

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Rethinking religious encounters in Matabeleland region of Zimbabwe, 1860-1893**

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**This article provides a new interpretation of the religious encounters that unfolded in Matabeleland region in the period between 1860 and 1893 from the perspective of Gramscian concept of hegemony and John and Jean Comaroff's concept of cultural and colonial encounters. The focus of the article is on the nature of encounters, uneasy religious dualities, conversations, contestations, blending, rivalries, negotiations and transformation of consciousness that developed at the centre of the meeting of the Ndebele speaking people and Christian missionaries prior colonisation. The article challenges previous scholarship that informed by the inflexible 'domination and resistance' perspective that had no room for the agency of the African communities involved in colonial encounters.**

**Key terms:** Religion, worldview, christianity, traditional religion, hegemony, colonial encounters, conversion.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Existing studies on the introduction of foreign religious ideas like Christianity into Africa have tended to take the erroneous view of African pre-colonial communities falling arbitrary into a foreign worldview. While African historiography has progressed beyond the 'domination and resistance' historiography that was installed by such historians as Terence Ranger (1967, 1970), there is still need to further demonstrate that early missionary enterprises were not inscribed on passive people incapable of reading their own agendas into the missionary encounters. This article emphasises that the Ndebele traditional religious evangelists just like Christian missionaries were active religious entrepreneurs who responded variously to the Christian challenge. This article deploys Gramscian and postcolonial conceptual tools to re-read the religious encounters in Matabeleland in the period from 1860 to 1893 as an encounter characterised by syncretism, bricolage, imbibing, contestation, reading, negotiation, siphoning and rejection of those aspects considered repugnant to each worldviews.

The Ndebele traditional religion was underpinned by worshipping through ancestral spirits and appropriation of Shona/Kalanga mountain cults and this was working well for the Ndebele nation to the extent that they did not see

any religious reason to convert to Christianity in large numbers in the nineteenth century. What attracted the Ndebele to Christian missionaries were commercial interests particularly the desire to acquire guns that were needed to defend the Ndebele state in an age of aggressive partitioning and aggressive colonisation of African societies. Christian missionaries were not only carriers of the gospel but were also traders and brought with them modern medicine and other modernist goods and ideas.

This article demonstrates that throughout the period from 1860 to 1893 the Ndebele speaking people remained reluctant to convert in large numbers to Christianity. This reluctance had two implications. First, it explains why Christian missionaries failed to make much head way prior to the violent imperial conquest of the Ndebele nation in 1893. Second it also explains why the missionaries allied with and supported imperialist and colonialist agenda of Cecil John Rhodes aimed at the destruction of the Ndebele state. It is within this context that the majority of Christian missionaries openly celebrated the destruction of the Ndebele kingdom as a civilising mission that broke the strong bonds of a pre-colonial autocratic regime that survived through plundering and raiding its neighbours (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2009)

## Historical background

The Ndebele emerged as a break away group from the Ndwandwe of Zwide and the Zulu of Shaka in the period 1818-1820 (Bryant 1929; Lye 1969; Rasmussen 1978; Etherington 2001). Their early history is inextricably intertwined with the complex history of the Mfecane. The Mfecane was a time of political transformation among Nguni and Sotho-Tswana communities marked by violence, migration and state-building (Omer-Cooper 1966; 1995; Hamilton 1998; Cobbing 1988; Peires 1981). The Ndebele nation and state crystallized around a Khumalo clan.

What characterized Nguni societies prior to the Mfecane is what Rasmussen (1978) terms 'political fission with its resultant dispersal of people.' Political fission meant that whenever a group was dissatisfied with one leader, they had the option of breaking away to establish new political formation elsewhere. But by the time of the Mfecane, weak groups were attacked, conquered and incorporated into the ranks of expanding kingdoms. The Khumalo clan fell victim to the Ndwandwe before defecting to join the Zulu in 1818. By 1820, the Khumalo and their allies defected from the Zulu due to a dispute between Mzilikazi and Shaka over distribution of spoils of raiding. Mzilikazi and his supporters who numbered between 200 and 300 crossed the Drakensburg Mountains into Sotho-Tswana country (Cobbing 1976).

Between 1820 and 1825, Mzilikazi and his Nguni adherents embarked on a complex nation-building process that included raiding the Sotho-Tswana and incorporating them into the nascent state and welcoming Mfecane refugees that desperately needed security and protection in the midst of turbulent times. As noted by Omer-Cooper (1966) Mzilikazi was one of the most capable nation-builders ranking alongside Moshweshwe of the Sotho and others that created new nation in the midst of the Mfecane. Between 1826 and 1836, Mzilikazi has succeeded in creating and Ndebele nation and state on the western highveld, incorporating such Sotho groups as the Pedi, Hurutshe, Ngwaketse, Kwena, Khudu and the Ndebele of Ndzudza and Magodonga who were already settled among the Sotho-Tswana communities (Kinsman, 1995).

By 1836 the Ndebele had to contend with the fire-arm wielding Boer trekkers from the Cape Colony, and mounted Kora brigands under Jan Bloem, and commando attacks of the Griqua under Captain Barend (Cobbing 1988; Etherington, 2001). These groups managed to break the nascent Ndebele state and to force them to embark on another long migration across the Limpopo River into the Zimbabwean plateau in 1837 after two major battles with the Boers—battles of Vegkop 1 and Vegkop 2 (Tylden 1953). On the Zimbabwean plateau, the Ndebele established themselves on the south-western part that was formally under the Rozvi confederacy. They continued with the practice of raiding and incorporation of local communities into the Ndebele state. They added to their state the Rozvi, Kalanga, Nyubi, Venda, Birwa, Tonga and some Shona groups (Beach, 1986; Bhebe, 1979).

By the 1840s, Mzilikazi had succeeded in creating a highly heterogeneous nation that was socially organized into three major groupings. At the top was abeZansi (those of Nguni stock that came from the South); at the middle was the abenNhla (those of Sotho-Tswana stock that came from the North) and at the bottom was amaHole (those of Shona and other stocks found in Zimbabwe) (Cobbing 1976). The capital city (isigodlo) was in Bulawayo and the Ndebele state weathered many storms until it was destroyed by white imperialists in 1893. What has remained vaguely understood is how Mzilikazi and his successor Lobengula managed to exercise power across this highly heterogeneous nation. The answer is that the Ndebele leaders formulated a complex hegemonic system of governance underpinned by delicate balancing of consent and coercion.

