


# The Bible and distortion of culture: Normalised distortions of Vhavenḁa culture through the Bible

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The Tshivenda Bible Translations 1936 and 1998 are language tools, which have since the advent of Christianity in Venda somewhat contributed to the shaping and reshaping of the language and culture of the Vhavenḁa people. These language tools have also contributed largely to distortion of the Vhavenḁa language and culture and unfortunately the distortions have become normalised to a great extent. The argument in this article is that in as much as the distortions have become normalised through these language tools, they can be reversed through disobedience at various levels and epistemic relinking with the values, customs, traditions and practices of the Vhavenḁa people.

**Contribution:** This article highlights language and cultural distortions inherent in Tshivenda Bible translations (1936 and 1998), and it proposes decolonial measures to rectify these distortions given the widespread use of these texts in the culture.

**Keywords:** Tshivenda; Bible translation; distortions; culture; language; decolonisation.

## Introduction

In the promotion of our languages today, the words of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela are often evoked:

If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his (own) language, that goes to his heart. (de Galbert 2019:1)

While Mandela makes an important point, the issue is: What happens in a person's or a people's heart when their language is distorted? What happens to the culture that the language carries when the language is distorted? Most of the distortions in our African cultures have their roots in the colonial Christian missionary enterprise, which had the Bible as one of its primary tools for colonisation. The implication of the Bible in the colonial enterprise makes it a 'colonising text' (Dube 1997:15). However, this is not because the Bible is a product of colonisers, but because of how the biblical texts, in some instances, authorise imperial rhetoric, for example Israel's conquest of Canaan as divinely sanctioned in the Hexateuch (Genesis-Joshua), and how it has been used to authorise the oppression, the plunder, and taking over of other peoples' lands in the European colonial project.

The focus of this article is on the Tshivenda Bible Translations (1936 and 1998) as language tools. I will argue that these texts are language tools that have contributed immensely to the distortion of the Vhavenḁa culture through the Venḁalising of Sepedi concepts and false appropriation of Tshivenda concepts.

In order to deal with the distortions found in the Tshivenda Bible Translations (1936 and 1998), it is necessary, if not imperative, to decolonise these texts. The decolonisation project requires us not simply to be critical of the hegemony and ideologies of those coming from the Euro-Western missionaries and their institutions (Bible translation societies and churches), which supported them; it also requires us to be critical of Bible translations and other texts produced by the indigenous people under colonial sponsorship or colonial influence considering the dynamics of the colonial matrix of power (coloniality).<sup>1</sup> As Maldonado-Torres (2007) argues:

1.This, therefore, requires us to be critical of what we have inherited from the colonial-apartheid times and even in the things that we regard as our own as the European colonial machinery sought to penetrate and redefine the modes of being of the colonised under the guise of civilisation while under-privileging them in the construction of the racialised global structures.

**Note:** Special Collection: Reception of Biblical Discourse, sub-edited by Itumeleng Mothoagae (University of South Africa, South Africa).

Coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained in books, in the criteria of academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects, we breathe coloniality all the time and every day. (p. 243)

In the decolonial project, I follow Mignolo's view that decolonisation requires an epistemic shift or a shift in the geography of reason through a delinking and a relinking process. The delinking is from Euro-Western paradigms or what Mignolo refers to as 'the web of imperial/modern knowledge' and 'the colonial matrix of power' (Mignolo 2007). Therefore, African scholars, be they linguists, historians, Bible interpreters, anthropologists, or scientists, must deliberately delink from the Euro-Western canons. However, for Africans the delinking cannot happen without a self-awakening and the realisation that the colonial dictates continue to undermine, plough under, and subordinate African beings and frames of knowledge (Walsh 2007:234).

For me, the relinking process is hearing the African drum and, in Lucky Dube's words, 'going back to my roots' – my African self and knowledge systems (Dube 1987). As I argue elsewhere:

The idea of relinking is not some obsession with time-travel to the long-gone, outmoded, precolonial past; rather, it is an epistemological reorientation in the present that refuses to abandon the rich heritage of the African ancestors and furthermore draws knowledge from the experiences of suffering from colonialism and coloniality. (Ramantswana 2016:190)

This article is structured as follows: Firstly, I will briefly address the issue of language and culture; secondly, I will highlight some of the distortions of Tshivenda language and culture found in the Tshivenda Bible Translations; and thirdly, I will make proposals on the way forward considering the distortions Tshivenda language and culture.

## Language and culture

Language and culture are intricately linked – the two go together. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o (in Eyoh 1985) argues:

Language is a carrier of a people's culture; culture is a carrier of a people's values; values are the basis of people's self-definition – the basis of their consciousness. (p. 157)

Language, whether available only in oral or in both oral and written form, is a carrier of a people's culture. If we neglect our own African languages and opt for the languages of the colonial masters, we lose our cultures and run into an identity crisis – 'colonial alienation' (Thiong'o 1998). Colonial alienation as Thiong'o argues causes African peoples to actively or passively distance themselves from the reality around them and in turn result in them actively or passively identifying with environment external to them (Thiong'o 1998). Among other things, the colonisers fostered alienation by enforcing their languages on African peoples thereby turning African people into consumers of the colonisers'

values, customs, traditions, and knowledge systems while their own values, customs, traditions, and knowledge systems were eroding. In as much as many of the indigenous people in Africa may want to agree with the statement of former president Thabo Mbeki and assert 'I am an African'; however, for the most part the majority of us are westernised Africans – we have hybrid identities. Some of us even think that we think better, speak better, reason better and do better in the languages of the colonisers, English, French, Portuguese, than in our own indigenous languages.

The colonial alienation also eroded Africans knowledge of themselves, while the colonisers were turning themselves into experts and authorities on Africa and African peoples. The colonisers turned African bodies into objects of study – learning the languages, customs, and values not because they were interested in adopting them as their own but in order to Christianise, civilise, and define them thereby becoming specialists in African languages, cultures, and history. Today, for Vhavenḁa people to know their history, language, and culture, and to define themselves, they are at the mercy of those who defined them; they must peruse pages and pages written by Euro-western anthropologists such as Hugh Stayt, Nicolaas Jacobus Warmelo, A. Gerhard Schutte, and missionaries such as Carl Beuster, Reinhold Wessmann, Paul Erdmann Schweltnus, Koos van Rooy, and others who wrote about them.

