

# a problem of presence

beyond Scripture in an African church

Matthew Engelke

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## *Up in Smoke*

### *Humility, Humiliation, and the Christian Book*

The simple reading and study of the Bible alone will convert the world.  
The missionary's work is to gain for it admission and attention, and  
then let it speak for itself.

ISAAC HUGHES

IN OCTOBER 1999 I INTERVIEWED Gaylord Kambarami, general secretary of the Bible Society of Zimbabwe (BSZ), an ecumenical organization that traces its roots to the British and Foreign Bible Society, established in 1804. Many churches operating in Zimbabwe, including several independent churches, support the BSZ. Kambarami estimates that since 1980 the BSZ has distributed over three million copies of Scripture, or about one Bible for every four Zimbabweans alive today. Based on these figures alone and discounting distribution by individual churches (to say nothing of copies handed down from one generation to the next), there should be at least one Bible in every Zimbabwean household, Christian or not. I suggested to Kambarami these were impressive statistics, but he was not satisfied. His goal, he told me, is to put a Bible into the hands of every Zimbabwean. "The Bible transforms people's lives," he said. "When you read that book, somehow something takes change in you."

Kambarami shared a number of stories collected from thirty years of work to convince me of this fact. One of these stories has stayed with me, both for the pleasure Kambarami expressed as he told it and for the unusual manner in which it demonstrates a certain kind of investment in the power of the book:

In 1995 I went to the Murewa rural areas to distribute copies of the Shona New Testament. In one village, a headman refused to take it. He said he couldn't stand the Word of God. I said, "Why?" And he said, "Because it pollutes people." So he refused to buy it. I told him that he could have it and just give it to someone else. He said he could only accept it if I allowed him to use the pages of the New Testament for smoking purposes. In the rural areas, you know, people use newspaper and whatever else they can find to roll their cigarettes. I said, "Fine, on one condition: read each page before you smoke." He accepted this, because he was literate. So I left the book with him and didn't think about it very much after that. Then, in 1997, I took a return trip to Murewa area. We had a convention there under a big tent. I was invited to speak, and I told the people how this book could change people's lives. Now, the same man whom I had given the New Testament to smoke was in the audience. Before the closing of the service, he stood and said, "Please, let me say a few words to [Kambarami]." He was dressed smart, in a suit. I did not recognize him at first. He said, "This man doesn't remember me; because when I last saw him I was a drunkard. But he came to our village and persuaded me to take the Bible. I told him I would use the paper to roll cigarettes. But I promised to read each page before doing so, which I did. So I smoked my way through Matthew. And I smoked the whole of Mark too. Then I smoked Luke. I started smoking John, but when I came to John 3:16 [For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life], a light shone in my face. And now I am a churchgoing person. I saw the light."

This is why we try to get people to read the Bible. Even reading it on your own, you can transform yourself. It can transform you. In fact we often say in the BSZ that the Bible reads people. It holds the answer.

The force of Kambarami's story resides initially in the tension provided by the headman, who aims to deny the Word's significance for anything other than facilitating his personal vice. But the tension is soon resolved. We are supposed to recognize the Bible not as hapless object but as humble subject. By going up in smoke—a resonant religious image in the areas where Kambarami and his staff operate—the Bible is sacrificing itself to itself, for the sake of the headman. As the story unfolds the Bible becomes not a representation of the Word but, through a literal inhalation, its presence. That smoke is a key index of the tension is only fitting because it challenges us to define what is central and what is epiphenomenal in this mode of signification. Sending the Bible up in smoke, only to see the

light: Kambarami is playing expertly on the difficulty of separating the significance of the Bible from its materiality.<sup>1</sup>

Using Kambarami's story as a point of departure, this chapter focuses on the issues of presence and representation through portraits of six Christians with deep investments in the power of the Bible. Taken together, they provide a picture of the kinds of semiotic ideologies that have had considerable purchase in colonial and postcolonial Africa. In this they exemplify the kinds of Christians the Friday apostolics argue against. Like Kambarami, these Christians suggest that the Bible is a definitive sign through which God's presence is manifested. And like Kambarami, they assume, and sometimes assert, that the materiality of the Bible functions meaningfully in what and how it signifies.

Like Kambarami's headman, Johane Masowe sent the Bible up in smoke, although in doing so he produced a different kind of Christianity. To understand Johane's motivations, we need to understand what the Friday apostolics position themselves against. The six portraits in this chapter comprise a range of examples of how the Bible is made significant as both word and thing, often in a manner that challenges the conceptual separation between word and thing, such that the question of its qualities is not always openly posed. And yet the Bible as a humble subject—which is how it functions in Kambarami's story—ought to be investigated, in light of the role its physical qualities play in the constitution of this status. The portraits in this chapter show that the book-as-object has been central to establishing its authority as the Christian sign, even as the materiality of this sign has often been taken for granted. For this, indeed, is the dual character of any object: "its extreme visibility and its extreme invisibility" (Miller 1987, 108). It is precisely when the Bible's material meaning is *not* taken for granted—and it never is, not uniformly—that we are prompted to consider how the humility of objects can turn into the humiliation of objects. Sending the Bible up in smoke can be either, and much in between.

The first two portraits, of nineteenth-century Protestant missionaries from Great Britain, give us a sense of the efforts to circulate the Bible as widely as possible in early modern evangelical work. Like Kambarami, these missionaries understood the Bible as an agent in itself—something that could reconfigure the world as Christian. The power of the Bible relied chiefly on its introduction: where it was present it could act by "reading" as much as by being read. The second two portraits, of a Zulu Christian prophet and an Acholi Christian medium, make clear that Christian

reconfigurations were not always according to missionary expectations. Contrary to the suggestion of Isaac Hughes in the epigraph, there is no such thing as a simple reading and study of the Bible. At the same time (and as Kambarami clearly hopes) Christianity has demanded an engagement with the text. This last point is evident in the second set of portraits but is developed further in the third set, which focuses on two African clergymen, an archbishop in the Anglican Church and a Methodist theologian. For them, the book has a tenacity that provides their theological ground, although the ground for each is distinctly different, as is the nature of the Bible's tenacity.

In what follows I paint in broad strokes. My goal is to provide a general picture of how Christians address the problem of presence through their understandings of the Bible's qualities as a sign. I necessarily leave out some important aspects of what defined African mission fields—the economic dimensions, for example, as well as several social and political ones. When I turn to the ethnography of the Masowe apostolics, some of the aspects left out here come to the fore. The broad-stroked picture omits important theological points too. Thomas O. Beidelman (1974, 1982) has rightly noted that historians and anthropologists have often conflated the approaches and philosophies of missions, assuming that Christianity is a monolithic force and Christians themselves a fairly homogeneous lot. One of the crucial differences to acknowledge here, extending discussions in the introduction, is that Protestants and Catholics “have sharply different views on the religious significance of literacy” (Beidelman 1982, 14). Unlike many of their Protestant counterparts, Catholic missionaries have not, in accordance with Church doctrine, presented the Bible as a sufficient source of faith. For much of the period under consideration, Catholics placed the Bible in the hands of the clergy more firmly than the congregation. What's more, not all Protestant churches have emphasized reading the Bible to the same extent. It has often been cast alongside other indexes such as gifts of the spirit and institutional-specific teachings.

At the same time I want to argue that since at least the 1850s the Bible in Africa has become an increasingly significant index of Christianity that has obscured otherwise obvious confessional distinctions. In fact, according to Norman Etherington (1977), the insistence on Protestant and Catholic difference is not always supported by the historical record. In southeastern Africa, for example, there were nine Protestant and Catholic missions from seven national traditions operating among the Nguni-speaking peoples in the mid-nineteenth century. When each began work there were

indeed “marked differences” among and between them; by 1880, however, Etherington tells us, “these variations hardly mattered” (1977, 32, 35). They hardly mattered because missionaries could never define their work by theology alone—if they had time to preach a theology, which was not always the case. African converts and potential converts (to say nothing of colonial authorities) had their own agendas and interests—some pragmatic, some religious. By downplaying historical and theological specificities in this chapter, however, I do not want to deny their existence or reject their importance. Rather, through this temporary suspension of the anthropological sensibility, I want to highlight the discourse of how the Bible has been set apart to lay the groundwork for how the Masowe apostolics approach the Bible in light of its materiality.

If the Bible once defined a paradigm of evangelical Protestantism, it is today something more, something that Christians in Africa have emphasized on their own accord—even, to some extent, in Catholic mission fields and communities.<sup>2</sup> Signs and their circulation are always difficult to control as both objects and ideas (Thomas 1991). The portraits here suggest the Bible has proven a particularly robust and unpredictable sign: robust, in the sense that its presence spread throughout a range of semiotic ideologies; unpredictable, because this was not always according to the plans of those who were spreading it. Even when they are not sent up in smoke, it is important to recognize that “objects change in defiance of their material stability” (Thomas 1991, 125).

