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**Lamin Sanneh**

## **Bible Translation and Human Dignity**

In this article, Lamin Sanneh explores the revolutionary impact, in various contexts, of translating Scripture into people's mother tongue. He shows this significant religious, social and cultural event is an expression of Christianity as a translated religion which empowers those who receive the translation and affirms their human dignity. These findings are illustrated from history and more recent mission experience in Kenya, West Africa and Zululand and a sketch is offered of the spread of Bible translation and the social and cultural renewal that has followed.

### **Genealogy of Translation**

This essay is concerned with two main subjects: the celebration of an anniversary, in this case the four hundredth anniversary of the creation of the King James Version (KJV), and how Bible translation has promoted the value of human dignity.

The modern missionary movement, particularly the nineteenth century Protestant missions, devoted considerable effort to bringing the Bible to indigenous populations, with the King James Version as the example *par excellence* of vernacular Scripture as the way for non-literate societies to be introduced to Christianity. It is easy to forget the extraordinary excitement with which the 'Englished' Bible, in its various early forms, was met in its day, or the revolutionary impact of the KJV on all of society as it found its way into household use. <sup>1</sup> The KJV brought religion out of the sacristy into the school, the study, the farmstead, the kitchen, the tool-shed, and onto fishing boats and ships. Indeed, the KJV changed forever the very idea of 'book' by making the Bible the people's possession. It was a liberating idea that rattled the Establishment and its ideas of hierarchy and pedigree, leading Christopher Hill, a prominent English historian, to conclude that Bible translation 'was a cultural revolution of unprecedented proportions.' <sup>2</sup> Having the Scriptures in the mother tongue is arguably no less important or less revolutionary in non-English and developing-world contexts.

On any credible view, Christianity is recognizable only in the embodied idioms and values of the cultures in which we find it, allowing Christians to speak and respond with the facility of the mother tongue, and mother-tongue speakers to express faith and trust in God's universal promises. Even among Christians there is a widely held view that some languages are unworthy of the status of being the language of religion; the cultural standard required for being possessors of revealed truth is restricted to advanced societies. To be worthy of the name, human dignity is the prerogative of cultures that have been raised, refined, and defined by cumulative historical experience, and for that reason Third World societies must be excluded because they lack critical historical consciousness.

This view, however, stands in open contradiction to the premise of Bible translation, not just as an evangelical idiosyncrasy, but as the expression of Christianity itself as a translated religion from its origin. Christianity is distinguished by the fact that it is invested without prejudice or favoritism in the particularities of national life, and flourishes in, not in spite of, those particularities. That is how the Jewish Jesus became credibly the Christ of the pagan

Greeks, and how devotees of the Pentateuch embraced the gospel in the pedestrian idiom of Koine Greek. Christianity was weaned and fostered without the language of its founder, and has come to us fully endowed with the tongues of a diverse humanity. The premise of Bible translation - that no culture is inherently impermeable or alien to the Gospel, nor is any society indispensable or exceptional as its audience - is a vindication of the religion's intercultural outlook.

It will be evident that this premise carries implications for religious, linguistic, and cultural initiatives above and beyond the specific, technical concerns of translators. The creation of the King James Bible, for example, vindicated the cause of those committed to English as a valid medium of faith and worship. In the process of its wider dissemination as an example of a successful vernacular translation, the King James Bible became a model of how Bible translation bears directly on the dignity of those without voice and on the margins of power and privilege. Bible translation is a religious act, obviously, but it is also something else: a social and cultural event of enormous significance.

There is inherent irony in the fact that Christianity's European (especially its English) forms of discourse are often given normative status in rendering the language of Jesus, with a corresponding disinclination to welcome the expression of faith in the tongues of the peoples of the wider world, including Asia and Africa. This irony is compounded when one reflects on the persecution attendant on early efforts to translate Scripture into English.

