

Cast as Written: Protestant Missionaries and their Translation of Molimo¹ as the Christian God in 19th-century Southern Africa

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Abstract

This essay reads the 19th-century Protestant Christian missionary archive in order to explore how it deals with translating the term ‘molimo’ as (the Christian) God. It shows that this work of translation rests upon a binary division that Protestant Christian missionaries make between the inside and the outside with priority given to the former over the latter. This binary division that informs the translation of molimo as God, has the consequence of dissolving the material religion of the 19th-century Sotho speaking people and inaugurating in its place a notion of religion whose foundation is personal interiority. The result of this departure of molimo from the material to personal interiority is the reorganization of the relationship between space and time. The essay argues that molimo’s departure from the material to personal interiority privileges space over time because, reconstituted as the Christian God, molimo gets cast in the language of writing. Writing has the consequence of dissolving an order of life based on the priority of speech (orality).

Keywords: molimo, writing, speech, Protestant missionaries, Southern Africa, translation

¹ This essay follows the old Sotho orthography in the spelling of molimo. The later orthography currently used in South Africa writes moḁimo instead of moḁimo. The essay uses the old orthography purely out of preference for the old over the new orthography.

Introduction

This essay explores the translation of molimo as (the Christian) God by Protestant missionaries working among the Sotho speaking people in the 19th-century Southern Africa. It claims that the translation of molimo as God introduces a new conception of religion among the 19th-century Sotho speaking people. This new conception of religion assumes a binary division between the inside and the outside and accords priority to the former over the latter. The binary division that the new Protestant religion makes between the inside and the outside as well as the privilege it accords to the inside over the outside, commences a process of the dissolution of the religion of the 19th-century Sotho speaking people. This is because the religion of the 19th-century Sotho speakers was defined chiefly by its outward manifestation. Religion, as the Sotho term 'borapeli' illustrates, was what people *did* and not what they believed. The translation of molimo as God inaugurates a new era in which the inside comes to define the understanding of religion. Other scholars have already shown that the binary division between the inside and the outside, and the subsequent preference for the inside that Protestant religion makes, have its basis in the 19th-century evolutionary thinking that conceived of religion along a linear progression from primitive to developed states (Asad 1993). An emphasis on the outward and material manifestation of religion denotes a primitive stage while retreat to a personal interiority announces religion in its higher and developed form. Lurking behind the translation of molimo as God is this epistemic assumption.

The translation of molimo as God has been subject to debate at the turn of the second half of the 20th century. The key concern of this debate is whether or not the Protestant missionaries were correct in their translation of molimo. This debate results in two traditions. The first tradition is affirmative of the Protestant missionaries' translation of molimo as God (Manyeli 1995). It bases its claims on an etymology of the noun 'molimo' as well as on an examination of some poetic work emanating out of the institution of 'lebollo' (initiation). Its key claim is that the Sotho speaking people of the time before the arrival of the Christian missionaries had a notion of molimo as a being who resided in heaven above – therefore as a being similar to the Christian God. The implication of this tradition is that the Christian missionaries did not necessarily bring a notion of the divine that the 19th-century Sotho speakers did not know. The second tradition is critical of this view and argues that the molimo of the 19th-

century Sotho speaking people was different from the notion of God that came with the Christian missionaries. It reaches its conclusion *via* a critical reading of the missionaries' translation work as well as through an examination of the Sotho language structure. This tradition dismisses the missionaries' tendency of seeing in molimo the local equivalent of the Christian God (Setiloane 1986). Its key claim is that a critical reading of the missionaries' translation of molimo as God, as well as a study of the Sotho language structure, demonstrate that molimo and the Christian God are not one and the same entity. It argues that, lurking behind the missionaries' translation of molimo as God, is nothing but the imposition of a Christian worldview on an otherwise local and Sotho outlook of life. The charge it makes is that the missionaries chose to ignore the evidence in their rush to localize Christianity among the 19th-century Sotho speaking people².

