


# The transmission and reception of biblical discourse in Africa: The language of the oppressor in Hymn 11, Hosanna

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Singing is central in African life and among the many reasons provided is that traditionally it is believed that people who can sing have a very special connection with the spiritual world. Songs are celebratory and could convey the message of joy and happiness in context of freedom, culture, love, gospel, etc. and could convey joy and happiness that is unique and beautiful. However, the songs can equally be dangerous. Music has the potential and possibility to carry messages of oppression, suppression, exclusion, abuse, rape, crime, xenophobia, among others. In this article, the author uses the hymn in Hosanna Hymn Book titled 'Jehova Modimo wa Iseraele/Jehovah God of Israel' to argue that what seems to be innocent and neutral carried the message (by and through education) and acceptance of colonisation. The transmission and reception thereof become dangerous for the unsuspecting colonised. The article deals with the history of colonialism relating to 'Christian' literature or hymns that carry with them a systematic theology aimed at oppressing others. The author does a minimum exegesis to express the worldview and language and content of the Hymn.

**Contribution:** This study contributes to an ongoing liberation discourse and Hymn 11 is used as an example of oppressive language and negative transmission (through education).

**Keywords:** transmission; reception; education; hymns; oppression.

## Introduction

This article was born and encouraged from a conversation that I had with Mr Tsietsi Winston Mohapi. Mr Mohapi is a Sesotho language expert and has published many books in Sesotho. He has recently completed the editing of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) hymnal consisting of 450 hymns. I have known Mr Mohapi from my seminary (NTS: Northern Theological Seminary of URCSA) days and as a member of Melodi Ya Tshwane URCSA as he was a Church Council member, a lay preacher and an interpreter during worship service. As I became a theologian at University of South Africa (UNISA) and a minister of the URCSA Lakeside, we met and in one of our conversations, he asked me, 'are you aware that some of the hymns are colonial, racist, oppressive, and anti-black?' He then referred me to Hymn 11 of Hosanna (a Hymn book of the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, adopted by the URCSA). The name of the hymn was 'Jehovah, God of Israel'. It has been years since I promised him that I shall read the hymn carefully and research on it. I have read the hymn and studied its history, and indeed it does contain the oppressor's language and agree that words contained in the hymn do impose themselves against our will and become a wrong education. I concur that language or words are not free from values and through language, prejudice exists or is overcome. Prejudice is then camouflaged (transmitted and received) as innocent education.

Indeed, there is power in language and the custodian of the language controls and has power over the recipient and education is that system that ensures transmission. Shaull (1970) in his foreword to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* said the following:

There is no such thing as neutral education process. Education functions as either an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present order and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the practice of freedom - the means by which men and women learn to deal critically and creatively with reality to participate in the transformation of their world. (p. 12)

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Integration and conformity are highlighted as part of the functions of education. The 'introduction' of Christianity brought with it the type of education diagnosed by Schaul. Beyond this, we must acknowledge that the introduction of the Christian religion and Christian education, on the other hand, changed the people's religious songs and cultural music. Acknowledging the close bond between the people's religion, education and music, Christian missionaries safeguarded a fast weakening in traditional culture and religion. Written church hymns replaced African religious songs, with a choral type of music comprising four lines, namely soprano, alto, tenor and bass. This type of music emphasised metre, a thing that was alien to African music which is based on rhythm and polyphony. It must be noted that one major change that the choir concept effected was to cut a clear division between those who were 'gifted with voices' and those who were not, who consequently became the audience in a society where, before, virtually everyone was considered a singer in their own way. The reality is that there is a lot coming out or received from music than we think of or bargain for. What we think and feel as 'mere' notes, or the production, or the sound of the instruments, there are other things contained in the music and affecting us, that is education transmitted and received. Music involves a lot of emotions (and education) and can become a perpetual illusion. Moreover, music influences our thinking and behaviour and its claimed 'innocence and neutrality' have been detrimental to Africans and black people. It is out of this context that I shall problematise Hymn 11 as being born in a certain historical context in Africa and as having transmitted a wrong education.