## **Translation and Revelation**

### **The experience of English translation**

The story of John Wycliffe (d 1384), who guided a vernacular translation by some of his Oxford colleagues, is illustrative. Wycliffe was condemned as a heretic; forty years after his death his body and bones were exhumed by ecclesiastical order and burnt, with instructions for his ashes to be so disposed as to leave no trace of the man. Thomas Fuller (d 1661), the historian, was moved to make amends for this effort to obliterate Wycliffe's memory: 'Thus this brook (the river Swift) hath conveyed his ashes into the Avon; the Avon into the Severn; the Severn into the narrow seas; they into the main ocean. And thus the ashes of Wyclif are the emblem of his doctrine, which now is dispersed all the world over.' <sup>3</sup> As Tyndale insisted, God is none other than as He has witnessed and testified of Himself, and it is an imperative to have access to that witness and testimony, not in one exclusive language, but 'in a tongue which I understand', because it is God's will no barrier be placed against lay, common access to His word. It was on this basis Tyndale appealed for the ban to be lifted on the English tongue. <sup>4</sup>

The view of language in Bible translation is far more radical - in its unqualified welcome of language, any language - than a purely utilitarian view in which languages of scale weigh more heavily in the balance of merit. Before God, all languages are equal in their merit, as in their demerit, for which reason none has an in-built advantage or disadvantage. All languages share in the consequences of fallen human nature, just as by virtue of Bible translation all languages share equally in the benefits of God's intervention in Christ. Scriptural translation is not an exercise in linguistic perfection; it is a willing and attentive inquiry into God's mind and purpose for us. The KJV translators declared

We never thought from the beginning that we should need to make a new translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one; (for then the imputation of *Sixtus* had been true in some sort, that our people had been fed with gall of dragons instead of wine, with wheal instead of milk;) but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones one principal good one, not justly to be excepted against... To that purpose there were many chosen, that were greater in other men's eyes than in their own, and that sought the truth rather than their own praise. 5

Undeterred by the pitfalls of human fallibility, the translators, like the biblical writers themselves, set to work with the unwavering confidence that their commission was from God. It is in that sense that the Bible is *sui generis*. A focus other than that may produce a technically correct translation, but not the Bible as the heritage of faith. Referring to the Septuagint, the pre-Christian translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into 'familiar' koine Greek (that was widely known not only in the Mediterranean basin but also in Asia, parts of Europe, and Africa), the King James translators reflected on both its providential suitability and its attendant imperfections:

Therefore, the word of God, being set forth in the Greek, becometh hereby like a candle on a candle-stick, which giveth light to all that are in the house; or like a proclamation sounded forth in the market-place, which most men presently take knowledge of; and therefore that language was fittest to contain the Scriptures, both for the first preachers of the Gospel to appeal unto for witness, and for the learners also of those times to make search and trial by. It is certain, that the translation was not so sound and so perfect, but that it needed in many places correction; and who had been so sufficient for this work as the Apostles or apostolick men? Yet it seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to them to take that which they found...rather than by making a new, in that new world and green age of the Church, to expose themselves to many exceptions and cavillations, as though they made a translation to serve their own turn; and therefore bearing witness to themselves, their witness not to be regarded. 6

What the KJV translators here say 'seemed good to the Holy Ghost' – authoritative use of an imperfect vernacular translation like the LXX – did not always seem good to everyone else. For some, the entire Reformation emphasis on vernacular translation was suspect, even reckless. It 'put [the Bible] into the hands of the commonality and interpreted no longer by the well-conditioned learned, but by the faith and delusion, the common sense and uncommon nonsense, of all sorts of men.' 7 (Such a bias echoes the strictures of Galen (d 200), the Greek physician, against the ancient Christians, namely, that they were intellectually uncouth. 8 )

Yet it is hard to see how Christianity *qua* Christianity can be cultivated or faithfully transmitted in any other way. A religion shut up in the language in which Jesus actually preached, taught, and worshipped, had never been available, and was never mandated by Jesus or by the apostles. Christianity is encountered only and always in a translated, and, therefore, in a comprehensible form, with interpretation its handmaid. And it is difficult to maintain fidelity to the vernacular ethos of Scripture by flouting the rule of making sense to 'the simple reader.' Tyndale pressed the argument memorably:

I wish that even the weakest woman should read the Gospel – should read the Epistles of Paul. And I wish that these were translated into all languages so that they might be read and understood, not only by Scots and Irishmen, but also by Turks and Saracens... I long that the

husbandman should sing portions of them to himself as he follows the plough, that the weaver should hum them to the tune of his shuttle. 9

The approach allowed Tyndale to deploy what Donald Coggan calls 'his almost uncanny gift of simplicity... a true nobility of homeliness.' 10 For his own reasons, Kepler echoed the sentiment when he declared, 'The Bible speaks the language of everyman.' 11