PRELUDE TO THE PORTRAITS:  
THE BRITISH AND FOREIGN BIBLE SOCIETY

“Printing,” Martin Luther once wrote, “is the ultimate gift of God and the greatest one. Indeed, by means of it God wants to spread word of the cause of the true religion to all the earth, to the extremities of the world” (quoted in Gilmont 1999, 213). It was the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS), progenitor of organizations such as Kambarami’s BSZ, that did the most to facilitate the actualization of this “gift,” and we cannot present the six portraits without first considering the “scriptural imperialism” (Sugirtharajah 2001, 45–73) Bible societies helped to put into place.

Printing presses were brought to the Cape Colony by the London Missionary Society in 1814 and 1819 (see Bradlow 1987), following on the heels of a concerted effort to provide texts in the emerging mission fields. No organization was more responsible for setting this mandate than the

BFBS. Its “sole aim” was (and still is) “the production and distribution of the Scriptures in the languages of the world” (Fenn 1963, 387). Its advocates were convinced “that the secret of England’s greatness was its reading of the Bible” (Sugirtharajah 2001, 53). The BFBS was not a mission society, and none of its editions (all based initially on translations from the Authorized King James version) contained any exegetical material, notes, or comments. Founders of the society worked under the assumption that if the peoples of the world had access to the book that they would want it and that “study and practice would automatically follow” (Howsam 1991, 3).

There was a growing sense in England at the end of the eighteenth century that reading the Bible was the key to salvation and that those without access to it were, in effect, being denied the essence of faith. One clergyman returning to London from Wales, where the poorest subjects were complaining of their lack of access to the text, declared in 1793, “Is there poverty like their poverty, who have not the Bible of God?” (quoted in Owen 1817, 3). His lament was captured in a well-known story from the time—still told today—of a girl named Mary Jones who wanted to buy a copy of the Bible in Welsh. After working hard to save money, she made the long trek to the bookseller’s, only to find that there were no copies available. Mary Jones became a symbolic catalyst for the evangelicals. It was unforgivable to deny people’s desire—their need—for the book. Mary’s story was retold to children throughout the British Isles. “And if for Wales,” one evangelist said, “why not also for the Empire and the world?” (quoted in Howsam 1991, 3).

Those sympathetic to the goals of the BFBS tried to suggest an innate desire for the book in the “lower races.” John Owen, the Anglican secretary of the society, quoted J. D. Carlyle, professor of Arabic at Cambridge University, who drew on the explorer Mungo Park’s observations among West Africa Muslims, to support the argument of this desire. Carlyle wrote in 1803, a year before the BFBS was founded: “According to Mr. Park, the negroes are proud of their literature, and seldom travel without a book slung by their side. Amongst their books he has perceived the Pentateuch, the Book of Psalms, and the Prophet Isaiah. All of these they prize very highly; and such is the general eagerness to obtain them, that he believes no articles would be more saleable in Africa than copies of the Scriptures in Arabic. He has seen a copy of the Pentateuch alone, sold at the price of one prime slave, i.e. about 20 guineas” (quoted in Owen 1817, 157). Carlyle’s report asserts a natural, almost unconscious, progression toward

Christianity expressed through African desires to read. And not only did West African Muslims already have a penchant for some of the key texts in the Christian tradition, they were willing to pay dearly for them.

It is worth stressing—certainly here, in light of the focus on materiality—that the BFBS and other Bible societies resist the characterization of the Bible as a commodity. Their underlying principle is the provision of “cheap Bibles” (see Howsam 1991), and none makes a profit. But neither do they encourage giving the Bible away for free, “since people do not value what they get for nothing” (Fenn 1963, 399).<sup>3</sup> This makes Carlyle’s report all the more notable. The parallel Carlyle draws between the value of human life and of Scripture is not only a comment on the spiritual worth of the written word, but its desirability as a commodity.<sup>4</sup> It suggests that as part of an emerging ideology of Christianity, commerce, and civilization, the Bible would prove a useful weapon in the abolition of the slave trade. The slave trade might end if there were books to buy instead. In this sense its materiality operated at several levels, indexing it as both the Gospel and a good.

Education was a key goal at mission stations, Protestant and Catholic alike.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, “the domain in which the encounter with mission made its deepest inroads was that of literacy and learning” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 311). Over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, “book knowledge” and “book learning” came to be understood in southern Africa as rooted in Bible study and catechism classes. The Bible’s influence in particular now extends well beyond Christian-only discourses. As in the West (Frye 1981; Jasper and Prickett 1999), in Africa (Hofmeyr 1994) it became an integral part of the cultural landscape, providing a well of symbols and allegories that have shaped social, religious, and political life.<sup>6</sup> The theologian John Mbiti has testified in this respect to the influence of the written word: “The Bible is a lived book and a living book, by the community, through the community, and for the community, whose foundation and goal is God. Nowhere else today is the world of the Bible as real or as alive as it is in Africa. Here, it is being experienced, not as a world of two to four thousand years ago, but in many ways as the African world of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Africa is living in the Bible, and the Bible is alive in Africa” (1994, 38).

Protestant missionary societies established the first schools in southern Africa to bring the Bible “alive” through its reading. The Bible and other religious texts were used as reading primers, further emphasizing the association between literacy and Christian faith. This emphasis on literacy

shaped expectations for the “mature” Christian: “The Christian stress on education, expressed in countless schools and colleges which owe their authority to missionary enthusiasm, derives from the conviction that only a literate Christian can fully enter into his faith and that literacy in the community at large is an asset in the propagation of the Gospel” (Fenn 1963, 403). We see this as well in reports from the time. In 1813 Sir John Cradock, patron of the newly formed Bible and School Commission in the Cape Colony, wrote, “The two great pursuits that seem universally, in the present day, to occupy the attention of . . . the civilized world . . . are, the more extensive circulation of the Holy Scriptures, and the solid establishment of such a system of education as will enable the people to reach and behold the divine light contained in those sacred readings” (quoted in Owen 1817, 505). The promise of education, the promotion of literacy, and the vision of Christianity went hand in hand. They were “beginning to make a decisive difference to Africa by 1850” (Hastings 1994, 243). And they were setting the groundwork for an understanding of the Bible as an agent in itself.

VENN, MOFFAT, AND THE  
TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF SCRIPTURE

Henry Venn and Robert Moffat were Protestant missionaries with a deep commitment to the power of the written word. Their portraits situate the connections among Christianity, colonialism, and textual authority during the early days of the mission frontier. Each made clear his utmost faith in the transformative power of Scripture. Venn and Moffat saw God’s Word as embodied in the physical book. It was as tangible as the thing itself and as fixed as the printed letters on the page.

Venn has been called “the most influential theoretician of mission in the United Kingdom in the nineteenth century” (Shenk 1983, xi; see also Stanley 1990, 66). He was born in London in 1796 to a prominent family in the Clapham Sect, an evangelical group that emphasized the idea of “lived faith” and used their wealth and social position to teach the Word of God through philanthropy. These evangelicals were also “men whose religious life had been transformed by a fresh study of the Bible and who bent their energies to persuading people not only of the truth of the Gospel but the necessity of nourishing their lives at the source of the Gospel in Scripture” (Fenn 1963, 387). In this tradition reading the Bible was an act of liberation and salvation in and of itself. Venn once said that the

Bible “possessed a ‘living energy’” (Shenk 1983, 31) all its own, an idea that became a defining characteristic of Venn’s missionary vision. It took root in other mission fields too—well beyond those of the Church Missionary Society (CMS)—and resonates in Zimbabwe to this day.<sup>7</sup>

Venn served as clerical secretary of the CMS from 1841 to 1872. (He never worked in Africa.) The CMS is an organization his father, John Venn, had helped to establish in 1799. It is an independent organization of the Anglican Church, a voluntary society responsible for its own fund-raising, recruitment, and strategies. Under Henry Venn’s charge, the CMS sought “to send out people, lay or clergy, men or women, to preach the Gospel and spread a knowledge of the Bible” (Hastings 1994, 293). Venn tried to recruit with exacting standards; he “wanted missionaries to be known as people of the Book” (Shenk 1983, 30). “The basis of your teaching,” Venn wrote to his recruits, “will be the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible” (quoted in Shenk 1983, 31). Drawing on his upbringing in the Clapham Sect, Venn stressed the idea that the Bible could transform any human being into a good Christian. If an African was taught to read, he or she could find faith. It was a missionary’s goal to foster a love of the book through the promotion of literacy. The Bible would take care of most of the rest.

