Adaptation or contradiction: The Berlin Mission Society among the Bapedi of the Eastern Transvaal

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Opsomming

Die aktiwiteite van sendelinge gedurende die vroegste tydperke van die Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis word soms op wyd uiteenlopende wyses vertolk. Sommige outeurs beklemtoon byvoorbeeld op eensydige wyse die invloed wat sendelinge op individuele swart opperhoofde en plaaslike politiek gehad het. Ander lê weer uitsluitlik klem op die godsdienstige doelstellings van die sendelinge en hoe dit die kultureel-ekonomiese omstandighede van diegene met wie die sendelinge in aanraking gekom het, beïnvloed het. In hierdie artikel word gepoog om op 'n meer gebalanseerde manier die soeklig te laat val op die wedersydse uitwerking van sekere sendingaksies wat deur die Berlynse Sendinggenootskap geloods is, op die oorspronklike kulturele en godsdienstige bestaanswyses van die Bapedi. Daar word, onder meer, aangetoon hoedat die sendelinge verplig was om hul evangelisasiepogings aan te pas, ten einde dit met sommige Bapedi-gebruike te laat rym, maar ook hoedat die aksies van die sendelinge die destydse Bapedi-opvattings oor die begrip mag, en oor verskillende soorte maghebbers, geleidelik verander het.

1. Introduction

Many a time mission historians fail to systematically analyse the evangelical enterprise in a holistic and balanced way. Most South African literature on the

evangelical encounter focuses on discussions around the philanthropic role of missionaries (Wilson, 1969, 1976; Silley, 1971), whereas other authors concentrate on missionaries as agents of imperialism (Majeke, 1952; Dachs, 1972). Philanthropists describe missionary encounter in terms of historical data, concentrating on issues such as growth in numbers of converts and pupils, establishment of teacher training colleges and schools, as well as administrative and financial matters relating to different mission stations (Horrell, 1961, 1963, 1968, 1970; Malherbe, 1925; Loram, 1917). On the other hand, radical historians (such as Bundy, 1979; Nwandula, 1987) informed by imperialistic thinking saw missionaries as vehicles through which imperial governments could establish both white superiority and a subtle caste or class system. In addition, there is a tendency by radical scholars to reduce the complex historical phenomena into a simple equation of cause and effect (Bundy, 1979).

Van der Walt (1992b) argues that both approaches, that of philanthropists and radicals (or Marxists) fail to acknowledge the personal motives of some of the missionaries against the background of the *Zeitgeist* – a characteristic spirit of a historical era taken in its totality and bearing the mark of a preponderant feature which dominated its intellectual, political and social trends – and the philosophical and theological spirit of the period of missionary encounter (Van der Walt, 1992a:223). Lewis and Steyn (2003) agree with Van der Walt when they mention that analysis of missionary encounter, viewed from both the Marxist model and the philanthropic model, tends to overlook the context in which missionaries operated, and fails to recognise that the work of missionaries and mission education was profoundly influenced by their historical backgrounds, culture, understanding of reality, personalities, social positions, ecclesiastical tradition, personal context, motivation and ideologies. Beidelman (1982:9) mentions that the work of missionaries should also be understood in terms of ethnicity, class and economic background.

In this article the author will attempt not to confine missionary encounter to either the philanthropic or Marxist paradigms, but to consider the cultural, political, religious and personal circumstances surrounding missionary enterprise. Since it seems as though the missionaries of the Berlin Mission Society (BMS) faced many contradictions in their encounters with the Bapedi people, including the challenge of adhering to two sets of philosophical thinking, the author intends to systematically analyse the evangelical enterprise of missionaries of the Berlin Mission Society (BMS) in their encounters with the Bapedi people in a holistic and balanced way. Questions that arise are whether and to what extent missionaries had to adapt to the Bapedi's cultural and religious beliefs. How did the missionaries ensure that the Bapedi converts' way of life was compatible with

their pietist and Christian philosophy of life? What effect did it have on the local politics of chieftainship and the wider cultural and economic contexts in which mission encounter took place?