## METHODOLOGY

One of the major methodological problems in the study of early encounters between Africans and Europeans in general and Christian missionaries in particular is that the literate missionary's written voice has constituted itself as the major source for historical reconstruction of the encounter. For instance, the long and friendly encounter between the founder of the Ndebele nation Mzilikazi Khumalo and the founder of the London Missionary Society (LMS) Robert Moffat is recorded by Moffat in his writings.

What we have are the impressions of Moffat on the Ndebele king. Mzilikazi's impressions of Moffat are not available. Even oral tradition provides vague information on this encounter. This is a point that was made clear by Kent Rasmussen as he wrote the history of the Ndebele South of the Limpopo River. Rasmussen noted that all interpretations of the encounter between Robert Moffat and Mzilikazi Khumalo were distorted by 'our one-sided perspective: Moffat was literate and Mzilikazi was not. Hence, we know little about Mzilikazi's feelings towards Moffat beyond what Moffat himself chose to tell us' (Rasmussen, 1978).

This crisis of sources however, cannot prevent new evaluations of the religious encounters between the Ndebele and Christian missionaries in the late nineteenth century. This article therefore is based on a careful and critical re-reading of the early writing of early missionaries and the premium has been on capturing the African voice in these documents. Historical canons of internal and external criticism of sources have been used to expose biases.

## Conceptual framework

This article deploys new conceptual tools derived from Gramscian theory of hegemony and the current post-colonial theories to re-read the encounters between the Ndebele and the Christian missionaries anew. This new interpretation does not see the encounter in simplistic terms of a contingent set of events and a cosmic coincidence in which the Ndebele happened to fall arbitrarily into foreign worldview. Secondly, the article takes into account the encounter's global dimensions including the rise of industrial capitalism to situate it fully within the expansive universalism that marked the dawn of modernity.

In this context missionaries were not only harbingers of a new religion but were also carriers of Victorian values that were consonant with the imperatives of industrial ca-

pitalist culture. In short, what appeared as Christian civilising mission was also a form of Westernisation that was simultaneously symbolic and economic, theological and political. The article also challenges the interpretation of the encounters between the Ndebele society and Christian missionaries crafted within the domination and resistance historiography as well as some anthropological approaches that stress alterity with 'everyone and everything involved' undergoing change (Comaroffs, 1991; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2007; Cooper, 2003).

The starting point of my analysis is that Christian evangelical endeavours encountered equally evangelical Ndebele religious hegemony that was intricately intertwined with nation-building, legitimation and ritualisation of Ndebele kingship. As such Victorian-missionary hegemony related to the meeting of two worlds, one imperial and expansive, the other local, defensive but equally hegemonic within its sphere of influence. The interaction that followed was therefore inevitably characterised by contestation and compliance, fascination and repulsion, as the Ndebele proved to be hardly passive recipients of western culture. The Ndebele did not only remain sceptical of some of its ways and means, but they also read their own significance into them, seeking to siphon off evident powers of the mission while rejecting its invasive discipline (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2007).

### Reconceptualising religious encounters

John and Jean Comaroff have noted that Christian missionaries were not just the bearers of a vocal hegemonic Christian ideology, nor merely the media of modernity. They were also the human vehicles of a hegemonic and sometimes altruistic Victorian-missionary worldview. Christian missionaries were the leading western cultural brokers who were later followed by very aggressive and aggrandising colonialists. Their mission was driven by a universalising ethos whose prime objective was to engage the Ndebele in a web of symbolic and material transactions that was to bind them ever more securely to the colonising culture (Comaroff 1985).

The Ndebele had their own worldview and were motivated by quite different axioms. Their own taken-for-granted world was founded on the assumption of cultural relativity and political autonomy. The Ndebele certainly did not equate exchange with incorporation, or learning of new techniques with subordination. However, the whole missionary enterprise was an attempt to replace and supplant one hegemony with another. Like all other hegemonic projects the Victorian-missionary project was often less a directly coercive conquest than a persuasive evangelical attempt to colonise consciousness, remake the Ndebele by redefining their taken-for-granted surfaces of their everyday worlds (Adamson, 1980; Anderson 1977). On the Ndebele side the major articulators of traditional norms and customs were mainly the kingship and the various traditional religious practitioners. These include

professionals and opinion leaders like the rain-priests, diviners, magicians, and army-doctors. They resisted the missionary enterprise, which tried to turn their worldview upside down and render them irrelevant (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2004).

The missionaries were not only the vanguard of the British presence. They were also the most active cultural agents of the empire. They were driven by the explicit aim of reconstructing the Ndebele world in the name of God and European civilization. They were more dangerous as cultural brokers because they wanted the Ndebele soul unlike the mining and farming magnets that merely wanted African labour and land. Theirs was a long battle for the possession of salient signs and symbols, a bitter and drawn out contest of conscience and consciousness that led to a clash of cultures and civilisations (Comaroffs, 1991).

Since the Ndebele leaders were also practising the same hegemonic style over their people and had constructed a particular worldview consonant with their traditions, culture and historical experiences and exigencies, the coming of Christian missionaries to the Ndebele state entailed a challenge to the Ndebele traditional values and customs. While some key contours of Western Christian morality were not totally out of sync with Ndebele worldview, the fact that they were constructed and tainted with contextual western historical experiences and understanding revealed their imperialistic texture. Inevitably, the interactions between the representatives of western values and the Ndebele raised a new cultural dialogue and resistance as well as complicity at the same time.