Venn’s larger vision of mission work also stressed “native agency,” the idea for which he is best remembered and, often, celebrated (Hanciles 2002; Shenk 1983; Williams 1990). Just as Africans should be able to read, so too should they direct their own churches. As Venn put it in an 1861 Minute to the society’s members, “It is expedient that native converts should be trained, at as early a stage as possible, upon a system of self-government, and of contributing to the support to their own Native Teachers. . . . It is expedient that the arrangements which may be made in the missions should from the first have reference to the ultimate settlement of the Native Church, upon the ecclesiastical basis of an *indigenous* Episcopate, independent of foreign aid or superintendence” (1971, 68–69). Native agency thus leads to what Venn called “the euthanasia of mission” (see Hanciles 2002). What I want to highlight here is an underlying emphasis on the text in Venn’s project of euthanasia. Venn based nineteenth-century missionary work on the assumption that the fixity of the written Word would translate into a fixity of faith, revealing something of the semiotic ideology that fueled his understanding of Christianity. In that ideology the materiality of the Bible is intimately bound up with the Gospel message it conveys. The goal of missionaries was to make themselves unnecessary, to

create “a native church nurtured in the theology of the Church of England” (Williams 1990, 49). In this project the Bible would act as a theological security blanket. As J. D. Y. Peel has pointed out in his research on the CMS, its members had no missiology “other than that provided by the Bible itself” (1995, 595). A Christian who read the Bible would be a Christian who read the Bible, regardless of the language in question. The text was thought to “fix the spiritual standard” (Venn, quoted in Sanneh 1994, 40), easing anxiety that Christianity could be compromised by “native culture” and become something less than Christianity as understood by the CMS. A similar logic is evident in Kambarami’s story. “Even reading it on your own,” Kambarami remarked, “you can transform yourself.” Without the benefit of an institutional framework, the Bible is a guarantor of Christian continuity—physical evidence of spiritual justness.

While one biographer has argued that Venn did not intend to “Anglicanize” converts and that he was driven by “the immensely strong conviction that culture and context matter” (Williams 2000, 172), it is clear from his writings that the authenticity of any Christian church was to be determined by his specific brand of Anglicanism. In 1857, for example, Venn made the case against polygamy by turning to the Bible. His logic was almost literalist in tone, as if these were self-evident truths, resistant to other interpretations. “After this review of the Scriptural arguments against polygamy,” he wrote in prelude to a lengthy exposition, “there should be no difficulty on the part of Missionaries in plainly stating to the heathen or Mahommedeans that the practice is contrary to the will of God” (Venn 1971, 79). There is a tension here that points to a more general aspect of Venn’s theory: “native agency” should exist only insofar as it coincides with CMS agendas. Native Christians could govern their own affairs so long as they measured up to the “spiritual standard” set by Venn’s reading of the Bible.

The native agency idea also gave rise over time to new group identities. Producing biblical texts in the vernacular contributed to “the ‘national’ enterprise” (Sanneh 1994, 39–40) in several mission fields. Biblical and other religious texts were some of those that “made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways” (Anderson 1991, 36). It was well after Venn’s death (and the undermining of his program) that these dynamics had their most notable influence. But they became part of a more diffuse ideology of mission that shaped both Protestant and Catholic spheres of operation. In Southern Rhodesia, for example, the most influential nationalists had

been educated by missionaries—and many became ministers themselves.<sup>8</sup> As Michael West documents in his study of the African middle class in Southern Rhodesia, “Colonial subjects quickly realized that Western-type education offered one of the few means of rising to a level higher than the one envisaged for them by the European architects of the new social order” (2002, 36). In Uganda, according to Tim Allen, “amongst the Acholi-speakers Catholic history has provided an ideological framework for the formation of a collective identity” (1991, 394), facilitated by the production of a vernacular literature. Religion, writing, and politics have never been far apart; Venn helped to foster their proximity at an important moment of the colonial encounter.

Robert Moffat’s mission career brings us closer to my ethnographic focus; his influence reached as far north as Matabeleland, near what is today the city of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, where Friday apostolics began establishing congregations in the mid-1990s. Moffat too has a paradigmatic status, having been called “the venerable father of the missionary world” by “universal consent” (Morrison 1969, 52). His claims to this title are based more on his perseverance in the field than the widespread influence of his ideas. If Venn was a theorist, Moffat was a practitioner. His portrait rounds out the discussion of mission ideology by highlighting how the creation of vernacular texts and the emphasis on the written word was caught up in the attempt to transform Africans into the subjects of empire. It also provides an example of how a belief in the Bible’s “living energy” was coordinated with action in a mission field.

Robert Moffat Jr. was born in 1795 in Ormiston, twenty-six miles from Edinburgh. Though he was the son of a moderately successful salt tax collector, Robert Jr. had little formal schooling in his youth (Bradlow 1987, 5; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 83). He learned to read, however, and when he left home “his mother . . . exacted from him . . . a solemn promise to read his Bible every day” (Morrison 1969, 28). Moffat’s parents were United Presbyterians. From them he learned that “improvement meant not only industry and thrift”—as demonstrated in the work ethic of his father—“but also good works for those less fortunate” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 82). As a young man he went to Manchester, where he was taken under the wing of the minister William Roby. Listening to Roby’s sermons and reading the Bible every day was the extent of his theological education, but he became committed to the idea of devoting his life to mission.

Moffat joined the London Missionary Society (LMS) and set sail for the Cape Colony in 1817. The LMS was founded the same year Moffat was born, 1795, as interest in overseas mission work started to grow in England. Although the LMS was established as an ecumenical mission simply “to further the cause of the Christian gospel,” within a decade, and with the founding of other mission societies (such as the CMS), it became dominated by Congregationalists (J. de Gruchy 1999, 2). Moffat seemed drawn to the LMS by its compatibility with the tenets of his upbringing: “The African was to be guided along similar paths, learning to read and reflect, to master the practical arts of civilization, to cultivate and sell his labor, and to see the value of industry and charity” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 83).

Moffat spent most of his life at Kuruman, a mission station at the edge of the Kalahari Desert and “the centre of missionary activity in southern Africa from which Christianity would spread throughout the interior” (Beck 1997, 108). He worked at the station over a period of fifty years, 1820–70. In that time he returned to Great Britain only once, for a five-year period (1838–43). It was on this return visit that he wrote his famous *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa* and had his translation of the New Testament in Setswana, which he had worked on for over a decade, published in London. It was also during this trip that he persuaded David Livingstone (his future son-in-law) to join the LMS. When Livingstone left for Africa in 1840, Moffat entrusted him to deliver five hundred copies of the Setswana New Testament to Kuruman. Like Venn, Moffat was committed to the spread of the Gospel in the vernacular. As Cecil Northcott argues, “Moffat’s early ambition upon which depended the fundamental success of his mission, was to translate the Bible into Sechuana [Setswana]” (quoted in Bradlow 1987, 3). This ambition was embodied in the work at Kuruman, evidenced most clearly by Moffat’s procurement in 1831 of a printing press for the station. On this press Moffat printed more than fifty tracts, hymnbooks, periodicals, and copies of Scripture (Bradlow 1987, 26–35). Kuruman became one of the most important outposts for the dissemination of the written word in southern Africa during the nineteenth century.

Moffat spent the better part of the 1820s learning Setswana. “The acquisition of the language was an object of first importance” (Moffat 1842, 291) to him, as it should be for every missionary. But Moffat often lamented the lack of time he had to pursue the vernacular. He explained why to his European audience in *Missionary Labours*: “After being compelled to attend to every species of manual, and frequently menial, labour for the

whole day, working under a burning sun[,] . . . it may be imagined that I was in no very fit condition for study, even when a quiet hour could be obtained in the evening for that purpose” (1842, 292). As late as 1851, after twenty years of operating the press, he wrote in a letter to a colleague, “We are instant in season and out of season in our public duties and in the work of translation, but the progress is slow, very slow” (quoted in Morrison 1969, 46). Even with enthusiasts such as Venn and Moffat, spreading the Word was a long-term proposition.<sup>9</sup>

Reaching the ideal type of Bible-reading Africans involved a series of lengthy steps. The first text Moffat published in Setswana, with Tswana collaborators, was a spelling and grammar book in 1826, which he had printed in London; the first gospel was Luke, in 1830 (Bradlow 1987, 6). But Moffat made clear that collaboration with Africans was not the ideal way to work. Interpreters were always second best to what a missionary could do directly, whether or not the missionary knew the vernacular language well: “A missionary who commences giving direct instruction to the natives, though far from being competent in the language, is proceeding on safer ground than if he were employing an interpreter, who is not proficient in both languages, and who has not a tolerable understanding of the doctrines of the Gospel. Trusting to an ignorant and unqualified interpreter, is attended with consequences not only ludicrous, but dangerous to the very objects which lie nearest the missionary’s heart” (1842, 293–94). Moffat’s ruminations on translation reveal something of the semiotic ideology that informed his understanding of the Bible. His approach to translation was based on the assumed efficacy of the Word. What mattered to him was the Gospel; “fluency” in Scripture could compensate for language barriers because Scripture could, in a sense, speak for itself. If in theory Venn saw promise in the vernacular, missionaries on the ground never relinquished the idea that they knew best and that the power of the written Word could transcend cultural difference on its own. As Kambarami was to say, “the Bible reads people.”