In this article, the author seeks not only to examine contradictions with regard to the cultural and religious implications of the mission to African people, but also to investigate how these related to political processes. These objectives will hopefully be achieved by examining and analysing the interplay that existed between evangelism and both its cultural and religious dimensions as a problem of power among the Bapedi-speaking people.

2. Missionary aims for evangelism

A study of mission enterprise throughout the world has shown that the fundamental aim of missionaries was universally the same, that is evangelisation by spreading the Gospel of Jesus to a heathen population (Dahwa, 1986:56; Loram, 1917; Seroto, 1999). The primary impetus for mission work lies in the scriptural quotation of Jesus Christ in Matthew 28:19-20 which states: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (*New American Standard Version*, 1999). Converting Africans to Christianity was only one such aim; helping the poor was also an act of service and love to the Lord.

One of the many issues that confronts missionary encounter and that did not receive much attention is the defining of the precise relationship between Christianity and African culture (Kaplan, 1986). The missionaries' goal to evangelise Africans did not clearly spell out the transition from heathenism to Christianity. For many centuries African people immersed themselves in religious and cultural activities, and for missionaries to effectively convert these people they had to look at different ways of fulfilling their calling. Most missionaries have been condemned as cultural imperialists incapable of or unwilling to fairly evaluate and respect the cultures of the peoples with whom they came into contact. Missionaries were often regarded as people who were unable to 'adapt' to the African way of living. According to Beidelman (1982:18), ideals of evangelism should have been closely related to the extent to which the missionaries accommodated Christian belief and practice into the traditions of those they evangelised. His sentiments were shared by Catholic missionary theorist Luzbetak (1970:231) when he averred that evangelism should include aspects such as respect, prudence, and scientifically and theoretically sound adjustment of the church to the native's culture and outward behaviour. Such views about evangelisation and conversion amounted to a theory of applied social change.

Strayer (1976:6) refers to the 'adaptation theory' as 'Africanization of Christianity'. Concepts such as 'contextualization' or 'incarnation' were associated with the adaptation theory. The concept of adaptation can be categorised and conceptualised into three areas. Firstly, adaptation was not always necessary in order to make Christianity more genuinely African. Strayer (1976) and Horton (1971) discourage viewing Christianity and African religion as opposite ends of evangelism. Mission historians should also make efforts to look at and interpret points of convergence between Christianity and African religion. The second approach towards the theory of adaptation is the re-examination of the extent to which missionaries themselves encouraged or allowed adaptation in African religious and cultural forms (Strayer, 1976:6). This aspect refers to the willingness of missionaries to be flexible on matters such as polygamy, ritual practices such as circumcision, and ancestral worship. The third approach to adaptation theory focuses on the African Christians. Adaptation cannot take place unless Christians cooperate.

Mission encounter should not only examine the process of religious or cultural encounter, but should also seek to refine the relationship of missions to the politics of colonial society. It has been well documented that missionaries served the interests of colonial governments (Majeke, 1952; Nwandula, 1987). Temu (1972:132) argues that to characterise missions as a mere 'arm of the colonial administrations' is one way of neglecting elements of divergence in the relationship. The interaction between the colonisers, the colonised and the missionaries was a complex one, and one that therefore requires careful analysis and interpretation. It was a relationship that involved a great deal of bargaining, compromise and shifting of alliance. There was conflict between the colonial governments and the missionaries over fundamental issues such as the survival of the colonial system. And while there was a degree of conflict, convergence and divergence between the missionaries and the colonial governments, their overly close association made it difficult for missionaries to realise their own goal of evangelism. The close relationship between the missionaries and the colonial governments posed a threat to the African chieftainship. Intrusion of Christianity into the matters of the African people was also seen as a threat to the hierarchy of African chieftainship.

In what follows, the author will attempt to address the issues he has raised above by analysing the missionary encounter between the Bapedi people and the Berlin missionaries. The first section will focus on a brief historical background to the Berlin Mission Society and the Bakopa (as an example of the Bapedi people). The missionary encounter between the Bapedi and the Berlin missionaries will be analysed with a view to understanding the interplay that existed between the cultural, religious and political dimensions.

