We call them Becwana, and we call their language Secwana; and these terms are now in common use among the people. But they say they learnt these names from us, and have merely adopted the white man's terminology. But however that may be, the word is now in general use, and is definite enough for all ordinary purposes. (Willoughby 1905: 295)

Between the arrival of the first European missionary among the Tswana in 1801 and the writing of the above passage by the missionary Willoughby in 1905, "Becwana" acquired "general use" as label for a large number of people inhabiting the interior of southern Africa. Although the word "Tswana" did not likely originate as "white man's terminology", it is clear that missionaries played an important role in the evolution of the term's meaning and the adoption of that meaning by both Europeans and Tswana. Through their long years of residence among Tswana people and development of written forms of Tswana languages, missionaries became acknowledged by other Europeans as experts on Tswana culture, and their notions of Tswana ethnicity became incorporated into European understandings of Africans and, eventually, into Tswana understandings of themselves. These ideas of Tswana-ness developed during the nineteenth century in several ways, de-
pending on the level of European knowledge of Tswana societies, the "ordinary purposes" served by that knowledge, and the changing circumstances of Tswana peoples' relations with Europeans and others. As with any other categorization, Tswana were initially identified by missionaries primarily in comparison to others — as being not European, not like other Africans and not Christian. As other identities became evident or arose, however, those distinctions became much more variable, and Tswana identity assumed forms unanticipated by European classificatory schemes.

The "invention" of Tswana and other ethnic identities in southern Africa by Europeans has long been recognized, from the time of Willoughby up to the present, but it is only in the past twenty years, with the end of European rule in the region, that it has been seen in a more critical light. In the early twentieth century, anthropologists determined that "Tswana" language and culture were very similar to those identified as "Sotho" and "Pedi", and they therefore grouped the three together as, respectively, "Western Sotho", "Southern Sotho" and "Northern Sotho". The existence of shared roots was confirmed by the various groups' oral traditions and described in some detail by historians later in the twentieth century. It was not until recently, however, that scholars more fully described, and questioned, the motives and methods of Europeans in their "creation of tribalism" (Vail 1991). These studies have been helpful correctives to earlier notions of 'discovered' primordial identities, but in their efforts to expose the exploitative uses of those inventions, they have sometimes focused too much on the influence of colonial Europeans (Ranger 1993). The development of Tswana identity began long before colonialism, and not just in the minds of Europeans but as a product of interaction and changing relationships (i.e. "negotiation") between different groups of people, both European and African. The meaning of "Tswana" today is quite different from what it was during the colonial era, and different again from what it was during the nineteenth century. Certainly, Tswana identity has been invented, but it is an ongoing process that has involved multiple actors and circumstances. It is the goal of

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2 Lestrade (1929: 8) and van Warmelo (1935: 96ff), as cited by Schapera (1953: 9).
3 Schapera (1954) and Breutz, various studies in the 1950s published by the South African Government and later summarized by the author (1989). Oral traditions were examined with other evidence by Legassick (1969) and Ngcongco (1979).
5 For a good overview of changing understandings of "Tswana" language from the nineteenth century up to the present, see Janson & Tsonope 1991.