost" or "spirit"? We can imagine that our explorer has heard from another traveller that the *Holy Ghost* is God, but when he asks someone, in his imperfect English, about "ghost", he is told about an evil apparition in a graveyard. He then asks about where he can find someone who knows about "spirits", and finds himself directed to a pub.<sup>49</sup>

In *Savage Systems* (1996)<sup>50</sup> David Chidester summarized the colonial-era debate over Southern African religion. He argued that a clear pattern could be found: while an African people remained unconquered, it was denied that they possessed "a religion"; but once they were conquered and dispossessed, a religion and a God were "discovered". Chidester linked this "discovery" to the "closure of the frontier": "From the drawing of boundaries, knowledge followed."<sup>51</sup> This somewhat postmodern analysis is fascinating, but seems to me distinctly vulnerable in terms of its actual data. In case of the Sotho-Tswana, Chidester's argument

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<sup>47</sup> Setiloane, *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana*, pp. 76, 85.

<sup>48</sup> It is worth noting how easily such misunderstandings can arise in religious discussion even between speakers of the same language: C. S. Lewis wrote in 1945 "I had argued for at least ten minutes with a man about the existence of a 'personal devil' before I discovered that *personal* meant to him *corporeal*." C. S. Lewis, "Christian Apologetics", *Timeless at Heart* (ed) Walter Hooper (London: Collins, 1970) p. 23.

<sup>49</sup> In trying to discuss things of ultimate concern, to demand a precise answer is often to miss the point. In C. S. Lewis's imaginative reconstruction of ancient European paganism, *Till We Have Faces*, a Greek philosopher tries to challenge the Priest of Ungit (in front of the King) over apparently inconsistent statements about the gods. The Priest replies: "...They [Greeks] demand to see such things clearly, as if the gods were no more than letters written in a book. I, King, have dealt with the gods for three generations of men, and I know that they dazzle our eyes and flow in and out of one another like eddies on a river, and nothing that is said clearly can be said truly about them. Holy places are dark places. It is life and strength, not knowledge and words, that we get in them." C. S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces* (Glasgow: Collins, 1987) p. 58.

Nevertheless, it would equally be a mistake to think that "rational" analytical thought on such subjects is peculiarly western. Casalis mentions one Mosotho who had repeatedly argued that human beings could not, as the usual creation story claimed, have come from reeds: it was absurd. If it were the case, he argued, he would himself be a reed. His neighbours therefore nicknamed him Rra-reed. (Casalis, *The Basutos*, p. 241.)

<sup>50</sup> David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996).

<sup>51</sup> Chidester, *Savage Systems*, p. 26.

depends on identifying D. F. Ellenberger's *History of the Basuto* (1912)<sup>52</sup> as the "discovery" of Sotho-Tswana religion. But Ellenberger's account of Sotho-Tswana religion, if more extensive than earlier ones, was hardly more sympathetic: "the idea of God [was] so obliterated that, at the time of which we are writing, there was nothing of religion among the people beyond a lively fear of bad spirits."<sup>53</sup> Ellenberger may have recognized Sotho-Tswana religion more than Moffat, but the comparison has to be with the accounts by Livingstone (1857) and Mackenzie (1871), both of which seem to me more sympathetic to the idea of "Sotho-Tswana religion" than Ellenberger. Nor can their writings easily be dismissed as less influential; Mackenzie was one of the most prominent missionaries while Livingstone was a veritable Victorian superstar.<sup>54</sup>

Paul Landau, in his important book on Christianity in the Ndwato kingdom, expressed grave doubts as to how far the "original" concept of *Modimo* could be recovered now.<sup>55</sup> His caution is accentuated by his unwillingness to cross the line between history and theology: whether "Modimo means God" is, he considers, a question in theology but not in history.<sup>56</sup> Landau has also questioned whether the category of "religion" is a useful one for pre-Christian Sotho-Tswana culture. This should not be seen as a statement *à la* Moffat that the Tswana "had no religion" but a statement about how experience is divided up differently by different cultures. For example, although the Setswana *ngaka* can be translated as "doctor", the work of a traditional *ngaka* includes things which to a westerner do not belong in the category of "medicine": this does not mean that the Tswana "had no medicine" but rather means that the western category of "medicine" will not map neatly onto an equivalent and coterminous category in Tswana culture. The Comaroffs have expressed similar reservations about "conversion" as a useful category.<sup>57</sup> I agree that "religion" cannot be translated unproblematically between cultures, but do not agree that this presents an insuperable obstacle; many other categories (such as "medicine", as noted above) pose comparable problems without being thought to prevent meaningful discussion of the relevant phenomena.