Moffat’s assumption points to the discrepancies between the theory and practice of translation, at least in some Protestant traditions.<sup>10</sup> It betrays the power dynamic that was part and parcel of the missionary’s ideological agenda. Like other missionary translators, Moffat exerted control over African cultures through the manipulation of language in the production of his texts—even as he might have claimed that the Scriptures themselves were directing his work. But choosing the right word for a translation of Scripture has often had the double effect of promoting “Christian culture” and

degrading “native cultures.” John and Jean Comaroff (1991, 218), for example, tell us that Moffat used the word *badimo* (in Setswana, ancestors) for *demons* in his translation of Matthew (see also Dube 1999). This has added an indelible negative cast to the word, suggesting an association between “traditional culture” and that which is evil. Ultimately, Moffat “transpose[d] the Bible into a cultural register true to neither [Setswana nor English], a hybrid creation born of the colonial encounter itself” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 218). What Bernard Cohn has argued in his work on the East India Company and British colonization of India holds true in this context as well: like men of commerce and colonial government, missionaries were “invading an epistemological space” and “could explore and conquer this space through translation” (1985, 325; see also Fabian 1986). The “invasion” was also an opening—the creation of something new and not wholly owned by either colonizer or colonized.

Moffat believed that the best way to instill the message of mission was through schooling. In southern Africa preaching was (and still is) a fundamental medium for spreading the Word of God. Hastings has said that what the first missionaries needed “was a good deal of knowledge of the Bible, a great deal of faith, and a strong voice” (1994, 258). As I highlight in later chapters, the spoken word is still alive and well in Africa—and even in the most devout “Bible-thumping” churches. It would be misrepresentative of the character of African Christian faiths to suggest otherwise. But Moffat recognized that “‘public preaching in a foreign tongue’ was far less compelling than were ‘private methods’ of conveying the truths of the gospel. And, sure enough, systematic education, with a heavy emphasis on the schoolroom, would replace preaching . . . as the primary medium of moral and intellectual reform” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997, 72). To this end he established a school at Kuruman, through which he could work toward his ultimate goal—“spreading the Bible to previously illiterate [*sic*] people, thereby influencing the minds of all men” (Bradlow 1987, 7).

Moffat made regular trips from Kuruman to evangelize in outlying areas. The most famous of these were to see the Ndebele king, Mzilikazi. Between 1830 and 1860 Moffat visited Mzilikazi five times. On the final trip in 1860 he established the LMS station at Inyati, near present-day Bulawayo, with Mzilikazi’s support. Moffat’s relationship with Mzilikazi is captured from Moffat’s perspective in his *Matabele Journals*. He paints a portrait typical for his day of the missionary as hero, layering contrasting images of hardship, boredom, and routine with perseverance, discovery, and evangelical success. Moffat’s portrayals of Mzilikazi give us a sense of

the ways in which African political figures were beginning to understand the power of the written word and help us to anticipate African responses to the impulse of colonial mission.

In one episode from the third journey, Moffat gives us a sense of how missionaries had managed to reinforce—unwittingly, he seems to think—the idea that writing in itself was an act of God, always associated with the Christian faith:

Moselekatse [Mzilikazi] sat a considerable time today in my bed with his back to the front of the waggon. He appeared busy looking into the books which lay beside him. Among these were the Bible, Kitto's *Cyclopedia of Biblical Literature* and some numbers of the *Eclectic Review* [a Non-Conformist periodical]. He admits I am wise and has heard that [I] get my wisdom from books. I suppose he was trying his hand to pick up a little. He turned over many a leaf, and the result of his researches was the picture of a parasol in one of the advertising pages of the *Eclectic*. He seemed quite proud that he had found something that he knew; for he had seen an umbrella before. He places all the books he sees in my possession in the category of God's writings, and even when he happens to see me writing my journal he tells those nearest to him that I am at God's writing. As I am a teacher of God he concludes that everything I do in that way must have reference to God. (Moffat 1945a, 278)

Mzilikazi's employment of a "reverse anthropology" (Wagner 1981; see also Guss 1986) is not far off the mark in terms of the book's symbolic capital. It reinforces a more general point I have been stressing: by 1854, when Moffat's third journey was undertaken, there was an intimate association between God's Word and the materiality of books. That Mzilikazi understood the Bible in these terms is testimony to his political acumen, if not his religious interests. Like an increasing number of Africans, Mzilikazi was beginning to recognize written texts as indexes of political and religious power.

On the fourth journey, in 1857, Moffat reinforces Mzilikazi's point that writing and religion should be always already connected. "He had often wondered why I was frequently found looking on a book," Moffat writes. "I said that I had had very little time to do so on this visit, but when I did, it was to get instruction, for though old, I was still learning the things of God and my duty to Him" (1945b, 128). Moffat does not specify which book, or books, he could be "frequently found looking on." He did not have to. The Bible was among them; it was the elemental, unmarked text, the presence of which could be assumed. In the same journal entry

Moffat returns to the impact of the text on Mzilikazi's worldview, this time in relation to its political possibilities. Moffat had failed to visit the nearby groups of Shona-speaking peoples, who suffered at the hands of Mzilikazi's men in attacks and raids. In the journal Moffat intimates that Mzilikazi was coming to understand something of the old adage, "the pen is mightier than the sword," as if he were afraid that Moffat would expose the injustices done to the Shona peoples by writing about them for others to read—by making them objects of knowledge that could be circulated beyond their originary contexts. Moffat writes:

I expressed my regret, as I had done before, that I had not had an opportunity of visiting a village of the Mashona tribe. [Mzilikazi] tried again to put me off with evasive answers—they were not men worth seeing, they drove away their women from them, etc.—most palpable falsehoods. I replied that I did not care what they did. I only wished to see them in their native towns. He replied, "But you write everything you see and hear." I thought to myself, "the pen and the press, what terrors these are to tyrants!" (Moffat 1945b, 129)

Over fifty years of mission work, Moffat's vision of the political situation of African peoples vis-à-vis the British and the Boers changed considerably (S. de Gruchy 1999). If at times he felt frustrated in his work, sympathizing with those who recognized "the stupidity . . . of savages" (see Bradlow 1987, 3), his sense of Christian social justice placed him in an awkward spot between the colonial and the African. "No missionary . . ." Moffat wrote, "can with any show of Scripture or reason, refuse his pacific counsel and advice, when those among whom he labours require it, nor decline to become interpreter or translator to any foreign power, or to be the medium of hushing the din of war arising either from family interests or national claims" (1842, 207; see also S. de Gruchy 1999, 25). Moffat was well aware that Africans came increasingly to suffer at the hands of white settlers. Moffat, remember, showed sympathy for the Shona at the expense of his friend Mzilikazi. Mzilikazi did not learn to read, and he did not convert to Christianity, but he was astute enough to recognize that the circulation and control of texts would become an integral part of political and social life in the world of his children.