3. History of the Berlin Mission Society

The establishment of the Berlin Mission Society (BMS) dates back to 29 February 1824 in Germany. The Berlin Mission Society had its roots in the eastern provinces of Prussia. The mission society was established in the times when Berlin was witnessing stormy revolutions, material impoverishment and spiritual deprivation. In the late 18th and 19th centuries, a reaction against the Enlightenment occurred in Germany. The use and celebration of reason, the power by which man understands the universe, became questionable during the Enlightenment period (Usher & Edwards, 1994:9; Lemmer 1998:19*)*. A number of religious thinkers sought to point out the boring aspects and ordinariness of the Enlightenment and to preserve and awaken genuine Christianity. The essence of German thought was contained in the *Evangelische Missionslehre* which propagated a "Biblicist orthodox combined with pietistic devotion and romanticism (Verkuyl, 1978:28). By the 1820s, romanticism and pietism had become dominant philosophical and religious practices in Prussia.

The spirit of romanticism dominated German intellectualism in the first half of the 19th century. Romanticism which had scholars such as Schleiermacher as pioneers led the awakening period in a scientific (*wissenschaftlich*) and speculative direction. The following are characteristic attitudes of romanticism: a general exaltation of emotion over reason and of the senses over intellect; a turning in upon the self and a heightened examination of human personality and its moods and mental potentialities; a new view of the artist as a supremely individual creator, whose creative spirit is more important than strict adherence to formal rules and traditional procedures; an emphasis upon imagination as a gateway to transcendent experience and spiritual truth; an obsessive interest in folk culture, national and ethnic cultural origins, and the medieval era; and a predilection for the exotic, the remote, the mysterious, the weird, the occult, the monstrous, the diseased, and even the satanic (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2010*)*. Missionaries who subscribed to romanticism saw themselves as mediators between two cultures and at the same time as interpreters of African life.

On the other hand, the German *Pietismus* influential religious reform movement began to gain ground among German Lutherans. It emphasised personal faith, instead of the main Lutheran church's perceived emphasis on doctrine and theology over Christian living; and, among others, it aimed at a renewal of piety and true faith, and reaction against rationalism (Wangemann, 1957; Warneck, 1979). With regard to religious matters, human beings were expected to be guided only by what the human understanding could grasp. Pietism stood for the renewal of the importance of individual prayer and for humility (Stoeffler, 1973). Pietists preached a turning away from the world with its temptations, such as theatre, dance, games and other enjoyments.

Pietists such as Baron von Kottwitz regarded the awakening in a practical and ascetic way, in other words one that harnessed men's organisational skills for religiously inspired self-help schemes (Witte, 1884). As a phenomenon of personal religious renewal, its indirect influence has persisted in Germany and other parts of Europe into the 21st century.

4. The Bapedi

The Bakopa were one of the Bapedi small groups with a lesser chief at the edge of their sphere of influence. They were a relatively small group which had close linguistic ties with the Bapedi group. The settlement history of the Bapedi should be understood in the context of the rise of the Zulu state which had an enormous effect on the hinterland of South Africa. The mounting wave of destruction known as the *difaqane* (upheaval) caused marauding tribes to be displaced by Zulu king Shaka's military campaigns. Most of these tribes turned against their agrarian neighbours, razing their settlements and seizing their stock (Thompson, 1969:391). In the 1820s the impact of the *difaqane*, and specifically the conquest of the Pedi heartland by Ndwandwe, led to the emergence of new leaders and political communities (Delius, 1980:12). It was in this context that chief Sekwati, a junior son of the previous royal house of the Bapedi, established his rule, and the ascendency of a reconstructed chiefdom.

