
AFRICAN-LANGUAGE PERIODICALS OF THE BERLIN MISSION CHURCH DURING THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, NORTHERN SOUTH AFRICA¹

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In the first half of the twentieth century members of the Berlin Mission Church in the Transvaal (today including the following provinces: Gauteng, North-West, Mpumalanga, and Limpopo) had access to a monthly newspaper and an almanac-yearbook published by the Berlin Missionary Society. This article explores the availability and accessibility of these publications to researchers, and the nature of the content, suggesting future research possibilities into these periodicals. The preliminary conclusion from small-scale assessments is that a longitudinal study of the *Moxwera wa Babaso* (newspaper) and the *Thsupa Mabaka a Kereke* (almanac) can shed more light on the changing culture within the Berlin Mission Church and how church members and church leaders (German missionaries as well as local pastors and evangelists) negotiated their changing relations in a time of increasing government encroachment on the day-to-day existence of South Africa's black population.

Keywords: almanac, Berlin Mission, newspaper, Northern Sotho, periodical, propaganda, Transvaal, yearbook

1 The groundwork for this article was done during NB Manyike's research firstly for a master's dissertation in Visual Culture Studies (2020) and then for a research essay in a coursework master's qualification in Heritage Conservation (2023). Both these studies are cited in this article. The initial research was conducted as part of "The Berlin Mission Archive as a Repository for African Knowledge" – a project led by L Kriel and AP Joubert from the School of the Arts at the University of Pretoria, funded by the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (CRP01611). Manyike also acknowledges the financial contribution of the DAAD and the Andrew W Mellon Foundation to her postgraduate studies. A special word of thanks to Rory du Plessis and Maggi Loubser for their unwavering supervisory support.

Afrikatalige tydskrifte van die Berlynse Sendingkerk gedurende die eerste helfte van die twintigste eeu, noordelike Suid-Afrika

In die eerste helfte van die twintigste eeu het lidmate van die Berlynse Sendingkerk in Transvaal (wat vandag die volgende provinsies insluit: Gauteng, Noordwes, Mpumalanga en Limpopo) toegang gehad tot sowel 'n maandelikse koerant as 'n almanak-cum-jaarboek wat deur die Berlynse Sendinggenootskap uitgegee is. Hierdie artikel verken die beskikbaarheid en die toeganklikheid van hierdie publikasies vir navorsers, asook die aard van die inhoud daarvan. Voorstelle word gemaak vir moontlike toekomstige navorsing rondom hierdie periodieke publikasies. Die voorlopige gevolgtrekking uit kleinskaalse ondersoeke is dat 'n longitudinale studie van die *Moxwera wa Babaso* (koerant) en die *Thsupa Mabaka a Kereke* (almanak) meer lig kan werp op die veranderende kultuur binne die Berlynse Sendingkerk en hoe kerklidmate en kerkleiers (Duitse sendelinge sowel as plaaslike predikante en evangeliste) onderhandel het oor hulle veranderende verhoudinge in 'n tyd van toenemende regeringsinmenging in die dag-vir-dag-bestaan van Suid-Afrika se swart bevolking.

Sleutelwoorde: almanak, Berlynse Sending, jaarboek, koerant, Noord-Sotho, propaganda, Transvaal, tydskrif

1. Introduction

Researchers of the history of Christian missions in South Africa are relatively well informed about the value of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century periodicals that missionary societies distributed in their home countries amongst supporters of their work abroad.² This study introduces periodicals that have, up till today, been rather underutilised in research: the Berlin Missionary Society's missionary

2 The following are examples of South African researchers who made ample use of missionary periodicals like the *Berliner Missionsberichte* (Berlin Mission Reportage) in their studies: DW van der Merwe, Die geskiedenis van die Berlynse Sendinggenootskap in Transvaal, 1860–1900, *Argieffjaarboek vir Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedenis*, Deel I (Pretoria, 1984); DW van der Merwe, Die Berlynse Sendinggenootskap en Kerkstigting in Transvaal, 1904–1962, *Argieffjaarboek vir Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedenis*, Deel II (Pretoria, 1987); A Kirkaldy, *Capturing the soul. The Whavenda and the missionaries* (Protea, 2008). The following sources are examples of collections focusing specifically on missionary periodical publications: F Jenz & H Acke (eds), *Missions and media* (Stuttgart, 2013); J Becker & K Stornig (eds), *Menschen – Bilder – Eine Welt. Ordnungen von Vielfalt in der religiösen Publizistik um 1900* (Göttingen, 2018). The following book includes several chapters discussing English-language missionary publications in South Africa: D Finkelstein, D Johnson & C Davis (eds), *The Edinburgh companion to British colonial periodicals* (Edinburgh, 2024).

propaganda³ media for local (mostly black) South African Christians in the northern parts of South Africa during the first half of the twentieth century. Two missionary publications that originated in South Africa and were created for South African audiences will be discussed: the *Moxwera wa Babaso* (Friend of the Black People), hereafter referred to as *Moxwera*, and the *Thsupa Mabaka a Kereke* (Highlight/Point Out the News of the Church), hereafter referred to as *Thsupa*. *Moxwera* was a monthly newspaper publication while *Thsupa* was a series of almanacs-cum-yearbooks annually printed for the Transvaal⁴ Berlin Mission Church in South Africa. The history of the periodicals, their content as well as some of the authors that were involved in the founding and maintaining of the publications, will be introduced. Informed by the work of Felicity Jenz and Hanna Acke,⁵ the study also discusses how the structure of both publications contributed to positioning them as carriers of missionary propaganda. Considering that neither of these publications have nearly been utilised to capacity by researchers to date, the availability and accessibility of these resources, their condition and requirements for their conservation are also mentioned.

2. Berlin Missionary printing works

In 1880 the Berlin Missionary Society (hereafter BMS) initiated a printing project to provide the different African communities of the Transvaal with reading materials that appeared in their native tongues.⁶ Most of this material was produced in Northern Sotho,⁷ but some also in Tshivenda, the language of the communities

3 It is debatable whether missionary periodicals which were, in Barringer's words, the "public relations tools" of missionary societies, should be categorised as propaganda media *in toto*. As Acke and Jenz affirm, these publications had the dual purpose of informing and influencing. See T Barringer, "From beyond Alpine snows to homes of the East" – a journey through missionary periodicals. The Missionary Periodicals Database Project, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 26(4), 2002 p 169; and F Jenz & H Acke, *Missions and Media* (Stuttgart, 2013), pp 9–12. In this article it will be argued that the extent to which information could be selected, formulated and folded into the mission church paradigm by authors of the periodicals aimed at the Africans in the mission field, implies a degree of bias which justifies the use of the term propaganda.