The crisis of our time is not simply that Africans are losing touch with their languages and histories and/or herstories, but also that African languages have been distorted and, consequently, African cultures too. Therefore, Thiong'o's words still echo:

when you destroy a people's language, you are destroying that very important aspect of their heritage ... you are in fact destroying that which helps them to define themselves ... that which embodies their collective memory as a people. It is precisely what imperialism in fact did. (Eyoh 1985:157)

The distortions and destructions of African languages to a great extent is attributable to colonisation of local languages. Through colonisation of local languages, the colonisers gained mental and cultural control of the colonised. The colonisers controlled how the languages were to be codified (written) and the learning of the languages. Unfortunately, in some instances, the colonialist aimed for total destruction of the languages. In our South African context, the almost complete erosion of the Khoi, Nam, and San languages is one example of colonial damage to peoples' identities and cultures (Van Wyk 2016:43–44).

In the (South) African context, the Christian missionaries played a crucial role in the colonisation of local languages. In learning the languages at the mission frontiers, codification of the languages and translations of the Bible, the missionaries' goal was not about the promotion of the languages and cultures of the indigenous people instead it was the evangelisation and conversion of the indigenous people and the infusion of colonial ideology into the languages – and

slowly but surely move the indigenous people out of their modes of knowing and being. When a language is colonised, it is inferiorised, and it becomes a tool of the colonisers, and it serves the interest of the colonisers. Thus, the textualisation of indigenous languages served imperial ends. As Dube (1999:57) argues, the colonisation of indigenous languages was a planting of colonial cultural bombs 'meant to clear the ground for the implantation of worldwide Christian commonwealth and European consciousness'. In this process, the colonial institutions were firmly established on the new frontiers of the colonising nations – Euro-Western forms of worship, schooling, governance, work, and trade. No matter how noble the missionaries and the Bible translation may be said to have been, the missionaries were agents of the colonising nations. Their work had detrimental effects on the languages and cultures of the people they evangelised.

As Dube (1999) highlights when the languages of the indigenous people are colonised, they no longer serve the interests of the original culture, but they become weapons against the people and their culture. The Tshivenda language, as we have it, has also been a weapon against our culture. I dare to say that the Tshivenda Bible Translations have dealt a tremendous blow to our Vhavenda culture as they served as tools to normalise the distortion of the culture.

## Normalised distortions in the Tshivenda translations

Thirty years after the publication of the 1936 Tshivenda Bible Translation, a revision committee was established to consider whether it was necessary to revise that translation. There was a decision to undertake such a revision, but it was not done. It was not until 2019 that a revision of the 1936 Tshivenda Bible Translation started, that is, about 83 years later. In his 1970 article, 'Venda names for God', Giesekke noticed that while there was a need for a revision, the Vhavenda people did not want it. Giesekke (1970) writes:

... this opinion is not shared by the average Venda Christian, especially of the older generation. Such conservatism is probably universal, but as regards the Venda Bible it is emphasised by the fact that many people still remember the joy of the day when the first Bibles arrived, and how they thanked God for their teacher, the late Dr. P.E. Schwelnus. Any criticism of the text is considered sacrilege, lack of appreciation for a gift from God. The fact that certain passages cannot be understood, where a number has been wrongly rendered or an omission inadvertently made, is not considered a shortcoming, but rather a lack of ability on their part to interpret the Holy Word of God. (p. 180)

For Giesekke, Vhavenda people considered the 1936 Tshivenda Bible Translation a sacred text and did not want it to be revised. Giesekke's projection of the Vhavenda people is that of a people who were willing to consume a cultural bomb while clearly aware of the shortcomings of the 1936 Tshivenda Bible Translation. Yet Giesekke himself, while he highlighted several problematic areas in the 1936 Tshivenda Bible Translation was content with the 1936 Tshivenda Bible

Translation because he deemed it theologically correct. As Giesekke (1970) states it:

[C]riticism could not be raised that we are telling them of another God, which doubtless it would be if Yehova should be changed to anything else. We are only trying to teach them to venerate God the more. (p. 185)

Regarding the chief translator of the 1936 Tshivenda Bible Translation, Dr Paul Erdmann Schwelnus, Giesekke (1970) highlights the following among other things:

Firstly, that Schwelnus was born in Venda and learned Tshivenda as a child and although it was his second language, he was well versed in the language as his mother tongue. Basically, Giesekke would like us to believe that Tshivenda can just as well be considered a mother tongue of Schwelnus. This is misleading and cannot be accepted as a fact. Giesekke does not highlight that Schwelnus attended the German school for missionary children at M'phome and he was trained as a missionary at the Berlin Mission Seminary in Berlin.

Secondly, that Schwelnus when translated the Bible into Tshivenda, he was based in Pretoria and relied on migrant labourers he had contact with in Pretoria. Thus, when Schwelnus translated the Bible, he was not based among the Vhavenda people.

Thirdly, that 'we know practically nothing of the reasons Schwelnus had when he decided on the way to translate or transliterate the names of God' (Giesekke 1970:180). Furthermore, Giesekke (1970) says:

Were the inconsistencies intentional or an oversight? These questions must remain unanswered; for the present revision we have to accept as they are, and consider the best rendering for each name in the light of the present-day usage. (pp. 180–181)

The problem with Giesekke's statement is that he sets Schwelnus as a demigod who is above scrutiny. Nevertheless, Giesekke highlighted then some problematic concepts used in the 1936 Tshivenda translation and even proposed some ways in which this text could be improved, and yet in the final analysis was of the view that the text should stand as is with its distortions. In Giesekke's view, the distortions were defensible and the 1936 translation was to be accepted and appreciated.

Similar appreciation of the Tshivenda 1936 translation is found even among the Vhavenda scholars; in Mathivha's Master thesis, he wrote:

... the greatest publication in the History of Venda Literature appeared viz. BIVHILI the complete translation of the Holy Bible by Dr. P. E. Schwelnus. Here Dr. Schwelnus gave his best form of the Venda idiom. It is in this translation that he reveals himself as gifted translator. (Mathivha 1972:34)

Even worse is the statement on the Bible Society of South Africa (2011) website, which states:

The complete Bible in Tshivenda (1936 Translation). This formal or literal equivalent translation of the Bible was first published in 1936. The text was updated during 2008 and digitised in 2011.

TABLE 1: Divine names.

Hebrew	Greek	Early Venda translations	1936	1998
אֱלֹהִים [Elohim] or אֱל [E]	θεός [Theos]	<i>Modzimo</i>	<i>Mudzimu</i>	<i>Mudzimu</i>
יְהוָה [YHWH]	κύριος [Kurios]	<i>Yehova</i>	<i>Yehova</i> or <i>Murena</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>Muṅe washu</i> or <i>Yahavee</i>
<b>Title for God</b>				
אֲדֹנָי [Adonai]	δεσπότης [Master/Lord] or κύριος [Kurios]	<i>Morena</i>	<i>Muṅe wanga</i> or <i>Murena</i> <sup>†</sup>	<i>Muṅe wa zwoṅhe</i>

†. In the Old Testament, this title is only found in Psalms 22:30, 44:23; 55:9, 57:9; 59:11; 68:19; 68:19, 22; 69:22 78:65; 79:12; 90:1; 109:21; 110:1, 5; 130:2.