The Bakopa settled in an area called Thabantšho (Black Mountain) also known as Maleoskop. Thabantšho was the residence of the Bakopa chief, Boleu, at the time when the Berlin Mission Enterprise's station of Gerlachshoop was active between 1860 and 1864 (Wangemann, 1957). Sekwati, the chief of the Bapedi, viewed the Bakopa as his subjects. Although at the time the Bakopa were submissive to the administration of the *Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek* (*ZAR*, South African Republic), they regarded themselves as relatively independent from the emerging structures of the Boer republics (Boshoff, 2007:100) as well as those of the Bapedi. The *ZAR* was one of the two republics (Transvaal and the Orange Free State) that emerged from the Great Trek. The Bakopa just like any other Bapedi group believed in magic. The chieftains were despotic rulers and their religious perceptions and practices were described as 'magic' (Mönnig, 1967:78-97; Boshoff, 2007).

4.1 The establishment of the Berlin Mission Society's work among the Bapedi

The first envoys of the Berlin Mission Society arrived in Cape Town from Germany on 18 April 1834. Gerlachshoop was the first mission station of the BMS in Southern Africa north of the Vaal River (Boshoff, 2007:98; 2004:445-471).

Towards the end of the 1850s, the Vice-President of the Committee of the BMS, General Leopold von Gerlach, saw it as an ideal that missionary work be extended in South Africa to an area beyond the Vaal River (Lehmann, 1974:56). All the BMS mission stations in the Cape Colony, British Kaffaria, Natal and the Orange Free State were located in British colonies, except for the latter which was an independent Boer republic. The BMS viewed the extension of missionary work into the Transvaal as another German presence in a foreign country, in this case the Transvaal or the *Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek* (*ZAR*) (Boshoff, 2007:99). In 1858 the young missionaries Alexander Merensky and Heinrich Grützner were sent by the BMS to do missionary work in South Africa. Within five years, four new mission stations had been established. The first was Gerlachshoop at Thabantšho, and the remaining three were situated in the Bapedi polity: Kgalatlou, Phatameetsane and GaRatau (Boshoff, 2007:102).

The mission station which predominantly served the Bakopa, under the leadership of chief Boleu, was located near the present town of Groblersdal. The missionaries named the newly established station Gerlachshoop. On 10 May 1864, a Swazi regiment – which inhabited the mountainous land far beyond Lydenburg (Bonner, 1983:82) – accompanied by a few Boers successfully attacked the Bakopa. Chief Boleu and several members of his family, as well as approximately 850 of his soldiers, died while they were defending their people (Boshoff & Steyn, 2008:37). He was succeeded by chief Rammupudu.

During the second half of 1861, Merensky left Gerlachshoop to establish a second mission station in the former Transvaal among the Bapedi which was named Kgalatlou. Grützner was left to continue with missionary work among the Bakopa. Immediately after the arrival of Merensky and the young missionary, Endemann, the chief of the Bapedi, Sekwati, died and was succeeded by his son Sekhukhuni. For a time all went well and considerable numbers of Sekhukhuni's followers adopted the Christian faith; but gradually Sekhukhuni became jealous of the growing power of the missionaries. Eventually the white vagrants and opponents of the missionaries convinced Sekhukhuni that the missionaries were trying to undermine the loyalty of his subjects and that they were behind a movement to hand over the country to the Boers (Walton, s.a.). Sekhukhuni developed a hostile attitude towards the missionaries and he began a cruel persecution of the Christians in his domains (Du Plessis, 1965:347). In 1865 Merensky bought a farm in the Valley of Olifants River, about eight miles to the north of the present Middelburg, and he moved to this site with his followers (also referred to as African Christians) under their leader, Johannes Dinkwanyane, a brother of Sekhukhuni. The new station was called Botšhabelo, the place of refuge (Engelbrecht, 1963:540; Du Plessis, 1965:345; Walton, [s.a.]:1). The other group

of Christians who joined the Bapedi Christians at Botšhabelo were the Bakopa Christians led by chief Rammupudu.

