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The Shona Bible and the Politics of Bible Translation

Although translations of the Bible into African languages aimed to make the Bible available in indigenous languages, they were not completely objective processes. As has already been observed by many scholars (such as Lafevere 1992 and Levy 2000), no translation is free from interpretation. Thus translation studies examine 'the literary and cultural history of translation practices with an emphasis on the role of the ideology of the translator in the praxis of translation' (Tate 2006: 381). Translation does not take place in a vacuum. Each translator is guided by a certain ideology or ideologies. This article discusses the politics of Bible translation focusing on the Shona Bible. Specifically it looks at the translation of the word 'banquetings' into '*mabira*' in the Union Shona Bible, the first complete translation of the Shona Bible.

The Shona language is spoken by over ten million people in Zimbabwe and some parts of Mozambique, Botswana and Zambia.¹ The article discusses the history of the translation of the Bible from the time the missionaries arrived among the Shona peoples in the 1890s to the time when the first complete Bible was translated into the Shona language in the late 1940s. It discusses the political and cultural factors that influenced the way the Bible was translated. How did missionaries' understanding of the Shona worldview influence their translation? How did the translators address the dialectical differences in the Shona language considering that it has five dialects? How did Shona cosmology and spirituality influence translation? To answer these and other questions concerning the politics behind biblical translation, specific biblical examples (here the translation of 'banquetings' into *mabira* in 1 Peter 4:3) are analysed. The article also briefly looks at subsequent 'improvements' to the Shona Bible to see how

translators have responded to cultural and linguistic changes over the years in their use of the Bible among the Shona.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TRANSLATION OF THE SHONA BIBLE

Christianity in Zimbabwe, as in most African countries, is closely associated with colonialism. Although several attempts to Christianise the country were made from as early as the mid-16th century (Weller and Linden 1984: 1), none of those attempts bore any lasting fruits. It was with the colonisation of the country in 1890 that the doors to the effective evangelising of the nation were opened. Various missionary bodies quickly moved in and with Cecil Rhodes' promotion of Christianity for purposes of civilisation, missionary bodies were not only given freedom to evangelise but were also granted large tracts of land for their missionary activities (Gundani 2002: 122–169). These missionaries were very quick to realise that if their message was to be accepted, there was a need for them to translate their foreign message into the language of the people. They then began the process of translating the various books of the Bible into the Shona language.

To understand the history of the translation of the Shona Bible it is important for one to first get a picture of how the missionaries operated soon after the colonisation of the country. The entry of the Pioneer Column of Cecil John Rhodes into Zimbabwe in 1890 marked the colonisation of the country. As soon as the missionaries who accompanied the Pioneer Column arrived in Harare, they divided the surrounding area amongst themselves (Hallencruetz 1998: 24). This was probably meant to avoid missionary conflicts, which occurred later when Pentecostal preachers, like L. Kruger and E. Gwanzura, started preaching freely without observing these missionary boundaries. Some missionary boards complained to the state and the official status that the Apostolic Faith Mission had previously been given was withdrawn (Maxwell 199: 243–264). The Salvation Army went to the north around Mazowe valley, the Catholic Church went northeast to Chishawasha, the Methodist Church went southeast to Epworth, and the Anglican Church went southwards to Seke. The same pattern occurred throughout the country. The Anglican Church and the United Methodist Church concentrated their work in the eastern region of the country, the Evangelical Lutheran Church concentrated in the southwestern part of the country, and the Dutch Reformed Church were in the southern part.

It is important to note that different Shona dialects are spoken in these different regions. In the southern region where the Evangelical

Lutheran Church and the Dutch Reformed Church operated, Karanga is the dominant Shona dialect. In the east, Ndau and Manyika are the common dialects. The Zezuru dialect is dominant in the central region of the country, while Korekore is spoken in northern Zimbabwe (Fortune 1969: 55–67). What this then means, is that when the missionaries translated the books of the Bible, they used the dialect of the region in which they were operating. Not only were the missionaries to translate the Bible, they also had to devise an orthography of the language, since the Shona themselves were then a non-literate society.