## The context and meaning of Hymn 11

The following lyrics are contained in Hymn 11:

Sesotho version:

Jehova, Modimo oa Iseraele  
 U re falalitse lefifing la pele  
 Re thaba haakang ha re u khumamela  
 Kajeno re batho, re tseba ho rapela  
 Maoto a khotso, a tsoang ho Monghadi  
 A tlile Lesotho, lefatsheng la madi  
 A re a sa ahlaha, Satan'a thothomela  
 Mokhosi oa khutsa, lira tsa re bakela  
 Mahaheng a matsho, thakong tsa ledimo  
 Ho binoa sefela se bokang Modimo  
 Naha ea nyakalla, e kgabile ke metse  
 Nala e hlahile bakeng sa ditsietsi  
 Ba neng ha qhalane ba boela ha habo  
 Ba diqhobosheane ba nka ka thabo  
 Leqheku le akoo ke tloholo tsa lona  
 Di tla di hodile, ho bokoe Mong' a bona  
 E, dipoko tsohle di hlabe hodimo  
 Ho uena, Jehuva, Morena Modimo!  
 Re sechaba sa hao, se ratiloeng ke Jesu  
 Tiisa 'muso oa hao fatsheng lena la heso.

English version:

Jehova, God of Israel  
 you saved us from the darkness we were in.  
 We are very glad  
 When we kneel before you.  
 Today we are people  
 who know how to pray.

The feet of peace  
 were sent by the Master  
 He came to Lesotho,  
 the land of blood.  
 When they came,  
 Satan trembled.  
 The noise stopped,  
 the enemies fled.

In dark caves  
 where cannibals used to live,  
 now a song is sung  
 to praise God.  
 The country is glad,  
 There are many homes.  
 Prosperity has come  
 in the place of danger.

The people who were scattered  
 have come home.  
 Those who protected fortresses  
 were received with joy.  
 The old man  
 sees his grandchildren.  
 They grew up in the meantime;  
 Praise the Lord!

Yes, let all songs go up  
 to you, Jehova,  
 Lord God!  
 We are your people  
 loved by Jesus  
 Strengthen your kingdom  
 in this country of ours.

The hymn was written by Eugene Casalis and P. Daques. Casalis was a French Protestant missionary or a representative of the Paris Evangelical Mission Society. Both of these composers or writers were writing Sesotho hymns assuming a superiority complex by writing for people in their own languages without co-writing with them. This behaviour is often rooted in cultural biases, historical dominance, epistemic marginalisation and economic power. Casalis was (Neele 2013):

... prepared for them by the French Reformed revivalist Henri Pyt (1796–1835), who had not only introduced him to the revival hymns of [*Cesar*] Malan but more importantly trained him in classical and 'dogmatic studies'. (p. 5)

Casalis confirms this influence and love of music in his book 'My life in Basuto Land' stating (Casalis 1889):

Often, amidst hours this passed, my cousin would take her guitar, and we sang together some of the beautiful hymns of Cesar Malan, which has just appeared. These hymns responded perfectly to the sentiments and the needs of the epoch of the first revival. Joy and hope break out of them. There is in their accents something chivalrous, almost martial, a defiance to the world, with its vanities, its calumnies, and its menaces, which thrilled us. (p. 29)

Casalis did recognise hymns as a military tool using concepts such as 'martial' and 'defiance'. This could have been one of the reasons why Basotho would relate to those hymns against the environment of colonialism that were having a military presence and the Amazulu military threats.

There are several implications found in Hymn 11 that I wish to expose and those contained in other hymns such as 'Seteng Sediba sa Madi', third paragraph as an example stating:

Baetsadibe ba batsho  
Ba se kenang ka tumelo;  
Ba tloha teng ka bosweu,  
Ka thabo le ka tshoarelo.