Such statements can only be true if we turn a blind eye to the critical distortions within that text. The 1998 Tshivenḁa Bible Translation text was supposed to have been a significant improvement of the 1936 Tshivenḁa Bible Translation; however, this text too still contains significant distortions. The 1998 Tshivenḁa Bible Translation for all we know is also under review. Some of the distortions in the Tshivenḁa Bible Translations are discussed next.

## The divine names and title

The most common divine names in the Tshivenḁa Bible Translations (1936 and 1998) are *Mudzimu*, *Yehova* or *Yahavee*, *Murena*, *Muṅe wanga*, *Muṅe washu*, and *Muṅe wa zwoṅhe* (see Table 1).

The names *Mudzimu*, *Yehova*, and *Murena* are commonly on the lips of Vhavenḁa people today. In fact, no one is faulted for using these concepts; rather one is likely to be frowned upon if you use names of the Supreme Being such as Nwali, Raluvhimba, Ralukole, Goko, and others. Since the 1998 Tshivenḁa Bible Translation, the transliteration *Yahavee* is also gaining some steam, and similarly the references to God as *Muṅe washu*, and as *Muṅe wa zwoṅhe*. Referring to God as *Mudzimu*, *Yehove* or *Yahavee*, *Murena* and *Muṅe washu* may seem innocent, but there are grave issues that I would like to highlight.

Firstly, in translating Elohim as *Modzimo* and subsequently *Mudzimu*, the translator(s) of the Tshivenḁa Bible Translations were not adopting or opting for a divine name for the supreme being within the Vhavenḁa religious-cultural framework; instead, they infused into the Tshivenḁa language a Sepedi concept for God, *Modimo*.<sup>3</sup> In the early writings of

2. In the New Testament, it is used to translate κύριος when used with reference to Jesus or God.

3. In the early days of the Berlin Missionaries' work in Venda, Carl Beuster and Christian Stech, were the first missionaries to work in the region. Beuster and Stech were influenced by Sepedi before coming to Venda. Beuster did his missionary internship under missionary Grütznier in Ga-Matlala, and for a brief time, worked in Ga-Mpahlela. Soon after, Erdmann Schwellnus also joined the Venda mission, and he did his internship from Botshabelo and Ga-Matlala Mission Stations. The subsequent Berlin missionaries sent to Venda did their internships with the missionaries already there. In addition, the Bapedi people served as interpreters during the initial stages. The early missionaries assumed that because the Bapedi and Vhavenḁa are geographically close, their conceptual frameworks would be identical and that the similar-sounding words between the two languages would mean the same thing. During this time, translations were also underway for Setswana (Moffat's 1857; Wookey's 1907), Southern Sotho (1881/1883, 1899,

missionaries, the divine name in Tshivenḁa was spelt *Modzimo*, which largely followed the German orthography.<sup>4</sup> Similarly words such as *mothu*, *monna*, *mosadzi*, *moroho* had the *mo-* prefix, which is more Sepedi or Sotho sounding instead of *mu-* as found in the subsequently improved orthography (see below 1899 Translation of Gn 1 Creation Story). When the Tshivenḁa orthography improved, the divine name was spelt *Mudzimu*. When Paul E. Schwellnus and his team translated the Bible into Tshivenḁa, it was already established to use the term *Mudzimu* for the divine being. The following texts, 1899 Translation of Genesis 1 Creation Story, Psalm 14 from the *Dziewpistola na Dziewangeli* (pre-1910), and Psalm 14 from the 1929 *Psalms in Venda*, highlight the development in orthography:

### 1899 Translation of Genesis 1 Creation Story

Maf'ongo mamoe a Modzimo a Testamente ndala

A o vomba. *Genesis 1*

O rangane *Modzimo* o vomba t'adolo na f'ase.

Honno f'ase ho va ho khagala ho se na tšetho,

ho va ho na šušy n't'a ha tiva, honno moea oa *Modzimo* oq nt'a ha made.

Honno *Modzimo* a re:

<sup>1</sup>Tšedza tše ve hone, honno tšedza tša va hone. Honno *Modzimo* a khetha tšedza na šušy,

Honno tšedza a tše ira a re: ndi maseare, honno šušy a le ira a re: ndi vosiko. Ha va madekuana ha va matšelone, la va dova la phanda.

Honno *Modzimo* a re:

<sup>2</sup>Tšekhala tše ve hone vokati ha made. Honno ha etea nga oralo. Honno *Modzimo* a ira tšekhala hetše a re: ndi makolene, la va dova la voveli.

Honno *Modzimo* a re:

<sup>3</sup>Made a re f'ase ha makole, a kovangane a vuęle ho thehe, ore ho qmaho ho vonale. Honno ha va ngaoralo. Honno ho qmaho *Modzimo* a ho ira a re: ndi šango, honno made a kovhanganaho a ira a re: ndi loanže. Honno *Modzimo* a re šango le mele hatsi na merohq e anoaho vana. Honno ha etea nga oralo. Honno ha va madekuana ha va matšelone, la va dova la voraru.

<sup>4</sup>Zuędza zu ve hone tšekhalane tša makolene, o khethekanya maseare na vosiko, na o va zuęa o laęds vathu zuft'hinga na madova na memoaha. Honno *Modzimo* a eta zuędzuzveli zuholo. A eta tšedza tšeholo, ore tše vuse maseare, na tšedza tše t'uku, ore tše vuse vosiko, na dzone nalędzi a dzi eta. Honno ha va madekuana ha va matšelone, la va dova la vona.

Honno *Modzimo* a re:

<sup>5</sup>Made kha a bwise zu talaho zu tšilaho, na zuņone zu f'of'e t'adolo ha šango. – Honno *Modzimo* a vomba khove kholo na zuękhqkhonqo zuęšilaho zoę zoę bwisoaho nga made zoa tšaka dzot'e na zoa maf'af'a. Honno *Modzimo* a zu f'at'otšedza a re: andane ne dale. Honno ha vha madekuana ha va matšelone, la va dova la vot'ano.

1909) and Sepedi (1904). It is likely that these Bible translations influenced the Berlin missionaries in Venda. For more on Sesotho and Sepedi influence on Tshivenḁa, see Mathivha (1972:11–15):

4. For the early missionaries, the similar sounding Tshivenḁa word presented itself as the option for the divine name.

Honno Modzimo a are:

<sup>6</sup>Šango le bwise zu tšilaho, khoḷomo na zu suvaho na phoka dza šhano.