### **The lessons of vernacular Bible translation in mission**

Along with societies with a written tradition, such as China, Japan, India, and the Muslim world, there were innumerable others without a written culture and where obstacles to evangelism were much greater. With no orthography, alphabet, or historical documents, oral cultures present a formidable challenge to the whole logic of a religion of the Book. And the resources one depends on for dealing with written cultures unfamiliar with the gospel are woefully inadequate for dealing with illiterate cultures. Off the beaten track, new tools have had to be invented, new structures and habits of investigation created – all of them requiring skillful recourse to local institutions, ideas, and values that had never before been systematized or documented. Missionaries had to cope not only with strange, unfamiliar sounds and usage, but also with nuance and allusions in languages for which they had to develop, almost literally, new ears. We know from missionary correspondence what a crushing burden this puts on the shoulders of even the most able and willing, and how long and arduous is the effort to make headway.

In this situation, the lessons of the KJV, and of its precursors in Coverdale and Tyndale, are instructive. The confidence of the translators that it is the desire of the living God 'that the Scripture may speak like itself, as in the language of *Canaan*, that it may be understood even of the very vulgar', is crucial in the quicksand of new mission frontiers. Even though the translators of the KJV were working with available literary resources, including other translations, they staked the reputation of their translation on its being accessible in the language of the people, without the shibboleths of an artificial linguistic decorum, an approach that fits well the condition of unwritten vernaculars. The KJV brought out the strength and beauty of the simple and the ordinary; missionary vernacular translation can and should do the same. Along with its many literary tributaries, the KJV gave us imperishable gems in language – rolling as easy on the tongue as on the ear; such colour and music are characteristic of oral cultures. Among numerous examples that could be cited: 'The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land' (Song of Solomon 2:12).' Or this: 'Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns... Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: and yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.' (Matthew 6:26,28-29).

Such passages call us back to the countryside, to the earth and its teeming life, showing the Bible to have its roots in the earthy preoccupations of our existence. This accessible and familiar character of the language of the KJV inspired Wordsworth to write his sonnet 'Translation of the Bible':

But to outweigh all harm, the sacred Book,  
In dusty sequestration wrapt too long,  
Assumes the accents of our tongue;

And he who guides the plough or wields the crook,  
With understanding spirit now may look  
Upon her records, listen to her song.

Across the mission frontier lay much hidden treasure waiting to be unearthed and gathered into the corpus of a shared spiritual heritage. That could be done only if one possessed a good ear and a keen eye and still had one's feet firmly planted in the soil. The KJV was a triumph of the colloquial over the recondite, of the warm voice over the cold pen, and as the people's Book it gave impetus to forays into remote and exotic regions to reclaim the people's heritage as part of the tribute of all to the living God. The KJV rejected the prickly scruples of theologians about what were called 'ethnic and heathenish distinctions.' The key to the Bible is prayer, not learning, said Thomas Taylor in 1619. 12

The idea of prayer as at the root of language, and the poetic imagination that one encounters in the Psalms in the KJV, finds an analogue in a fragment of an ancient Pre-Columbian Quechua hymn dedicated to *Viracocha*, the Creator, as captured in this felicitous translation:

The wind lifts up  
The tops of the trees  
And waves each branch  
In tribute to thee.

From the shadowy woods  
The birds sing out  
To render praise  
To the Ruler of all.

The flowers show forth  
In brilliant array  
Their vivid colors  
And pungent perfumes.

The cliffs are dressed  
In glowing green,  
And the canyon walls  
With flowers gleam.

Without the seal of non-translatibility that distinguishes the Qur'an (requiring it to be performed in the sacred Arabic alone), the vernacular Bible comes to us as witness that the 'word became flesh', bearing the crown of thorns. Its message is not that the word became Book, tied up in syllables. In that wise, the appeal of vernacular Bible translation to popular lay use in matters of religion proved impossible to curtail or to control, penalties and prohibitions notwithstanding. To say the gospel should not be translated is like saying that we should not see the sun in its own light. In Thomas Taylor's view of the Bible, as we have seen, devotion and faithfulness have primacy over privilege and hierarchy. Understood in its personal rather than sacerdotal sense, the idea of prayerful reading of the Bible is consistent with the emergence of the idea of the individual as a free social agent. 13

## Learning from translation in Africa

This view is true even of such distant and remote people as the Pygmies (Bayaka, Babenga) and Khoe. The missionary endeavor among them helped to affirm their particularity by uncovering linguistic and cultural ideas for transposition into Christian terms. From 1737, when George Schmidt, the Moravian missionary, set to work among the Khoe, to 1857, when Dr Livingstone tried to wean Africans from their superstitious practices, missionaries have been notable for their ethnographic and similar achievements, whatever their racial ideas and religious motives. Local converts appreciated at once the significance of indigenous languages and cultures for the new Christian enterprise, but also for their threatened societies. Their perception of what was good in the changes happening around them was rooted in an appreciation of their own languages and cultures, a trail that Bible translation blazed for them.