Firstly, the hymn assumes that Basotho 'were saved from darkness'. This is not a surprise because Casalis (1889) was of the view that Basotho were heathens and this was expressed:

After long years of ministry amongst the heathens, I have had the happiness of reciting and singing to him some of his hymns translated into Basuto. And what a joy was this to him. (p. 30)

But Casalis strangely forgot to mention that King Moshoesheo refused to be baptised. Darkness, paganism and heathenism were interchanged about the African believer. Casalis' assumption of 'Basuto joy' was confirmed by Boon (2013) arguing:

But more in general this song also refers to the general state of affairs in pagan Africa. The arrival of the missionaries however brought stability and joy. The song expresses it more precisely: The coming of the Lord Christ-with the feet of the missionaries-made Satan to tremble and the enemies to flee. (p. 3)

This was a reference to the Amazulu and other tribes' military might and gave a sense of hope to Basotho, of course, a replacement of a problem with another. There were other threats from within, including the risk of cannibalism. Cannibalistic tribes were called *Majabatho*. The missionaries registered the confession of one of the repented cannibals to a journal stating:

[A]ll the tribes were waging war against one another, and everyone was a fugitive. Day after day people started to eat people, and also I have tasted human flesh. From that time I started to avoid my friends, because I was afraid of being eaten myself. What horrible days after I had chopped off the arm of my mother's brother, cooked and eaten it. I also ate my father's brother, every piece of him, and many others. Just as the prophet Ezekiel had seen a vision of dry bones of a whole nation coming together again, so I saw in my anxieties how the bones from those of which I had eaten the flesh, coming together and arising against me in the Day of judgement. I see one with necklace around his neck; another one arises from the earth with my knife

in his chest, a third appear without an arm, whilst another points at the old pot in which I cooked his flesh. Woo me! I am scared! I am kholumolumo, that ugly animal from the old fable, who devoured mankind and all the animals of the field. (Couzens 2003:95)

The issue of tribal wars and cannibalism is emphasised by Rev. Boon (2013) in his study arguing this about Hymn 11:

This song does not contain beautiful words in general, but it gives a historical description of the circumstances in which the Sothos found themselves with the arrival of missionaries:

- They were cannibals
- They lived in Caves
- Because of the tribal wars the people were scattered and nobody's life was safe.

This situation specifically alludes to the pogroms executed by the Zulu King Shaka in the 1820s, causing nations like the Sothos to become almost extinct. It caused large areas in the interiors to be devastated and depopulated. The remaining Sothos fled to the inaccessible mountainous regions. (p. 3)

The song was therefore contextual as it exposed the politics and economics of the day in Lesotho and also the imperial and colonial politics that brought with it religious imposition.

Secondly, African tradition, culture and lifestyle were problematised. Houses of Africans were not viewed as proper, exploitative labour was encouraged, poverty was encouraged, polygamy was demonised and teaching in the hymn was perceived as white. Boon (2013) refers to those who accompanied French missionary Arbousset at Genadendal, the Moravian mission station in the Western Cape mentioning:

Another man, Paulus Matate, said the following: 'I see sons of Africa, sons of Europe, blacks, brown, whites, Basothos, AmaXhosas, and Hottentots: all are equal before God, when they repent to Him. Your teachers have come to bring you the Word of God: honour them and follow them. We also have teachers now. Previously we lived in sin, we had many wives. I see, you have gardens and house, that is good: work hard for your living. Don't think I'm a Pharasee, laying burdens on others, whilst not carrying them myself. I also work in the sweat of my body. But on Monday I take my spade, and the bread that I eat in the sweat of my body, taste sweet. Don't sow on the flesh, whoever sows on the flesh will reap destruction by the flesh. Lazarus was poor, but he was rich in God. The rich man sowed on the flesh, he had no treasure in heaven, and his soul was lost. Each tree, bearing no good fruit, will be cut down and thrown in the fire. Christ is the vine, his father the farmer. Stay with Him, then we will meet again in heaven. (p. 4)

Of course, there are multiple problems in this paragraph, 'the teacher bringing God', 'honouring teachers and following them', 'we live in sin', 'we had many wives', 'encouraging hard work for the system', 'glorifying poverty and suffering', 'encouraging heaven life against the life here and now'. This theology contained in the hymn is problematic and anti-black. The paragraph assumes that God was brought to Africa by Europeans; it directs us to honour European teachings and accept them; it declares Africans as sinners by

virtue of their geography and colour, and it wants us to ignore the worldly realities and difficulties that Africans found themselves.