4.2 Cultural and religious practices of the Bapedi

African artists and intellectuals believed that mission societies alienated Africans from their culture and made them follow the ways of the evangelists. This view is based on the Christianisation mission which asserted the superiority and godliness of Christian culture and dismissed Africans as 'pagan' and 'uncivilised'. Kaplan (1986:166) points out that in most cases missionaries were unable to separate the Christian religion from such European trappings as monogamy, Western dress and etiquette, and accordingly sought to impose an all-inclusive package upon the African population, rather than confine themselves to religious change *per se*. One should also keep in mind that missionaries faced the challenge of evangelising the African people and that meant making sure that their converts lived according to what they understood by a pure and holy life.

African religious practices such as magic and sorcery which formed the central religious system of the Bapedi were believed to be heathen and pagan. The BMS used church discipline articulated as "Rules and Regulations" or *Platzordnung* launched at Botšhabelo as an instrument of social control over mission stations, and the fusion of spiritual and temporal power made the missionary landlord a figure of formidable authority (Merensky, s.a.). Merensky, the landlord, made it very clear that all customs and traditional practices that were in conflict with God's word were forbidden. That included worshipping false gods, rainmaking feasts, witchcraft, adultery, drunkenness, gambling, marriage by cattle dowry or "lobola", polygamy and circumcision (Rüther, 2004:218).

There were contradictions, convergence and divergence with regard to the acceptance of religious and cultural practices which were upheld by the Bapedi people. For example, the BMS missionaries were instructed through regulations drawn up in 1882 that:

> The first task of a missionary who begins his work amongst a pagan tribe is to learn the language of that tribe so that he becomes deeply acquainted with the people and thus [is] accepted as a member of that tribe and earns confidence, and thoroughly learns their customs and habits (Rüther, 1998:33).

The BMS acknowledged that the African people, in this case the Bapedi, have a religion. Learning the customs and habits of the Bapedi also meant that the missionaries were to carefully understand those practices and adapt where possible. Missionaries were expected to move towards the notion of adaptation or incarnation of religious and cultural practices of the African people. On the other

hand, the BMS evangelist described the Bapedi religion as "the religion of the devil … associated with it is the main bulwark of Satan which we campaign against here …" (*Berliner Missions-berichte*, 1864:108-110). They saw a direct link between the religious practices of the Bapedi and the devil. This was in line with the pietist philosophy of turning away from worldly activities and practices.

In the early 1860s, Alexander Merensky together with his colleague Grützner were eager to seize all those pagan customs among the Bapedi which were incompatible with Christian beliefs by the roots and eradicate them; however, they continue to mention that:

> … all the remaining national customs [*volksitten*], indeed the whole life peculiar to the people [*volk*] in the home, courtyard and garden we left untouched, to the extent that it had nothing specifically pagan about it. We said to the people that they should remain Basotho and not attempt to imitate the whites (Merensky, 1899:113).

The statement above indicates contradictions that the BMS missionaries had with regard to adaptation on one hand and adherence to pietist philosophical thinking on the other. Missionaries faced a sensitive call to heed and accommodate African ways and practices and also to see to it that converted Africans progressed well in Christianity by abandoning their pagan beliefs. Missionaries had to leave other cultural practices of the Bapedi untouched which in a way compromised their spirituality.

4.3 The Berlin missionaries and the chiefdom

The chief-missionary contention was one of the major difficulties that prevailed between the Berlin missionaries and the Bapedi. The political organisation of the Bapedi has been characterised by a central authority which was based upon the chief. The administrative system and controlling tribal life of the Bapedi have been based on the institution of chieftainship, and permeate from the chief downwards through the tribal structure (Mönnig, 1967:249). Undermining the authority of the office of the chief constituted a serious crime and in most cases, and through wars, chiefs defended themselves.