Honno *Modzimo* a re:

Kha re ete mothu nga tšefanyiso tšašu tše fanaho na rene, ore a vuse zoa madene, na zu t'aadolo na khoḷomo dza šango lof'e zu suvaho šangone.

Honno Modzimo a vomba *mothu* tšefanyisone tšaoe, a vomba *monna* na *mosadzi*. Honno Modzimo a va f'at'otšedza a re: andane ne ve vanže, dadzane šango ne le kunde, ne vuse khoye dza loanžene na zuṅone zu re f'ase ha makole na zu tšilaho zo f'e zu tšimbelaho šangone; honno *moroho* oof'e na meri eanoaho vana, ndo ne f'a e ve zuleoa zoano; na zu tšilaho zo f'e ndo zu f'a hatsi ho; na zu adolo na khoḷomo dza šango lof'e zu e za zu eta, honno vonane, zo va zo naka zuholo. Honno ha va madekuana ha va matšeloṅe, la va dova la vo'ano na vothehe.

Makole na šango zo f'edzoa nga oralo na mahoro a zo. Honno nga oralo *Modzimo* a f'edza nga dova la vo'ano na voveli mešumo eaoe eot'e, honno a aoela dova la va'ano na voveli mešumone eaoe eot'e, ee a eta, honno a f'at'otšedza dova la vo'ano na voveli, a le kheṭha, ngaova o aoela nga lo mešumone (The 1899 translation of Genesis 1 in the Spelboek ea Tšewenda, (1899:20–22).

When the Tshivenda orthography was improved, the spelling shifted from *Modzimo* to *Mudzimu*. See, for example, the translation of the Psalms from in *Dziepistola na Dziejvangeli*, which originated pre-1910, and the Psalms in *Venda*, which reflects the new orthography:

#### Psalm 14

Tsilo le re mbelune ealo: a hona *Modzimo*! Vo vif'a, va eta zuve f'edzi mešumone eavo eote, a hona moeti oa zōnakao.

<sup>2</sup>*Yehova* o laveḷesa vana va vathu, e t'adolo, o vona, khamose odo va hone momoe oa t'alokanyo, a t'odaho *Modzimo*.

<sup>3</sup>Honno vo xela vote, ndi vave vote, a hona momoe a etaho zōnakao, na momoe f'edzi.

<sup>4</sup>Na vote vaetazuve a va na mano na? va laho vathu vanga, o ng va tši la vosoa, *Yehova* va sa mo vidze.

<sup>5</sup>Ndi zone vo oeloa nga nyofō kholo. Naova *Modzimo* o kha lošaka loṅakao.

<sup>6</sup>Na a tšenya tšengo ea motšinyali, honno *Yehova* ndi vošaveḷo haoe.

<sup>7</sup>Ndi nye oa Tšion, ane a do nea Israel mbolongo? – Arali *Yehova* a tši t'osa mevof'o ea vathu vaoe, hone va-Yakob va fululedze va-Israel va takale. (As translated in *Dziepistola na Dziejvangeli*, (1891:87)

Compare the above Psalm 14 with the following 1929 translation in *Psalms in Tshivenda*:

Psalm 14

Malogwane, Iwa Davida.

<sup>1</sup>Vha matsilu mbiluni dzavho vha ri: A huna *Mudzimu*! Vha shanduka vha tevhela mikhuvha mivhi, hú sina muvhuya kha vhone.

<sup>2</sup>*Yehova* u sedza vhana vha vathu é ṭadulu, u ri a vhone arali a divhaleaho é hone, a ṭodaho *Mudzimu*.

<sup>3</sup>Vho ṭaṅuwa vhoṭhe, vho rindidla, a huna muvhuya na muthihi.

<sup>4</sup>Naa vhavh a vho, vha laho vathu vhahashu, a vho vhona-aa pfumo li tshi la vhanyadza-*Yehova*?

<sup>5</sup>Vha ḑo tetemela, vha sala vhe'owee, ngauri *Mudzimu* u ima na vhadzia-zwivhuya.

<sup>6</sup>Maano e vha vhambela muheḑana o pfuvha, nga u' *Yehova* a vha dzhavelo lawe.

<sup>7</sup>U tshidzwa ha Isiraele nga hu ḑe hu tshi bva Tsioni! *Yehova* a tshi ḑo fhedza maṭhupho a vathu vhawe ndi hone vha Yakopo vha tshi ḑo fhululela, ndi hone vha Isiraele vha tshi ḑo takala. (As translated in *Psalms in Venda* (Schwellnus 1929:3), which is the same as what we find in the 1936 Tshivenda Bible Translation)

The adoption of the concept '*Modzimo*' or '*Mudzimu*' distorts the Vhavana religio-cultural perspective. In Tshivenda language, the concept *mudzimu* refers to an ancestor be it a living person or someone who has passed on to the next life. In the plural, it is *vhadzimu* (ancestors) (see Table 2). The concepts of *mudzimu* (singular) and *vhadzimu* (plural) are used in the Tshivenda language to refer to living ancestors and those who have passed on to the next life (Junod 1920:211; Munyai 2016:34). Therefore, I will briefly outline how they are used with reference to dead and to the living.

When the concepts are used for the dead, this presumes that there is life after death. While death terminates the life of a person; however, the Vhavana people believe in the continuity of life after death. Therefore, when a person dies, that person becomes *mudzimu* and thus joins the company of *vhadzimu* (plural) (see Table 2). In the next life, there are ancestors of our paternal side (*vhadzimu vha ihohoni*) and those of the maternal side (*vhadzimu vha ḑamuni*). The concept *vhadzimu* when used to refer to the dead is an encompassing term for those who have gone to the next life. The dead in Vhavana culture are venerated as they are believed to exercise protective powers over the living. In venerating *vhadzimu* through rituals, the *vhadzimu* are called upon to exercise protective powers and guidance over the family members left behind. In addition, the *vhadzimu* can temporarily transition back to living and communicate with the living by possessing the body of a living family member. Such transition, however, happens during the malombo ritual, in which the spirit of the dead will possess a living person, and that person will during the time of possession behave as the dead ancestor who has possessed him or her, and this is referred to as *o wa mudzimu* [an ancestor has fallen].

The concept *mudzimu* when used with reference to the living, can refer to the following: Firstly, an elderly person within

TABLE 2: Vhavana conceptual framework.