Thirdly, we need to understand that hymns are words in action. A believer repeats the words, internalises them and translates them into action, whether positive or negative. Hymns therefore are a spell. Pratt (2017) makes this observation by arguing that:

Hymns have their own potency. Singing hymns does more than simply give expression to our faith. We can be influenced by what we sing. Hymns can change us. This is the danger of 'a good sing'. What we sing matters because we will carry the after effects of our singing on into our lives. What we sing may influence much more than our belief. It can inform our behaviour. This should not surprise us. Hymns are intensely human constructs. They come from human minds and enable mind to speak to mind, sometimes across centuries. The effect can be positive or negative, freeing or controlling. For more than reading, singing internalises what is expressed. (p. 120)

We must also agree that music provokes our deepest emotions. Worship songs appeal to the whole person, the will, the emotions and the intellect, and it must be clarified that:

The words on their own may have great effect, while the tune may be stirring. The two together are greater than the sum of the parts enabling the words as Saliers has written, to have 'greater emotive range and associational power than when we only speak them'. It seems that as human beings we have innate ability to respond to music which is not simply intellectual but also physical. When we sing we embody (in-body) the theology that we have read. We take it in, translate, we, perhaps, formed or changed by the medium. Not pushing the metaphor too far, is it in any way like eating – what we eat becomes part of us and it can nourish or poison. (Pratt 2017:121)

Fourthly, some hymns contain untruths. Rev John Thompson delivered an address before the Minister's Forum of the Methodist Episcopal Church and brought theological content to the fore:

The time has come when more attention should be paid to the hymns sung in our churches. We are singing a good many hymns which are nothing more than doggerel. They would be just as good sung backward. Many of them are full of theological untruths. If a preacher preached the heresies sung in many of these hymns he would be rushed to trial and theological decapitated. All great religious leaders, such as John Wesley, Martin Luther and others, knew the value of good hymns. They put true religion into their hymns...

Fifthly, we must caution against making hymns as canon because of their natural shortcomings of theology. We must understand and grasp that (Ginn 2009):

There are obstacles inherent to the theological evaluation of the hymnal. While in American Protestantism hymns are valued highly through lived religion common to church and home life, as well as the disciplines of hymnology, doxology, and liturgical studies, they are fenced off from being valued too highly. This can create a research environment that resists or impedes

comparison between hymnic authority and biblical authority, resulting in two separate spheres of investigation: canonical authority and noncanonical authority. This paradigm assumes noncanonical texts cannot attain comparative status with the Bible and necessarily prevents an intersection between the two, so it seems, in order to preserve the supremacy of the Bible over all other edifying texts. (p. 1)

Lastly, there are disconnects and neglects. Ginn (2009) argues that:

There are further challenges to this dissertation created by various disconnects:

1. While theology and hymnology intersect, theological treatment of hymnic texts is not a developed area of study in theology.
2. While the theology of hymns is not denied, theological (and aesthetic) criticism of hymn texts has been obstructed by the evangelistic and/or edifying valuation of hymns; thereby, the utility (and admiration) of hymns inhibits theological criticism.
3. While children's hymnody has a rich legacy in Protestantism, a critical examination of children's hymnody as a source of theology has been neglected.
4. While black theology has an interest in African American spirituals and improvised hymns, Protestantism as the theological context for the spirituals has been neglected. Post-colonialism has created a sensitive environment in which to raise questions of Christianization and race theology, as well as the presence of anti-Semitism in slave songs ... (p. 2)

## Christianity and colonialism

Christianity and colonialism are often closely associated with each other because of the services of Christianity in its various sects (namely Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Protestantism) as the state religion of the European colonial powers, in which Christians likewise made up the majority. Christian missionaries were colonialists: 'agent, scribe, moral alibi' and more so as ideological sponsors.