When a local Christian held in his hands a copy of the gospels for the first time, he declared: 'Here is a document which proves that we also are human beings – the first and only book in our language.' <sup>14</sup> He was echoed by the testimony of another Christian in Angola who celebrated holding the Gospels in his hands for the first time, declaring jubilantly, 'Now we see that our friends in the foreign country regard us as people worth while.' <sup>15</sup> At an assembly of local Christians when a Wesleyan missionary produced the complete Bible, an elder declared, 'I know that in my body I am a very little man, but to-day as I see the whole Bible in my language I feel as big as a mountain.' Another echoed him: 'I wish that I were as big as an ox, or had the voice of an ox, so that I might shout the great joy which I feel.' <sup>16</sup>

In his reflections on the intellectual and social significance of vernacular Bible translation, David Livingstone offered general observations on the authentic humanity of Africans. He considered particularly the case of Batswana of then Bechuanaland where Robert Moffat, his son-in-law, had been at work on the language of the people. Livingstone noted that the orderliness and simplicity of the language of the Batswana may lead the inattentive observer to conclude wrongly that the people had fallen from a former state of civilization. Rather, a true understanding of the language will challenge us to consider the universal human characteristics of language. Livingstone continues:

The language is however so simple in its construction, that its copiousness by no means requires the explanation that the people have fallen from a former state of civilization and culture. Language seems to be an attribute of the human mind and thought, and the inflections, various as they are in the most barbarous tongues, as that of the Bushmen, are probably only proofs of the race being human, and endowed with the power of thinking; the fuller development of language taking place as the improvement of our other faculties goes on. <sup>17</sup>

We may draw several inferences from Livingstone's observation. One is that language belongs with our humanity, and our own gives us our particular identity. Stripped of language, we would be stripped of our humanity. This idea is well expressed by Dietrich Westermann, a one-time German missionary in West Africa. Arguing for translation as empowerment, Westermann says that 'the most adequate exponent of the soul of a people is its language. By taking away a people's language, we cripple or destroy its soul and kill its mental individuality.' For that reason Westermann argued that the Gospel and Christian education 'must take root in the mother soil of the vernacular'. <sup>18</sup> A similar note is struck by

Thomas Huxley, the English marine biologist who was a contemporary of Charles Darwin and author of the influential book, *Man's Place in Nature* (1863). A self-declared agnostic, Huxley nevertheless lauded the teaching of the Bible in schools in England, saying omitting it would diminish the value of education. 'By the study of what other book', he asked, 'could children be so humanized?' 19

Another inference we may draw is the argument that the mother tongue basis of biblical literacy provides a persuasive argument for opposing wholesale cultural displacement. It is difficult first to institute the mother tongue as a medium of Scripture and religion and then to reject it for reasons of economic and political necessity. Livingstone made this argument, saying encounter with Western civilization must now include reckoning with the value of mother tongue preservation. Livingstone saw Bible translation as the best chance the vernacular had of surviving collision with Western civilization. He expounds:

It is fortunate that the translation of the Bible has been effected before the language became adulterated with half-uttered foreign words, and while those who have heard the eloquence of the native assemblies are still living; for the young, who are brought up in our schools, know less of the language than the missionaries; and Europeans born in the country, while possessed of the idiom perfectly, if not otherwise educated, cannot be referred to for explanation of any uncommon word. 20

A celebrated architect of language in his own right, Walt Whitman (1819-1892) echoes these primal sentiments when he speaks in his 'November Boughs' of the translated Bible as the seed and symbol of the creative life. He affirms: 'I've said nothing yet of the Bible as a poetic entity, and of every portion of it... How many ages and generations have brooded and wept and agonized over this book! ... Translated in all languages, how it has united the diverse world! Not only does it bring us what is clasped within its covers. Of its thousands there is not a verse, not a word, but is thick-studded with human emotion.' The special character of the Bible, Whitman pleads, consists in its 'incredible, all-inclusive non-worldliness and dew-scented illiteracy.' 21 In the mother tongue it is the Bible's special power to harmonize the individual and the universal, to blend pithy anecdote and general norm, so that simple parable teems with sublime truth. So much of the Bible is weighed down with tribal matters, so much of it is festooned with the fabric of country speech and with the ripe tones of close-lived experience, that we forget that Scripture was designed for the primal ear and heart.