4 Transvaal refers to the territory north of the Vaal River which constituted a Boer Republic in the second half of the nineteenth century and which became the northern-most of the four provinces of South Africa in the twentieth century (the other three being Free State, Natal and Cape Provinces). After apartheid the Transvaal was dissolved into four new provinces: Gauteng, North-West, Mpumalanga, and Limpopo.

5 F Jenz & H Acke (eds), *Missions and media* (Stuttgart, 2013), pp 9–15.

6 SPP Mminele, "The Berlin Lutheran missionary enterprise at Botshabelo, 1865–1955: An historical-educational study" (MEd dissertation, University of the North), 1983, p 93.

7 For the purposes of this study, the language is referred to as Northern Sotho because of the location in which it was predominantly spoken. In early twentieth-century accounts it was also referred

in the northern-most parts of South Africa. By 1882, the printing press at the Berlin Mission's training facility Botshabelo (near Middelburg in the present-day province Mpumalanga) was almost ready to function as an independent entity, as it had both a printing and bookbinding section. This project intended to encourage a reading culture within the Transvaal and asserted the status of Botshabelo as the pinnacle of the BMS's educational operations in the Transvaal.⁸

Linda Zöllner and Hans Heese regard the era from 1866 until the conclusion of the nineteenth century as the "golden years" of the BMS.⁹ Gunther Pakendorf confirms that the era before the First World War was the ground-breaking years for the Society. African scholarship owes some of its achievements to the work that the Berlin Missionaries contributed as linguists and anthropologists. Amongst the contributors in the ground-breaking years was Gustav Trümpelmann who led the translation of the Bible into Northern Sotho.¹⁰ Solomon Mminele points out that Trümpelmann was also the founding author who established the *Mogwera* in 1895.¹¹ This date is confirmed in an article about the newspaper which appeared in the German magazine *Der Missions-Freund* in 1897.¹²

3. The *Moxwera wa Babaso*

3.1 The beginning and the founders

Initially named *Mogoera oa Basotho* (Friend of the Basotho People), this monthly newspaper soon changed its name to *Moxwera wa Babaso* (Friend of the People). Following the changes in Northern Sotho orthography it then became *Mogwera wa Babaso* in October 1930, and eventually *Mogwera*.¹³ The publication is referred to as *Moxwera* in this article as most of the publications investigated here are from the years when it was titled *Moxwera wa Babaso*. The National Library of South

to as Sesotho or Sepedi. In the present-day context, Sepedi would be more commonly used, with Sesotho generally referring to Southern Sotho, associated with the Free State province of South Africa and Lesotho. Strictly spoken, the name Sepedi acknowledges only one of several Northern Sotho dialects. For this reason, some speakers prefer the name Sesotho sa Lebowa.

8 SPP Mminele, "The Berlin Lutheran...", pp 93–95.

9 L Zöllner & H Heese, *The Berlin missionaries in South Africa and their descendants* (Pretoria, 1984), p 17.

10 G Pakendorf, A brief history of the Berlin Mission Society in South Africa, *History Compass* 9(2), 2011, pp 111–112.

11 SPP Mminele, "The Berlin Lutheran...", p 94.

12 A Merensky, Mogoera oa Basotho oder: Der Basotho-Freund, *Der Missionsfreund* 52(1), 1897, pp 1–7.

13 SPP Mminele, "The Berlin Lutheran...", p 94.

Africa (NLSA) only houses the publications from July 1925 to April 1938. Over this timespan, the minimum number of pages per issue was four, and in later years the publication had six pages.

Initially, the *Moxwera* was printed at Botshabelo. Reverend Hermann Kuschke led the project.¹⁴ A missionary craftsman by the name of Gustav Schultz took over from him. The January 1932 issue of the publication includes an article about Schultz and the news of his passing on 28 November the previous year (1931). From this obituary, we learn that when he started printing the newspaper in 1895, he was assisted by two local Africans: Idisa Maputle and Yoel Mpoeste from Botshabelo.¹⁵

Mminele states that the Botshabelo printing project was driven by the desire to provide different African communities within the Transvaal with literature in their native languages.¹⁶ The Venda-speaking people were also included in the vision, yet the Northern Sotho-speaking communities were better accommodated in terms of the number of titles printed in their language. This is also seen in the *Moxwera* as more articles are written in Northern Sotho than in Tshivenda. The motive behind the printing of the newspaper was to create a communication network between the Christians in the northern Transvaal and those who resided in the southern part of the Transvaal. The second aim was to give a platform to the African helpers of the missionaries to showcase their writing skills and share their activities within their communities.¹⁷

The January 1897 article by Alexander Merensky in *Der Missions-Freund* discusses the origins and content of the *Moxwera* in its infant years. Merensky mentioned that *Moxwera* was set in Roman letter format (unlike the Fraktur typeface then still commonly used for German-language printing) and that it was printed by Schultz, here referred to as “the former missionary craftsman”. The content of the newspaper was described to German readers as including spiritually uplifting and educational matters, and events from the everyday lives of the Sotho people. It also contextualised the laws of the Transvaal Government that were geared toward African people – and subjecting them to white rule (although this was not spelled out for the German readers). Merensky added that the publication included advertisements of different kinds from businessmen aiming to familiarise Africans with their shops (and lure them into a modern commodity-consuming culture –

14 SPP Mminele, “The Berlin Lutheran...”, p 93.

15 Anon., PG Schulz, *Moxwera*, 1932-01.

16 SPP Mminele, “The Berlin Lutheran...”, p 93.

17 SPP Mminele, “The Berlin Lutheran...”, p 94.

again, this implication was not spelled out). Merensky also mentioned that the publication gave liberty to African writers to express their opinions.¹⁸