When Commandant Piet Nel, the *ZAR* official, told chief Boleu that the government was sending the BMS missionaries to his people, he did not show any feelings of animosity. In most cases the chiefs were impelled less by the missionary religious message than by military and economic conditions. Chief Boleu was prepared to welcome the Berlin missionaries because of political and diplomatic developments in the Boer republics. So did chief Sekhukhuni after the death of his father. Actually, the Bapedi chieftainship did not necessarily have any interest in the missionary encounter, since chief Boleu once told Piet Nel that the

government should, as a payback, ensure that the Bapedi were not attacked by the Swazi (Boshoff, 2007:100). The introduction of the BMS by Nel was seen by the chief as a way of creating a healthy relationship between them and the *ZAR* government. Among others the Bapedi chiefs were also quick to see temporal advantages that the missionary encounter brought along with it. Missionaries could also procure and repair guns, weapons which had assumed an important role in hunting and warfare (Chirenje, 1976:405). Accepting missionaries in the Pedi polity would make incessant requests for goods as well as military aid from the government easier.

The Bapedi chiefs were always suspicious of the BMS missionaries. Immediately after the arrival of the BMS in 1860, Sekhukhuni announced to his subjects that the missionaries had not come to 'doctor the nation', that they had not come to play the role of 'masters of knowledge' but that their primary responsibility was to teach (Rüther, 2004:210).

The sporadic growth of the mission station threatened the office of the chief of the Bapedi and the chief felt suspicious when his principal wife Tlakale and the prince were Christianised (Lehmann, 1974:60; Wright, 1971:17). The situation was exacerbated by, among others, the conversion and public renouncement of the Pedi dress codes. One of the chief's other wives, Maria Sethume, presented herself to the Lord during daylight, took off all leg and arm ornaments (*maseka*) given to her by chief Sekhukhuni and laid them at the chief's feet (University of South Africa Archives, 1889; Wangemann, 1957; Van Rooyen, 1954).

The Bapedi and the BMS missionaries were in the realm of the debilitating impact of two powerful centres of authority which co-existed in the same state, and unfortunately there were no adequate mechanisms which were put in place for delineating authority or minimising friction.

Chief Sekhukhuni became more hostile to the missionaries and their converts by expelling them from his territory. As a result of the conflict that arose between the BMS and the Pedi polity, Wangemann, then Mission Director in Germany wrote:

> Sekhukhuni, listen to what I have got to tell you in God's name … Move away from your heathen nature, give up your enmity against me, and I will turn you into a great and powerful man. If, however, you continue to disobey the Great Word, this will be your end just as it was the end of Maleo and Moschesch (Transvaal Archives, 1865).

The statement above, even though it could be interpreted in terms of the spiritual authority the BMS or Wangemann had over the Bapedi, reflects the subordinate position the BMS propagated against the Bapedi chieftainship as well. The Bapedi chieftainship felt that they were continuously undermined by the BMS. One

should not lose focus that, on one hand, the missionaries were convinced that chief Sekhukhuni did what he did due to heathen convictions and practices that he himself indulged in. His action was condemned and interpreted from a biblical point of view and was based on Psalm 34:19 which says "Many are the afflictions of the righteous: but the LORD delivereth him out of them all" (*Holy Bible*, 1961).

The Bapedi also felt that their chieftainship was challenged when the role Merensky played was thought to be above that of their chiefs. Chief Rammupudu of the Bakopa together with the Bapedi chief who fled to Botšhabelo after being persecuted by chief Sekhukhuni were allocated responsibilities of settling disputes among their subjects; however, they were not allowed to retain fines. Merensky, apart from being a dynamic religious leader of Botšhabelo, acted as a paramount chief since he presided over serious cases (Delius, 1980:223). The tension between the BMS missionaries and the Bapedi chiefs was compounded by the missionaries' failure to comprehend that the Bapedi polity could not differentiate its leaders' secular power from the missionaries' spiritual stewardship as it was practised in European countries.