Singular	Plural
<i>mudzimu</i> [ancestor]	<i>vhadzimu</i> [ancestors]
<i>vhudzimu</i> [genitals of males or females]	<i>vhudzimu</i> [genitals of males or females]
<i>tshidzimu</i> (a fee paid to <i>vhomaine</i> [traditional healer] before the consultation or paid after the patient has been healed. It is also known as <i>phuthula-thevhele</i> or <i>putulula thevhele</i> [Van Warmelo 1989:397–398])	-

the family or community – that is, a very old person. And so, we find the saying ‘*makhulu ndi mudzimu wanu*’, which because of the Christian influence some mistranslate as ‘your grandparent is your god’<sup>5</sup> instead of ‘your grandparent is your ancestor’. Secondly, the term can also be used for a parent, thus a parent is a *mudzimu*, and therefore we have *mudzimu wa fhohoni* [a father] and *mudzimu wa damuni* [mother], and in the plural it is *vhadzimu vha fhohoni* [ancestors from the fathers’ side] and *vhadzimu vhadamuni* [ancestors from maternal side]. It is also worth observing that the concept *mudzimu* is also related to another word ending with *-dzimu*, the word *vhudzimu*. *Vhudzimu* refers to genitals whether male or female. The term *vhudzimu* is a euphemism to refer to the genitals.<sup>6</sup> The genitals are dignified in this manner because they produce *madadzwane* or *vhana* [offsprings].

In the Tshivenḁa Bible Translation, the concept *Mudzimu* is pluralised as *midzimu*. In the early documents, the word was spelt as *medzimo* (Anon 1888). The word *midzimu* is used in Tshivenḁa Bible Translations to refer to idols or gods of other nations or any other god other than Elohim or YHWH. The use of the word *midzimu* was an infusion of a word or concept in to the Tshivenḁa language, which did not accord with the language (see Table 3). This resulted in the word *midzimu* being mixed up with *vhadzimu*, and so the distortion started to creep in as people started referring to *vhadzimu* as *midzimu*. This distortion was propelled by Carl Endemann’s booklet entitled *Midzimu ya Malombo*, which was published in 1927 (Endemann 1927). In the booklet, Endemann describes what happens at a *malombo* ritual as follows:

Musi vha tshi thoma u tshina, ndi uri ha lwala muthu. Vha mu alafha, vha vhona a sa fholi, vha ya thanguni. Mudzia thangu a vha vhudza a ri: u na mudzimu wa malombo. Ndi hone vhatshi vhidza munwe a tshinaho uri a ḁe, a ‘wise’ mudzimu wa malombo. Ha kuvhangana vhatshu na mashaka awe, vha thoma nga u lidza: ‘Tshele dza mgala nga pasi’. Kha musu vha do lidzela mulwadze vha vhuya vha ita maduvha as a ‘wi’. Vha mu vumbela, ndi uri vha mu dodza mishonga yothe i dihwaho nga vhone vhaḁe. Arali a takuwa, a wa fhasi, sa muthu wa tshifakhole, a kuma, ndi hone vha tshi zhamba vha lidza mifhululu na phalaphala, na dziḁanga, vha pembela vha ri: O wa mudzimu. Vha gidima vha ralo vha mu ḁanzwa. Zwino na zwijiwa vha vho ḁa, ene ha ḁi tshitu, na vha no mu tshinisa a vha ḁi. (Mathivha 1972:250–251)

While Endemann’s description of *malombo* ritual is acceptable, what is unacceptable is the equation of the ritual with ‘*midzimu*’. It is not uncommon nowadays to find people saying ‘*midzimu i ya hana*’ [the gods are refusing] by adopting the made-up pluralisation of *mudzimu* instead of ‘*vhadzimu vha ya hana*’ [the ancestors are refusing]. In the Vhaventḁa religious-cultural worldview, there is no pantheon (a plurality of gods). The moment you equate *vhadzimu* with *midzimu* you then heathenise the Vhaventḁa concept of ancestors, they become foreign gods (see Table 3).

5. For mistranslation of this concept see Van Rooy 1971:139.

6. Other terms to refer to male and female genitals are, such as, *nnyo* and *bunyuni*.

TABLE 3: Distorted view.

Singular	Plural
<i>Mudzimu</i> [God]	<i>midzimu</i> [gods]
<i>mudzimu</i> [god]	<i>midzimu</i> /[ <i>vhadzimu</i> ] [gods]
<i>tshidzimu</i> [offering to God or gods]	<i>Zwidzimu</i> [offerings to God or gods]

Furthermore, another *-dzimu* term, *tshidzimu* came to be distorted in the use of *Mudzimu* as a divine name. The word *tshidzimu* as translated in the Tshivenḁa Bibles is used to refer to sacrifice or offering (singular) and *zwidzimu* to sacrifices or offerings (plural) (see Table 3). However, the concept of *tshidzimu* in Vhaventḁa culture implies something completely different. It refers to a fee that is paid to *vhomaine* [doctor or medicine person] before or after the consultation (Van Warmelo 1989:396). The other word to refer to such a fee is *phuthula/putulula thevehele*, which basically means ‘untie the divining bones’ (Van Warmelo 1989:396). The use of the word *tshidzimu* in the Tshivenḁa Bible Translations therefore completely distorts the meaning of the term. This is not a case of one word having multiple meanings but rather a case of transferring meaning to a term that carries no such meaning.

It is an open secret that the common name of the supreme being in Tshivenḁa religious-cultural framework is *Nwali* or *Mwali* or *Muali*, which in the Shona language is *Mwari*. The divine name *Nwali* among the Vhaventḁa name has to a large extent fallen to disuse together with the other divine names such as *Raluvhimba*, *Khuzwane*, *Mutumbukavhathu* or *Musikavhathu*, *Ralukole*, *Gole*, *Goko*, *Muhali-muhulu*, and so on. While it has been noticed again and again that the divine name among the Vhaventḁa people is *Nwali*. Yet, even those who acknowledge in scholarly texts that the name *Nwali* is the name for the divine being continue to speak of *Mudzimu* in their day-to-day engagements. The scholarly writings are proving useless as the distortion of the culture is normalised.

Secondly, the Hebrew divine name *YHWH* is translated differently in the Tshivenḁa Bible Translations. This is a difficult name to translate as its meaning is unclear and most translations opt for the transliteration of this Hebrew name. However, as can be seen in Table 1, the name is rendered in the Greek translation as *Kurios*. In the 1936 translation, it is rendered *Yehova*, which in this case was simply following the established traditions found in German and English translations. In the 1998 Translation, the name *YHWH* is rendered *Mupe washu*, and transliterated as *Yahavee*. The transliteration as *Yehova* or *Yahavee*, which is an option is however, problematic. These concepts are not meaningful in the Vhaventḁa culture. The option of *Mupe washu* that the 1998 Tshivenḁa Bible Translation followed in some instances can be a way to go; however, it is not the only option considering the many divine names in the Vhaventḁa culture, particularly, considering that names such as *Raluvhimba* and *Khuzwane* were also used for the divine being. Considering that the Hebrew concept *YHWH* is a divine name (Ex 3:13), it is sensible to use a divine name in the Vhaventḁa culture. It

was common to speak of *Nwali Raluwhimba* [God Raluwhimba] or *Raluwhimba Nwali* (Raluwhimba God); therefore, this duo would be a better and more meaningful translation of the duo *Elohim YHWH* or *YHWH Elohim* than what we find in 1936 Tshivenda Bible Translation and earlier translations, *Mudzimu Yehova* or *Yehova Mudzimu* (in earlier translations, Modzimo Yehova or Yehova Modzimo) and in the 1998 Tshivenda Bible Translation, *Mudzimu Yahavee* or *Yahavee Mudzimu*.