Scholars like Bhebe (1979) offered interesting insights to the theme of the interactions between the Christian missionaries and the Ndebele in the nineteenth century based on empirical articulations of surface missionary activities (Bhebe, 1973). Cobbing (1973: 39-56), Samkange (1968), Ranger (1966, 1967a, 1967b) and Brown (1966) concentrated on secular interactions between the Ndebele and the Europeans during the Scramble for Africa period. They interrogated the problem of policies of the Ndebele kingdom in the 1890s and they also exposed details of deception and chicanery by whites during this period commonly described as 'concession-hunting' period in the Ndebele history. To term, this crucial period of inscription of alien culture and claiming of space by representatives of Victorian hegemony the 'concession-hunting' period is to minimise the epistemological and cultural invasion of Ndebele social space and efforts to invade human consciousness via a new religion.

One of the useful contributions of post-colonial theorists to current studies of colonial encounters and imperial studies as noted by Cooper (2003) is to transcend not only the traditional 'domination and resistance' thesis but also the traditional way of looking at this colonial enterprise even at its infancy phase only as a material phenomenon. Thus despite their theoretical promiscuity, postcolonial theorists like Said (1978), Spivak (1994) and Bhabha

(1994), have reoriented and reinvigorated imperial and colonial studies, taking them in new refreshing directions that conventional historiography has hardly begun to consider.

Recent literature has correctly emphasised that the cultural and political history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a history of colonial encounters. For example, Greene (2002) has explored how the landscaping of colonialism reworked African people's conceptions of sacred spaces whereas Gray (2002) wrote of the colonial encounter as similar to 'two very different cognitive maps' confronting each other in Africa. Whereas Gray rendered the history of early colonialism as the encounter between two intellectual and cultural systems where colonial history becomes to all intents and purposes an epoch of cultural death and life, Hunt (1999) presents a more subtle interplay between old and new, blending uneasily together through her focus on Africans' mundane acts of interpretation of early cultural encounters with western outsiders. Hunt emphasises how Africans in general deployed their own flexible 'prior knowledge' to size up and seize control over European objects and ideas.

These theoretical re-evaluations of colonial encounter are very useful in rethinking the interactions between the Ndebele and the missionaries prior to the fall of the Ndebele state in 1893 which for a long time has been studied in empirical terms of 'missionary activity' in Africa (Bhebe 1973). This simplistic and empiricist approach to the encounters between African and Christian missionaries was pioneered by such scholars as Oliver (1952), Wright (1971) and Ajayi (1965) who were somehow unwittingly falling into Hugh Trevor Roper (1960)'s interpretation of African History as the history of Europeans in Africa. The main flaw in these early studies was that African agency did not come out clearly while the agency of the missionary emerged poignantly.

The cultural encounter was very complex entailing the final colonial objective of colonizing Ndebele people's consciousness with axioms and aesthetics of western alien culture. The force of this alien cultural imperialism was at once ideological, and economic, semantic and social. The Ndebele response was also complex involving those who succumbed, those who resisted, and those who tried to cast its intrusive forms in their own image (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 1997). The dualities were never complete and there was no clear winner up to today as Christianity still competes with traditional African religion in Matabeleland.

The Comaroffs (1997) interpreted the study of the colonial encounter as at once concerned with the colonizer and the colonised, with structure and agency. They noted that it was an exchange of signs and substance, with each party trying to gain some purchase on, and some mastery over, the other. While the missionaries' objective was to convert the Ndebele to Christianity and make then usable for capitalist economic ethos; the Ndebele

objective was to divert the potency of the church to themselves.

The key problem was that missionaries as western cultural brokers came to the Ndebele state with some absolutist and hegemonic western supremacist ideas about their culture, traditions, customs, religious beliefs and even mannerisms, some of which were not easily compatible with the Ndebele way of life and culture. While the missionaries engaged in highly evangelical crusade to win the hearts and minds of the Ndebele, they simultaneously remained rigid and intolerant towards non-western cultures, values and norms that were different from theirs. This explains why missionaries made little attempts to empathise, learn, and understand the culture and traditions of the Ndebele, concentrating on condemning, stigmatising, castigating, and trying to supplant cherished Ndebele values and traditions as manifestation of 'savagery' and lack of civilization (Comaroffs 1997).

The broader aim of missionaries was that Ndebele culture was to be deconstructed and re constructed mainly through converting them to Christianity since this cultural-religious ideology was viewed as the only way which could open the Ndebele to the western values and make their actions amenable to western economic and political ethos. However, the dominant members of the Ndebele society such as the kingship and the religious practitioners who benefited most from the traditional Ndebele status quo ardently defended Ndebele cultural and traditional values and norms and resisted Christianisation of their society. They counter moved against Christianity and Christian missionaries, presenting the whole evangelical enterprise as nothing positive but as a curse on the Ndebele space and soil bound to finally bring about the destruction of Ndebele civilisation and Ndebele people. Interpreted from an epistemological view, tolerating this alien religion was very dangerous as it was provocative of the feared anger of Ndebele amadlozi (ancestral spirits) as guardians of the land, and which could harm the Ndebele society perpetually (Schoffeleers, 1978).

At another level, this encounter between the Europeans and the Ndebele prior to colonial conquest raised one of the crucial cultural and ideological ambiguities touching on issues of rights and choice in Africa. The ambiguity related to the crucial debates on Ndebele rights to cultural autonomy and the right to struggle against oppression even within one's own culture (Mazarire, 1996). The Ndebele strongly resisted the encroachment of western values and norms to their cherished culture by remaining mainly indifferent to Christianity. Their struggle involved commitment to preservation of Ndebele cultural autonomy.

What escaped earlier analysis of the encounter between missionaries and the Ndebele was that Ndebele culture itself was not free of structural oppression, which began to emerge poignantly as Christian missionaries' consistently subjected Ndebele culture to severe critique. This facilitated and reinforced the emergence of internal

subordinate resistance to the dominant Ndebele religious-cultural project, utilising fissures and crevices opened up by the presence of missionaries (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2009). Thus while the mainstream Ndebele community was busy resisting Christianity, new kinds of experimental consciousness and new ideologies were emerging that pointed to the discrepancies between received Ndebele worldviews and the worlds they claimed to mirror. Indeed some members of the Ndebele society exhibited their resistance to traditional denials of human rights and democracy within the Ndebele state by embracing aspects of Christianity. This reality gave credence to the emerging argument that when cultures encounter each other, each culture casts a light on the other and the people caught up within this cultural ocumene are offered a chance to reflect on the cultures in play (Thornton, 1998).