Towards the end of the South African War (1902) printing activities in Botshabelo had to be stopped, although it continued to be a centre for the distribution of published works. Printing activities in Botshabelo were not only stopped because of the War but also because it was apparent that many kinds of printing could be carried out more affordably in Berlin (as will be seen with the *Thsupa* in part two of this article) and London (as was the case with the Berlin Missions' Northern Sotho Bible translation).¹⁹ The Berlin Mission's struggle to find a replacement for Schultz while he was away on furlough in Germany²⁰ also confirmed the challenges of localising the full publishing project in South Africa. However, while it may have been cheaper to print Bibles and similar literature overseas and ship them to South Africa, the *Moxwera*, as a regular publication with local impact, could not be imported. In the 1938 issues of the newspaper one can read that at that stage it was printed at the Morija Printing Works located in Basutoland (today Lesotho). The NLSA website, however, states that the publication was produced from Blaauwberg (present-day Blouberg in Limpopo Province). A probable explanation for this may be that the missionary taking the major responsibility for the content of the *Moxwera* must have hailed from this mission station for some time.²¹ The General Post Office distributed the newspaper from Botshabelo, Middelburg across the Transvaal. Mminele states that the *Moxwera* "remained a popular publication even after the end of the missionary enterprise at Botshabelo in 1955".²² It is a pity indeed that the NLSA does not have copies of these later editions.

Figure 1 is an example of a cover page of the *Mogoera oa Babaso*. Caroline Jeannerat, along with Mminele and Manyike²³ one of the few researchers who has thus far made extensive use of this publication as a historical source, worked on the *Moxwera* publications that were kept in the NLSA, Pretoria Campus. She

18 A Merensky, *Mogoera*..., pp 1–7.

19 Archives of the Berliner Missionswerk, Berlin: BMW1_02787-01: British and Foreign Bible Society – Berlin Missionary Society, 15 September 1911.

20 SPP Mminele, "The Berlin Lutheran...", p 95.

21 The missionary in question was Martin Jäckel, who was stationed at Blaauwberg from 1913 to 1926 (L Zöllner & H Heese, *The Berlin Missionaries*..., p 171). Curiously, the descendants who provided Zöllner & Heese with the information for the publication mentioned many of Jäckel's other books, but not his editorship of *Moxwera*.

22 SPP Mminele, "The Berlin Lutheran...", p 94.

23 NB Manyike, "Should we burn or conserve? A case study of the *Moxwera wa Babaso* newspaper (1925–1938)" (Master's dissertation, University of Pretoria), 2023.



Figure 1: Cover page: *Mogoera oa Babaso*, 1 August 1927, (Source: National Library of South Africa, Pretoria Campus. This is one of the few pages in the newspaper that featured an illustration. Photo: Berniece Manyike.)

recorded that the December 1927, January 1931, and February 1934 publications were missing from NLSA's 1925–1938 collection of publications.²⁴

24 C Jeannerat, *Writing faith in the life of SM Dzivhani*, 2005, (https://www.academia.edu/1965559/Writing_faith_in_the_life_of_S_M_Dzivhani), viewed 2022-06-18. Jeannerat recently revisited her doctoral research and presented it in the following book: *An ethnography of faith: Personal conceptions of religiosity in the Soutpansberg, South Africa, in the early 20th century* (Basel, 2023).

Figure 2 is an image of the book-bound publications *Manyike* located at the NLSA, Cape Town Campus during research for a master's study on the conservation requirements for this resource. In contrast to these neatly bound issues, Figure 3 shows the brown paper covering used to hold together the publications located in the NLSA, Pretoria Campus.



Figure 2: Four Book covers created for the 1931–1938 *Moxwera wa Babaso*.
(Source: National Library of South Africa, Cape Town. Photo: Berniece Manyike.)



Figure 3: Two brown paper covers for 1925–1938 *Moxwera wa Babaso*.
(Source: National Library of South Africa, Pretoria. Photo: Berniece Manyike.)

As seen in Figure 1, the dimension of the newspaper is 277 mm (width) by 437 mm (length). At the very top it reads from left to right: *ngoaga* (year) xxv (25) Middelburg, Transvaal, 1 August 1927, *ngwato boshego* (June: it does seem as if each publication was prepared two months in advance), no. 28 (possibly the volume or issue number). This writing is followed by a border pattern that frames the title information. Within the pattern there is also a table with three columns and in the columns is the following information: the price of the publication, the editors, and who to contact to receive a copy.

At the top, above the title, it is stated that the publication is registered as a newspaper per the standard requirements of the General Post Office (GPO).²⁵ Underneath the acknowledgement is the sub-title: *Goa boifa Morena ke mathomo oa bahlale*²⁶ (The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom), taken from the book of Psalms 111:10 in the Bible. Underneath the sub-title is the main title: *Mogoera oa Babaso*. The information in the first column in the pattern states that the newspaper appears once a month, its cost is 3/- per annum, 3d per publication, and 2/6 per announcement. The second column identifies the editor as G Schwellnus, Lydenburg, assisted by Reverends C Hoffmann and J Trümpelmann. The third column instructs anyone who would like to buy the newspaper to send 3/- to Rev. A Kohl, 68 Tenth Street, Boksburg North.

3.2 An analysis of selected extracts from the *Moxwera wa Babaso*

The first article, as noticed in most of the issues of *Moxwera*, consists of a Bible verse or a hymn. In the August 1927 issue, the verse stated is 1 Samuel 17 verse 23 (Which should have been verse 32 according to how it translates): “‘Don’t worry about this Philistine’, David told Saul. ‘I’ll go fight him!’” Usually, the first article would be followed by international news about wars and major events happening overseas. The international news would be followed by local news. As can be seen in Figure 1, the local news in the August 1927 issue entailed an account of events in the Roman Catholic Church. It is being reported with an undisguised pro-Lutheran bias. The article states that the Roman Catholic Church does not get along with other Evangelical (i.e., Protestant) churches. It elaborates on the tensions and the resistance towards specifically the Lutheran Church. Following this article

25 Why newspapers are registered at the GPO, 2017, <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/entertainment/county-nairobi/article/2001232027/why-newspapers-are-registered-at-the-gpo>, viewed 28 November 2022.

