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**GOD & PATOIS IN
JAMAICA**

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Introduction

Theology defines the study of God in its general application; language, on the other hand, indicates a system of communication used to express thoughts, ideas, and feelings. Therefore, the theology of language describes a vehicle of communication that is used to articulate thoughts, ideas, or feelings about God and the things concerning God. God can be found in every language, tongue, and speech of the world because it is God who created them all. Jesus told His disciples to evangelize the entire world with His gospel, to every nation, tribe, and tongue. This includes Jamaica and the Patois language.

What Is Language?

The Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary provides the following definition for language: Human speech used to express ideas by words or specific coherent sounds, for communicating thoughts. Language consists primarily of the oral utterance of speech sounds. When persons express the same sounds representing their ideas, the expression of these sounds communicates their thoughts and ideas to another through the organ of hearing (Dictionary. 2003).

Language articulated sounds can be represented by letters, marks, or characters which form words. Therefore, at the written level, language can involve words that are organized into sentences, either written, printed, or engraved, and presented for viewing. Language can also involve speech or the expression of ideas specific to a peculiar nation. Additionally, the inarticulate sounds expressed by animals of their feelings and wants are uttered by instinct and understood only by their species. (Dictionary. 2003)

Language, therefore, is not only an enunciated verbal expression; it can also be classified as nonverbal communication such as body language, and sign language. Sign language, a system of communication using visual gestures and signs, as used by the hearing impaired. Body language, on the other hand, takes the form of facial expressions, body movement and posture, gestures, eye contact, and touching. All these are vehicles of expressions of thought and cultural development (Humboldt 1988).

In the book of Genesis chapter eleven, we note that, up to that specific point in human development, the whole earth spoke one language (Gen 11:1). And mankind decided to build a tower extending up to heaven (11:4). It was at that time God confused their language, so that they may not understand each other's speech (11:7), and scattered man all over the earth, resulting in each linguistic grouping having a different dialect (11:8). This Biblical record accounts for the diversity of languages we have today. The Bible sometimes uses Language, Tongue and Speech synonymously as seen in the following passages; (Gen 10:5,11:1, 7; Deu 28:49; II Ch 32:18; Ezr. 4:7; Act 1:19; 2:8, 22:2; Rev 7:9). However, the word tongue is generally used to describe the speech of a specific nation; (Gen 10:5; Deu 28:49; Ezr. 4:7, Act 21:40; 22:2) and language is sometimes used as an umbrella term that describes every tongue and speech (Gen 11:9; Acts 17:26; Rev 7:9).

The Theology of Language

Theology defines the study of God, and language indicates a system of communication used to express thoughts, ideas, or feelings as defined above. Therefore, the theology of language is a study of the systems of communication used to articulate thoughts, ideas, or feelings about God and the things concerning God.

Smith (2002) argues that it is established that God is a transcendent and infinite being, at least from the Judeo-Christian perspective. However, human language is confined. Human language, therefore, would appear to reduce God to ephemerality. Therefore, in terms of language within the confines of human intellectual capacity, can divine existence ever be made known? Smith asserts that language and theology provide the protocol for any encounter between the physical and the spiritual, and this encounter is found in the manifestation of the Logos i.e., the Son of God (Smith 2002).

According to Scott (2017), the primary goal of the Theology of Language is to define the meaning of religious sentences and utterances. Generally, religious sentences are expected to possess a religious subject matter or a religious utterance. Scott further explains that the rudiments of religious subject matters should incorporate a variety of constructs such as states of affairs or properties, God, deities, angels, miracles, redemption, sinfulness. Most attention, however, has been devoted to the meaning of what we say about God (Scott 2017).

In the Scriptures, there is evidence of numerous language themes. These language themes are used by the Prophets, Jesus, and His disciples. Some of these themes are: love, mercy, salvation, and redemption, to name a few. I would like,

however, to use Satire, as an example. Encyclopedia Britannica defines Satire as, “an artistic form, chiefly literary and dramatic, in which human or individual vices, follies, abuses, or shortcomings are held up to censure, employing ridicule, derision, irony, parody, caricature, or other methods, sometimes with an intent to inspire social reform” (Elliot 2019). Wilson (2003) asserts that this theme is used pervasively in scripture; therefore, its biblical reality is undeniable. Satire is used in speech that is considered sarcastic or insulting for the sole purpose of ridicule and rebuke: (Neh 13:25; Ps 94:8; Isa 3:16-17; Eze 23:19-20; Amos 4:1; Mat 3:7, 12:34; 15:14; 23:15, 17, 24, 27, 33; John 8:37, 44; I Cor 4:8; Gal 3:1, 5:12; Php 3:2; Heb 5:11). The referenced scripture verses are but a few of this colorful literature pervading scripture. An example is Jesus calling the scribes and Pharisees “a whitewashed supulchre” (Matt 23:27).