At the end of the day the presence of Christian missionaries within the Ndebele state revealed the crucial instabilities of Ndebele hegemony. Missionaries were managing in seeding their culture within fissures of local communities that were not satisfied with Ndebele way of doing things. Internal resistance to traditional denials of rights within the Ndebele state became more manifest towards the fall of the state in the 1890s (Bhebe, 1978).

### Historicising the encounters

The Ndebele first encountered the white people while they were still south of the Limpopo River. The white friend of King Mzilikazi, Reverend Robert Moffat came into direct contact with the Ndebele in Mosega in 1829. At the same time, two European traders namely, Schoon and McLuckie visited the Ndebele king's headquarters in early August 1829 where they demonstrated to the king the use of guns (Smith, 1925). Ndebele envoys led by Mncumbatha Khumalo visited Kuruman to invite Robert Moffat to visit the Ndebele king in the 1820s. After 1834 the Ndebele experienced open confrontations with the Voortrekkers. The climax of the Ndebele interactions with the white people prior to coming to Matabeleland was the signing of a treaty of general friendship between Mncumbatha Khumalo representing the Ndebele king, and Governor Benjamin D'urban of the Cape Colony on 3 March 1836 (Rasmussen, 1978).

These early encounters of the 1820s show Mzilikazi keenly interested in making friends the white people to the extent of asking Schoon and McLuckie to send missionaries to the Ndebele state to stay permanently among the Ndebele. The reasons for this interest were far from being religious at all. They were purely secular with the Ndebele king seeking to use missionaries to secure guns (Rasmussen, 1978). Even his friendship with Robert Moffat was not based on the king's appreciation of Christianity. To Mzilikazi, Moffat was a powerful white king who could enable him to acquire guns and facilitate trade between the Ndebele and whites (Kirby, 1940).

Mzilikazi treated early whites with love and friendship

and emphasised to them 'how men seek to do evil against me' (Ibid). One here finds the Ndebele king presenting himself and his people as a peaceful community which only wanted guns for shooting elephants and for defensive purposes (Wallis, 1945). Mzilikazi's wish for friendship with the early whites was spelt out in his prayer to his ancestors, which was witnessed and recorded by Robert Moffat during one of his visits. The prayer went like this:

Moffat is saved by God. God is good to him. My companion, who is Mchobane is come. God must preserve him that he may return home in safety. No evil must befall him while he is with his children. We are his children. No one must tease him but let him go in peace, when he goes. He must stop long and then take a good report to Kuruman, to them, the white people also. Had my brother been alive, I would have sent him to remain at Kuruman for initiation, but he is dead by the late sickness which has killed so many of my people. My children are little. If I had one youth among them, I would send him. I wonder, I wonder to see such a man as Moffat, he is indeed my friend. Though I live among my own people, they will not inform me of an approaching enemy, but he will inform me. There is Machobane (pointing at Moffat). I shall send indunas with cattle to the Kuruman and he will send them to the white king, that they may inform him how men seek to do evil to me, and I shall hear and pay a visit to the Kuruman, where I shall hear everything. When I obtain guns from the white king, I shall shoot elephants and give him ivory (Wallis, 1945).

If Robert Moffat recorded Mzilikazi's prayer properly, it is indeed necessary for the prayer to be quoted at length here because it encapsulates how Mzilikazi understood his encounter with the early whites. Firstly, Mzilikazi viewed Moffat as sent to him by Mzilikazi's late father Mashobane to protect him and his people. Secondly, he viewed Moffat as a good messenger who would inform him about the approach of enemies to the Ndebele state. Moffat was important for diplomatic purposes. Finally, Mzilikazi never alluded to Robert Moffat as a Christian missionary who came to teach him and his people about western values and morality.

Mzilikazi was very selective in the way he dealt with early whites. For instance, he was not open to such people as the Methodist missionary James Archbell who sought a new mission field because he considered him less powerful than Moffat. He never asked Robert Moffat to serve as a missionary among the Ndebele because in his mind Moffat was a useful political actor, a man with whom he might potentially exchange state visits. This is clearly revealed in his farewell statement to Moffat:

Tell the white king [i.e. Colonial governor] I wish to live in friendship, and he must not allow the Bastards [Griqua] and Korannas to annoy me as they have done. Let the road to Kuruman remain open (Wallis, 1945).

Mzilikazi regarded Moffat as his only completely trustworthy European contact. Moffat often acted as Mzilikazi's unofficial liaison with all European traders, hunters, and missionaries who entered the interior (Rasmussen, 1978).

While it is difficult to get a clear picture of the Ndebele and their king's attitude and feelings towards their encounter with the white people from other sources other than those written by the early white observer, a careful reading of Robert Moffat's writings gives us a clear picture of how the white people tried to inculcate western values on the Ndebele including their biases as well as outright intolerant and even dismissive-ness of Ndebele traditional customs and traditions. Even though Moffat was a close friend of Mzilikazi and a welcome visitor to the king's court at any time, he still looked down upon the Ndebele governmental system and the justice system. He described the Ndebele justice system as tyrannical to the core (Wallis, 1945). Despite the widely written about friendly relations between Moffat and Mzilikazi, Moffat still regarded Mzilikazi not as his equal but as a 'savage' king who presided over a tyrannical system of government (Lye 1975).

Moffat criticised such Ndebele customs and traditions as the law of celibacy, raiding and what he considered to be cruel treatment of offenders. He mentioned that as a result of his requests, teachings and influence on Mzilikazi, the Ndebele king was forced to embark on a reform process. He even claimed that during his presence among the Ndebele, the king pardoned offenders who might have been punished by death. Moffat also pointed out that as a result of his requests to Mzilikazi, the king was forced to relax the law of celibacy and allowed considerable numbers of his male population to take wives and 'don the head ring, the symbol of their new dignity' (Wallis, 1945). These claims by Robert Moffat are typical of all missionaries and should not be taken at face value. Moffat as a Christian missionary and as an over zealous London Missionary Society agent in Africa was expected to produce results of his activities to his financiers.