More recently, Landau has argued that the original sense of *Modimo* was "a particular way of directly indicating the power of the collective social body, and was not an independent or 'remote' deity at all."<sup>58</sup> His approach apparently makes use of early recorded dialogues in which Tswana speakers seem to think questions about *Modimo* may be about particular chiefs. His concerns are to a large extent about translation. He calls into question early translations, which were typically made by missionaries on the basis of their own assumptions. Also, he suggests

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<sup>52</sup> Now reprinted with a new introduction by Morija: D. Fred. Ellenberger, *History of the Basuto: Ancient and Modern* (Morija: Morija Museum & Archives, 1997)

<sup>53</sup> Ellenberger, *History of the Basuto*, pp. 237–8.

<sup>54</sup> Chidester's book contains a great deal of valuable material even if one does not accept his overall argument; e.g. his account of the rival interpretations of Zulu belief.

<sup>55</sup> Paul Landau, *The Realm of the Word: Language, gender and Christianity in a Southern African kingdom* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995) pp. xx, 5.

<sup>56</sup> In the strict sense of this, i.e. the actual identification of an objectively existing being, most historians would I think agree with Landau here. However many would be prepared to talk about "Modimo meaning God" in the looser sense of implying a similar concept. Landau, however, raises problems with such usage.

<sup>57</sup> Jean Comaroff & John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) vol. 1, pp. 250–1.

<sup>58</sup> Paul Landau, abstract of paper on "The meaning of Modimo: translating 'God' and 'Self'", <<http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/ASCWA/conference99/abstractLandau.html>> accessed Feb. 2001.

that the whole business of translating “God” is very problematic. Whether or not one goes all the way with Landau, he raises important and difficult questions.

The debate also raises questions about the written record and oral tradition. Historians use a number of different types of source: all may have value, but not all are used in the same way. In particular, historians in Africa often make use of oral tradition, but note an important difference between oral and written sources. A book printed in 1842 contains the same words now that it did in 1842, whereas an oral tradition has been *transmitted* through intermediaries and *may* have changed in the course of this transmission. This does not mean that historians necessarily prefer the written source—if it was wrong in 1842 it is still wrong now—nor does it mean that the written source does not need to be interpreted. But it does mean that there is an extra type of problem with the oral source: the oral tradition must be examined with the possibility of change having occurred in the “text” itself. Using oral traditions well will involve, for example, some understanding of *how* traditions have been transmitted in a given culture. The written text of 1842 is an artefact of 1842, and to use it we must understand how and why it was created in 1842. But for the oral tradition, which may be partly an artefact of intermediate authors, we must *also* understand how and why it was transmitted in intervening times. I have explained this point because non-historians sometimes get the idea that, because we do not necessarily accept oral traditions at face value, we somehow value them less than other sources. *All* sources have to be interrogated, in the ways that are appropriate for the particular source.

However, it is true that the different nature of sources may lead particular historians, in particular cases, to favour one type or another; this is a point about which debate is likely to occur. In the case of the “original” meaning of *Modimo*, differing assessments about the nature of the oral tradition may lead to radically different conclusions. Schapera concluded that oral traditions about *Modimo* were very hard to use; while Setiloane found them fairly unproblematic. Schapera did not, it should be noted, reject oral sources as such; on the contrary he made very extensive use of them in his work as a whole, and so his doubts in this particular case must carry some weight.

The religious history of the Sotho-Tswana is far from being an esoteric academic concern remote from ordinary life. It is a matter of considerable importance to Batswana what their ancestors believed not so long ago.<sup>59</sup> Is the time separating us from the pre-missionary Tswana a long time? It is longer than a single lifetime, but short enough to be connected to the present by a short chain of memories, perhaps even a single step. Recently a Motswana colleague to whom I had been talking about this paper expressed a sense that it seemed as if the debate I was reporting was among western scholars—few of whom really knew Setswana well—who set aside the oral testimony of Batswana and their own historical memory.

These are difficult questions, and I cannot pretend to have anything like a satisfactory answer to them. Nevertheless I feel they have to be raised. Seretse Khama called on historians to give Africans back the past that had been denied. Our conclusions must follow where we think the evidence leads, rather than the path of popularity, but it cannot be a matter of indifference if we

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<sup>59</sup> The local press provides evidence of a variety of strongly-held opinions about missionaries; see e.g. *Mmegi/The Reporter* 09–15 Feb. 2001 p. 15.

find that the way we want to ask questions is not what our surrounding society finds meaningful.<sup>60</sup>

## POSTSCRIPT

The conference proceedings showed that the debate is still developing. Many modern Africans tend to find the proposition that their (not very distant) ancestors did not have a concept of God somewhat repellent.<sup>61</sup> But in the conference proceedings, it was apparent that some African religious scholars are now questioning the identification of *Modimo* with the God of Christianity. The missionaries, of course, are still in the dock, and anything they did may be used in evidence against them: having been condemned for failing to identify *Modimo* with God, an omission which showed Eurocentric prejudice, they are now condemned for attempting to identify *Modimo* with God, an act which showed Eurocentric prejudice.<sup>62</sup> Clearly, the pre-Christian meaning of *Modimo* is very much a live question.