Thirdly, the title *Murena* is used in the 1936 Tshivenda Bible Translation but does not appear at all in the 1998 Tshivenda Bible Translation. Many of the Vhavana people nowadays when they say *murena* think of it as an honorific title. As Giesekke (1970) observes:

[A]s far as can be determined, by the first missionaries. They already knew the word from N. Sotho [referring here to Sepedi], and when they met it in Venda concluded that it had the same meaning.

Giesekke (1970) further observes:

Through the years, *Murena Yesu Kristo* has become firmly rooted in the vocabulary of the Church. If this borrowing had replaced the original meaning of *Murena* in Venda, and acquired the meaning it has in the Sotho languages, there would be no ground for objection. On the contrary, there would be a decided advantage in Christians in Vendaland using the same title for the same Lord as Christians in Sotho areas. (p. 182)

This is another example of a distortion within the 1936 Tshivenda Bible Translation, and the distortion has been normalised. Many of the Vhavana people now when they say *Murena* think of it as an honorific title.

The word *Murena* in Tshivenda culture is not used as an honorific title, in contrast to what we find in Sepedi, Sesotho and Setswana, it is used in the following context: firstly, by older people to address the younger people (the older addressing, the younger), secondly, equal addressing each other, or the chief addressing the subjects (Van Warmelo 1989:232). The use of *Murena* as an honorific title with reference to God or Jesus is a complete distortion of the Tshivenda language and culture.

### Intermediaries to approach the ancestor and the supreme being

In the 1936 and 1998 Tshivenda Bible Translations, the intermediaries especially those who functioned at the shrine or the temple are referred to as *tshifhe* [singular] or *vhotshifhe* [plural]. In Israel's cult centred in Jerusalem, there was a hierarchical system when it came to approaching the Supreme Being, YHWH or Elohim. In Israel's religious practice, it was the high priest (כֹּהֵן הָרָאשׁׁ), which the Tshivenda translations translate as *tshifhe muhulu*, who was the key figure in terms of communicating and offering sacrifices YHWH. The use of the concept *tshifhe* for those who functioned within the Jerusalem cult does not accord with the use of the term in Tshivenda language and culture.

### Intermediaries with ancestors (Vhadzimu)

In the Vhavana culture, *tshifhe* is a short form of the title *tshifhavoahdzimu* [the-one-who-gives-to-the-ancestors], that is, a person who functions within the family as the one who communicates with *vhadzimu* [ancestors] and through rituals performance also gives to *vhadzimu* [ancestors] (Van Warmelo 1989:398). *Tshifhe* or *tshifhavhadzimu*'s function is not to communicate with *Nwali* but with the ancestors. In the family context, this role was often fulfilled by *makhadzi* [a father's sister], but it was not only limited to *makhadzi* (Matshidze 2013). The role of communicating with the ancestors is also fulfilled by *vhomaine* [traditional doctors], who will occasionally or from time to time be called within the family (Ntshauba 2011). There is also a proverb, which says, '*Tshifhavoahdzimu ha lali na ndala*' [the one who gives to the ancestors does go to sleep hungry].

### Intermediaries (Vhoḡendila) with supreme being (Nwali)

In the Vhavana culture, communication with *Nwali* was not a function that could just be performed by anyone. There were specific people to officiate or act as intermediaries between the people and the Supreme Being (*Nwali*, Raluwhimba). When the need arose to communicate with the supreme being, people would go to the *Nwali* shrine in Zimbabwe at the Matopo Hills, and there they would find the intermediaries (Vhoḡendila) who would take their requests to *Nwali*. The first person of contact they would go to was either a *mubozwi* [a male] or *mbonga* [a female] that is a person who would receive matters of the people. Then *mubozwi* or *mbonga* will take the issues to *manyusa* ([plural] *vhomanyusa*), which is the person who will then take the issue to *Nwali* (Daneel 1970; Rodewald 2010; Van Warmelo 1989:202). *Vhomanyusa* were the intermediaries between the people and *Nwali*. It was common among the Vhavana to go to Matonzheni or Matongoni, that is, a place in Zimbabwe at the Matopo Hills where *Nwali*'s shrine was. It is, for this reason, that there were references to *Nwali wa Matonzheni* or *Matongoni*, and also to speak about *Vhamatongoni* (Schutte 1978).

However, for the Vhavana people *Nwali* was not confined or limited to the shrine in Matopo Hill. *Nwali* also appeared in the Vendaland in places such as Makonde, Ha-Luvhimbi, Ha-Mudzivhaḡi, Ha-Musekwa, na Ha-Mudimeli. When *Nwali* appeared at Makonde, the *manyusa* in which case was *Vho Magwabeni*, who was the intermediary between King Ravhura and the people at large (see also Munyai 2016:29–30; Schutte 1978). Munyai (2016) rightly observes:

The official who approached *Nwali* was accorded great respect and was referred to as a priest, as he was not connected to the family gods but to family gods but to *Nwali* himself, who was in charge of the cosmos. (p. 30)

Therefore, referring to priests who functioned at the central cult in Jerusalem as *vhotshifhe* is to distort the language of the Vhavana and their culture. Those priests did not function

within the family context or family-orientated veneration but within the context of national or universal worship towards the supreme being, *Elohim*, *YHWH*. If the concept *tshifhe* is to be used with reference to the role of mediating between people and God, the proper context for the word should be set. In the case of the worship of God, then the concept should be *tshifhaNwali* [the-one-who-gives-to-God]. While the short form *tshifhe* can be used, it is necessary that the context within which the term is used should determine the meaning.

The distortions that I have highlighted here are not exhaustive; rather, they merely serve as examples of the language distortions effected in the Tshivenda language through the Christian mission and the Tshivenda Bible Translations. The distortions highlighted touch on the fundamentals of a people's religious-cultural worldview. In my view, just leaving the distortions as they are without seeking ways to reverse the distortion is not an option, therefore, the necessity for decolonial redress of this situation.