In 1873, Dinkwanyane, a Christian chief who fled with the persecuted Bapedi Christians, ordered women of his group to undo the head scarves they had put on as a sign of Christian awareness after they had moved away from Bopedi. The decision was reversed by Merensky and he ordered the women to continue putting on their scarves. In 1873, the *Platzordnung* had empowered the missionaries to compete directly with the chiefs and it became a real practice when the Berlin missionaries at Botšhabelo preached against the Bapedi women having pates (Rüther, 2004:219). Chief Dinkwanyane of the Bapedi openly opposed the practice of women wearing long hair and regarded this as the violation of the Bapedi customs. This brought about misunderstanding between the chief and Merensky. In these scenarios, the chief felt that his authority was being challenged and above all threatened. Dammann (1958:114) and Van der Heyden (2008:126) mention that in most cases missionaries tried not only to undermine the authority of the chief within a community, but also campaigned intensely against any traditional manners and customs, sowing discord amongst the members of a particular group.

The wedge between the intrusion of Christianity and the chieftainship widened as many of the chiefs also held the view that the missionary encounter would change them into servants. Most of the African chiefs also felt they were not being awarded the respect which was commensurate with their office as chiefs. It can be seen below that the BMS had a desire to limit the authority of African chiefs by redirecting their missiological approach to look like that of the colonial government, that is to regard the natives as a subordinate group. The BMS support of subordination of the Africans is evident when they mention that:

> Political independence of the natives ought not to be too highly rated. It raises many and large difficulties for the mission and it is only too frequently the vehicle of unbroken paganism working in opposition to the missionaries (quoted in Wright, 1971:17).

Merensky mused that it normally took two to three generations for chiefs to be converted to Christianity. He further mentioned that the complexity of the office of the chief always hindered him/her from being converted to Christianity. This office, according to Merensky was "sacred" (Poewe & Van der Heyden, 1999:25). In practice the BMS challenged, consciously or unconsciously, the chieftainship even though they had views that they were sacred institutions.

The Bapedi people felt that the missionaries took the place of their chiefs. These contradictions were informed by a number of factors, among others evangelisation of the pagans by missionaries, and the expectation by the Bapedi for missionaries to adapt to African beliefs and cultural institutions such as the respect for chieftainship. Contradictions with regard to political power between the chiefs and the missionaries continued to prevail. The Bapedi expected respect for their chiefs from the missionaries, whereas the missionaries focused primarily on the conversion of Africans to Christianity.

5. The BMS missionaries and the colonial government

While there were points of divergence between the missionaries and the colonial authorities, an overly close association with the state imperilled the missions' ability to realise their goal of evangelisation. The Berlin Mission Society, like other German missions, appeared to have had a more suspicious collaboration with the colonial authorities (Wright, 1971). Van der Heyden (1985) holds the view that the BMS had neither the nationalistic ideals nor the colonialist interests linking it with the colonialists working in South Africa. He continues to mention that there were no national links between the BMS missionaries and the colonial power (Van der Heyden, 1996:415). Merensky, after taking a post in Germany as Metropolitan Inspector, condemned colonial policies and concluded that undifferentiated repressive colonial means of impressing its authority on the Africans resulted in their opposition and made governing them more difficult (Wright, 1971:19). Lehmann (1965:13) also supported the notion that there was no link between the BMS and the colonial interests when he mentions that on many occasions Merensky was treated with hostility by the Boers. Despite what Van der Heyden and Lehmann say about Merensky, his position between the Africans on one hand and the Boers and the British on the other can be seen as contradictory and confusing.

For example, when Botšhabelo was established in 1865, Merensky established a Commission consisting of the Landdrost, the field-cornet and a farm inspector to

look at conditions around the establishment of such a mission station. The Commission stated, among others, that the Bakopa group would be allowed to settle at Botšhabelo on condition that their chief, Rammupudu, would subject himself to the power of the *ZAR*; and that he would take control of his people and never give shelter to the enemies of the *ZAR*. Merensky played a pivotal role in making the Commission's recommendations which were at a later stage adopted as rules and regulations at Botšhabelo. Suspicions that the Berlin missionaries were collaborating with the *ZAR* government became evident when Merensky was elected as the representative of the *ZAR* among the Bapedi in 1863 (Wangemann, 1957). The Bakopa felt that Merensky's collaboration with the Boer authorities threatened their existence at Botšhabelo. The tension between the Bakopa and the Boer authorities was long in existence since they (the Bakopa) regarded themselves as an autonomous tribe and the Boer administration on the other hand claimed 'overlordship' over them, something which the Bakopa never acceded to (Van der Heyden, 2008:124).