26 The word *bahlale* here is incorrect; it is later fixed to *bohlale* which is the correct term. In her essay *Writing faith...*, C Jeannerat also refers to spelling errors that occur in the publication.

is an obituary of the founder of the *Moxwera*, Reverend Hermann Kuschke, who was born in Berlin on 14 January 1853, started his missionary career teaching in Riversdale in the Cape in 1877, and died on 24 June 1927. The obituary gives context to the work he carried out in GaMamabolo (in present-day Limpopo) and Johannesburg (in present-day Gauteng).

As mentioned above, the first article in the newspaper would usually be followed by international news about wars and major events happening overseas. The January 1937 publication is a good example of the kind of propaganda introduced when the Berlin missionaries translated and interpreted world events for the local African readers. The three international accounts in this specific issue of the newspaper (the first concerning England, the second China, and the third Spain) all pertain to prominent crossroads in the history of the West in the twentieth century. By considering what is emphasised in the reportage and what is not mentioned at all, the bias in the reporting becomes apparent.

The account of England focuses on the abdication of King Edward VIII on 10 December 1936. He left the throne to King George VI. The author goes on to say that many were not pleased with Edward's decision to renounce the throne as he was a trustworthy king who took care of his people.²⁷ What is not mentioned, is that Edward VIII was known for his pro-German sentiments and even pro-Nazi leanings since well before his ascendancy to the throne. The British Prime Minister had placed him under MI5 surveillance throughout and beyond his year as monarch.²⁸ The account of China speaks of the kidnapping of Chiang Kai-shek, who is described as a prominent leader and a powerful man who encouraged the Chinese government to remain united. He is also described as a peacemaker who advocated against war with Japan.²⁹ This version makes light of Chiang's obsession to destroy the communist opposition within his own country. This, many observers would argue, was the actual threat to Chinese unity.³⁰ The account of Spain mentions the ongoing civil war in the country. It describes how the war involved volunteers from many countries, including Russia, France, and England. The article continues to state that, while their governments agreed that

27 *Moxwera*, 1937-01.

28 B Maranzani, Were Edward VII and Wallis Simpson Nazi sympathisers?, *Biography*, 2020-06-16, <https://www.biography.com/royalty/edward-viii-wallis-simpson-nazi-sympathizers-hitler>, viewed 2024-07-07.

29 *Moxwera*, 1937-01.

30 Anon, Xi'an incident, *Oxford Reference*, (Oxford, 2024), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803125214733#:~:text=Chiang%20was%20captured%20by%20conspirators,had%20occupied%20Manchuria%20in%201931>, viewed 2024-07-07.

the Spaniards should be left to fight out the war amongst themselves, support for the communists turned up in Spain via ships and trains carrying arms and volunteer soldiers. The article mentions that around 500 000 people had died in the war at the time it was written.³¹ Expectedly, the Berlin Mission publication steered clear of empathising with the leftist and communist Republicans. Conspicuously, it does not mention that the Republicans and their international supporters were fighting the Nationalists to prevent a fascist dictator from taking over the country.³²

Besides international and local news, the *Moxwera* also provided readers with news about the church and other local occurrences. Staying with the January 1937 publication, the following is a good example of the kind of local occurrences that were documented in the newspaper. One of the articles in this issue is titled, “Ke ba hweditse ba bolela Seisemane” (I found them speaking English). The writer expresses his disappointment at three boys he found speaking English. The writer wanted directions to a certain place and the boys continued to speak in English. The writer felt that they had abandoned their native language. Numerous accounts in the *Moxwera* emphasise the importance of maintaining one’s mother tongue and encourage people to learn in their native language. This was in line with the Berlin Mission’s ideology of *Volkschristianisierung*³³ (more about this under the discussion of the *Thsupa*).

Besides obituaries, regular features in the *Moxwera* included a rubric about what was being taught to the school children in their native language, accounts about the size of the world population, advertisements for teaching posts, and the Literature Commission section (a list of publications and their prices). In some issues, one would also find competitions that were geared towards promoting writing in the African languages. The articles in the *Moxwera* were predominantly written in Northern Sotho; with some in Tshivenda, which makes sense when considering that Tshivenda was the native language only in the northern-most Soutpansberg area of South Africa, while Northern Sotho was more prominent in the greater part of the Transvaal covered by the Berlin Mission.

31 *Moxwera*, 1937-01.

32 AW Palmer, The battle over the memory of the Spanish Civil War, *Smithsonian Magazine*, 2019-10-24, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/battle-memory-spanish-civil-war-180969338/>, viewed 2024-07-07.

33 This entailed that Africans should convert as and within the nations they belonged to. The Berlin Mission did not see conversion as a departure from the converting community’s familiar culture into the culture of the missionising nation. With thanks to Alan Kirkaldy for this explanation. See P Naudé, From pluralism to ideology: The roots of apartheid theology in Abraham Kuyper, Gustav Warneck and theological pietism, *Scriptura* 88, 2005, pp 161–173; G Pakendorf, A Brief History of the Berlin Mission Society in South Africa, *History Compass* 9(2), 2011, p 113.

While the examples provided above give a clear indication of a rather conservative missionary influence on reporting in the *Moxwera*, which would certainly have alienated African readers with leftist political leanings,³⁴ there is also evidence of diversity in the reporting, confirming that there was scope for African contributors who did subscribe to the Christian context in which it was published, to express their views. The *Moxwera wa Babaso* contains articles written by African congregants sharing their experiences on what was happening in the church environment. But these accounts portrayed in the publications were not church related only. For example, some of the articles in the 1931 issues give an account of certain natural disasters that occurred, and the extent of damage caused to the environment. The disasters reported on were both local and international. As of January 1936, the newspaper had its first African editor, Epaphras Magagabise Ramaila, who was a renowned intellectual and author.³⁵ This further widened the scope for African readers' self-expression of their interpretations of their world by contributing to the newspaper.

Caroline Jeannerat illustrates this in her study of the Venda-based author Stephanus Maimela Dzivhani's contributions to *Moxwera*. The reportage included prayers for rain, welcoming ceremonies held at the church for a chief's wife, and the involvement of the church with the Department of Labour in arranging an event for the Venda people. The inauguration of church leaders and accounts of wedding ceremonies held by the church are also mentioned. Jeannerat observes that Dzivhani's writings suggested that the Venda traditional leaders had good relations with the Berlin Missionaries. Jeannerat emphasises that the motive behind the Berlin Missionaries wanting to gain favour with the chiefs and kings is that they felt that this would assist in also gaining the leaders' conversion to their faith. Dzivhani's articles however state the political leaders' involvement in events rather than their control or leadership role. It also shows their relationships with African congregants rather than their relations with missionaries.