Moffat's overarching intention was similar to that of other missionaries. He was thirsty for converts. He tried to achieve this by exploiting the cordial relations between himself and the king. However, it is difficult to ascertain the degree of his influence on the Ndebele norms and values. Moffat's attempt to inculcate western values 'the top-down' style was bound to fail because Mzilikazi was one of the strongest defenders of Ndebele culture and religion. Moffat's impact might have been minimised by the fact that he never established a personal mission station among the Ndebele to act as a launching pad for his ideas on the Ndebele. He only visited the Ndebele at intervals. He first visited the Ndebele in 1829, his second visit was in 1835 and his third visit was in 1854.

There is a widely-believed Ndebele tradition that Moffat warned Mzilikazi that the war with the Voortrekkers was inevitable if the Ndebele remained in the Transvaal, and

that he should avoid such a disaster by leading his people to present day Matabeleland in Zimbabwe (Moffat, 1842). Rasmussen terms this tradition the 'Moffat Myth' in the migration of the Ndebele from South Africa to the Zimbabwean plateau because it is hard to believe that Moffat recommended migration to an area which he did not know anything about until his third visit to the Ndebele in 1854 (Rasmussen 1978). It would seem Moffat himself created, accepted and popularised the 'myth' in order to enhance his prestige among the Ndebele.

What must be noted is that by the 1840s onwards the Ndebele kingship was succeeding in ritualising itself to the extent that it needed not alien ideology or civilisation to enhance and buttress its reputation and legitimacy. The success was so resounding that political leadership could not be clearly separated from the leading religious figures. The Ndebele kingship was attaining some divinity consonant with the constant challenge of broadcasting power across a heterogeneous state. Ndebele culture and traditions were proving very able to satisfy all the social and spiritual needs of the Ndebele including legitimising kingship in the Ndebele society. The Ndebele people and their leaders were in a phase of vigorous assertion of its values and culture in a clearly hegemonic fashion. The kingship was becoming the strongest defender of Ndebele traditional norms that legitimised its continuous rule over people of diverse ethnic and religious beliefs (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2004).

Only diplomatic and trade requirements forced the Ndebele kingship to continue interacting with agents of Western culture and to accept missionaries and even to allow a missionary settlement to be established in 1859 at iNyathi. Bhebe noted that Mzilikazi hoped to use the missionaries as trading agents with white South Africa and that the opening of the London Missionary Society settlement within his state would draw his personal friend Moffat of the Kuruman mission station near to him. Also the Ndebele king hoped to exploit missionary technical skills in mending and repairing of his fire arms (Bhebe 1979). Ndebele agency was at work trying to exploit the encounter with whites for satisfaction of Ndebele diplomatic and commercial interests. To this extent, the colonial encounter was not a one-sided affair whereby the whites were active agents of transformation and the Ndebele passive, inflexible traditionalists and unconscious recipients of white wisdom (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2009).

However the opening of the first missionary settlement within the Ndebele state in 1859 posed a serious challenge not only to the Ndebele kingship but to the entire Ndebele traditional way of life and norms. An antibody was inscribed within the Ndebele worldview and body politic. Missionaries began propagating teaching that consistently and constantly conflicted and subverted Ndebele way of life. Inevitably religious competition between what the missionaries stood for and what the Ndebele stood for ensured. The duality involved the Ndebele and the missionaries trying to transform each other, and at times

they clashed, at times they blended, at other times they compromised their cultural differences (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2004).

At the conceptual level, differences emerged as Christian missionaries' teaching was predicated mainly or reflected western liberal ideas of individualism and equality among people and before God. The Ndebele on the other hand emphasised collectivism and group rights while at the same time accepting that not all people are equal on earth and even before God. Elders and the leaders were highly respected among the Ndebele and could not be equal to children. Leaders were mini-gods among their followers. Therefore, John Smith Moffat's sermon of the 15<sup>th</sup> of July 1860 about the equality of all men regardless of age, sex and position in society before God was too radical for the Ndebele society where issues of status were highly valued (Thomas, 1873). Inevitably, such teaching and evangelism constituted an attack and a direct threat on the social and political structure of the Ndebele society where the king was not equal to anybody. The Ndebele also did not believe in the equality of men and women. Mzilikazi was present when this sermon on equality of people was delivered and he was personally offended to the extent that he suddenly flared up in rage and ordered the interpreter to stop 'telling the people such stuff and lies' (Austin, 1966).

The Ndebele conception of the relationship of the living with the supernatural world also emphasised seniority and status in the intercession with the ancestral spirits whereas the Christian view held that anyone could have direct access to God through prayers and sacrament (Bhebe, 1979). Even ancestral spirits were ranked in terms of seniority with the royal ancestral spirits held above other ancestral spirits as they had a national task to protect the state as well as everybody. When it came to national issues, God could only be reached via the royal ancestral spirits (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2004). Moffat's preaching was subverting all this. Still in anger Mzilikazi is said to have ordered his people to sit well away from the missionary preacher in the next Sabbath so that they could hardly hear the sermon. The king from that day never attended church services castigating the Sabbath as sacred only to the Christian missionaries and not to himself (Wallis, 1945b). This event demonstrates the beginning of ideological clashes between the Ndebele and the missionaries whose embers continued to burn until its fire consumed the whole Ndebele nation in a violent imperial conquest in 1893.

While Mzilikazi was dismissive of the Sabbath the missionaries dismissed such important occasions as the *inxwala* ceremonies and other rain-ceremonies as 'meaningless traditions and dreams' of uncivilised people (Bhebe, 1979). Christian missionaries pre-occupied themselves with the inculcation of a code of behaviour which had little relevance for the Ndebele. Their emphasis and opposition to polygamy and witchcraft made them to appear to be setting up themselves as an opponent of the Ndebele

norms and way of life (Cobbing, 1974). This way the missionaries provoked resistance and failed to make meaningful inroads into the Ndebele way of life in the period 1859 to 1893. Their failure was compounded by their refusal to satisfy the Ndebele people's material aspirations. They refused to trade on behalf of the Ndebele king, arguing that Christianity should be accepted by the people on its own merits without any bribery (Bhebe, 1979).