Disseminating the Bible and other texts in vernacular languages shaped local articulations of Christianity in unpredictable ways, a situation

missionaries came to understand with greater clarity over the course of the nineteenth century. Venn and Moffat have been lauded primarily for their goals by church historians (if less so by anthropologists), but those who came after them began to disagree with their principles, feeling that vernacularization was leading African Christianity too far astray from European control. By 1900 Venn's CMS had become a different organization. Venn's desire for euthanasia of the mission "was no longer discussed" (Williams 1990, 229). In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the CMS came under the control of conservative Anglicans unsympathetic to Venn's ideals. Scandals in the Niger Mission, 1880–92, involving the alleged immorality of the native pastorate, fueled the impulses of these Anglican conservatives to wrest control from Africans. "As it was," Sanneh writes, the "CMS permitted the view to harden that Africans were as a race unfit to govern in the church, their lack of moral discipline being something of a natural blemish" (1989, 132).<sup>11</sup> In Moffat's case translating the Bible into Setswana became an unwitting "political decision" (S. de Gruchy 1999, 27) to give the Christian Tswana a sense of authority and legitimacy that made colonial and missionary establishments uncomfortable. Venn and Moffat embodied a tension for missionaries "between their universal humanism and their fear of the degradation of Christianity at the hands of 'others'" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997, 87). As Sanneh puts it, "The real issue is whether missionaries could successfully perpetuate Victorian values where they also successfully promoted vernacular translation and the literacy that went with it" (1989, 5–6). The answer, I would argue, is no. Missionaries failed to account for an important fact: Africans might read the Bible differently. But to understand this point in any depth, I want to suggest, scholars of mission need also to consider the semiotic principles informing these practices of translation and education. Without due consideration of how the Bible was understood to function in these practices, we elide important questions about the agency invested in the mediums of missionization. Close attention to Venn and Moffat on the Bible suggests that any native agency was thought to be guided by a more powerful one—that the Bible itself was setting the terms of the mission encounter. Moffat's case also suggests that an approach guided by "the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible" was never entirely that. But in figures like Venn and Moffat we find the roots of Kambarami's assertion that the Bible can read people. We find the idea that as a sign the Bible is also a subject. I turn now to look at some African responses to mission

and its mediums, men and women who took the Bible and its promises into their own hands, divorcing themselves from missionaries while staying wed to the Word of God.

SHEMBE AND LAKWENA: READING IN THE VERNACULAR

The “success” of missionaries such as Venn and Moffat in bringing the written word to Africans does not mean, of course, that Africans were everywhere reading—still less reading how the missionaries might have liked (Harries 2001; Hofmeyr 1994, 2004). Neither literacy nor Christianity moved as quickly as the influence of textual authority. I alluded to this in the discussion of Mzilikazi. It can be seen as well, from a different angle, in the story of Jim Ximungana, a Swiss Mission convert in Lourenço Marques who established a church and appointed as a preacher a man who did not believe in God but could in fact read (Harries 2001, 418–19). The Bible—and, by extension, all written texts—was identified as a source of power, bearing “the essence of white might” more readily than its role as an elementary reading primer. It is also clear from the historical record that “missionaries often misread any interest in literacy as a sign of religious feeling and a commitment to the values of the mission world” (Hofmeyr 1994, 49). Just as often, it was for the social and political benefits it might bring.

Learning to read in the early days of mission work in any case often entailed disenchantment with the missionary. As I mentioned in the introduction, during my fieldwork, I was told that when Africans first learned to read they picked up the Bible and discovered that missionaries had been lying about a number of things. Polygamy, for instance, has been defended countless times by recourse to the Old Testament, pace Henry Venn. In 1869 David Rood, of the American Missionary Board in South Africa, wrote:

Native Christians when conversing upon religious topics are I think too apt to let the habit and love of discussion interfere with the simple love to know the truth. I have often noticed this with feelings of regret in the adult classes in the Sunday school. . . . Take such questions as polygamy or the demanding of cattle for daughters when given in marriage, they will go back to the Old Testament history, to Jacob and others, and they will say that they find these customs were approved by God and nowhere in the Bible do they find them forbidden, and they will argue with zeal and boldness. (Quoted in Etherington 1978, 157)

And these were not the only African rereadings:

With the help of vernacular Scriptures, for example, Zulu Christians found sanction for their habit of dressing in skins (Gen. 3:21), and began to criticize missionaries for not being properly dressed according to the Scriptures. The same criticism was voiced with regard to church services, with Africans insisting that missionary churches were unfaithful to the Scriptures, which call for dancing and music in worship and praise (Judg. 11:35; 1 Sam. 18:6; 2 Sam. 6:14; Ps. 149:3; 1 Chron. 15:16; Lk. 7:32, 15:25; Matt. 11:17). As for the custom of singing, Africans found in Scriptures a stream in full spate. (Sanneh 1989, 176)

These alternative readings of the Bible and of Christianity inspired a number of African visionaries to take matters into their own hands. “Far from literacy domesticating the savage mind, in many cases its power was appropriated, harnessed, and yoked” (Harries 2001, 417; cf. Goody 1977). Many, such as Mzilikazi and Jim Ximungana, seemed to have little interest in Christianity for itself. But there were an increasing number of Africans who took the missionary message seriously, many of whom became influential Christian prophets and mediums in the newly emerging independent churches.

In many countries, such as Ghana and Zimbabwe, the number of Christians in independent churches matches or exceeds those in the mission churches. I would like to focus the discussion here on two such groups—to fill out the narrative of the Bible’s various influences in Africa but also to provide points of comparison for the later, more extensive discussions of the Masowe apostolics. The first example is the Nazarite Baptist Church (NBC) of South Africa, founded in 1910 by the prophet Isaiah Shembe and today having close to one million members. The second is the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM), a much smaller movement led by Alice Lakwena, an Acholi woman in Uganda, that existed for just a short time in the mid-1980s. In the spectrum of Christian independency these movements stand at significant remove from one another. In each, however, the written word has played a central role. Shembe and Alice suggest the way in which Africans have seized on the idea of the Bible as an object with living energy, which as such can be disembedded from the missionary’s vision of Christianity.

Isaiah Shembe, a semiliterate, made his living as a wandering preacher and healer. Until 1979, when the Nazarite Baptist Church split over a

leadership struggle, it was based at a site called Ekuphakameni (Elevated Place) on the eastern coast of South Africa near the city of Durban. The “loyal” followers of Shembe now congregate at Ebuhleni (Place of Splendor) close to the original headquarters, following a line of leaders descended directly from him. Shembe’s teachings have attracted large numbers of women, a phenomenon that other scholars of religion have discussed in their work on African independent churches (see, e.g., Hoehler-Fatton 1996; Mukonyora 1998a). Ekuphakameni became a “place of spiritual and economic refuge for widows, orphans, and those women previously in polygamous marriages whose husbands had converted to mission Christianity” (Muller 1999, xix). The NBC provided a space for those disenfranchised by the competing forces of mission, the state, and “tradition” in the colonial encounter, constituting itself as an alternative “site of bureaucratic power” (Muller 1999, 47).

There is a large academic literature on Shembe and the NBC (Brown 1995; Gunner 1979, 1988; Kiernan 1992a; Muller 1997, 1999). The church has also produced a large body of its own primary texts (see Gunner 2002). For all of that, I want to focus here on the tension Shembe created between the authority of the written and the spoken word, a “complex coexistence” (Gunner 1988, 204) that characterizes Christianity generally.

Shembe did not set out to establish a religious community, but he attracted such a devoted following that he bought the land for Ekuphakameni (with money donated by the people he healed) sometime around 1915.<sup>12</sup> The growth of Shembe’s church follows a pattern typical in Christian independency. At Ekuphakameni, after a five-year period of wandering, Shembe established a religious regime framed by a number of concerns: (1) the emerging market economy and growing importance of mission work as exemplified by the influence of writing; (2) the continuing importance of “traditional” rites of passage in the constitution of social life; and (3) the developing culture of African townships, in which traditional and modern lifeways were reworked in secular form. Shembe, then, drew from a range of cultural registers to express his message: “Isaiah’s mission was to preach the word of God, as he found it in the mission Bible, to traditional peoples, whom western missionaries had had little success in convincing. Shembe believed that these people could be converted to Christianity and still retain their own cultural ways, many of which were reflected in the Old Testament” (Muller 1999, 25). In this he was perhaps not so different in intent from Henry Venn, although Shembe drew little support from white communities. What backed him in his Christian efforts was the Bible.

Muller argues that “the quintessential issue to which colonial history in South Africa may be reduced, is the contest between the power embedded in the written over the performed or enacted word” (1997, 3). Early on, Shembe recognized ways in which the Zulu Bible could be used to establish his authority at the expense of the white missionaries. “Power, Shembe realized, resided in and with the written word” (Gunner 1988, 204). He drew on narratives in the Old and New Testaments to build a mythic image of the church. He spoke of his followers as Israelites, suffering at the hands of an oppressive regime. He also drew comparisons between the persecution of early Christian communities and his own, citing chapter and verse from the Gospels to reinforce the claim. In this way Shembe was able to build up a “collective consciousness saturated in Biblical mythology” (Muller 1999, 233). Not unlike the CMS in West Africa, Shembe took the Bible as the “supreme paradigmatic history” (Peel 1995, 395). Stressing the similarities between Nguni cultural practices and those in the Old Testament (polygamy chief among them), “Shembe’s community ‘proved’ that in many ways, they were more faithful followers of the Word of God as contained in the Holy Bible than white Christians were” (Muller 1999, 48). Shembe was facilitating the proper functioning of the Bible as a manifestation of the divine.