When you examine the various contexts of biblical literature, it is found that this kind of language is only used in response to sinful acts such as ungodliness, adultery, oppression of the poor, hierocracy, and pride. I conclude that this type of language should only be used by Christians with an intent to confront and expose sin, and to invoke a response of repentance (Mat 5:22) (Wilson 2003).

God and the Patois language

(Gad an di Patwa langwij)

The word Patois (or (Patwa) is French and carries the meaning: rough speech or dialect. This word sometimes conveys a negative undertone (Gladwell 1994). Patois represents a language spoken within a country, state, or area that is dominated by two or more languages, and the dialect language is a derivative of the mixture of those dominant languages.

In Jamaica, Patwa is sometimes called African English because of its two main influences are, English and the different flavors of the African vernacular. Patios is the post-indigenous language of the Jamaican people which began its evolution in the 1600s, as a result of the English slave owner’s insistence that African slaves who worked on their sugar plantations, not speak their native tongue (which they did not understand, and for fear of the slaves planning insurrections) but adopt the English language (Gladwell 1994). This infusion and influence of the European and African cultures created the Jamaican patois in its evolved state. Patois shows the lexical and grammatical features of both English and African languages.

Patwa is the mother tongue of approximately eighty-five percent (85%) of the reported 2.7 million Jamaicans living on the island. Jamaica is largely a bilingual nation, with Patwa co-existing with English; however, there are several in-between varieties (Di Jamiekan Nyuu Testament 2012).

Stewart (2005) studied the connection between the tradition of African-derived language and religious forms and their influence on the Jamaican religious culture. Stewart’s study shows, that African people in the diaspora have forged their language,

religious rituals, and theological formulations by intermixing it with some of their African traditions to produce a unique blend. Stewart noted that the derivative of these Afro-centric traditions in historical and contemporary Jamaica are Myal, Obeah, Native Baptist, Revival/Zion, Kumina, and more recently, Rastafari. These religious movements have formed the indigenous theological corpus for the Jamaican and Caribbean culture (Stewart 2005).

Does God Speak Patois?

(Yu tiink Gad chat Patwa?)

The word of God was revealed to His inspired servants, who wrote with fervor to proclaim His infallible truth to all mankind. The Bible indicates that God's Speech is potent; it creates, it kills, it resurrects, it restores, it comforts. But what language does the Omnipotent one speak, and how does man understand him? In the discourse between the children of Israel and Moses in Exo 20:18-19, they begged Moses not to allow God to speak to them: "And all the people saw the thundering, and the lightning, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off. And they said unto Moses, speak thou with us, and we will hear but let not God speak with us, lest we die." At that time, it is obvious God spoke in a language that they understood; not for His benefit but for them.

Jamaicans have always prayed to and worshipped God in the Patwa, believing that God understands the language. However, the translation of the New Testament Bible into Patwa suggests that God is not only listening and understanding the language when they speak it, but God also speaks to them in Patwa, not as a foreigner but as one who embraces and understands the nuances of Jamaican language and culture (Erskine 2013). What language does God speak? God transcends all languages of the world; it was He who created them all (Gen 11:1-8).

The God in the Patois Bible

(Di Gad iina di Patwa Baibl)

The Holy Bible has been translated into thousands of languages and dialects worldwide for the sole purpose of fulfilling the mandate in the "Great Commission," spreading the good news in all the world to every creature (Mark 16:15; Matt 28:16-20). This begs the question: does the translation of the Bible into another language diminish the sovereignty of God? Does it dilute the word of God in any form? Cannot the person who hears it be convicted of sin? Absolutely! I have heard countless preachers who do not have a grasp of the Queen's vernacular preach the word of God in Patois on many occasions, reading from the Holy Book and translating it into Patois and have won

many souls for the kingdom. The Jamaican Patios Bible speaks of the same God that is portrayed in the King James version and all the other translations. (Rose 2016), (*Di Jamiekan Patwa Baibl chat bout di same Gad dat den shua iina di Kin James Baibl an di resa di adda buuk dem*)

Erskine (2013) questions whether the translation of the New Testament in Patwa will reverse the idea among Jamaicans of the inherent superiority of the English language over Patois or whether Jamaicans may now begin to understand that no language or culture is excluded from being the bearer of Scripture or divine truth and that no language or culture has exclusive access to divine truth (Erskine 2013).

In a not so recent BBC News Magazine article, Pigott (2011) informs us that the Jamaican Patois Bible has now been published, with a preliminary publication of the Gospel of St Luke entitled, "Jiizas - Di Buk we Luuk Rait bout Im", (Jesus: The Book Luke Wrote about Him). The author stated that from his observation of the reading of the Patois Bible it seems to have an electrifying effect on those listening. "Several women rise to testify, in patois, to what it means to hear the Bible in their mother tongue. "It's almost as if you are seeing it," says a woman, referring to the moment when Jesus is tempted by the Devil. "In the blink of an eye, you get the whole notion. It's as though you are watching a movie... it brings excitement to the word of God." (*a it put bashment iina Gad wod*).