Even though the reign of Lobhengula Khumalo witnessed a growth in missionary interest in the Ndebele state, like his father did not renounce his traditional religion. Lobhengula's power and security as a leader rested on his ability to combine secular and religious activities to the benefit of his subjects. Much of Lobhengula's prestige in the Ndebele state rested on his reputation as a good rainmaker, and his co-operation with the Mwari cult priests as well as Christian missionaries. He widely relied on the both Shona and Ndebele diviners to smell out potential rivals and rebels as witches. Bhebe rightly noted that a formidable alliance between the Ndebele kingship and the religious institutions largely accounted for the Ndebele indifference to Christianity (Bhebe, 1979).

Even though Lobhengula once stayed with the missionary Thomas Morgan Thomas and notwithstanding that he was given asylum by missionaries during Ntabayezinduna crisis of the 1840s he did not embrace Christianity at the expense of his own African religion. Instead he accepted the insignia of the Mwari cult 'order' consisting of black cloth which he wore round his waist and was accepted into the Mwari cult priesthood (National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) Historical Manuscript BE2/1/1).

However, Lobhengula like Lewanika of Barotseland who made use of both missionaries and the royal graves to legitimise his rule, tried to indigenise Christianity without throwing away traditional Ndebele customs (Coillard, 1897). Lobhengula emphasised that Christianity and Ndebele traditional religion had equal conceptions of the supernatural world and its relationship with the living human beings. Lobhengula believed that the two religious systems were divinely willed at creation and that it was wrong for Christianity to be imposed on the other. It must be noted that the Ndebele had already integrated Mwari cult into their religious beliefs so Lobhengula tried to absorb aspects of Christianity into Ndebele traditional religion too. In defence of Ndebele culture and religion, Lobhengula told the Christian missionaries that:

He believed in God, he believed God had made all things as he wanted them. He had made all people and that he had made every country and tribe just as he wished them to remain, he believed God made the Amandebele as he wished to be and it was wrong for any one to seek to alter them (NAZ Historical Manuscript B1/F2/JD).

This was indeed an enlightened defence for the Ndebele right to cultural and religious autonomy that the Christian missionaries sought to destroy. What Lobhengula did for

missionaries was to allow the London Missionary Society to open a second missionary station called Hope Fountain. Above all Lobhengula, like his father realised that he could not excite the displeasure of the religious institutions without loosing much of his power and prestige.

The Ndebele kingship remained steadfast as a defender of Ndebele cultural autonomy from European influences. Christian missionaries stigmatised the Ndebele kingship's resistance to western values and ideas as a sign of savagery. Their correspondence with their colleagues commonly described the Ndebele kingship as a repository of absolute dictatorship and despotic government. The failure of the Christian missionaries ultimately led them to advocate for the destruction of the Ndebele kingdom as the only way to open it up to Western ideas and values. This view was clearly expressed by Reverend D. Carnegie's prayer of 1889. He specifically called for the destruction of the kingdom in the following words:

Oh! For liberty and freedom and a power to break the cords of this savage monarch! This done then our mission will begin. It was so in Zululand it is so here and will continue to be so until a new government is formed and just laws administered to the people (Holmberg, 1966).

The call for the destruction of the Ndebele state and for the removal of Lobhengula from power indicated beyond doubt Christian missionaries' frustration and failure. The call for the removal of the Ndebele kingship only was misplaced because the king was not alone in the struggle to resist cultural imperialism. Another group that was vehemently opposed to Christian missionaries and western values was that of religious practitioners. Bhebe (1978) noted that Lobhengula was as much the pawn of the traditional religious authorities, as the latter were his. He could not act contrary to the interests of these religious practitioners without some serious loss of popularity and hence undermining his very position as king (Bhebe, 1978).

The various Ndebele religious practitioners had different professions and they included rain-priests (*amahosana*), diviners (*izangoma*) who specialised in the field of divination, magicians (*izanusu*), witch doctors (*izinyanga*) and army-doctors (*izinyanga zebutho*) (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2004). These specialists were the most articulate intellectuals on Ndebele traditional norms and acted as the major Ndebele cultural brokers. As professionals they charged and received payments for provision of their services in the form of cattle and other goods. As such they constituted a group of respected and wealthy people in the Ndebele society (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2004).

The attempt by missionaries to turn upside-down traditional Ndebele norms that recognised the services of these Ndebele traditional religious practitioners was vigorously resisted. The Ndebele traditional religious authorities working together with the Ndebele kingship had a powerful hold on the people. The coming of western ideas posed a threat to these people's professions too,

hence traditional religious practitioners constituted a formidable force that stood for the autonomy of Ndebele culture and they vehemently resisted western ideas. Like the missionaries they also fought for the control of the hearts and minds of the Ndebele as well as capturing the heart and trust of the king. The king trusted them as guardians of the Ndebele state empowered by ancestral spirits to keep the nation healthy.

When Robert Moffat led the first group of Christian missionaries in 1859 into the Ndebele state, he observed signs and symptoms of lung sickness among their draught oxen and immediately reported these to Mzilikazi. Mzilikazi's response was not only to quarantine the diseased animals but he also arranged for his traditional religious practitioners to administer medical treatment to the missionaries themselves. The missionaries were cleansed and their possessions were sprinkled with medicines soaked in water. On the missionary side, the cleansing ritual was of no significance, but on the Ndebele side, the ritual was an important process meant to chase away 'bad spirits' coming with these white people and causing diseases and other misfortunes (Wallis, 1945).

Immediately after the arrival of the missionaries, the Ndebele religious practitioners became active and vigilant for any misfortunes befalling the Ndebele society and were quick to blame them on the presence of the whites in the Ndebele state. The Christian missionaries isolated themselves more from the mainstream of the Ndebele society by deliberately showing lack of respect for Ndebele religious beliefs and cultural taboos. In November 1859, when the Ndebele were preparing for their most important annual religious *inxwala* ceremony through which they worshipped the royal ancestral spirits, the missionaries became rather dismissive of the whole affair. When the Ndebele entered *umthontiso* rituals, which preceded *inxwala*, everybody was supposed to stop engaging in the normal daily activities for that week (Thomas, 1842). However, the missionaries defied this norm by going out hunting and fishing during this sacred national holiday.