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<sup>60</sup> Paul Landau, despite his scepticism, concluded his study *The Realm of the Word* by acknowledging that while his own analysis could not be based in religious belief, “Any balanced reading, however, must see that when men and women in GammaNgwato prayed to God, they were, so to speak, also praying to God.”. Landau, *The Realm of the Word*, p. 219.

<sup>61</sup> See e.g. Amanze, *African Christianity in Botswana*, p. 5, referring to the view that “deity is a philosophical concept which Africans... [were] incapable of conceptualizing”

<sup>62</sup> One comment from the floor suggested that the missionaries had “colonized Modimo”.

## APPENDIX: some words with root *-dimo*.

The word *Modimo* is one of a number of words in Setswana with the root *-dimo*, from the Bantu root *-dzimu* = spirit. Noun classes are given according to the *Setswana-English-Setswana Dictionary* 4th ed., compiled by Z. I. Matumo.

(sing.)	(pl.)	
Modimo (1)	[no pl.]	God
dimo (1A) (SeSotho <i>lelimo</i> )	bodimo (2A) (SeSotho <i>malimo</i> )	giant, ogre, cannibal, monster
modimo (3)	medimo (4)	spirits, demigods
[no sing.]	badimo (2)	ancestor-spirits
sedimo (7)	didimo (8)	invisible being, ghost
ledimo (5)	madimo (6)	strong wind, storm
godimo (17)		above
legodimo (5)		heaven

Notes:

(i) Although many of these words have a sense of “spirit”, a *dimo* (in Sesotho, a *lelimo*) is an ogre, a giant human-eater; supernatural perhaps but certainly not immaterial. *Bodimo* appear frequently in folk-tales, where they are overcome by clever heroes. In Lesotho the term (Sesotho *lelimo*, plural *malimo*) was applied to the cave-dwellers who adopted cannibalism during the *lifaqane*, but this was an exceptional phenomenon due to the extreme suffering and no real-life cannibals had existed there before.<sup>63</sup>

(ii) *Medimo* is recorded in several varying meanings. Sometimes *medimo* seem to be ancestral spirits, as in the prayer “*Medimo e menyennye, re rapelele go ya kgale*” (“Newer *medimo*, pray for us to the older ones”).<sup>64</sup> The Comaroffs cite evidence for *medimo* as meaning *bad* spirits, those who (e.g. due to lack of proper burial) were “undomesticated” and never joined the *badimo* who had a purely collective presence.<sup>65</sup> Apparently the common element here is *medimo* as spirits who can still be considered as individuals. Setiloane states that *medimo* include the following:

(a) those who have died relatively recently and are still called by name

<sup>63</sup> Stephen J. Gill, *A Short History of Lesotho*, (Morija: Morija Museum & Archives, 1993) pp. 68–70; Thomas Arbousset, *Missionary Excursion into the Blue Mountains: Being an account of King Moshoeshoe's expedition from Thaba-Bosiu to the sources of the Malibamatso River in the year 1840* ed. & trans. David Ambrose & Albert Brutsch (Morija: Morija Archives, 1991) pp. 67–72.

<sup>64</sup> Setiloane, *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana*, p. 76.

<sup>65</sup> Jean Comaroff & John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) vol. 1, p. 155.

- (b) more distant ancestors of the kinship group (it is not clear to me whether Setiloane distinguishes *medimo* in this sense from *badimo*, and if so how)
- (c) ancestors of other communities not regarded as ethnically related
- (d) ancestors of displaced former occupants of the land.<sup>66</sup>

The last two might be partly explained by the fact that noun class 2 (*ba-*) tends to be reserved for Sotho-Tswana kinship groups, while the names of out-groups tend to belong to other classes (e.g. *Matebele*).

Leloba Molema has drawn my attention to an alternative Sotho form of the “*Medimo e menyennye*” prayer in which a new *modimo* (singular) is asked to pray to the older ones.<sup>67</sup> Civic prayers to *specific* royal ancestors are mentioned in a number of early accounts;<sup>68</sup> this aspect of traditional belief would naturally have suffered more than invocations of *badimo* when chiefs converted to Christianity.<sup>69</sup> Each such ancestor would presumably have been a *modimo*, a word which could be used even of living chiefs.

The *Setswana-English-Setswana Dictionary* 4th ed. gives *modimo* as meaning “demigod”, apparently with reference to invocation of beings like Matsieng (normally considered a First-Ancestor figure), but Setiloane expresses doubts about this usage.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Setiloane, *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana*, p. 266n.11.

<sup>67</sup> Personal communication.

<sup>68</sup> E.g. Casalis, *The Basutos*, p. 248.

<sup>69</sup> The centralization of much important ritual under the authority of a small number of major chiefs in Botswana meant that conversion of these chiefs had a much greater impact on these aspects of ritual than on the domestic aspects.

<sup>70</sup> Setiloane, *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana*, p. 266n.11.