While the two traditions offer meaningful contributions to the missionaries' translation of molimo, they completely overlook how casting molimo as written, as the process of translation demands, reorganizes the relationship between space and time, because writing removes molimo from its location among things and therefore from death. The consequence of this is the inauguration of a new order that accords priority to space over time in the imagination of life. This reorganization of the relationship between space and time consolidates a Protestant Christian order built on the understanding of religion as constituted by the priority of the inside over the outside. The Protestant Christian order in question establishes modernity in the 19th-century Southern African Highveld. How modernity emerges as an order underscored by the priority of writing over speech has already been established, though this is with regard to Western Europe (Pickstock 1998). This essay is trying to illustrate this concerning Southern Africa in the 19th century and during the moment of contact with the Christian missionaries. The issue of how the translation of molimo as God facilitates the introduction of a new Protestant conception of religion is what the two traditions, outlined above, are missing. By addressing itself to this gap, the article is trying to broadly speak to those who

² The fact that there is much debate concerning the translation of molimo as God, makes it almost impossible to rediscovering the original religion of the 19th-century Sotho speakers. The possible character of such religion can only occur through a critical reading of Christian missionary sources. This is what this essay tries to do.

have written about missionary translations in African contexts (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Meyer 1999).

The article begins with an overview of the translation of molimo as (the Christian) God by the Christian missionaries, Eugene Casalis and Robert Moffat. It then proceeds to examine the thought processes of this translation. Casalis and Moffat are the two most influential Christian missionaries concerning the translation of molimo as God. By focusing on both these missionaries, this article deliberately seeks to take the conversation about this translation outside the nationalistic/‘tribalistic’ tendencies that have come to constitute the imagination of the 19th-century Sotho speaking people. It regards these people as characterized by commonalities and not by the essentialized differences that define the language of colonial modernity. It reflects on the translation by the missionaries of molimo as God at a time in South Africa wherein decolonization of both society and politics has become the battle cry (Heleta 2016; Pillay & Kathard 2015). Its point of departure is that decolonization will have to take seriously the role of religion in the constitution of modern African subjectivities if it is to become a success.

From Molimo to the Christian God: Missionaries and the Work of Translation in the 19th-century Southern African Highveld

It can be said that one of the chief results of contact between the 19th-century Sotho speaking people and the Christian missionaries from Europe was the translation of molimo as (the Christian) God. This process of translating molimo as God flows out of attempts by the Christian missionaries to localize Christianity among the 19th-century Sotho speakers. Specifically, it is a consequence of their attempts to construct a new expression of belonging that is all embracing and universal. The creation, after all, of universal community accessible through faith, is a founding mission of Christianity. The making of this universal Christian community rests upon a reading of the 19th-century Sotho system of thought in order to uncover in it the equivalent of the Christian God. This exercise unveils and inaugurates molimo, the chief organizing figure and notion of the thought systems of the 19th-century Sotho speaking people, as the equivalent of the Christian God. This discovery allows for a commence-

ment of the establishment of Protestant religion in the Southern African Highveld in the 19th century.

While the Christian missionaries find in molimo the equivalent of the Christian God, it becomes evident through their writings, that molimo and the Christian God do not necessarily mean the same thing. The disjuncture between molimo and the Christian God appears first in a conversation that Broadbent (1865) has with some of his Barolong followers³. In the conversation Broadbent tries to teach them a version of the Lord's Prayer he had translated into Serolong. After reciting the first sentence of the Lord's Prayer, 'Our Father who is in heaven' he pauses and asks his followers who this 'Father in heaven' is. To his shocking surprise none of them, not even those who attended Christian services frequently, knew who this 'Father in heaven' was. Broadbent states that his Barolong followers found reference to 'Our Father in heaven' in the Lord's Prayer rather strange because they had never heard of such a 'Father'. However, when he rephrased the question and asked who the source and origin of all things is, several exclaimed together and said 'Madedemo' (Molimo) (Broadbent 1865:81). That Broadbent's interlocutors had never heard of 'a Father in heaven' must not be allowed to pass unnoticed, as Broadbent would like his readers to believe. On the contrary, the utter dismay of his Barolong interlocutors concerning the existence of 'a Father in heaven' should suggest the existence of a system of thought that is opposed to a Protestant outlook of life. The 19th-century material religion of the Sotho speaking people denotes this competing system of thought.

That Protestant Christianity was trying to find expression within a context of a competing epistemic system is further evident in the work of Moffat. Documenting his own account of the translation of molimo as God, Moffat (1842) acknowledges that, among the 19th-century Sotho speaking people, 'Morimo is never called man' (sic). His explanation is that the linguistic structure of the Sotho language does not permit for molimo to ever be referred to as human. Setiloane (1986) has, since Moffat, shown that,

³ This is the period of the beginning of Christianity among the Barolong (possibly those of the Seleka branch). Broadbent, a newly arrived Methodist missionary, describes these men who are following him as his servants (Broadbent 1865:80). The introduction he makes of the Lord's Prayer, therefore, is done to people who are in his company because of work. He is using these men to test his knowledge of Serolong – their language – and to test their knowledge of the Christian God.