## Decolonial options: Reversing the distortions

The shortcomings of the Tshivenda Bible Translations may be regarded as common in translations as there is no perfect translation. While I subscribe to the view that every translation is to some extent a mistranslation; this, however, does not imply that every translation should be deemed acceptable. While the efforts of the Berlin Mission missionaries in translating the Bible into Tshivenda and subsequently the Bible Society of South Africa translation team can be viewed as noble; however, when these texts distort the culture of the target audience, the situation cannot be left unaddressed.

In the case of the two Tshivenda translations I propose the following decolonial options to reverse the curse of normalised distortions:

### Option 1: Epistemic delinking through disobedience

Epistemic disobedience is the deliberate refusal to perpetuate the distortions. Such disobedience is not the refusal or the denial of the Bible among the Vhava people; rather, it is the willingness to expose the distortions and the damages resulting from the distortions. Such disobedience can be exercised as follows:

#### Reading disobedience through application of Ketiv Qere principle

Reading disobedience needs to be intentional. In our case, the case is to correct through reversal by reading what should be read instead of what is written. The principle of not reading what is not written is not a new one. For the Jewish Masoretes, the principle of *Ketiv Qere* functioned as a principle of correcting the errors in the text. This principle is followed in textual critical studies and informs Bible translators. Furthermore, it is worth observing that for Jews the divine name *YHWH* cannot be read, and therefore, the reader does

not read what is written. Hence, when a reader encounters the name *YHWH*, the reader reads *Adonia*.

Therefore, as an immediate remedy, Vhava Bible readers can exercise disobedience as matter of correcting and reversing the distortion by applying the same *Ketiv Qere* principle by not reading what is written whenever the concept *Mudzimu* is encountered. Hence, instead of reading what is written should rather read *Nwali*. In the case, where the transliteration *Yehova* or *Yahavee* is encountered one should rather opt for the divine name, *Raluohimba*. The divine name *Raluohimba* is among the Vhava people used interchangeably with the name *Nwali* and therefore, presents itself as a better alternative within the Vhava religious-cultural framework.

In the case, of the title *Murena*, when we encounter this, we read *Muhali*, which is a laudatory epithet used for a king or chief. The 1998 translation opted for the concept *Muṅe washu*; however, in Tshivenda when speaking to a king or chief, the common terms, which designate honour are *Muhali*,<sup>7</sup> *Vhanevhangha* [My Master/Lord], *Mavu* [the Soil or Land Owner].

#### Church disobedience

In the church, the teaching on repentance, that is to 'turn around', is at the core of the proclamation of the good news. The Bible is a book that particularly comes alive within the life of the church, and therefore, it is incumbent upon the churches to live to the basic and fundamental principle of repentance. The church has done enough in eroding the Vhava culture, and therefore, the least she can do is to move towards restorative justice.

To repent on the side of the church implies acknowledging that the church was instrumental in the colonisation project and the distortion of the Vhava language and culture. The indigenous converts to Christianity also became complicit to the distortion. It is also incumbent upon those in the church to acknowledge that they are mentally colonised. While the wheels of the churches may take time to turn in taking measures, it is incumbent upon individual believers in the churches to exercise disobedience. The disobedience in the church should be exercised from the pulpits and whenever the Bible is read by correcting in the public readings the distortions found in the Bible. The correcting and reversing of distortions does not have to be viewed as going against the Word of God, but rather as a requirement of the Word of God.

Church disobedience regarding the translated texts available is to breathe the Spirit in the letter that kills. Bible translations that are distorted do a disservice to the people and their culture. In the absence of better translations, therefore, believers have no option but to exercise disobedience by refusing to propagate distortions in their available translations by reading otherwise.

<sup>7</sup>This term also refers to a great warrior or a strong-minded person.



## Academic disobedience

The distortions found in the Tshivenda Bible Translations are no longer just through the Bible, they have also made their way into academia, and therefore, the distortions are also perpetuated in our academic performances in university classrooms, grammar books, and dictionaries. It is very common to find dictionaries produced by Vhenda linguists perpetuating distortions. For example, *Thalusamaipfi ya Luambo luthihi ya Tshivenda* by S.L. Tshikota (2010) has the following entries:

*Mudzimu dzin musiki wa zwithu na vhathu ~ ha fhi nga tshanda muthu u wana zwivhuya nge a tou zwishumela vhukuma; ~ o hangwa khoṅo u nes ha mvula i si tsha tsha; ~ u a divha maipfi ane a ambiwa a ambiwa nga muthu a tshi khou ṭoḍou sumbedzi uri zwine a khou amba ndi zwa ngoho \$ Mudzimu ha rumi tshi no lamba muthu, zwivhini u tou didzhenisa \$ ya Mudzimu i boa dziNweni ndi musi muthu o wana zwithu ndi musi muthu o wana zwithu a songo lavhelela.*

*Murena dzin jinwe dzina la Yesu*

*Mutshidzi dzin dzina jinwe la Yesu Khristo*

*tshidzimu (zwi) dzin tshihavhelo tshi no nekedzwa musi hu tshi rerelwa*

*Tshifhe (vho) dzin muhulwane wa zwa vhurereli*

*Ramaandaothe dzin Mudzimu we a sika zwithu zwothe*

*vhadzimu dzin vhathu vho hwelwaho nga mimuya ya vho tuwaho kale*

This dictionary is more influenced by the distortions of the Tshivenda Bible and, therefore, provides no corrective help. There is no entry in this dictionary of the Tshivenda divine names *Nwali*, *Raluvhimba*, and so on. Furthermore, the explanations provided in these entries reflect a Christian influence (see entries of *Mudzimu*, *Murena*, *Mutshidzi*, *Ramaandaothe*, and *Tshifhe*). Some instances provide incorrect explanations of concepts. For example, the rendering of *vhadzimu* as '*vhathu vho hwelwaho nga mimuya ya vho tuwaho kale*' [literally rendered 'the people who are possessed by the spirits of those who died long ago'] does not accord with the Vhenda culture at all.

Terms must be defined on the basis of the language and culture, not on the basis of a Bible, which only is 87 years old in the language and culture. To take the Bible as a starting point is to allow a colonising text to dictate the language and the culture.

Another book that deserves mention is *Tshivenda Terminology and Orthography No. 3* (2011) (Tshikota 2011), which was supported by the Department of Basic Education. There are problematic areas with the book, which I would like to highlight. When entries are made, there are three columns: English, Afrikaans, and Tshivenda. While this may seem innocent, it is not as it speaks volumes. The starting point for the linguists responsible was not their language; rather, it was English followed by Afrikaans, and then Tshivenda. Such an arrangement of a Tshivenda terminology book is tantamount to 'inferiorisation' of the Tshivenda language. Because English is the starting point, it implies that there are many Tshivenda words, which were entered as Tshivenda words and are

TABLE 4: Dictionary entries.