The translation of the Bible into Shona happened in various stages. Initially the different mission bodies translated different biblical texts and other worship materials. For example, as early as 1891, Andrew Louw of the Dutch Reformed Church in southern Zimbabwe wrote in his diary, ‘Today I found time to review the translation of Psalm 23, John 3:16 and “Our Father”’ (van der Merwe 1953: 24). Thus bit-by-bit the missionaries translated different texts of the Bible as needed. By 1897 Louw had completed translating the Gospel of Mark into ChiKaranga (the southern Shona dialect). He was also the first to complete a Shona translation of the full New Testament in 1900. Other mission bodies were also doing the same in their designated regions of the country. John White of the Methodist Church in Epworth as early as 1898 published his *Ivangeri ya Marako* (the Gospel of Mark) with the British and Foreign Bible Society, using the Shona dialect of Zezuru. He followed this with a translation of the Gospel of John in 1903, and by 1907 he had translated and published the whole New Testament. As for the Manyika dialect, translation of the Bible into Shona began as early as 1905 when E.H. Etheridge translated the Gospels and Acts, followed by the translation of the whole New Testament in 1908. Another Shona New Testament was also published in the Ndau dialect at Mount Selinda mission before 1910. In fact by 1910 there were four versions of the New Testament in Karanga, Manyika, Zezuru and Ndau dialects (Fortune 1969: 55–67). Obviously because of the different dialects and the different theological backgrounds of the translators, the four versions differed not only in the choice of Shona words, but in theology as well. For example whereas the Catholic translations would translate ‘prophets’ as *masvikiro aMwari* (God’s spirit mediums) accommodating the Shona cosmology to some extent, the Dutch Reformed Church translators decided not to translate the word ‘prophets’, thus transliterating it as *vaprofita* (prophets).

The missionaries soon realised that the parallel translation of the Shona Bible in different dialects did not make sense, neither financially nor

missiologically. Thus from the beginning of the translation of the Bible, the need for a common version of the Shona Bible was recognised. But for this to be achieved there was the need for a common orthography. This process was spearheaded by the Southern Rhodesian Missionary Conference, which began in 1903 (Fortune 1969: 60); it was, however, a mammoth and time consuming task. Several committees were set up by the Conference between 1915 and 1928 with the objective of developing this orthography. It was only after the government decided to teach the vernacular language in schools that the process was accelerated. This saw the engagement of Professor C.M. Doke of the University of the Witwatersrand in 1929 to lead a Language Committee tasked with the development of a common Shona orthography. But although the government, through the Language Committee, was responsible for the production of the final orthography, missionary influence on this final orthography was strong. For example, Fortune (1969: 55–67) notes that the missionaries' earlier suggestion that Shona orthography be standardised on the basis of two dialects, Karanga and Zezuru, was the one that Doke adopted. Also in the process of standardisation, notes on Karanga and Manyika forms of the Shona language were contributed by missionaries, Rev. A.A. Louw of the Dutch Reformed Church and Father Barnes of the Roman Catholic Church respectively (Fortune 1969: 62).

The government approved the Doke orthography in 1931. Although some missionaries had reservations on the orthography, generally they welcomed it. The Missionary Conference then started the work of producing a Shona Bible on the basis of this common orthography. This Shona, in the common orthography, came to be called 'Union Shona' since it tried to present Shona language in a form that unified the five Shona dialects. The Mission Conference left this work (of producing a Shona Bible in Shona orthography) to Rev. Louw of the Dutch Reformed Church. In 1941 his translation of the New Testament in Union Shona was published by the British and Foreign Bible Society. The translation was well received but not without criticism. The problem of dialects resurfaced. The major criticism was that it was essentially a Karanga translation. Father Buck, who tested it with Shona speakers from all the different dialects, concluded that some forty alterations would be necessary in the first two pages alone if the translation was to be understood by the greatest number of Shona people in all regions of the country (Fortune 1969: 63). Be that as it may, Rev. Louw's translation was the first Union Shona translation. After its publication he continued with the translation of the Old Testament in Union Shona, and, in 1950 the whole Bible translated

into Union Shona was published (van der Merwe 1953: 38). The problem of dialect differences was only resolved in this translation by having a glossary of words in other dialects (*Mashoko pane dzimwe ndimi*) as an appendix to the Bible.