The other incident that showed Merensky's convergence with the colonial government policies was seen in how he handled the tax issue. The Botšhabelo Christians were expected to pay taxes. Ironically, only black people at Botšhabelo or those staying in white areas were forced to pay tax. Black people who were under chiefs did not pay tax. This arrangement in its entirety was discriminatory and unacceptable not only to the Christians at Botšhabelo, but also to black people residing outside the BMS stations. Merensky tried to explain why it was important for the black people at Botšhabelo to pay tax, and he was regarded by the Bapedi as a friend to the Boers and a traitor (Mminele, 1983).

Delius (1980) points out that Merensky and Grützner were careful to observe the code of conduct laid down by the *ZAR*. Merensky further mentioned to the *ZAR* government in a letter that he wrote in 1861 that he would remain in the status of being a missionary and would "always be willing to support the government in its attempt to maintain law and order" (Transvaal Archives, 1861). In a letter which was addressed to the BMS by Hughes (on behalf of the Land Department) more than ten years later, the government still maintained thát relationship between itself and the BMS as long as the mission abided by the laws of the state (Transvaal Archives, 1905).

The BMS missionaries emphasised African obedience and devotion to their masters. They would establish virtual statelets within the state, out of sight of the distant Transvaal state under the Boer administration. They would produce station regulations (*Platzordnung),* often denying chiefs any exercise of traditional power. They were convinced that God would help them fight their cause in situations of conflict (Ruether, 2002:367).

The German missionaries at Botšhabelo started redirecting their theological approaches of converting the Bapedi by ensuring they fitted more accurately into the colonial context of African people's subordination to white overrule. Missionaries were faced with the challenge of retaining their religious convictions and the same time reserving for themselves the strategies to cope with the colonial governments. They were consequently to reinforce black subordination to be able to gain the favour of the colonial authorities. The notion that the BMS missionaries were in favour of black subordination can also be seen from the letter which was addressed to the Minister of Native Education by the Berlin Mission Elders:

> We, the undersigned Elders, teachers and Native Ministers of the Berlin Mission congregation in Transvaal, most respectfully beg to request the government and both Houses of Parliament of this Colony to vigorously assist us in our struggle against heathenism … by introducing and enacting laws, suitable for Christian Natives, and to interpret same in accordance with Christian principles (Transvaal Archives, 1909).

The statement above suggests that the BMS would support legislation that would make the black people subordinate and obedient to the *ZAR* government. According to Mphahlele (1978:131), Merensky remained friendly to the government as long as it promised peace and tranquillity so that missionary work could prosper.

6. Conclusion

This article highlighted the complex interaction between the Berlin missionaries and the Bapedi people, a relationship characterised by contradictions, convergence and divergence in many respects. One of the contradictions within the missionary encounter related to the adaptation of Christianity into the African culture. The Berlin missionaries confronted two sets of contradictory philosophies, that is to accept African cultural practices (such as *lobola*, rainmaking feasts, ways of dressing and chieftainship) on one hand, and to adhere to biblical principles based on pietist philosophy on the other. In some instances, the Berlin missionaries were prepared to compromise their pietist stance and accommodate some of the African practices, which were difficult to implement in the missionary enterprise. But in many cases, the Berlin missionaries sought not only to erode the cultural aspects of the Bapedi people, but also their entire foundation. In seeking to restore the religious authority to God, the missionaries created a wedge between the power of God and the legitimacy of the chieftainship. The missionaries faced the challenge of retaining the authority as instituted by God, given the authority that the chief also held. The BMS was an authority at its

mission stations. It always sought the approval of the Boer authority since its security relied heavily on the relationship it had with the colonial government. In most cases it ensured that converts remained loyal to the state. The missionary encounter was characterised by complex contradictions which manifested themselves in cultural, religious and political dimensions as a problem of power.

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