This open intolerance and lack of respect by Christian missionaries towards Ndebele culture and norms gave the Ndebele traditional religious practitioners ammunition to stigmatise and blame the missionaries for any misfortunes that befell the Ndebele society after 1859. In defence of the Ndebele culture and their professions which were challenged by Christianity, traditional religious practitioners began to blame the white people for having come with such animal diseases as lung sickness which claimed a lot of Ndebele cattle in the 1860s. The death of Loziba, the favourite wife of Mzilikazi on 5 October 1862 of rheumatic fever, the outbreak of smallpox by December of the same year and the severe diarrhoea that affected the Ndebele population, were all seen as disasters associated with the permanent presence of whites among the Ndebele (Bhebe, 1979). A Ndebele song that was composed in the 1860s revealed how the Ndebele



associated the epidemics with the missionaries. The song had the following words:

Umoya lo uvelapi na?  
Uvela koMtshede enkulumana.  
(This wind whence comes it? From Moffat from Kuruman)  
(Bhebe, 1979).

Thus while the missionaries stigmatised the Ndebele as backward and uncivilised, the Ndebele traditional religious answered back by castigating missionaries as hangers of evil. But while cultural battles were being fought at the religious level, at the economic level the Ndebele still welcomed white traders and exchanged goods with them constantly.

Christian missionaries were pinning their hopes for success in getting converts through causing a rift between ordinary Ndebele people and the privileged one closely associated with the kingship. Their idea emanated from their perceptions that ordinary Ndebele people lived under a tyrannical system of government and Christianity would promise a life of equality and rights. They also thought Ndebele women were going to welcome Christianity as they considered them to be suffering under the yoke of polygamous marriages. They thought ordinary Ndebele people would be more welcoming to Christianity so as to escape from accusations of witchcraft. Thus their sermons emphasised the issue of equality of all people before God regardless of sex, age, royalty, and position in society. This was an attempt to appeal to the supposedly down-trodden members of the Ndebele society such as 'captives' and what the whites preferred to term 'slaves' (Bhebe, 1979).

These ideas were based on misguided understanding of the robustness of Ndebele social structures and the patriotism among the people. The failure to make many converts until after colonial invasion of the Ndebele state is evidence enough to show that not only the kingship and the Ndebele traditional religious practitioners resisted the invasion of their culture and religious beliefs but that even ordinary people did not readily accept Christianity. Mzilikazi and Lobengula had successfully weaved together an enduring and robust heterogeneous nation with a dynamic culture blending together Nguni, Sotho and Shona aspects. To a person alien to Ndebele culture and its hybridities, it looked like despotic and inflexible but to the Ndebele it accommodated everybody from the lowest in the socio-economic and political hierarchy to the kingship. Hence the missionaries' strategy of challenging such Ndebele traditional institutions as polygamy and witch-hunting did not appeal even to the ordinary Ndebele people (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2004).

Explaining why missionaries failed to make headway, Bhebe argued that 'Witch-doctors and medicine men were in power, and no one would have dared to be different from anyone else' (Bhebe, 1978). Mzilikazi is said to have warned the Ndebele people who attended school regularly in 1862 in these words: 'Yes I see you listen to

the teachers more than to me, you love them more than me' (NAZ Historical Manuscript MSCI/CA5). Such threats from the king himself made the ordinary people to fear to embrace Christianity and other western ideas. In another instance, when the missionary Sykes told Mzilikazi that God spoke to all men through the bible, Mzilikazi declared, 'I tell my people my own words' (Bhebe, 1979). The clashes were so acute at times that the king openly asserted his power against missionary teaching and beliefs. The cultural contest was characterised by high levels of evangelism by the Ndebele and the missionaries, intrigue, threats, and fear among the subordinate groups. The subordinate groups constituted the fish open to be caught by the missionaries. But the Ndebele ruling elite could not just let the fish go.

However the fact that they were few Ndebele people who openly embraced Christianity demonstrates that the Ndebele hegemonic project was porous. While it largely succeeded in capturing the popular mentality and the Ndebele common conceptions of the world, it was never total. The coming of missionaries posed a serious threat to the Ndebele hegemonic edifice. Christian ideology generated a contradictory consciousness in the Ndebele state, whose main features were to foster a discontinuity between the world of the Ndebele as hegemonically constituted and the world as practically apprehended, and ideologically represented, by subordinate people (the man-in-the-mass) (Comaroff, 1997).

The act of embracing Christianity in the midst of a Ndebele ruling elite that was against it demonstrated a form of complex response of subordinate groups. This defiance consisted of an ambiguous admixture of tacit (even uncomprehending) accommodation to the Ndebele hegemonic order at one level and diverse expression of symbolic and practical resistance to it at another. In despair Father Prestage who was allowed by Lobhengula in 1887 to open a mission station at Empandeni in the midst of the Kalanga, explain his failure to make converts in the following manner:

Our failure at Empandeni was not owing to the unwillingness of the natives to learn, and even become Christians, but it was due to the overwhelming terror, engaged by the system of government, which seizes every native in the country, when it is a case of [casting?] off their pagan customs to [adopt the] new system (NAZ Historical Manuscript BO1/2/2).

He simply blamed the Ndebele kingship for the failure of Christianity in the Ndebele state.

But how do we explain the behaviour of the few who defied all odds and embraced Christianity? For instance by May 1888 Frederick William Sykes found that about fifty-sixty people attended Sunday service at Inyathi. At Hope Fountain twenty-five to thirty people came to Church and always paid great attention to the words of the preacher (NAZ Historical Manuscript MISC/SY1/1/1).

The reality is that these people represented a small but

growing critique to the existing Ndebele social order since it was not perfect. Another group of people who tended to embrace western religion were those who worked as servants of the white missionaries. Thomas, who was based at Shiloh, was the first missionary to preach to the Ndebele who worked for him in his station. In the morning, just before the workers went to their different task and at break time, they were taught how to read and write on top of bible reading and praying. Lomaqele who worked as a servant of Thomas for twelve years was baptised in 1881. On 24 April 1882, Lomaqele was 'united in holy wedlock' with another convert named Baleni Gumbo (NAZ Historical Manuscript TH2/1/1).