According Pigott (2011), the Rev Courtney Stewart, General Secretary of the West Indies Bible Society (who has managed the translation project) insists the new Bible demonstrates the power of patois. Mr. Stewart also stated that the project is largely designed to bring scripture alive; it also has another important function - to rescue patois from its second-class status in Jamaica and to enshrine it as a national language. Additionally, Mr. Stewart concluded; "The language is what defines us as Jamaicans; it is who we are, patois-speakers." This patois Bible represents a bold new attempt to standardize the language, with the historically oral tongue written down in a new phonetic form (Pigott 2011).

Pigott (2011) further stated that the primary purpose of the Patois Bible project is to allow Jamaicans and Christians to associate with a Bible with which they can truly identify and understand better. Moreover, it will help to change the perception of those who believe that Jamaican Patois is not a suitable medium for communicating the message of the Gospel. On this score, Rev. Courtney Stewart further states, "The Scriptures have the greatest impact when you hear it in your mother-tongue; so this translation to Creole is affirming the Jamaican speaker's language and is very, very powerful!" (Pigott 2011).

Speaking in Patois Tongues

(*Chatn iina Patwa Tuungs*)

The Greek term *glossolalia* is a compound of the words *glossa*, meaning "tongue or language" and *laleō*, "to speak, talk, chat, to make a sound" (Strong 2007). This Greek expression appears in the New Testament in the books of Acts and First Corinthians. Speaking in tongues is listed as a gift of the Holy Spirit (I Cor 12:10). On the day of Pentecost 120 sisters and brothers in an upper room gave linguistic witness to the endowment of the Holy Spirit by utterances of languages they had never previously learned, and spoke in the languages of at least sixteen countries and ethnic groups that were gathered in Jerusalem for the festival of 'Shavuot' (Feast of weeks) (Stone 2009, 63). The second chapter of Acts recounts the phenomenal occurrence of the endowment of the Holy Spirit on these disciples as they spoke in other tongues (Acts 2:4). The diverse assembly of people gathered there was utterly amazed when they heard the disciples speaking in their native tongues and witnessing of the wonderful works of God (2:11) (Rose 2016). (*Di oul hiip a piipl dem dat did deh deh did frietn cause dem ier dem a chat iina dem langwij bout how Gad good*)

Now to clarify the point that the tongues that the disciples spoke were not just ecstatic utterances or unintelligible speech but known languages, note that the people gathered there understood what they were hearing (Act 2:6) (Hyatt 2002, 110). Now if God through the Holy Spirit endowed them with these new languages, cannot the same God allow persons to speak in the tongue of Patois for the same purpose as on the day of Pentecost? However, if this utterance is being displayed in an audience of foreigners then it would require an interpreter as instructed in I Cor 14:27.

Keener (2009) confirms that tongues provide the catalyst for the multicultural audience's acknowledgment of God's supernatural activity (Acts 2:5-13), and the opening remarks for Peter's discourse (2:14). Moreover, tongues do not appear capriciously, as one possible sign among many. But rather, it relates to the Acts' theme enunciated in Acts 1:8 as a Spirit-inspired, cross-cultural witness. Luke records that "they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance." (2:4). Peter clarifies the occurrence as biblically inspired-prophetic speech, remarking that it fulfills the prediction of Joel the Prophet (Joel 2:28) (Keener 2009, 58-59).

Conclusion

(*Mi suu dun nou*)

The languages of humanity were given by God to engender communication of thought and ideas—and preeminently—to offer thanksgiving and praise to the Giver. It is through language, we understand people, ourselves, and the world around us. Within this context, we see the Theology of Language as a system of communication to articulate thoughts, ideas, or feelings about God and the things concerning God.

The Patois language is considered the national language of Jamaica, blended from an Afro-European concoction, and until recently was orally transmitted for many generations. It was integral in the development of the ethnoreligious movements and

theological corpus for the Jamaican and the wider Caribbean culture. This begs the question, therefore: Does God speak Patois? Absolutely! Any Jamaican Christian will tell you that they communicate with Him daily and that His language of preference is Patwa. (*emi Jamiekan kristan we tell yu dat dem chat wid iim evri tiam an a patwa iim luv chat*)

In 2012, the Jamaican Bible Society published the first New Testament Bible in Patois (*Di Jamiekan Nyuu Testament*) that enables Jamaicans to read and hear God's word in their native tongue.¹ The Jamaican Patwa Bible speaks about the same God that is portrayed in the King James version and all the other translations. (*Di Jamiekan Patwa Baibl chat bout di same Gad dat den shua iina di Kin James Baibl an di resa di adda buuk dem*). Full stop! If you hear it during a praise and worship session and the ecstatic utterance of tongues, particularly in a foreign country, it is your responsibility to offer an interpretation according to I Cor 14:27-28.

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¹ The OT is being worked on; the book of Jonah will be published soon, DV.

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