linguistically, molimo belongs to the third class on the Sotho table of nouns. In the main, the third class on the Sotho table of nouns designates things describing natural phenomena. Mist and dew belong to this category of nouns that often do not have a plural form. This then, as Moffat observes, indicates categorically clear that molimo is not human, because in order for molimo to be human, it would have to belong to the first class of nouns that designates beings. It is quite ironic, though, as Setiloane (1986:22) remarks, that Moffat would nevertheless go ahead and impose the notion of a being on molimo in his localization of Christianity among the 19th-century Sotho speaking people of the Southern African Highveld. This, notwithstanding the observation Moffat makes, is of paramount importance because it suggests that the location of molimo in the religion of the 19th-century Sotho speaking people, was outside, at the level of the material. This is why this term is classified with things and not beings.

The fact that molimo's location was outside, among things, and not inside (and therefore in the realm of beings), is further apparent in the following note that Moffat makes: 'Morimo, to those who know anything about it, had been represented by rain-makers and sorcerers [the high priests of the traditional society!] as a malevolent selo, or thing, which the nations in the north described as existing in a hole' (Moffat 1842:261).

Moffat is correct in saying that the local populace referred to molimo as 'selo' (a thing) and that the terms 'monster' and 'beast' better capture the notion of molimo as 'selo'. He is, however, wrong when he implies that a reference to molimo as a thing exhibits ignorance on the part of the local populace. What he does not see, or perhaps chooses to ignore, is the fact that the reference to molimo as 'selo' (a thing) presupposes the existence and operation of a different metaphysics that is opposed to a metaphysics of being that underscores the Christian worldview. This essay is of the view that a reference to molimo as 'selo' suggests the existence and operation of a metaphysics of terror. Located outside and among things, terror becomes molimo's fitting attribute. This is because location outside, at the level of the material, signals the presence of a system of thought that accords priority to death, and therefore destruction, as the organizing principle of life⁴. A location among things

⁴ The association of the divine with death in indigenous African spirituality is a point that literature has already established (Mbiti 1990:45). However, the literature ignores the philosophical implications of that association.

suggests the elevation of the temporal in the constitution of life. It is after all in the passing nature of things that life consists. It has nothing to do with backwardness on the part of the local populace as Moffat asserts. The underlying association of molimo with death as the organizing principle of life, manifest in molimo's designation as 'selo', can be seen in the social extension of the title 'selo' to rulers of the time, particularly those distinguished by their military power. This cultural practice of extending to powerful rulers the title of 'selo' borrows from the terror, awe, and reverence associated with molimo. Like molimo, they too are regarded to have the capacity to put to death or to destroy. Setiloane (1986:23) makes this observation with reference to Pilane, the 19th-century chief of Bakgatla.

The other tradition of translating molimo as God is represented by Casalis (1861). This tradition is confident and impatient and pays little attention to contradictions exhibited by the translation of molimo. Instead of placing molimo in contradictions that are rooted in the local context, Casalis sees in molimo a noun and an idea that could not have originated among the Sotho speakers of the time before the arrival of the Christian missionaries (Casalis 1861:48). This is because, according to him, the prefix 'mo-' in the noun 'molimo' can only refer to intelligent beings, while the root '-limo' symbolizes molimo's abode which is supposed to be in heaven above (Casalis 1861:48). Of course, Casalis arrives at the conclusion that '-limo' denotes place, and specifically a place up or above because he thinks that this root comes from the adjective 'holimo', which means 'up' or 'above'. Put together, the prefix 'mo-' and the root 'holimo' would mean the one above or the one who is up or above. However, even if '-limo' in the term 'molimo' would come from the adjective 'holimo' (up or above), it does not necessarily mean 'up in the sky', as 'holimo' can also mean up north in which case it depicts direction. It can further refer to the top of a mountain. The conclusion that Casalis makes, therefore, that it denotes to heaven is not without problems. What is apparent in his reasoning, nonetheless, is that it assumes an evolutionary schema that places the 19th-century Sotho speaking people at the bottom of the evolutionary pile. This is because the 19th-century Sotho systems of thought did not ground religion on the idea of a being, but a thing. For Casalis, religious expression grounded on the idea of a being stands as a marker of evolutionary progress, because it assumes distance from material religion that he seemingly associates with religion in its primitive and infancy stage. He is wrong, because he does

not regard the system he is studying as grounded on the elevation of death as the organizing principle of life.