THE POLITICS OF TRANSLATION IN GENERAL

Having briefly traced the history of the translation of the Shona Bible, we now turn to look at the politics involved in this process of translation. However, before that let me in this section briefly define the concept of 'translation' and consider some of the factors that influence the process of translation. Peter Newmark (1996: 5) gives a simple definition of translation. He defines it as, 'the transfer of the meaning of a text (which may be a word or a book) from one language to another for a new readership'. This is a simple definition, one that presents translation as a straightforward, objective process. But as Newmark himself acknowledges, translation is not a simple and straightforward process. It is a difficult operation especially in the case of the missionaries among the Shona who were not native speakers of the receptor language. As J.C. Kumbirai (1979: 61–74) notes, translation can be horizontal (from one contemporary language into another) or vertical (from an ancient language to a contemporary language). Because Bible translation involves consulting both contemporary and ancient languages, mainly Hebrew and Greek, it is a blending of both horizontal and vertical translations. The translator needs knowledge not only of the source languages and the source world but also of the receptor language and the receptor world. As sometimes happens, and especially in the case of the translators of the first Shona Bible, the translators did not have much knowledge of the source text and world. A.A. Louw of the Dutch Reformed Church, who was responsible for translating the earliest Shona Bible, had not even completed his basic theological training (van der Merwe 1953: 12). Also, as we have seen above, missionaries began translating the Bible into Shona scarcely a few months after they settled among the Shona. Obviously they were themselves still learning both the language and the customs of the people. Translations of the Bible in English and other European languages were used to produce Shona Bibles and this must have limited the translation to the missionaries' Eurocentric worldviews. The Shona Bible, like other African language Bibles, was therefore a translation of other translations (Mojola 2004: i–iii).

Another factor that influences translation is that there are no two languages that are identical, either in the meanings given to corresponding

symbols or in the ways in which such symbols are arranged in phrases and sentences (Nida 2000: 126). Translation is therefore a decision-making process (Levy 2000: 148–159) making it the most direct form of commentary. It is thus not an objective process as noted above. The translation of ‘a drunkard’ (Greek *methusos*, 1 Corinthians 5:11) or ‘drunkards’ (1 Corinthians 6:10) in the Union Shona is a case in point here. The Shona Bible translates these as *kana anosinwa doro* (singular) and *kana vanosinwa doro* (plural), connoting a person or persons who sometimes drink beer. Reading this, the Shona, most of whom would not take the trouble to compare the translation with English Bibles, concluded that a Christian should not even taste beer. Thus it is not surprising to find some Shona readers of the Bible today who think that being intoxicated by wine is not against Christian teaching since the Bible (1 Corinthians 5:11) forbids beer (*doro*) and not wine consumption. The translation of ‘a drunkard’ therefore was taken as a commentary meaning not to avoid alcohol abuse, but any drinking of beer.

Obviously understanding Christianity from Eurocentric perspectives, the missionary translators of the African Bibles often presented a Eurocentric form of Christianity in their translations. Although translation frequently requires that one minimises his or her biases, putting this into practice is often difficult, if not impossible. It has been observed that translations are not made in a vacuum (Lefevere 1992:14). This is because translators function in a given culture and at a given time. They are therefore often influenced in their work by the way they understand themselves and their culture. J.N. Amanze (1998) describes how European missionaries in Africa understood themselves and the people to whom they were to minister. He says,

Salvation (for the missionaries) was only possible if they (the Africans) renounced their past, that is, their beliefs and practices and show willingness to live according to the Christian principles. This involved a wholesale transformation of African ways of life for ‘Africanness’ or blackness was, to the Europeans, a symbol of evil. (1998: 52)

An analysis of the way they translated some texts into the Shona language, as I shall demonstrate in some detail below, reflects this. This attitude to the receptor culture and religion affected the way they translated the Bible. As Mojola (2004: i–iii) says, considering that African languages and cultures are closer to the cultures of the ancient biblical worlds than they

are, for example, to European languages and cultures, it could be argued that basing an African translation on a European version was likely to produce more translational difficulties and distortions than would result by working from the original source texts.

To André Lefevere (1992: 2) translation also has to do with authority, legitimacy, and ultimately, power. It is not a 'window opened to another world', but rather, it is 'a channel opened, often not without a certain reluctance, through which foreign influence can penetrate the native culture, challenging it and even contribute to subverting it'. This was more often in the translation of the Bible into African languages as translation marked the introduction of African orthographies by the translators. For this reason, Musa Dube is right to describe biblical translation in Africa as the 'colonization of local languages' (1999: 33–59). Let me then look at how some of these 'political' factors influenced the translation of the term 'banquetings' (KJV) or 'carousing' (RSV) in 1 Peter 4:3 in the Shona Bible.