Examples of agency amongst the *Moxwera's* community of readers include instances where funds were requested to build a new church. There are also

34 See for example MM Kotane, Dope, *Umsebenzi*, 1930-10-17 for the following commentary on a Hermannsburg Mission Society paper for African Christians: "Does it show us how to abolish passes, poll taxes and other forms of oppression? Does it show us the way to free our country from imperialism? Not in your life ... The missionaries only succeed in muddling our minds and leave us naked and unarmed to be robbed by imperialism." Thanks to Corinne Sandwith for this reference.

35 TDM Skota, *The African who's who: An illustrated classified register and national biographical dictionary of the Africans in the Transvaal* (Johannesburg, 1966), p 54.

appeals made in the newspaper to increase the industrial courses offered to girls as there was a rising interest in these. There are articles where victories are shared of how preaching prevailed against resistance from certain Northern Sotho rulers (an interesting contrast to Dzivhani's reportage from Vendaland). Another article mentioned how a rising interest in carpentry motivated the initiative to build a school of carpentry.

The few examples discussed thus far confirm the historical significance of the *Moxwera* for an understanding of the Berlin Mission's impact on African Christian culture in the Transvaal in the first half of the twentieth century. It would be useful to undertake a systematic longitudinal approach to the content and establish how the ratio of content produced by German missionaries, African pastors, and African readers responding to content in the paper, changed over the years. Such a study promises to yield insights into the dynamics between the church's German leadership and its African congregations, which would become increasingly strained the further they moved into the twentieth century.³⁶ However, all the information that could lead to such potential findings is under threat of being lost as no conservation plan has yet been drafted for the preservation of the newspaper.

4. The *Thsupa Mabaka a Kereke*

4.1 Beginnings and founders

Across the different Christian denominations, almanacs have been a stock item in the arsenal of church publications since the early days of print culture.³⁷ Nowadays, the daily almanac for Bible reading in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of South Africa (hereafter ELCSA) (the successor to the Berlin Mission Church established in the 1970s) can be accessed on its Facebook page or downloaded in PDF. In the twentieth century it was printed as a periodical. In 1930 the *Almanaka* (almanac) which by then had been in print for almost two decades, mostly as a church calendar, without pictures or articles, was terminated.³⁸ In 1931 it was replaced with the *Thsupa Mabaka a Kereke*, an illustrated missionary calendar-cum-yearbook

36 G Pakendorf, "For there is no power but of God." The Berlin Mission and the challenges of colonial South Africa, *Missionalia* 25(3), 1997, pp 255–273.

37 Concord Free Public Library Special Collections, Almanac Collection (1789–1950), 2014-03-22, https://concordlibrary.org/special-collections/fin_aids/almanack, viewed 2024-10-27; CP Morehouse, Almanacs and yearbooks of the Episcopal Church, *Historical magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 10(4), 1941, p 330–353.

38 The 1929 issue's full colour cover was printed in Germany. The rest of the publication was printed by OH Schultz from Middelburg, Transvaal. See NB Manyike, "Seeing beyond the cover: A critical analysis of the missionary periodical *Thsupa Mabaka a Kereke* 1931–1935" (MA dissertation, University of Pretoria), 2020, p 45.

for the African Lutheran congregations in what was then the Transvaal and the Free State. The *Thsupa* would initially be printed in Berlin, Germany and then later in South Africa.

The almanac is a periodical publication with a long history. By the time the Berlin Mission launched the *Thsupa* in 1931, almanacs were still so commonly in use by farming and faith communities around the world that a researcher had to remark in 1934: “One type of publication that does not come readily to the mind of the average person as an historical source, but that is similar to newspapers and periodicals in that it records contemporary history, is the almanac.”³⁹ Today, almost a century later, the twentieth-century issues of the *Thsupa* can serve this purpose as a historical record of print culture for researchers with a command of the Sotho languages, Tshivenda and Afrikaans.

Compared to the *Moxwera*, the *Thsupa*'s content was less detailed, its news having been harvested less frequently. It also had less scope for contributions by members of the faith community itself. Indeed, its whole outlook and purpose was more top-down and institutional, and thus it had left fewer polemical and polyphonic traces than the *Moxwera*. But unlike the *Moxwera* in its poorly preserved state, the twentieth-century copies of the *Thsupa* could be digitised with funding from the German Research Association (DFG). As from 2015 it is readily available for use by any researcher with internet access. It was included in the open access online database, the *Hoffmann Collection of Cultural Knowledge*, launched in 2015 and maintained by the library of the Humboldt-University-Berlin. Missionary Carl Adolf Hoffmann was a prolific writer and the editor of the *Thsupa* from 1931 to 1935, which explains why the digitisation of the periodical could be included in this online collection of his papers.

The copies of the Berlin Mission Church's almanac-yearbook which were used to create the digital, online version for the *Hoffmann Collection*, are reposed in the library of the Berliner Missionswerk in Berlin. Ironically, in the era prior to digitisation, while the *Thsupa*, printed for South African readers in local languages, was preserved in Germany, the German-language monthly periodical of the Berlin Mission aimed at German supporters in Europe, was readily accessible to researchers in South Africa. Between the UNISA and the University of Pretoria libraries, an almost complete set of original *Berliner Missionsberichte* (they appeared from 1828 to 1940) is at the disposal of researchers with a command of German and the ability to read the old Fraktur typeface. Like the *Moxwera*, they

39 E Jerabek, Almanacs as historical sources, *Minnesota history* 15(4), 1934, p 444.

are in a frail condition, with pieces of paper crumbling off every time a volume is taken from the shelf. The Library of the Berliner Missionswerk recently made a digitised version available on their website, along with the periodical's post-Second World War successor, *Der Ruf*, which is not available in South African libraries.⁴⁰ If researchers could be encouraged rather to work from the digitised versions, the hard copies of the *Berliner Missionsberichte* in the UNISA and Pretoria University libraries can be protected from unnecessary further wear and tear, but the institutions will have to be convinced of the continued importance of preserving them.