By locating molimo's origin from without the thought systems of the 19th-century Sotho speaking people, Casalis apparently agrees with his predecessor and possible guide, Moffat. He seems eager to respond to Moffat's chief observation that molimo, according to the thought system of the 19th-century Sotho speaking people, was a thing and not a being. His intervention is that the original idea of molimo is that of a being whose purity as a being has been forgotten over time. This association of molimo with an externally derived being whose purity has been forgotten over time, provides a basis for bypassing the explanations of the thought systems of the 19th-century Sotho speaking people concerning molimo. It provides a basis for the delegitimization of ideas about molimo that are rooted and are affirmative of the religious systems of 19th-century Sotho speaking people. Of what use are such systems if they have lost the very foundation of purity, the notion of a being? Since they have disqualified themselves by allowing a being to become a thing, and by so doing embraced perversions, they had to make way for explanations that appreciate molimo as a being and as a figure of purity. Casalis seemingly feels that entertaining explanations of molimo derived from the 19th-century Sotho systems of thought ran the risk of recycling apparent perversions. He does affirm after all that the notion of molimo was awaiting the arrival of the Christian missionaries in order to regain its rightful status as a notion denoting a being (Casalis 1861:48).

It could very well be that Casalis opts for a strategy that bypasses the local interpretations of molimo in favor of a theory that claims molimo to be externally derived, because he is frustrated by the extent to which molimo is affirmed as outward by the local systems of thought. This affirmation is not only manifest in language, as Moffat illustrates, but also in the myths of origin of the time. As we have already seen, Moffat himself does state that the Sotho speakers of his time thought molimo resided in a hole (Moffat 1842:261). Perhaps Moffat would have done better by saying that, according to the myths of origin of the Sotho speaking people of his time, the abode of molimo was considered to be in the underground, in the belly of the earth. This would have been better than his rather casual and disparaging remarks that betray his own ignorance instead of that of the 19th-century Sotho speaking people. Casalis, too, does state that the underground was considered to be the abode of the spirits, and therefore of balimo (the ancestors) and molimo (Casalis 1861:247).

The reference to the underground as the abode of molimo does not only suggest creation from below and not from above, as Setiloane (1986) remarks, but rather cements the view that the Sotho speaking people of the 19th century considered molimo to be outside and with things and not beings. This is probably why Casalis opts for a theory of molimo as externally derived. He realizes that the religion of his interlocutors is a deeply material one. His option in this case is to entirely abandon the local systems of thought in order to arrive at them from the outside. In this way, he is able to impose the idea of molimo as a being.

Casting Molimo in the Language of Writing: The Dissolution of Orality (speech)

The removal of molimo from the outside, from its location with things and death, sets in motion a far more subtle process of the supplanting of the temporal by the spatial. This is because, once removed from the outside and situated inside as the Christian God, molimo gets cast in the language of writing. This dissolves the priority of orality, and, therefore, speech, in the constitution of the social life of the 19th-century Sotho speaking people. This is because the language of writing that casts molimo as a being, freezes life in space because it is an abstraction from the material and from death. This departure from time absolves molimo from permanent movement and change that location in time and orality presupposed. By relocating from time to space, molimo enters a dangerous terrain of things that are dead by virtue of alienation and removal from temporality. Casting molimo in the language of writing consequently crowns the cult of the celebration of life as dead, that Christianity inaugurates in a 19th-century Southern Africa.

Implicit in the broader move of molimo from time to space is an even bigger process of the prizing of life and death that is observable in the casting of molimo in the language of writing. Writing creates a polar opposition between life and death and presents life as desirable and preferable. This is because writing, as Pickstock (1998) has shown, is primarily opposed to death, because it is opposed to temporality. This is evident, because as a being and as the figure of the Christian God, molimo has to be rescued from location in time, for, as Casalis and Moffat reason, such location can only be indicative of corruption and aberrations. Location in time is tantamount to location in death,

because it is a location in a permanent passage. It is a location in unceasing birth and death in which final victory over death is impossible. This stands in sharp contrast to the Christian vision of final victory of life over death in the aftermath of the Day of Judgment. Casting molimo in the language of writing, makes him/her the guarantor of this new order that lusts for final victory over death: Molimo can only do this by entering the domain of things as dead, space. It has to be understood that the view of death presented here differs from the traditional way of speaking about death in African indigenous religions, in which case it designates a continuity between the living and the dead (the ancestors) (Mbiti 1990; Setiloane 1986). The view of death presented in this essay is philosophically inclined and opens up to existential aspects of African indigenous spirituality that scholarship has so far ignored.