English	Afrikaans	Tshivenda
Ancestor	Voorouer, stamvader	<i>mudzimu</i>
ancestral spirit	Voorvaderlike gees	<i>mudzimu</i>
calling (divine summons)	<i>reoping</i>	<i>mbidzo (ya mudzimu)</i>
goddess	<i>godin</i>	<i>Mudzimukadzi</i>
Idol	<i>afgod</i>	<i>mudzimu u sili</i>
Lord, the	<i>Here, die</i>	<i>Murena</i>
Lord's Prayer	<i>Die Onse Vader</i>	<i>Thabelo ya Murena</i>
Monotheism	<i>monoteïstiese</i>	<i>Monotheisimo, thendamudzimu muthihi</i>
monotheistic religion	<i>monoteïstiese godsdienst</i>	<i>Vhurereli ha monotheisimo, vhurereli ha thendamudzimu muthihi</i>
Trinity	<i>Drieenheid</i>	<i>Vhuraruthihi, mudzimumuraru</i>
Triune Godhead	<i>Drieenheid</i>	<i>Mudzimumuraru</i>

Source: Adapted from Tshikota, S.L. (ed.), 2011, *Tshivenda Terminology and Orthography No. 3*, Kalahari Productions and Booksellers, Thohoyandou

dependent on English words. Furthermore, this leads to linguists choosing to borrow terms from other languages rather than creating terms based on their own language. If this trend continues, what we will end up with is Vandalised English. This is no different from what the missionaries did when the Vandalised Sepedi which resulted in the distortion of Vhenda religious-cultural worldview. See Table 4 for such entries.

In the book, while the entry on 'ancestor' and 'ancestral spirit' are both referred to in Tshivenda as *mudzimu*, the reference to God as *Mudzimu* is, however, retained.<sup>8</sup> The distortion then continues into other words as well: *mbidzo ya mudzimu*, *mudzimukadzi*, *monotheisimo* (*thendamudzimu muthihi*), *vhurereli ha monotheisimo* (*vhurereli ha thendamudzimu muthihi*), *mudzimumuraru* (see Table 4). The concept 'Murena' is also retained as an honorific title translated as 'Lord'. When our academic enterprise contributes towards the distortions of our language and culture, then we need epistemic disobedience in our academic enterprise by refusing to play the game under the dictates of the distorted translated Bibles, and dictates and limitations of the foreign languages. Resorting to borrowing and transliterations is again tantamount to inferiorising Tshivenda language under the banner of academia or scholarship and language development when it is in actual fact language devaluation.

## Option 2: Epistemic relinking

The late Ghanaian philosopher, Kwasi Wiredu (1992:332) states, 'Conceptually speaking, then, the maxim of the moment should be: "African, know thyself!"' We cannot know ourselves through the language of others, and we cannot promote our cultures if not through our languages. Epistemic relinking requires the following among others:

### Rethinking and remembering our values, customs, traditions and practices

The Tshivenda Bible Translations have served the purpose of making Vhenda people forget the names of God in their own language, their values, customs, traditions, and practices.

8. In the book, see particularly the section where the book deals with introductory matters regarding Tshivenda Orthography, pages viii, xvii.

The superimposing of Sepedi concepts over Tshivenda words did not serve the Vhavenda people; it has instead eroded the Vhavenda language and culture. Furthermore, giving new meaning to existing Tshivenda concepts distorted the Tshivenda language and culture.

The available translations of Tshivenda have to a large extent ignored the Tshivenda and Tshikalanga (Shona) relationships. In rethinking and remembering, the Tshivenda and Tshikalanga relationship will have to be explored as it will help to shed light and provide some of the missing pieces. We can only hope that *mudzimu u do wa* [an ancestor will fall] and we will rethink and remember our roots because we are sick and need healing as a Vhavenda nation.

Furthermore, when I engage with some of the living libraries (the elderly in the communities, *vhadzimu vhashu*), I am constantly confronted with the sad reality of fading memories of our culture. The erosion in the memories of people and the institutions in Vhavenda culture only serves to distance the people from their own self. However, there are still bits and pieces in the memories, which will help in putting the pieces together. It is up to us to put the pieces together as we do away with the distortions.

#### **There is a need for a new Bible translation of the Bible by Vhavenda for Vhavenda**

The Bible translations that Vhavenda people currently have through the Bible Society of South Africa, the 1936 and 1998 Tshivenda Bible Translations, were championed by white people: The 1936 Tshivenda Bible Translation was headed by Dr Schweltnus and the 1998 Tshivenda Bible Translation was headed by Koos van Rooy. This is not to say that they did not work with the assistance of the Vhavenda people, because they did; however, the Vhavenda people were roped to fulfil subordinate functions.

The reviews of the 1936 and 1998 Tshivenda Bible Translations, while they will serve to improve the translations currently available, it however, does not imply that those texts will become fully fledged translations by Vhavenda people for Vhavenda people. It will be impossible to completely de-ideologise those texts from their colonial ideology. Traces of the colonial ideology in those texts will remain.

I am currently not aware of any plans by the Bible Society of South Africa or any other Bible Society to have a new fully-fledged translation project of the Tshivenda Bible by Vhavenda people. We can only hope that such a text if it will be done will be to promote the language and the culture of the Vhavenda people. It is perhaps time for such a proposal to be tabled so that a new Tshivenda translation can emerge. There are people well versed in the languages of the Bible and experts in Tshivenda language and culture who can do the job.

## **Conclusion**

The Tshivenda Bible translations have served to normalise the abnormal among the Vhavenda. It is abnormal that a nation can abandon the names of its God and desist from

using those names in day-to-day interactions. It is unusual that a nation can forget the concepts and meanings of concepts that existed before the advent of Christianity among them. It is unthinkable that a nation can regard its ancestors or refer to its ancestors as *midzimu* – which according to the distorted texts are false gods or foreign gods. The success of colonialism is in turning a nation against itself by creating permanent and irreversible damage to its language, culture, identity, image of the self, and knowledge systems. However, *Nwali u ya hana na vhadzimu vhashu vha ya hana*, meaning, God is refusing and the ancestors are refusing to let go. It is incumbent upon the Vhavenda people (us) to continue developing strategies of resistance to the degradation of our culture, and therefore, the proposals that I have put forward would be an add-on to the already available strategies of defiance within our communities and in academia. It is when we launch epistemic disobedience and relink with the heritage of our ancestors that we can view our past as a resource for constructing our future, and not see our past as a wasteland. Therefore, it is incumbent on us to heed the saying of our ancestors: *Nwana wa mbevhha ha hangwi mu kwita* [a baby of a rat does not forget its path].

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