The influence of the written word is also evident in Nazarite ritual life. At commemorations of the NBC’s founding each March, members tell origin stories. One year a woman addressed her audience to explain how at the founding of the church, in March 1910, a star appeared in the sky (see Muller 1999, 69–71). She went on to explain that Shembe interpreted its appearance after hearing a “voice from heaven” and closed her lesson by encouraging Christians to read from certain books in the Bible that paralleled her own. Muller argues that such large-scale public commemorations are part of “a religious discourse deeply embedded in an array of expressive culture . . . and all authenticated through parallel evidence found in the missionary’s Bible” (1999, 71).

Women’s religious attire has also become a powerful repertoire of signs, both iconic and indexical. According to Muller, “Women have transferred the power and value attached to a central tenet of mission Christian ideology—that Truth is contained in the written word—onto traditional Zulu ritual performance and attire” (1997, 4). The beads women wear, for instance, are referred to as a kind of “writing” that can be “read,” based on their configuration, to determine the status of a certain woman’s spiritual relationship with Shembe. More generally, women associate their ritual

performances—many of which involve strenuous all-night activities, strict taboos, and sacrificing one’s duties as a wife and mother—with doing “good deeds” in the name of God. If a woman performs a ritual well, if she lives up to the expectations of a “true” Christian, she is said to be “writing her name in the book of life” (Muller 1999, 119, 184)—or ensuring entry to heaven. For the women of the church, some of whom are illiterate, this is a tangible sense in which they can harness the power of the written word.<sup>13</sup> These performances produce “a discourse of cultural truth equivalent to the value of the written word” (Muller 1999, 231). The implications of this reversal—from text to performance—are important to note. In this example, the binary opposition between the written and the spoken word breaks down through the play of signs in ritual action. Despite the central role of the Bible as an authorizing presence, “Shembe provides a belief system that emphasizes the experiential and visual rather than written evidence” (Muller 1999, 232). The written word is pressed into service through ritual life. Its presence is marked through other tangible signs, to which it has been connected. The beads women wear and the rituals they perform point back to the Bible.

Alice Lakwena’s Holy Spirit Movement could hardly be more different from the Nazarite Baptist Church. The movement was short-lived and itinerant; its members promoted violence in pursuit of their goals; it was run by a woman. Like the NBC, however, the HSM capitalized in a number of ways on the power of the written word, a strategy its members recognized as quintessentially Christian.

The story of the HSM reinforces the elementary lesson in social scientific work that religion is never free from the push and pull of social and political life. Alice’s movement arose from tensions in the Ugandan civil war in the mid-1980s. The civil war broke out after the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA) deposed the infamous tyrant Idi Amin, and Milton Obote, Uganda’s onetime president, returned to power. Shortly thereafter Yoweri Museveni challenged Obote’s rule. Obote fueled ethnic tensions in the UNLA (the national army) between his own Langi people and the Acholi. This led to an internal coup in which the Acholi, under Bazilio and Tito Okello, toppled Obote and took control of the state in the Ugandan capital, Kampala. This infighting, however, weakened the UNLA to the point that it could not defend Kampala against Museveni’s National Resistance Army (NRA). In January 1986 the NRA, under Museveni, took control of state reins, forcing the short-lived Acholi elite

out of power. In August 1986 an Acholi woman named Alice Auma declared that she was possessed by a Christian spirit called Lakwena. "She announced in the Acholi language . . . that the spirit Lakwena was fighting to depose the Museveni government and unite all the people in Uganda. She said that . . . she was here to proclaim the word of the holy spirit" (Behrend 1999, 3).<sup>14</sup>

Behrend ties the rise of Alice Lakwena to the misfortune Acholis suffered after their defeat by Museveni. The Acholi became marginalized in national politics. Acholi soldiers were tortured; those who returned to their homes in northern Uganda became "internal strangers" (Behrend 1999, 24; cf. Werbner 1989b, 239). These new "strangers" challenged the authority of the Acholi elders on the strength of their service as soldiers for the nation. The soldiers blamed the elders for their dislocation, appealing to the discourse of witchcraft to explain the Acholi's misfortune. The elders saw the returning soldiers as the source of the Acholi's problems and appealed to ritual proscriptions in an effort to reintegrate the war veterans. According to the elders, the soldiers had not undergone the proper rituals of purification (guns made warfare too indiscriminate) so the spirits of the people they killed in the civil war "tried to avenge themselves on the soldiers or their relatives" (Behrend 1999, 29). Modern warfare had given "tradition" more bite, and the Acholi were suffering for it. The Acholi needed "to establish a new discourse and new practices, in order to dissolve the vicious cycle and put an end to the evil" (Behrend 1999, 30). In her effort to resolve the tensions Alice was drawn to Christianity.

There is sensationalism in the story of the HSM: its woman-warrior leader, the active role of more than 140,000 spirits in their mission to topple Museveni (including a spirit of the kung fu star Bruce Lee), the belief that soldiers rubbed in shea butter were bullet-proof, and accusations against the HSM of murder, rape, and looting on the road to Kampala. According to Tim Allen, Alice "became an international celebrity for a time" (1991, 370), especially in the United Kingdom, where her campaign was chronicled in the newspapers. Yet what interests me here and what Behrend documents so well is Alice's emphasis on the importance of texts for carrying out her mission, in particular, the use of the Bible to establish her authority. Behrend notes, for example, that the HSM was adept at using the media to spread their message; in the initial proclamation of her apotheosis, in fact, Alice "demanded balanced reporting" (1999, 3) from the local and international press (see also Allen 1991, 395). Behrend goes on to catalog the numerous ways in which the written word was used:

Alice and the Holy Spirit soldiers were aware of the power of the mass media, and tried to build up a counterforce to meet it by setting up a Department of Information and Publicity within the HSM. It produced leaflets giving information on the goals of the movement, distributed them among the populace, wrote letters to chiefs and politicians, and also collected information. A radio set was available and a photographer took pictures of prisoners of war, visitors, captured weapons, and rituals. The Holy Spirit soldiers wrote their own texts. They kept diaries; the commanders and heads of the Frontline Co-ordination Team (FCT) drew up lists of casualties, recruitments, and gifts from civilians; they kept minutes of meetings and composed reports on the individual battles. And the chief clerk, Alice's secretary, wrote down what the spirits had to say when they took possession of Alice, their medium. Individual soldiers also noted in school notebooks the twenty Holy Spirit Safety Precautions, rules the spirits imposed on them, as well as prayers and church hymns. And pharmacists, nurses, and paramedics noted the formulas for various medications invented by the spirit Lakwena. (Behrend 1999, 3–4)

The HSM did all this, Behrend argues, as “an act of self-assertion, an attempt to have their truth, their version of the story prevail against others” (1999, 4). Behind the spirits, the written word provided a sense of security; with important items such as the Holy Spirit Safety Precautions written down, there was no excuse for failure. The HSM asserted its authority through the creation and circulation of its texts, which were the assurance of their Christian authenticity.<sup>15</sup>

Alice Auma was born in 1956, the daughter of a catechist in the Anglican Church. In 1948 her father, Severino Lukoya, heard the voice of God while reading a passage from the Book of Isaiah. “God shone a bright light on the open pages of the Bible” (Behrend 1999, 130) and told Severino that he would get married, have many children, and prosper in the church. Severino married Iberina Ayaa. But he became selfish and quickly forgot all that God had done for him. According to one version of the story, one day his wife beat him unconscious. His spirit went to heaven. He saw Jesus with an open book containing all the names of the people on earth. Next to Severino's name the word *love* was written. Jesus took him to God, then to Abraham, David, and Moses. It was decided Severino should live. Before returning to earth, Moses gave Severino a book with the Ten Commandments. Severino was then filled with a number of holy spirits that told him one day they would come to earth and possess his child (Behrend 1999, 130–31). This divine sanction became part of the myth surrounding

Alice; she was Severino's chosen child. The Bible and other holy texts—Jesus' book, Moses' Ten Commandments—grounded her authority before she was even born. As permanent markers of truth, they stood in her stead until the day she became Alice Lakwena to realize their promise.