The prizing of life and death makes the future of paramount importance, because that is the time of the realization of the final victory over death⁵. This does not only have the consequence of postponing life here and now, but it foregrounds abstraction as the organizing principle of the new Christian era in Southern Africa. Divorced from temporality, the vision of Christianity, even if it is the vision of the final dissolution of death in the aftermath of the Day of Judgment, can only rely on an abstraction from the temporal and material. Casting molimo in the language of writing therefore inaugurates an order of life that is mainly based in the centrality of abstraction. By so doing, Protestant Christianity serves as the forerunner of capitalism – a system that reduces life to systems of means and ends (Hegarty 2000). Portrayed as the Christian God, molimo oversees an order that elevates the formal and the abstract. This emerging order of abstraction and formality appears to be in concert with and assumes the priority of reason to the organization of social life. This could be the reason why Christianity legitimizes both the logic of the market and the state. Both share with Christianity an orientation towards utility and the life of a project.

Casting molimo in the language of writing, suggests that Christianity emerges in the 19th century and among Sotho speaking people as a masculinist religion. This is because, regarding molimo as the Christian God, requires dis-

⁵ While this article finds the articulation of the notion of African time done by Mbiti (1990) problematic, it certainly agrees with his claim that the notion of the future that accrues with the modern era, presents a radically different conception of time to that informed by the indigenous African spirituality.

entanglement from the specificity of the 19th-century Sotho systems of thought. This process of decontextualization and de-particularization, in order to indigenize from the point of view of the universal and Western European thought, implies an exercise in disembodiment. This is the disembodiment of molimo from the materiality of an order of life premised on the priority of death and of time. The divorce from time that the establishment of universal religion demands, allows for the emergence among the Sotho speaking people of the 19th-century Southern African Highveld of a religion grounded in the word of the Father. Consequently, the localization of Christianity points to the intimacy between masculinity and the emerging priority of the spatial over the temporal. As the word of the Father, Christianity secures an emerging order of life built around the primacy of the spatial over the temporal. That Christianity has historically served as a vehicle for masculinist logic is well established (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983; Ruether 1983). This does not necessarily imply that indigenous African spirituality has no gender problems. It certainly has, as those concerned with the spread of HIV/AIDS in Africa seem to suggest (Delius & Glaser 2005; Leclerc-Madlala 2001).

This emerging Christian order casts writing (in the form of the Christian Bible) as the final authority in matters pertaining to the knowledge of molimo. Knowledge of molimo presupposes authoritative knowledge of the Christian Bible. This relationship with molimo contrasts sharply with that which its location in time presupposes. Time appears to situate experience as the final authority in matters relating to the knowledge of molimo. Seemingly, knowing molimo is something that one acquires over time. One must experience temporality in order to know molimo, because time is seemingly the only arena through which molimo can manifest. The spatial move that delegitimizes experience as the final authority in matters pertaining to the knowledge of molimo, only serves to engender alienation in the relationship between time and the subject. Consequently, it conceals the presence of molimo in time and obstructs molimo's passage in temporality via knowledge gained through experience over time. The priority of the spatial thus can only result in one thing: The production of people who are alien to time. This is what transpires, as writing becomes the single legislator of knowledge about molimo in a 19th-century Southern Africa.

Community: The Negation of Terror

Moving Molimo from the outside to the inside *via* writing has the further consequence of dissolving community, because it is a move in favor of the possible over the impossible. This is the impossibility of ever-realizing community as closure. The impossibility of closure that molimo's location in time signifies, is a terrain of community, because it is a domain for the surrender of life to death and decay, where it can only be experienced as passing. It is in the impossibility of closure that life enters the passage of time leading to eternity. Molimo's relocation from time to space dispenses with this tradition, because it suggests that the life of the collective can be realized apart from death. In fact, this is what molimo's departure to space tries to secure – collective life apart from death and the eternal passage of time. Located in time, molimo proclaims community as the experience of the impossible. As a construct of molimo's location in time, community is the impossible that can never be fully realized, but that must nonetheless be constantly pursued. That community is the experience of the impossible and is therefore not necessarily traceable to the period after the Second World War and specifically to the work of Nancy (1991). It appears to be an ancient wisdom taken away from humanity by the fallacies associated with the modern era.