Andrew (2010) writes:

Historians have traditionally looked at Christian missionaries in one of two ways. The first church historians to catalogue missionary history provided hagiography descriptions of their trials, successes, and sometimes even martyrdom. Missionaries were thus visible saints, exemplars of ideal piety in a sea of persistent savagery. However, by the middle of twentieth century, an era marked by civil rights movements, anti-colonialism, and growing secularisation, missionaries were viewed quite differently. Instead of goldy martyrs, historians now described missionaries as arrogant and rapacious imperialists. Christianity became not a saving grace but a monolithic and aggressive force that missionaries imposed upon defiant natives. Indeed, missionaries were now understood as important agents in the ever-expanding nation-state, or ideological shock troops for colonial invasion whose zealotry blinded them. (pp. 663–691)

We cannot run from the reality that missionaries nurtured the political, economic and cultural imperialism in Africa.

Moreover, missionaries contributed to the destruction of African values, using Christian hymns and education as tools. Of course, music should be viewed as a transmission of education. This transmission was aggressively aimed at seeking national, personal and religious advantage. There was a vision of the world abroad that was accessed and conquered using Christianity. Missionaries then functioned as the 'innocent face' of knowledge production as 'civilised' educators, social reformers, language scholars, medical providers, hymn writers, among others. In this process, missionaries carried an unseen ideological, political and social baggage of their particular cultures.

Christianity as such, by the missionaries, represented Western civilisation and the basis for Anglo-Saxon morality. In disguise, Christianity served as a major force in the colonisation of Africa. Christianity was used to degrade the culture and society of the African people. Rodney (2011) argues that:

The Christian missionaries were much part of the colonizing forces as were explorers, traders and soldiers. There may be room for arguing whether in a given colony the missionaries brought other colonist forces or vice versa, but there is no doubting the fact that missionaries were agents of colonialism in the practical sense whether or not they saw themselves in that light. (p. 252)

Eugene Casalis, Thomas Arbousset and Constant Gosselin established a mission station in Thaba-Bosiu and it should be clarified that due to the link between missionaries agenda and colonialism, they cannot be exonerated from colonialism and innocence.

We must also not forget that this process of colonisation made whiteness a highly valuable and profitable capital for white people. And we must then remind one another that beyond everything we must not forget that the philosophy underpinning the 'White Man's Burden' consisted of 'the C's of colonialism; Civilization, Christianity and Commerce'. Rudyard Kipling in his poem published in 1899 in *McClure's Magazine* entitled 'White Man's Burden' promoting the civilising of non-whites' wrote:

'To seek another's profit  
And work another's gain  
Take up the White Man's burden-  
And reap his old reward:  
The blame of those ye better  
The hate of those ye guard-  
The cry of hosts ye humour  
(Ah slowly) to the light:  
Why brought ye us from bondage,  
Our loved Egyptian might?'

Kipling bemoans that the African people will come 'slowly to the light' and would lament their release from 'bondage'. In essence, Kipling believed that the 'non-white' racial groups were so backward that they would be unable to comprehend the benefits of Europeanisation. In Kipling's view, Africans

must be pulled towards the 'light' in order to see the error of their, in his view, savage nature.

