

Book review by Bruce S. Bennett (DRAFT VERSION)

*Words of Batswana: Letters to Mahoko a Becwana, 1883 – 1896*

Translated and edited by Part T. Mgadla and Stephen C. Volz

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One of the problems of studying nineteenth-century Batswana is the difficulty of knowing what they were actually saying or thinking. We know what Europeans were saying about them, but relatively seldom can we hear the voices of Africans. This book is an attempt to help rectify this.

*Mahoko a Becwana* was a Setswana-language missionary newspaper published at Kuruman in the late nineteenth century. It carried, as an extra, letters to the editor, on a wide range of subjects. This book presents a selection of letters, arranged thematically. (It should be noted that at present many numbers of *Mahoko a Becwana* are missing, leading to gaps in the debates: we can hope that copies will come to light elsewhere.) The book is well-produced, presenting the letters in Setswana and English facing pages. The index is acceptable but the table of contents could be more detailed. There are a few errors in the English text which should be corrected in a future edition, but not such as are likely to mislead. At less than P200 for a well-bound book, it is very good value.

As the editors note, the writers of the letters were not typical of Tswana society. They were, by the fact of taking part in such newspaper communication, literate and usually church members. However, although the letters appeared in an L.M.S. paper, the evidence indicates that the editors did not use their position to control the shape of debate as they might have done. In the debate over *bogadi*, for example, initial criticism of the church's position is followed by anti-*bogadi* writers. But the debate is not closed there: further debate follows, making new defences of *bogadi*, before the debate tails off.

In general the collection is a source for Tswana voices. However, there is a striking 1883 letter by the missionary Alfred Wookey, about education at Kuruman, in which he wrote that it was essential that academic learning should be combined with technical subjects, if Africans were to equal European ability. Eighty years before Swaneng, he insisted that "the book must go hand in hand with manual labour."

A wide variety of issues is covered and I will only mention a few of special interest. Some things seem to be perennial; such as the correspondent who writes at great length about cows. One thing that stands out in the letters is the very high quality of some of the contributions. In a discussion of whether certain letters are needed for writing Setswana, Gomotsegang Magonaring answered by presenting minimal pairs (words distinguished only by one sound), as neatly as a Linguistics 101 tutor could ask. But Gomotsegang had never taken Linguistics 101: he had, in effect, worked the theory out for himself.

The debate over *bogadi* is also of high quality. Although the missionary editor had raised the issue in somewhat more general terms, the correspondents defined the main issue as whether *bogadi* was a "purchase", and if so, of whom. A range of arguments for interpreting the transaction in different ways are presented. The pro-*bogadi* view, that it was a gift which legitimated marriage, was challenged by a view, close to that of many modern anthropologists, that it was a transaction for the woman's potential children. Some correspondents did not hesitate to tell the missionary editor he did not know what he was talking about—a notable contrast to the subject of alcohol, where the church line received overwhelming (though not universal) backing.

There is interesting, but tantalizingly limited, material about religious life and thought. Seleka Sebetsho wrote twice in 1895 (there was a reply, now lost, to the first) asking why believers' non-Christian relatives were not prayed for at funerals although they had been prayed for in life. Christ's love, the author argued, using New Testament texts, could not end. "It is a big school of God. I say, God will fill us up if we can do so [i.e. pray]. Sometimes I see them looking very sad, wanting to be prayed for." This problem, the conflict between the need to connect the African family and ancestors, and a sharply defined view of the community of salvation, has been a recurring one for African Christians. Seleka's theological approach drew on scripture to propose a "communion of saints" model. These letters cannot be taken as a representative sample, but this case shows that the difficult issues were not necessarily simple conflicts between Christianity and tradition.

The Victorian debate over "Science and Religion", in which new scientific knowledge was perceived to be challenging some of the contents of the Old Testament, makes an appearance in a surprising form: the missionary editor himself took a rather "advanced" line, explaining for example that modern science showed that the Flood could not have covered the whole earth (although he continued to believe in it as a Mesopotamian event). Some Batswana, including Sechele, were disturbed by this non-literalism. The missionaries also used scientific knowledge, such as the ability to predict eclipses, as evidence of the general potency of European knowledge.

In conclusion, I must note an eyewitness report of meeting a *sennore* or *khuduku*. Although ferocious this creature seems harmless in that it treats the human being with contempt, rolling over and rubbing up against him or her. The *sennore* is classified by the editors as folklore, but perhaps it should become Botswana's competitor to the yeti or Loch Ness Monster.

*Voices of Batswana* is an important source book which should be acquired and read by all Botswana scholars.

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