POLITICS IN THE TRANSLATION OF THE SHONA BIBLE

Before I proceed to discuss the politics of the translation of the Shona Bible, let me define what I mean by 'politics' in this paper. The unabridged edition of the Random House Dictionary of the English Language (1971) has seven entries defining the word politics. The first entry defines politics in the general sense in which the word is often used, that is, as the science or art of political government. However, for purposes of this article, I find the sixth entry the most appropriate. Here politics is defined as the 'use of intrigue or strategy in obtaining any position of power or control' (The Random House Dictionary 1971: 1113). Following this definition, I use the word 'politics' to refer to strategies used by Bible translators to influence the meaning of the texts for the recipients of the translated texts. Therefore in this section I consider the strategies used by the missionaries to influence the meaning of the Bible for the Shona readers by looking at how the word 'banquetings' was translated into Shona.

Studies on the politics of the translation of the Shona Bible are scarce. Apart from Dora R. Mbuyeyesango's study of how local divine powers were suppressed through a translation of the Christian God into Mwari (2001: 63–77), I am not aware of any other such studies. Mbuyeyesango's study traces the history of the translation of the biblical God into the Shona Bible. She looks at some of the terms that early missionaries used to render the biblical God in Shona, terms such as *Wedenga*, *Mudzimu*, *Yave*, and so on until there was a general consensus to use Mwari. Her conclusion is that

the use of Mwari to translate the biblical God was a 'political' move meant to win the Shona to Christianity. She writes:

The missionary translation of the Bible was aimed at replacing the Shona Mwari with the biblical God in everything else but the name. If the missionaries had come to introduce a new God to the Shonas, they might have met much resistance, as happened in the earlier mission ventures. The adoption of the Shona name Mwari for the biblical God was in reality the religious usurpation of the Shona. The missionaries took the Shona captive by colonizing the Shona Supreme Being. (Mbuwayesango 2001: 67)

It is not only in the translation of the name of the biblical God that the missionaries sought to win the Shona from their religious and cultural practices. The translation of 'banquetings' into *mabira* in Shona was another attempt to win the Shona. In 1 Peter 4:3 of the King James Version (KJV), the author gives a list of vices from which people must turn away: 'lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries'. I am interested in the translation of 'banquetings' into the Union Shona Bible, the oldest Shona Bible. 'Banquetings' is rendered as '*mabira*'. If the adoption of Mwari as a name for the biblical God was a usurpation of the Shona, translating 'banquetings' into *mabira* (thus presenting *mabira* as vice) was a total blow to the Shona religion and cosmology. This is because of the place that *mabira* played among the Shona.

THE PLACE OF MABIRA AMONG THE SHONA

Mabira is the plural form of *bira*. In traditional Shona society *bira* was a very important ritual expressing the full Shona worldview.² The Shona believe that the universe is a spiritual world where they, as human beings, are ontologically linked to nature, fellow human beings, the ancestors, and God (Banana 1991: 23). The ancestors occupy a very important place in Shona religion and cosmology. The ancestors (*vadzimu* plural and *mudzimu* singular) are spirits of one's patrilineal and matrilineal relatives who died as adults. For one to be a *mudzimu* he or she was supposed to have lived an exemplary life, being morally upright and having left children. They were also supposed to have received a proper burial with all rituals and ceremonies properly observed; otherwise his/her spirit would haunt rather than protect the living family (Turaki 2006: 480). *Vadzimu* are responsible for the well-being of their living family members. They are the mediators between the living and the Supreme Being. This is because

the Shona believe that *kukwira gomo hupoterera*, meaning that God is so great that to approach him directly is perceived as being disrespectful. He therefore should be approached indirectly through the ancestors. Among the Shona, as in many other traditional African societies, ancestors are the symbols of family, tribal and ethnic unity, community cohesiveness, and custodians of kinship, religion, morality, ethics, and customs (Turaki 2006: 480). Thus, although the Shona were monotheistic,³ their religion was complicated to outsiders who often took their belief in ancestors as some form of polytheism. The ritual of *bira* should be understood in the context of this Shona worldview.