Tracing back to the print culture of eighteenth-century European societies, João Lisboa mentions that almanacs were useful for people who would not have access to any other form of reading material.⁴¹ In this regard, the *Thsupa*, targeting a community of first- or second-generation [textually] literate African Christians, resemble the eighteenth-century purpose of European almanacs. Almanacs may not have included as many different voices from the community as a newspaper, but they reached a broad audience. The *Thsupa* had a print run of approximately three thousand copies per year.⁴² Lisboa explains the longevity of the almanac as a periodical in the Western world by referring to its intention to be accessible to peasants who had no means to purchase other books, and that it served the purpose of guiding them through their daily routines. The same can be imagined of the Berlin Mission's *Thsupa* readers who, by the 1930s, did not have much exposure to other forms of documentation – especially in the far northern Transvaal. But even as these circumstances changed (by the 1950s Berlin Mission Church congregants in these areas had access to “inflammatory pamphlets they receive from their folks in the city”),⁴³ the *Thsupa* continued to serve its purpose as a regulating mechanism within the church. Once the Berlin Mission Church became independent in the 1970s, ELCISA still continued to print an almanac for their congregations.

This makes sense when we remind ourselves that the heart of an almanac is the annual calendar. Throughout the centuries, the calendar told members of farming

40 Landeskirchliche Bibliothek Berlin-Brandenburg-schlesische Oberlausitz, *Berliner Missionsberichte*, <https://redstorage.gemeinsam.ekbo.de/d/7e53f6a4bdfa46d896da/>, viewed 2024-08-31.

41 JL Lisboa, Popular knowledge in the 18th century almanacs, *History of European ideas* 11(1–6), 1989, p 509.

42 NB Manyike, “Seeing beyond the cover...”, p 3.

43 Kirchliches Archivzentrum Berlin, Berliner Missionswerk, 3030: A Dörfer – Missionsinspektor, Berlin, 1955-07-18. Translation by N Thoma. See L Kriel, A space too vast and silent? German deaconesses and the patriarchy of the Berlin Mission in apartheid Transvaal, *Comparativ* 17(5/6), 2007, p 69.

and faith communities when the holidays were, on which days to fast – in short, it provided all the useful information related to public worship.⁴⁴ The calendar was designed in such a manner as to engage its reader daily. It provided planned-out Bible study. This is a consistent occurrence within all the editions of the *Thsupa*. It indicated which verses should be read in the morning and which should be read in the evening for every day of the year. Every year's publication presented a new allocation of verses per day, and the annual special days on the Church Calendar (like Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Christmas, etc.) were provided with dates for that particular year. Once it had become an indigenous Church run by black African Christians for themselves, instructions of this nature were no longer given by German missionaries, but the religious community continued to submit themselves to the discipline and the authority of their faith and the practice of using a church almanac persevered.

The octavo-sized *Thsupa* as it appeared from 1931 to 1970 under the auspices of the Berlin Mission Church, can be seen as a hybrid periodical publication; it combines all the features of an almanac, with some of a yearbook. As Morehouse explains: "Properly speaking, an almanac is a book giving a calendar for the coming year with various data, astronomical and otherwise, while a yearbook is a book published or revised once a year, giving statistical and other information pertaining to the past year."⁴⁵ The *Thsupa* did not include statistics like a typical yearbook, but with its many illustrations and reading material, it was certainly exceeding the narrow definition of an almanac. For the sake of keeping the exploration of the *Thsupa* parallel to that of the *Moxwera* (for which only copies up till the mid-1930s could thus far be located), the analysis following in the coming paragraphs, focuses on the first five years of the *Thsupa*'s existence.

4.2 An analysis of the structure and selected extracts from the *Thsupa Mabaka a Kereke*

With some exceptions and variations, the following layout was annually adhered to in the *Thsupa*:

- cover page,
- one or two letters,
- the calendar (providing the daily Bible verses to read),

44 JL Lisboa, Popular knowledge in the 18th century almanacs, *History of European ideas* 11(1–6), 1989, p 509.

45 CP Morehouse, Almanacs and yearbooks of the Episcopal Church, *Historical magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 10(4), 1941, p 330.

- instructions (on how to post letters, parcels, and money),
- public holidays,
- the changing of the month in the specific year,
- moon and solar eclipse (of the specific year),
- news of the year,
- the time of the rising and setting of the sun,
- news about famous people or popular news about events in South Africa in the past year,
- a list of the residential addresses of the native commissioners,
- a list of black African chiefs (in the Transvaal & Orange Free State),
- a letter about the Berlin Mission,
- a letter/article about matters that influence the society or the readership in some way,
- addresses from the Berlin Mission Pastors (Southern Transvaal, Northern Transvaal and Orange Free State Synods) of the specific year,
- a list of authors.



Figure 4: Illustration of a Biblical scene: cover page of the 1931 Thsupa Mabaka a Kereke.
(Photo: Lize Kriel.)

Not only did this fixed formula, maintained from one year to the next, shape a recognisable Berlin Mission Church identity,⁴⁶ it also presented a specific way of seeing the world, harnessing the congregants into their place in this orderly system: Which province and which district they resorted under, which native commissioners, missionaries, chiefs, pastors and teachers were overseeing them; what qualified as valid history and what was worth knowing, when one should work and when one should rest, what one should read, and even (with notifications about changes in the Sotho orthography) how one should spell. But besides binding them into a very specific South African hierarchy, the *Thsupa* also folded the congregants into a transnational Evangelical Lutheran tradition.

One clearly sees this from the cover pages. The cover page of the first issue of the *Thsupa* (Figure 5) features a colour print (costly, because it had to be attractive) produced in Germany, of the scene in John 20:16, where Mary refers to Jesus as Master. Jesus is thus the first to adorn the first cover of the *Thsupa*. Inside this issue appears the portraits of the German leadership of the Mission in Berlin: Siegfried Knak, the Director, and Siegfried Schoene, the Inspector, trailed by an article by a local German missionary, Gustav Eiselen. Thus, after Jesus, follows the second order, the European leaders. A local indigenous leader, Chief Piet Mohlamme Mathebe, only appears on page 27. From this the researcher can deduce that the ordering of persons and information communicated a certain hierarchy of power to the readers.