Of course Christianity had its appeal to some people than others depending on one's station in life. Those few who embraced it could have compared some aspects of the Ndebele culture and religion and realised that Christianity was more attractive. Christian missionaries emphasised peace rather than war, forgiveness rather than revenge, equality rather than oppression and it criticised such practices as witch-hunting, which claimed a lot of Ndebele lives. From the mute experiences of those who embraced Christianity, a picture of tensions emerges predicated on new kinds of experimental consciousness, new ideas that pointed to the discrepancies between received worldviews and the world they claimed to mirror. The sad story is that the cultural drama that began with a few missionaries and other western cultural brokers culminated in the colonisation of the Ndebele by Cecil John Rhodes British South Africa Company. The imperialists were different from the Christian missionaries in that they were openly commercial agents of the empire and they concentrate on economic resources of the Ndebele state. Rotberg in his classic book, *The Founder: "Cecil Rhodes and the Pursuit of Power"* superbly summarised the multifaceted concerns of the imperialists like Cecil Rhodes in the period 1888 to 1892. He isolated nine aims in Cecil John Rhodes' grand imperialist design about the African societies north of the Limpopo River in the 1890s. The prominent aspect in it was the intention to destroy the Ndebele state and to exploit both human and material resources on the Zimbabwean plateau (Rotberg, 1988).

Other scholars like Samkange (1968), Warhurst (1973), Brown (1966), Holmberg (1966), and Cobbing (1973) produced impressive details of the deception and chicanery of Cecil John Rhodes' representatives as they worked very hard to make his grand imperial plan a reality between 1888 and 1890. What needs to be emphasised here is that Rhodes and his associates, including some missionaries like Charles Helm and David Carnegie, all tried to use human rights rhetoric to justify imperial destruction of the Ndebele state. The period 1888 to 1890 saw a number of descriptions of the Ndebele state as an obstacle to the spread of civilization and Christianity, as a 'kingdom of heathen tyranny' which 'cannot remain intact for many months' (The Cape Argus, 3 January 1893).

The associates of Rhodes like Rutherford Harris and Leander S. Jameson went to the extent of collecting ex-

aggerated details on previous Ndebele raids on the Shona and the previously ignored missionary letters and other documents calling for intervention on behalf of the Shona were also collected and sent to the British press (Samkange, 1968; Warhurst, 1973; Brown, 1966; Holmberg, 1966; Cobbing, 1973). Rotberg argued that Rhodes and his friends had gleaned of gold in their eyes and avarice for land in their blood as they advanced to Matabeleland. However, on the 27<sup>th</sup> of September 1893, Harris wrote to London Board that:

The question of contention between the Company and Lobengula is not one of the gold or land or taxes, but is the unfortunate slave or Maholi (NAZ Historical Manuscript LO5/2/30).

It is clear that Harris tried to hide the economic designs of the imperialists behind the human rights issues. Even hunters like Frederick C. Selous did not sympathise with the Ndebele after the whites had conquered them. He wrote that:

'No one knowing their abominable history can pity them or lament their downfall. They have been paid back in their own coin' (NAZ Historical Manuscript SE1/1/1). The imperialists and other enemies of the Ndebele state seized the Ndebele raids on the Shona to justify their attack on the Ndebele state in 1893'.

What can be said here is that the spread of whites to the Ndebele state in the nineteenth century became the major source of the gradual weakening and eventual destruction of the Ndebele state. White influences ended up polarising the Ndebele leadership into two camps, namely the 'pacifists' which included Lobhengula, Lotshe and Gampu Sithole and the 'anti-white bloc' or what Bhebe terms 'conservatives of the conservatives' mainly led by Ndebele religious practitioners like the army doctor, Hlegisane (Bhebe, 1978).

This Hlegisane had raised a brilliant argument in his opposition to the Rudd Concession that was used as justification for the colonisation of Matabeleland. This is how he put forward his case:

I have been at Kimberley Diamonds Fields and one or two white men cannot work, it takes thousands to work them. Do not those thousands want water and they also want land? It is the same with gold, once it is found the white men will come to work it, and then there will be trouble. You say you do not want any land, how can you dig for gold without it? Is it not in the land? and by digging into the land is it not taking it, and do these thousands not make fires? Will that not take wood? (NAZ Historical Manuscript W16/2/1).

Hlegisane, demonstrated beyond doubt that he had a long foresight and he expressed the far-reaching consequences not only of the Rudd Concession, but also of the imperialist adventures in general. Hlegisane had worked at Kimberley Diamond Mines as a migrant worker. His approach to politics was sophisticated and he understood the broader implications of imperialism and colonialism.

The so-called 'pacific group' accepted the inevitability of white dominance in the Ndebele state and what they tried to do was make whites entry into the Ndebele state on Ndebele terms rather on their own terms.

This was very difficult if one takes into account that the whites were a representative of a very big and hegemonic wave bent on supplanting the African world view through open destruction of Ndebele traditional life (Bhebe, 1978). Both groups failed as eventually the Ndebele state was smashed by the imperialist forces in 1893.

## Conclusion

The inscription of Western culture into Africa needs to be traced carefully to the role of the adventurous missionary, the lonely hunter, the romantic white traveller who were the first to test the depth of the African cultural waters.

Indeed what had started as personal visits and altruistic evangelism developed into concession-seeking, crystallised and coalesced with capitalist commercial interests, and finally culminated into the destruction of autonomous African states and the imposition of western colonialism culture. The Ndebele were not just passive in the face of this hegemonic Victorian-missionary onslaught. Their responses included attempts to read themselves into this new encounter, out-right rejections, subtle and cautious complicity and negotiations. Since the missionary enterprise was imbricate into imperial hegemony, it was sometimes misread as purely commercial and sometimes as purely religious and at other times as purely political. The Ndebele therefore read it at different levels at different times as they contested, negotiated, subverted, tried to absorb, reject and take advantage of the missionary enterprise. What is beyond doubt is that the missionary factor in Africa was a vanguard of new order of things to come emanating from an encounter of two worldviews.

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