Lakwena is the name of the spirit of an Italian army captain who died in World War II. He stood at the head of the army of 140,000 holy spirits there to aid Alice and the Acholi in the overthrow of Museveni's government. The HSM's military strategy was simple, and allowed a way around the ritual prohibitions that concerned the Acholi elders. As is often the case in possession (Boddy 1989; Lambek 1981; Lan 1985), in the HSM spirits held agency over the people through whom they worked. "The power of spirits is always borrowed, an alien power; it is granted at the cost of denying oneself" (Behrend 1999, 139). When the soldiers of the HSM went to war, then, it was not they who were fighting but the spirits. In this way Alice's army was able to "wage war without killing" (Behrend 1999, 141) and thus work around rituals of purification that had, in the civil war, proved the Acholi's demise.

The spirit Lakwena was the realization of God's promise to Severino, but even after his arrival the Bible and the written word were accorded prominent places in the expression of HSM Christianity. Behrend suggests that reading and writing were "essentially connected" (1999, 115) with the Acholi understanding of Christian faith. She cites J. K. Russell, according to whom Acholi speakers referred to European missionaries as "readers" (see also Sugirtharajah 2001, 69). As a Christian movement, then, the HSM would always need the inspiration of the text alongside the influence of the holy spirits. Alice stressed "education as the path to salvation and a better world" (Behrend 1999, 157). Positions of leadership in the movement were held by the most educated individuals. For the soldiers, "the Bible became the sign of special status" (Behrend 1999, 157). It had been "the key to the Europeans' power" because "missionaries placed the Book of Books, the Bible, at the centre of their teaching" (Behrend 1999, 148). Now it was to help the HSM overthrow Museveni.

The HSM was soundly defeated by government troops in October 1987, just over a year after Alice took up Lakwena's call to arms. Alice went into hiding in Kenya; today her whereabouts are unknown.<sup>16</sup> She blamed the failure of the movement on the inability of her soldiers to respect the rules the Holy Spirit had set down in the Holy Spirit Safety Precautions—a document every member had access to and which most carried in their school notebooks. The written word may have made the rules clear, and

it may have been the key to Christian power. But, as for her missionary forebears, the “fixed text” provided Alice no guarantees.

Independent churches and religious movements in Africa have taken up the text in unpredicted ways. The Nazarite Baptist Church and the Holy Spirit Movement are just two examples. Shembe and Alice did not reproduce Christianities that fit within a missionary mold. All the same, they wrestled with making sense of the Bible’s significance in a manner related to some of the dominant evangelical paradigms. Shembe saw himself as giving proper voice to Scripture; Alice expected her movement to be protected by it. For each, then, it was (re)invested as a sign with “living energy.” In an unexpected rendering of Isaac Hughes’s opinion, it could “speak for itself.” The difference between the Victorian missionary and the African visionary is what each heard when it did so.

#### TUTU, BANANA, AND THE THEOLOGIES OF CRITIQUE

In a postcolonial world where there are more Anglicans in Uganda than in the United Kingdom (Isichei 1995, 1), it cannot be said that “mainstream” religious practice or theology is defined in Western metropolises (Gibellini 1994; West and Dube 2000). “Native agency” is alive and well in what Venn might characterize as a bittersweet victory. And with it, there are struggles over the Bible’s qualities as a sign.

The “native agents” I want to discuss are Desmond Tutu and Canaan Banana. Each has expressed strong views about the role of the Bible in Christianity and in African life. Their positions diverge in nearly all respects, but each reaffirms in his own way the centrality of the written word.

Desmond Tutu was born in Klerksdorp, South Africa, in 1931. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984 for his struggles against apartheid. As a young man he trained at a teacher’s college and taught in Johannesburg and Krugersdorp before joining the ministry. He was ordained an Anglican priest in 1961 and held a number of positions in the church until his retirement in 1996, including bishop of Lesotho, dean and then bishop of Johannesburg, and archbishop of Cape Town. On a number of occasions throughout his career Tutu has referred to the Bible as the pathway to both deliverance and racial equality in South Africa.<sup>17</sup>

Tutu often tells a story in his speeches and interviews that is popular in South Africa. It goes like this. When the white man came to Africa, he held the Bible in his hand and Africans held the land. The white man

said to the Africans, “Let us bow our heads in prayer.” When the Africans raised their heads, the white man had the land and the Africans had the Bible. According to the theologian Takatso Mofokeng:

With this statement, which is known by young and old in South Africa, black people of South Africa, point to three dialectically related realities. They show the central position which the Bible occupies in the ongoing process of colonization, national oppression and exploitation. They also confess the incomprehensible paradox of being colonized by a Christian people and yet being converted to their religion and accepting their Bible, their ideological instrument of colonization, oppression and exploitation. Thirdly, they express a historic commitment that is accepted solemnly by one generation and passed on to another—a commitment to terminate exploitation of humans by other humans. (Quoted in West 2000, 30; see also Engelke 2003, 297)

Throughout his career in the Anglican Church and as chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Desmond Tutu has been committed to building a South African society based on equal rights and, more generally, the termination of exploitation. But in the meantime he often seems to suggest that in the original transaction with the white man, Africans got the better half of the deal. Just as Mofokeng emphasizes the paradox of liberation-subjugation, Tutu suggests that the Bible contains the key to its own resolution. For Tutu, the paradox is resolved by a turning inward: “This reflection on the Bible is determined by his conviction that liberation is its central theme, its hermeneutical key” (Draper 1996, 222).<sup>18</sup>

Tutu’s stance on the Bible can be seen in most of his interactions with the apartheid state. In 1982, for example, Tutu was asked to give testimony before the Eloff Commission, a state-run body established by South African Prime Minister P. W. Botha to investigate the affairs of the South African Council of Churches (SACC), which the government had recognized as an “internal enemy” (Allen 1994, 53). Tutu was general secretary of the SACC at the time. In his statement to the Commission, he began thus: “My purpose is to demonstrate from the scriptures and from hallowed Christian tradition and teaching that what we are as the South African Council of Churches, what we say and what we do, all of these are determined not by politics or any other ideology. We are what we are in obedience to God and in response to the gracious Gospel of his Son our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (1994, 54).

Tutu's strategy was to suggest that as a Christian institution the SACC was not a political body but a religious one and that as such it could not be construed as an "internal enemy" of the state, particularly "by a government which claims to be Christian" (Tutu 1994, 55). He went on: "If anyone were to show me that apartheid is biblical or Christian, I have said before, and I reiterate now, that I would burn my Bible and cease to be a Christian. I will want to show that the Christian Bible and the Gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord is subversive of all injustice and evil" (1994, 56). Tutu's vision of Christianity is not, then, apolitical. As he has said elsewhere, "The God we worship is not a God that is neutral" (Tutu 1994, 158). But the standard against which Tutu measures his "political" activism is set by the Bible.<sup>19</sup> Embodied in a sacred text, the standard is universal. "So," Tutu says, "the Christian must always be critical of all political standards, always testing them against Gospel standards" (1982, 10). In his Eloff testimony he works to resolve the paradox of colonial mission: "The Bible is the most revolutionary, the most radical book there is. If a book had to be banned by those who rule unjustly and as tyrants, then it ought to have been the Bible. *Whites brought us the Bible and we are taking it seriously*" (Tutu 1994, 72; emphasis added).

Six years later Tutu reiterated his claims in a letter to Botha after a turbulent meeting between the two at Botha's offices in Cape Town. The meeting was set up to discuss the sentencing of the "Sharpeville Six," a group of men convicted of murdering a Sharpeville town councillor in 1984. As Tutu left the meeting Botha handed him a letter asking if he and other church leaders answered to God or to political parties, such as the African National Congress or the South African Communist Party. In his reply Tutu said that he was not associated with any political party—that he was a Christian, political only insofar as Christianity was a religion that supported social justice and racial equality. He turned to the Bible for proof: "My theological position derives from the Bible and the teachings of the church. The Bible and the church predate Marxism and the ANC by several centuries" (1994, 147). He then went on to cite passages from 1 Kings 21 and 2 Samuel 12 to reinforce his claim, concluding:

This kind of involvement of religion with politics and the habit of religious leaders to speak to the sociopolitical and economic situation can be attested to as standard practice in the Bible, which provides our mandate and paradigm.

Our marching orders come from Christ himself and not from any human being. Our mandate is provided by the Bible and the teaching of the church, not by any political group or ideology, Marxist or otherwise. (1994, 150)

For Desmond Tutu, the Bible holds the key to both personal salvation and social justice. His arguments are based on a certain Christian lesson—that the Bible transcends culture, that it is bound by neither language nor party politics, and that it sets a universal standard of truth to which all peoples have access. Tutu reads the Bible in this manner as an act of total liberation. So confident is he, so certain that the Bible makes this signification, that he would gladly send it up in smoke if anyone could prove him wrong, if anyone could prove that the Bible is not what he knows it to be.