The Berlin Mission leadership took it for granted that the founders of their Church in Germany ought to be as important to the African members of the Mission Church as they were to the members of the mother church in Germany. Featured on the cover of the 1933 issue, and then also in an article inside, is *Morêna* Gustav Adolf: *moxale o moxolo wa Kêrêkê ya Luther* (Mr/ Lord Gustav Adolf: the great hero of the Lutheran church). An extension of this assumption then follows in an address by the President of the BMS, KO von Kameke, titled *Tumediso xo badiri ka rena le xo diphuthexo tsa Berlin Mission ya xeso ya Luther kua Transvaal* (Greetings to the labourers/workers from us and to the Lutheran congregations of the Berlin Mission in Transvaal). Following a photograph of Von Kameke, some indigenisation of the Gospel is afforded by the inclusion, just before the calendar section, of an illustration of the birth of Jesus in a style imitating African rock art.

46 H Acke, Missionary periodicals as a genre. Models of writing, horizons of expectation, in F Jenz & H Acke (eds), *Missions and media* (Stuttgart, 2013), pp 225–243.

the church, but also indigenous chiefs and diviners. ‘Ordinary men’ like male congregants were also captured in photographs. Women form an interesting category of analysis because they were depicted as performing either pre-Christian indigenous or post-conversion Christian practices, their attire marking aspects like domesticity, including childcare and subordination to the husband. In this the missionary wives did not differ that much from the African Christian women, except that the latter worked as servants in the missionary households (but that was hardly ever portrayed in photographs in the *Thsupa*). Marriage, polygamy, and monogamy were visually represented in the photographs as commentary on pre- and post- conversion African family dynamics.

When moving from the formal aspects and the visual presentations in the almanac to the written content, it is difficult to comprehend from a twenty-first century vantage point how African people of a century ago could have been attracted to the rhetoric of the mission church. The letter by Missionary Inspector Siegfried Schoene, written from Berlin after he and the Director Siegfried Knak had visited South Africa the previous year, was reproduced in a Northern Sotho translation in the *Thsupa* of 1931. Referring to the congregants as workers (as Von Kameke had also done in 1933; this must be understood in the sense of workers bringing in the harvest for the Kingdom of God), he reassured them that he had not forgotten about them. Then he mentioned how he was encouraged by the work that they had accomplished in South Africa and that they were continuing to pray for those who were ill, and for the ‘heathens’. He then said that he hoped that the Lord would bless them and those who read these letters/words (*mafoko*) so that their inner souls might be strengthened, so that Christ could reside in their hearts in faith. This was followed by quotes from Ephesians 3:16–17 and Psalm 100:2. The tone and content replicate the epistolary style of the early New Testament missionaries like Peter and Paul, so that one can assume that the Mission Church congregants (who were educated in the content of the Bible) would have been able to make such Biblical and faith connections to their relationship with Berlin while reading this letter.

One detects an emulation of Biblical style also in the contributions of Jesaias Letswalo, the African writer who had written the most frequently of all the African authors in the *Thsupa* in the first five years of its existence, with contributions in the 1931, 1932, 1933, and 1935 issues. His parables, while stylistically aligned with the ones he would have known from the Bible, is also reminiscent of African storytelling. He would map out a scenario and give a lesson which could be learnt from. In the part where the lesson was told his voice had an immediacy, expressing a oneness with the readers by his use of the pronouns *rena* and *re*; ‘us’ and ‘we’.

Letswalo's contribution to the *Thsupa* of 1935 is a heart-wrenching parable titled "Ó bolailwe ke mmaxwe" ("he/she was killed by their mother"), playing into the separation of families because of migrant labour. Somewhat surprisingly, the male migrant in this story is the upright son who does not succumb to any of the temptations of the city, while the mother left behind at the rural home is pitiable and inebriated, expecting her son to provide for her as his father had passed away. The son was away for a long time, to the point that the community started to think that he had passed away. However, he was saving money little by little and when he saw it to be enough, he went back to his community. Upon arrival he was met by his sister, and he left his luggage with her, only carrying with him a gift.

When he arrived at his mother's house, she was drunk and therefore did not recognise him. He asked for a place to sleep, and she offered up some space. He then told her that he had something to give her, which was covered, but he said he would do so the next day, and yet he handed it to her. He went to sleep, and she became curious of the content and eventually opened it and found bronze coins. This discovery made her anxious and she started to pace up and down. She then started to prepare for bed but while she was sleeping, she was tossing and turning. She then went outside and there she found a machete with which she killed her son. A few moments thereafter, her daughter arrived in excitement, telling her that her son was back. And they both burst in tears at the realisation that she had killed him. Letswalo gave an elaborate lesson in which he also included Eli from the Bible as a point of reference. This intricate tale calls for further analysis, especially the gendered and generational casting of the characters: upright, hardworking and dedicated children with the male child as the saviour of the family, opposed to a diminishing parental generation, especially the decrepit mother.

The above contributions confirm the paternalist, Biblical direction the Berlin Mission was attempting to give their African congregations via their almanac as propaganda tool. The inclusion of contributions by colonial experts gives an impression of the guidance they also wished to give their church members in secular, political affairs. In the 1931 issue, the government ethnologist Nicolaas van Warmelo (who was educated in Germany)⁴⁹ wrote an article titled "Na Sesotho se xesu se timela ka xo reng?" The title in English means "Why is our Sotho disappearing?" (pp 32–34). He began this text by stating that before white

49 Nicolaas J van Warmelo succeeded Gerard P Lestrade as director of the Ethnological Section of the Department of Native Affairs in Pretoria in 1930. L Kriel, Historical contextualisation, in A Joubert (ed), *Ethnography from the mission field. The Hoffmann Collection of Cultural Knowledge* (Leiden, 2015), p 35.

people came to the Transvaal, Sotho-speaking people did not receive any news and were only exposed to their own language. He stated that when the English came with all their technology (cars, ships, guns and trains), and their language which was different from Sesotho, they were not very keen to learn Sesotho as they said it was too difficult. The Sesotho speaking people then realised that the English-speakers were intelligent, and they wanted to be like them.