Although we can talk of *bira* (singular), there were in fact many types of *mabira* among the Shona. *Bira* was a ritual feast meant to give offerings to the ancestors. It could be for appeasement, for thanking, or for honouring the ancestors for the protection of the family. *Mabira* were therefore meant for specific purposes: asking for rainfall (*mukwerekwere*), giving a name (*kugadza zita*), bringing home the spirit of the dead (*kurova guva*), and many other ceremonies. Generally a *bira* took place as follows:

The head of the family organizes the brewing of beer, possibly collecting contributions of grain from close family members. The women brew the beer. When it is ready, the whole extended family gathers, with other relatives, in-laws and neighbours. Offerings of beer (and some times snuff) are made to the spirits and the remainder distributed to those present. The ceremony often involves traditional music with singing and dancing. (Bourdillon 1997: 71–72)

I must emphasise that there were indeed many *mabira* and sometimes following slightly different procedures from the one described above, depending on each Shona tribe. However, all in all, *mabira* were meant to venerate the ancestors. They were associated with beer drinking, meat eating and general feasting. It was the occasion when members of the extended family and indeed the whole tribe came together. Therefore participation in the *mabira* gave one a sense of belonging and indeed identity. Thus Charles Nyamiti (afrikaworld), referring to ancestor veneration in general, says that the cult (of ancestral veneration) was characterised by solidarity (totality and participation). Often the ancestral spirits took the occasion, through their mediums, to talk to the living advising them on issues of life. Depending on the type of the *bira*, *mabira* involved all members of the family, young and old. What then were the effects of translating 'banquetings' into *mabira*?

THE POLITICS OF TRANSLATING 'BANQUETING' INTO MABIRA

I mentioned above that the Shona traditional worldview appeared polytheistic to outsiders. There is little doubt that the missionaries who translated the Shona Bible considered *mabira* to be some form of worship and therefore idolatry for the Shona Christians who continued participating in them. Talking about how the Dutch Reformed Church came to the Shona people of southern Zimbabwe as a 'Day Star' (Morgenster), van der Merwe (1953:18) describes the Great Zimbabwe ruins, where most *mabira* used to take place, as 'once the centre of pagan worship'. Translating 'banquetings' into *mabira* was therefore not just a translation but an interpretation meant to deal with what the translators thought to be an obstacle to the Shona people's full acceptance of Christianity. Just as Musa Dube (1999: 33–59) noted, the translation of 'demons' as *badimo* (ancestors) in the Setswana Bible was a structural device used by the missionaries to alienate natives from their cultures, the same can be said on the translation of 'banquetings' as *mabira*. Except for achieving their objectives of alienating natives from their cultures, I find it difficult to understand how 'banquetings' was specifically translated as *mabira*. The word translated as *mabira* is the Greek word *potos* which Rogers and Rogers (1998: 577) translate as drinking or drinking parties. Now *mabira* were not drinking parties for the Shona. Although drinking by both the living and the dead was part of the ritual, the Shona did not understand this to be a party. It was a ritual, whose significance was communication between the living and the dead. As M.F.C. Bourdillon (1998: 228) writes, during these rituals, the living asked the ancestors to take care of the family, protecting it from illnesses and other misfortunes. Also if the family (the living) considered the spirits (ancestral) to have been failing in their obligations towards them, the formal address of the spirits by the living could involve harangues with shouts of support from those attending.

To use Musa Dube's language (1999), translating 'banquetings' as *mabira* therefore dropped a cultural bomb that shattered and fragmented the Shona culture. Reading the translation in the context of the whole verse (1 Peter 4:3), the Shona readers of the Union Shona Bible were told that the time they had played *mabira* was over and doing so as Christians was as bad as worshipping idols. What comes over loud and clear from this translation then is the missionaries' attitude to the Shona culture and religion. They did not respect the Shona religion and culture. For them the whole Shona way of life was a life of iniquity. Through the translation of 'banquetings' as *mabira*, all Shona ceremonies

were demonised. Participation in them was seen as participation in idol worship. The result of this has been a Shona identity crisis and the total colonisation of Shona culture and religion. Writing on the problems of pastoral care among the urban Shona, Tapiwa N. Mucherera (2001: 45) correctly notes that when most urban Shona Christians go to seek pastoral counseling, often it is on issues of personal and religious identity confusion caused by the demonisation of their traditional religion by the missionaries.

Translating 'banquetings' into *mabira* has succeeded not only in demonising Shona culture and religion but also in dividing Shona families. As described above, *mabira* were occasions for the extended family to come together, know each other as individuals, and commune with the living dead. It was also a time when family members learnt to cooperate, forgive each other for whatever evils that had developed among them, and grew to honour the family structures for the good of all. With its demonisation, the extended family has been broken up and in some cases rivalries created. Christians who no longer want to take part in *mabira* are often accused of witchcraft by their traditional relatives. Since they do not want to participate in the honour of the departed, family misfortunes are attributed to them. Divided, the Shona have therefore been conquered by the missionary translation of 'banquetings' into *mabira*.