The late Reverend Canaan Banana had a different take on the power of Scripture, one more closely informed by his understanding of this-worldly politics than Tutu would countenance. Banana was born in Essexvale, Southern Rhodesia, in 1936 and was trained as a Methodist theologian. Throughout the heyday of African nationalism and into Zimbabwe's war of liberation Banana held a number of church and political party positions, including membership on the advisory committee of the World Council of Churches and vice president of the African National Council. In 1977, after serving two prison sentences in Rhodesia for his anticolonial activities, he joined the Zimbabwe African National Union, the earlier incarnation of Mugabe's ZANU(PF). On Zimbabwe's independence, in April 1980, Banana served as the country's president, a position he held until 1987. Although the presidency was at the time a ceremonial post, his appointment was a kind of vindication of his conviction that church and state could freely mix. In his reflections on the role of the church in Zimbabwe's liberation struggle, Banana had little patience for what he saw as the Christian disengagement from the political process: "The Church chose to engage in the theology of silence rather than that of combat, and dialogue at an inappropriate time instead of confrontation. Their theology focused mainly on survival, rather than redemption, and apology rather than protest" (1989, 203).

Banana is less well known on the international stage than Tutu, but in southern Africa he has attracted controversial attention on more than one occasion both before and after Zimbabwe's independence. One of these episodes involved his opinion as a theologian on the role of the Bible in Christian life. In April 1991, while serving as honorary professor

of religious studies at the University of Zimbabwe, Banana gave a paper in which he argued for the need to “rewrite” the Bible.

Banana based his arguments on the role of historical contingencies rather than divine plans. He reminded his audience that the canonical texts of the Christian Bible are the product of human decisions—that the books of the New Testament were decided on in the late fourth century in church councils. This suggested to Banana that the Bible should be understood as a tool rather than a foundation of faith. What matters above all is faith in Christ, not faith in a book: “Jesus Christ is not a product of the Bible. He existed before the Bible; the Bible is a product of Jesus Christ. It is a document that tells us about Jesus’ life and his saving grace. Let us not forget that most of what Jesus said and did is not recorded in the Bible. The Bible is but a bird’s eye view of the life of a great man” (1993, 27). This claim in itself would not necessarily cause alarm throughout the Christian world—even in churches driven by what Sugirtharajah calls scriptural imperialism. Tutu, for example, has always stressed church teachings alongside Scripture in his arguments against apartheid. But Banana goes on to a conclusion that is less well received and in many ways the antithesis of Tutu’s:

Christian church history is a saga of exploitation in the name of Christ, from the subjugation of the European tribes, the crusades to redeem the Holy Land from the infidel, to the subjugation and exploitation of native people in the “new world,” to the colonisation of Africa in the great mission thrusts of western civilisation. This history is long, sordid, and deeply sad: the result of the use of the Bible as a justification for exploitation; the self-serving adoption of one group as “superior” to another. In other words, it can be argued that the ideology of racism has its genesis in the Bible. (Banana 1993, 21–22)

And so where Tutu finds a central theme of liberation, Banana finds a template for exploitation. In 1994, just three years after Banana’s proclamations, almost one million Tutsis were killed in Rwanda, in a genocide that several anthropologists have argued was set in part within the mythic framework of the Hamitic hypothesis (Mamdani 2001; Taylor 1999). This hypothesis was promoted during the era of colonial rule to naturalize the differences between Hutu and Tutsi, marking the latter as “white” and thus superior to the former. Through a specious reading of Genesis 5, the Tutsi were cast as the children of Ham and therefore descended from Noah. While once considered accursed, the Hamites in this new colonial

reading became privileged vis-à-vis the Hutu, who fell outside the biblical genealogy. The Tutsi were “African Caucasians[,] . . . [t]he great civilizers of Africa” (Mamdani 2001, 86). This was used to explain the existence of the Rwandan kingdom—because Africans were thought not to be able to have developed such an “advanced” political system. It also justified the Belgians’ preferential treatment of the Tutsi vis-à-vis the Hutu and the Twa. In 1994 Hutu extremists in the *interahamwe* (lit. “work party” but understood as “genocide”) used this difference as the chief justification for purging the Rwandan nation of Tutsi: the Tutsi were outsiders who needed to be got rid of. Christopher Taylor is unequivocal on this point: “One of the reasons why people in this area of the world have killed their compatriots by the hundreds of thousands is because of the enduring psychological damage that has been done to them by the Hamitic hypothesis” (1999, 92). Had it happened before his call to rewrite the Bible, Banana likely would have used the Rwandan genocide as another case in point for the corrupted state of the book.

Banana derides the Christian text. But it is important to note that his proposal is for the Bible to be rewritten—not abandoned. His criticism is not of the written word per se but the ways in which a particular text has been abused by historical actors. The Bible as it stands is too far gone. What we need now, according to Banana, is “a more universal Bible,” one free from “culture-specific world views” (1993, 17, 30).

Banana has no faith in the Bible as we know it, but he makes clear his conviction that the written word has the potential to foster a more responsible version of Christianity. He wants to “liberate the Bible” from itself, to transform it into a document that can serve as “a unifying element that will help our world to set aside our differences and to learn to live together” (1993, 17, 29). This is a profound and simultaneously perverse confirmation of the message that nineteenth-century Protestant evangelicals worked so hard to instill: in Banana’s theology, the written word is a privileged medium. What Banana suggests is that the Bible has an essence and is, in that essence, Truth itself. He expresses doubt that the Bible in circulation today is authentic. What we have been reading is a corrupted version of the Truth, and so the Truth must be re-presented.

That the Bible has been used to justify projects of political and racial domination is a point that Tutu also accepts; he was frequently critical of the Dutch Reformed Church’s reading of Scripture as a justification for apartheid. But Banana writes as if hermeneutics, liberation theology, or any number of other traditions that might provide a way out of the

“ideology of racism” never existed. His theology has the character of a fundamentalism but a fundamentalism without its proper text. There is, for Banana, a correct way to read the Bible, a just way to read the Bible—only the Bible in question does not exist. Once it does we will be able to “learn to live together” in accord with divine intention. But we cannot read the Truth until its Book is rewritten.

Banana’s theology is riddled with holes and contradictions, but it brings us back to the overarching theme of this chapter. Banana’s argument reinforces the centrality of a concern for presence in the written word. His association between “Truth” and the Bible, as if the two terms are synonymous, as if there were a Bible-behind-the-Bible, is an idea that frames the chapters that follow. I have already broached this in the introduction. Nzira was at pains to make clear that there is a “true Bible” present in Masowe weChishanu services and that the physical one can be used instead as toilet paper. Having presented several ideas about the significance of the text in Christianity, what remains is to provide some provisional conclusions before turning to the more detailed investigation of the Friday apostolics.

V.Y. Mudimbe has argued that missionaries are “the best symbol of the colonial enterprise” (1988, 47; see also Peel 2000, 317). This echoes Beidelman’s observation that “missionaries may be considered the most ambitious and culturally persuasive of all colonialists, attempting social change and domination in their most radical form” (1981, 74). Reading what missionaries such as Venn and Moffat have written, it becomes clear that from their points of view any such projects of social change were not due to them alone but to the books they carried. In their versions of the Christian message—reconfirmed by Kambarami—the Bible is presented as a force unto itself, an agent in the mission fields. When Kambarami says “the Bible reads people” he is making a claim about the object’s agency that resonates throughout the portraits presented here. The agency of the Bible permits it a “status of *being* rather than *representing*” (Drucker 1994, 10). And in any such semiotic ideology, that which “is” can move independently of those who put it into circulation. This independence opens onto the possibility of other modes of signification—from those who challenge the status quo, such as Shembe and Alice, to those who occupy positions of authority in erstwhile colonial institutions, such as Tutu and Banana, and wrestle with the transcendent nature of the Word and the instrumental potentials of the written text.

Throughout this chapter I have referred to the unexpected and unforeseen ways in which Africans have taken up the Bible. In doing so, I hope to have shown that there is no such thing as “simple reading” and that the materiality of the Word provides nothing more than an assertion of stable meaning. The portraits here support Nicholas Thomas’s point that we cannot take “the ‘concrete and palpable’ presence of a thing to attest to the reality of that which we have made it signify” (1991, 176). But there is a flip side to the unpredictability and open-endedness of reading. What unites the portraits is the presence of the Bible and the problem of presence in it. Whether it is smoked, burned, translated, performed, iconically represented, read, reread, or even rewritten, it is, in the end, *there*; something to be reckoned with. What is predictable, then, is that in each of the portraits the Bible’s materiality is bound up with its significance. It is this materiality—this particular kind of presence—that the Friday apostolics want to consider anew.