Was Van Warmelo chiding these Africans for being conceited, rebuking them for succumbing to the temptation to forfeit their ‘authenticity’ and emulate the English? If so, what was the message behind the reprimand: That Africans should not aspire to such intelligence, or should not ‘try to be clever’ ... or, that they should not make the mistake to think that they could find intelligence by means of abandoning their own language? We have seen that, also in the *Moxwera*, the Berlin Mission promoted pride in and loyalty to the African languages as part of the way they conflated belonging, ethnicity and mother tongue as inseparable fibres weaving humans into communities. Pragmatically, however, through their encounters in the colonial world, Africans experienced English as a useful tool to assert themselves politically and economically, and they also experimented with other possible ways of constituting communities.

Another ethnologist who was trying to educate the members of the Berlin Mission Church, was Werner Eiselen (1899–1977), the son of Berlin Missionary Gustav Eiselen. Like Van Warmelo, he had obtained his doctorate in ethnology (*Völkerkunde*) from the University of Hamburg before the Second World War. Although he retracted on some of his views later in life, Werner Eiselen is remembered as one of the most influential architects of apartheid.⁵⁰ In 1933 he contributed the following article to the *Thsupa* (pp 38–39): “Nna naxa ya South Africa ka tokelo ke ya bomang?” (Who does the South African land belong to?). He began by stating that Africa is a Roman name meaning “the black piece of the world”. He then gave an animal metaphor in which he equated the black people in South Africa to a cat that went to report a dog to the king of the animals, the lion, about its stolen meat. The white people of South Africa are equated to the dog in the metaphor. The lion asked the cat where it found the meat in the first place and the cat failed to respond, and both animals were accused of theft. Eiselen went on

50 A Bank, The Berlin Mission Society and German linguistic roots of *Völkerkunde*: The background, training and Hamburg writings of Werner Eiselen, 1899–1924, *Kronos* 41, p 167.

to say that, like in the metaphor, the land of South Africa belongs to neither black nor white people as none of the two originate from this land, claiming that some of the first people in southern Africa were from Asia.

What was Eiselen trying to say: That black people should accept the way the white colonial government was dividing up land and determining where black people were allowed to stay? Eiselen had been known to the readers of the *Thsupa* since 1931, when he was introduced as one of the most knowledgeable people on the languages and ‘the behaviours’ of the different black people in South Africa by none other than Missionary Carl Hoffmann.

The above exploration of the different kinds of textual contributions to the *Thsupa* include pastoral letters from the Mission ‘fathers’ in Berlin, sermons by local African pastors emulating the style of Biblical parables but addressing pressing issues of the day like societal disruptions caused by industrialisation, and lectures by local white ‘experts’ on how to think about identity and land. It is tempting to try and extrapolate a singular message to the Berlin Mission Church members embedded in the contributions selected for their annual publication. And yet, when reading the South African missionaries’ reportage to their supporters in Berlin in *Der Missionsberichte* of 1938, one detects a more complex position, rather heeding Letsoalo’s prophesies than the colonial experts’ certainties from the early 1930s:

It seems as if all the government’s segregation plans, i.e. the separation of black and white, were intended for earlier, more patriarchal conditions, and that the rapid development of recent years into huge industrial centres will ultimately throw all plans in this regard overboard. The city needs more and more black workers, the countryside [farms] too, and the blacks and their families are to be transplanted to the native reserves! Will the black labourer on these reserves, eventually forced by hunger, be willing to be perpetually separated from his family for 5 to 9 months a year to meet the labour needs of the white man? That is the big question.⁵¹

51 S Schoene, Der ‘neue Zeit’ in unserer Hochveldarbeit von Transvaal, *Berliner Missionsberichte* 1938: 106–7. “Es scheint so, als ob die ganzen Segregationspläne der Regierung, d.i. die Trennung von Schwarz und Weiß, für frühere, mehr patriarchalische Verhältnisse gedacht waren, und daß die stürmische Entwicklung der letzten Jahre zu gewaltigen Industriezentren letztlich alle diesbezüglichen Pläne über den Haufen werfen wird. Die Stadt braucht mehr und mehr schwarze Arbeiter, das Land ebenfalls, und dabei sollen die Schwarzen mit ihren Familien in die Eingeborenen-reservate verpflanzt werden! Wird der schwarze Arbeiter dieser Reserven, schließlich durch Hunger genötigt, für ständig willig sein, sich jährlich für 5 bis 9 Monate von seiner Familie zu trennen, um den Arbeitsbedürfnis des weizen Mannes zu genügen? Das ist ein großes Fragezeichen.” (Translated with www.DeepL.com/Translator (free version)).

5. Conclusion

It is hoped that the exploratory assessment of the form and content of the *Moxwera* and the *Thsupa* presented in this article may encourage more researchers to consult them as historical sources. More so, they need to be studied as periodicals in which the unfolding of missionary propaganda can be studied alongside the shaping of an indigenous African Christian discourse within a mission church. It should be asked whether, emboldened by a broader (transnational, Lutheran) and longer (transcendental, Christian) visuality, the African people who chose to be educated by, and get confirmed in – and remain loyal to – the Berlin Mission Church, had somehow managed to look beyond the rhetoric in the *Moxwera* and the *Thsupa* that stand out as blatant colonialist propaganda. Indeed, the Lutheran way was neither a path chosen by all, nor a path stayed on by all who embarked on it. As from the nineteenth century, and increasingly so in the twentieth century, disputes over land surfaced in relations between missionary and congregation time and again.⁵² Some preliminary suggestions have been made about the possible motivations of Africans who became (and remained) Lutheran in the first decades of the twentieth century.⁵³ A longitudinal study of the periodicals created for the African Lutherans by the BMS may contribute to shedding further light on these questions.

52 A Schulze, *In Gottes Namen Hütten bauen. Kirchlicher Landbesitz in Südafrika: Die Berliner Mission und die Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche Südafrikas zwischen 1834 und 2005* (Stuttgart, 2005).

53 L Kriel, The Lord God is like a cow: Sermons and reports of African pastors and evangelists of the Berlin Mission Church in the Woodbush and Wolkberg area, former Northern Transvaal, South Africa, 1920s and 1930s, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 70(2), 2018, pp 407–433.