## The meaning of music in Africa

Music is a universal aspect of human behaviour. In Africa, music is used for social and ceremonial purposes. With this in mind, we must equally acknowledge that music plays a role in entertaining, healing and as a unifying force but it can also create damage and be a dividing factor. Mbaegbu (2015) argues that:

... in almost all the denominational churches and even in the Catholic Church music has become an inseparable handmaid of worship. Put simply, African music is one of the cultural characteristics that make the African who he is as a distinct cultural being in the world, for it binds Africans together and gives them common characteristics. (p. 177)

Thus, African music contributes to the unity of Africans. This unity by and through music may even supersede denominations or even create conflict or division and reason is given by Rev Wood (1874) quoting Henry Ward Beecher arguing:

Give hymns enough and singing enough, the Christian laity will make head against ecclesiastical defection, against doctrinal aberration, and against spiritual declension; for a hymn carries the people's theology, their commentary, their experience. (p. 591)

The people's theology, commentary and experiences overshadow even the doctrine, even when (Stead 1904):

[T]he hymn may be doggerel poetry, it may contain heretical theology, its grammar may be faulty and its metaphors atrocious, but if that hymn proved itself a staff and stay to some heroic soul in the darkest hours of his life's pilgrimage, then that hymn has won its right to a place among the sacred songs through which God has spoken to the soul of man. (p. 15)

The speaking to man's soul exposes that music tells a story or is used to tell a story or convey meaning and messages.

On the negative, the coloniser could use music as an instrument of oppression because he understood that (Warren & Warren 1970):

[M]usic follows the African his entire day from early in the morning till late at night, and through all the changes of his life, from time came into this world until he has left it. (p. 3)

Because of this, some songs are about defeat and acceptance of colonisation. Others are embracing the colonisers and the selling of the self. Nettle (1956) argues:

Africans have war music sung during war periods and at the war front. The role of music during periods is to solicit supernatural assistance, ensure success while that sung by soldiers at war fronts, encourages soldiers to move into the battle filed confident that victory is theirs. Among the [Igbo] of Nigeria, there is incarnation which emboldens action. (pp. 6-7)

Music therefore enables. It is for this reason why Degmecic, Pozgain and Filakov (2005:229) argue that 'music is the special form of flexible abstract thinking, which enables us to

use all kind of configurations and schemes in our developmental stages in the creative and integral purposes'. The enabling invites action and control, and colonisation is a form of social control. Agordoh (1985) records this function about music:

[M]usic is used as a social control, and there is music to criticize those in authority. For example, in Benin Republic, there are 'songs of allusion' which are topical songs of current events of interest and gossip, and to perpetuate knowledge. (p. 15)

Like Hymn 11 which sounds and seems innocent because of being detached from its historical context, they lose meaning. Agu (2001) argues that:

Some music types in the rural communities have lost their contextual usage, concepts and effect, and are now performed more on prestige and entertainment values. It is also true that most of the rural ... Audiences have lost trend of the socio-cultural and religious implications, meaning, and story-interests embedded in most performances, symbolic costumes, instruments, performance, situations, timing and venues. Nevertheless, what has been happening is development in innovative continuity since the new genres still remain indefinable with the original genres where contextual usage, meaning and significance have neither being altered nor effaced. (p. 224)

Prah (2001) argues that:

Culture is the main pillar in any cultural system, and literacy in a given cultural system represents the most important feature in the development of a capacity for a language to work either as a repository of past knowledge or as a basis for the development and integration of new knowledge into the society or cultural system. In all societies, which are able to advance forward scientifically and technologically, primacy is vested in the development and use of languages indigenous to the people. (p. 7)

## Conclusion

The article is the beginning of reading, observing and understanding of hymns of the URCSA and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) with a black eye and ear. It serves as an attempt to open the eyes and ears of a black Christian singer and believer to understand that colonialism remains a baggage in our hymns that sound nice and innocent. The singing, digesting and mimicking of this hymn, specifically Hymn 11 for this purpose, maintains, sustains and advances a Eurocentric agenda (or education) of colonialism and whiteness as the model and medium of Christianity. The article aimed to expose colonialism and whiteness using history to expose and use politics with theology to clarify and advance the argument. The author aims to identify hymns and to expand the argument in future.

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B.B.S. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

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