NOT MABIRA BUT KURARADZA IMPROVEMENTS TO THE UNION SHONA
TRANSLATION

The entrance of native speakers into the business of Bible translation has seen some improvements made to the Shona Bible. In 2005 the United Bible Society published *Testamente Itsva MuChishona Chanhasi* (The New Testament in today's Shona). This New Testament has 'corrected' some of what the translators thought were wrong translations in the Union Shona Bible. For example instead of translating 'a drunkard' as *anosinwa doro*, they have translated it as *chidhakwa*. This is the correct translation of 'a drunkard'. They have also translated 'banquetings' to *kuraradza*. Indeed in the context of the vices mentioned in 1 Peter 4:3, *kuraradza* is the best meaning for 'banquetings'. It is more likely that the author of 1 Peter had in mind drinking parties when he mentioned banquetings rather than ancestor veneration (*mabira*), the practice of which is not explicitly mentioned in the New Testament. There have also been attempts to try as much as possible to use the contemporary Shona language, but without losing the dignity of the word of God. Thus translators have avoided using what M.F.C. Bourdillon (1998: 233) calls *chitaundi*, Anglicised

Shona language. Unfortunately besides having modern translations, the Shona still believe that the Union Shona Bible is the Bible. Often modern translations are approached with suspicion, being understood to be more interpretations than translations. It is therefore not surprising for many to question the sacrality of modern translations.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have looked at the politics of translating the Bible into the Shona language. I have approached the subject understanding politics as a strategy used by someone to obtain a position of power and/or control. I have looked at the politics of the translation of the Shona Bible by first tracing the history of the translation of the Shona Bible. Here I have highlighted the contribution of different mission bodies and their realisation for the need for Union Shona in the light of the five dialects of the Shona language. I then focused on the translation of 'banquetings' in 1 Peter 4:3, highlighting the effects of translating that word as *mabira*. Underlining the centrality of *mabira* in Shona religion and culture, I have concluded that such a translation was influenced by a Europeanised Christianity which saw nothing good in the Shona, their culture, and their religion. It was a translation meant to evangelise and to conquer, 'a cultural bomb' in the words of Musa Dube.

However, I do want to end by noting that the politicisation of the translation of the Bible was not the work of missionaries only as even modern translators also are influenced by the politics of the day: their educational, doctrinal, personal, social, and even denominational sensitivities (Mojola 2004: 77–104). As Lefevere, whom I cited above, noted that translation does not happen in a vacuum. However, translators must, as much as possible, avoid bias and deliberate interpretation in their translation. Missionaries should indeed be given credit for the work they did in translating the Bible into the Shona language. It should be emphasised that they did their work under very difficult conditions: without native orthographies, with limited knowledge of the native languages and worldviews, and with very few educated natives from whom to seek an opinion. This, however, should not be used to exonerate them from the clear politicisation of the translation process. More work therefore needs to be done as people continue to revise African Bibles translated during the missionary era. As Mojola (2006: 1315) correctly argues, 'it is vitally important that biblical exegesis be done in the languages in which the majority of believers interact with the word of God—their mother languages'. For this to happen, he goes on

to say, the pioneering translations of the missionaries need to be revised, more translations need to be made for those languages lacking vernacular Bible translations and more culture, age and gender-sensitive study Bibles need to be produced in many African languages. Over and above this, more work needs to be done to educate African Christians on the effect of translation on Scripture. It is my conviction that an awareness of the 'the politics of translation', will help modern translators avoid some of the problems caused by the missionary translations of the Bible into African languages.

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NOTES

1. This is an estimate figure I arrive at on the basis that about eighty percent of Zimbabwe's around twelve million people, according to the 2005 census, are shone speaking.
2. *Mabira* can generally be used to refer to all Shona rituals to appease ancestors. Chabudapasi (1970: 65–66), for example, also uses the word '*bira*' to refer to *kurova guva* (ritual to bring home the spirit of a dead relative).
3. I am aware of the debate concerning traditional African religions and monotheism. Contrary to the position I take in this article, there are scholars who think that the view that African traditional religions were originally monotheistic is a result of Christian and Muslim influences (Bediako 1997: 98). The debate is on whether ancestors were some 'gods' themselves or were intermediaries between the living and the Supreme Being. Nürnberg (2007: 33) thinks because ancestors, in most cases, did not speak in the name of the Supreme Being then they were authorities themselves. I think otherwise.

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