Separated from death *via* writing, the Christian discourse projects the life of the collective as a possibility but only in the future when victory over death is secured. This affirmation of closure and its postponement to a distant future renders the life of the collective here and now into a fossil, since it can only exist as waiting and anticipating final victory over death. As life in waiting is the life that the Christian discourse imagines, it becomes a life that is preserved because it refuses the passage of time *via* death. It has to be pointed out here that as preserved life, the life of the collective, as imagined by Christianity, can only be life that is lived in the absence of others. This is because, located in time, molimo conjures a view of life that issues primarily from the domain of others and strangers – a view of life as a gift that has to be received from the terrain of others and strangers because it is as a passing gift that time projects life. This view of life contrasts sharply with the Christian imagery of life that demands of the other and the stranger to embrace a life that is devoid of death and passage through time.

By treating the life of the collective as something to be experienced in isolation to death, the Christian discourse in a 19th-century Southern Africa re-

duces community to work in the Bataillian sense of the reduction of life to projects of utility (Hegarty 2000). This happens in two ways: First, community becomes work because, located in the future and after final victory over death, it becomes an end towards which we need to work. This subjects the life of the collective to systems of means and ends in which case it becomes a project. Second, and because in its Christian imagery, it is removed from death and becomes a terrain for the endless application of abstraction to life in the hope of securing a future without the active presence of death. Therefore, reduced to work *via* a rejection of death, the Christian sense of community serves as a forerunner of the emergence of what Foucault calls a population – the reduction of the life of the collective to forms of variables that in the end turn collective life into a target of the modern exercise of power (Curtis 2002).

The embrace and celebration of the life of the collective as dead, points to an even bigger problem. This concerns the notion that the experience of collective life is tantamount to the experience of the self as foundation, which is manifest in preference for the priority of the possible over the impossible – that appears with molimo's departure to space. As this is a move against time and materiality, it is a move that proclaims a choice for the pure and essential. This is a choice for that which offers a sense of permanence over that which is characterized by passage and a lack of durability. It is a choice for the simple and certain over the complex.

Perhaps, what is noteworthy, is that molimo's departure from the outside to the inside as well as all the consequences that this involves, happens through the manipulation of a symbolic structure of signs or language. This manipulative process renders the languages of the 19th-century Sotho speakers into sites for the enactment of the dissolution of death and the elevation of life. This is because the unequal relationship of power between death and life gets embodied in these languages. Since, as Mignolo (2003:669) observes, language is an aspect of who we are, the unequal relationship of power between death and life that molimo's departure from the outside to the inside inaugurates, finds its way into the subjective experience of the world of not only the 19th-century Sotho speakers, but of other African communities undergoing conversion to missionary Christianity. This unequal relationship of power has survived the end of formal colonialism and is with us to this day, as it is inscribed on the body *via* language. On a secondary level, casting molimo into the language of writing has the consequence of fragmenting and freezing what would probably have been dialects into discreet national and ethnic languages.

In this regard, Christianity repeats and realizes its historical character associated with the Protestant revolution.

Conclusion

This essay has tried to argue that the translation of molimo as (the Christian) God by Protestant Christian missionaries working among the 19th-century Sotho speaking people of the Southern African Highveld, removes molimo from its location among things and from the materiality of life. This is because the Protestant Christian missionaries' translation of molimo emanates from a division that Protestant Christianity makes between the outside and the inside. This division accords priority to the inside over the outside and consequently reverses the order structuring the religious outlook of the 19th-century Sotho speaking people. Translating molimo as God inaugurates a new Protestant epistemic posture privileging the inside over the outside, because the process of this translation seeks to establish an order prioritizing beings over things. This emerging order of beings over things that crowned molimo as the Christian God, has to uphold the priority of life over death in the organization of the life of the 19th-century Sotho speaking people. It inaugurates a new era of their entry into a cult of the celebration of life as dead.

The essay has shown that the emerging Christian order of beings rests on writing. Writing establishes the order of beings, because by virtue of its tendency to freeze life in space it is opposed to death. As writing is opposed to death, it delegitimizes speech as the primary mode of constituting experience and as this happens, space takes priority over time. The consequence of this emerging spatial order is the dissolution of community. Community ceases to be the experience of the impossible that can only be encountered in its eternal passage and as something that can only be passed on to others but becomes framed in opposition to death. Opposed to death, community becomes a project of utility and its full realization awaits the final dissolution of death in the aftermath of the Day of Judgment. The translation of molimo as (the Christian) God therefore ushers in a new era in the 19th century in Southern Africa that privileges space over time, writing over speech, life over death, and beings over things and the materiality of life.

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