## **Gift of Tongues**

### **The Church of Christ in Africa**

We may consider now a few examples drawn from field practice. One comes from Kenya and concerns the Church of Christ in Africa (CCA), founded by a Luo, Matthew Ajuoga. Ajuoga traced his call to conflict with the Anglican Mission, yet in his case the vernacular and ethnic issue was of considerable importance. In 1953 the Dholuo Old Testament was published, and Ajuoga was struck by the word the missionaries translated as 'hera', namely, the Greek 'philadelphia' and the English 'love'. He claimed that hera, 'brotherly love', was absent in missionary treatment of African converts, and concluded that such treatment represented a scandalous failure of love. After several years of protest and discussion aimed at major reforms in the church, Ajuoga and his followers separated themselves and established the

CCA in 1957, when it was a purely Luo church. Yet its outreach soon extended beyond ethnic boundaries, being able to appeal to several ethnic groups at once:

By 1965 the CCA claimed members among fifty-six of the tribes and sub-tribes of Kenya, Uganda and northern Tanzania; by 1967 eight dioceses had been formed in the three nations. Among its seventy clergy then there were two Teita, two Kikuyu, six Luyia (including one archdeacon) and one Gusii – all from Bantu tribes traditionally somewhat hostile to the Luo.’  
22

### **The Church of the Lord (Aladura)**

Yet another example, to return to West Africa, is the Church of the Lord (Aladura), founded by Josiah Olunowo Oshitelu of Nigeria. The Church of the Lord (Aladura) established branches in different parts of Nigeria, and founded an active missionary movement in Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, and farther afield. 23

In his linguistic research into kiKongo, the language of the long defunct Kongo Kingdom, Holman Bentley, a Protestant missionary, spoke of ‘the richness, flexibility, exactness, subtlety of idea, and nicety of expression of the language.’ He said all this knowledge was at the finger tips of the local lad who was his principal helper. Bentley noted that as he came to appreciate it, kiKongo was so precise and strict that

the tricks, the double intention, the falsities and illogical perversions which are so freely perpetrated in European languages would not be possible in Kongo argument. Half the quibbles and mountains of reasoning, thrown up upon strained usages of words and indefinite expressions, which have vexed and separated sections of the Christian Church, could trouble no Kongo, with so exact and definite a speech at their command. 24

The complete kiKongo Bible appeared in 1905, the work of Swedish, American Baptist, and Christian and Missionary Alliance translators.

When, for example, the conference of Foreign Mission Boards of the United States sent a notice in 1895 to the missionaries working among the Zulu with the request to encourage the idea of a self-supporting church, the notice was disregarded. But when the circular was translated into Zulu, the words for self-support (*ukuzondla*) and self-government (*ukuziphatha*) completely changed the dynamics on the ground. Reading the Zulu circular, the leaders promptly concluded ‘that the missionaries were withholding from them the rights of Congregational Churches’, that is the right to choose independent, self-propagating congregations. 25 Such was the potency of translation that the Zulu Congregationalist Church was formed in 1896 as a consequence, and it changed the climate of religious practice.

### **Western missionaries and the vernacular**

Some missionaries realized soon enough to the fact that the vernacular was antithetical to the perpetuation of Western forms of the religion, and tried to buy time. J Sandstrom, the first Swedish missionary at Ceza in northern Zululand, arriving there in 1905, was understandably wary of the future for people like him, faced with mother tongue pressure as they were. He wrote in 1926:

Our aim is of course an African Christian National Church with which eventually the Lutheran National Church must merge, with the peculiar gifts and blessings that have been bestowed upon her. But will we get the time to reach our first goal, a strong, self-supporting and self-propagating Lutheran Zulu Church, before the development overtakes us and the Natives' own National Church builds its walls higher and higher, attracting the masses perchance by concessions with regard to polygamy, church discipline etc? 26

Other missionaries accepted gracefully that the missionary enterprise taught them things that they did not know before they arrived in the field and for which they remained grateful. For such people the exposure of the field-setting was an eyeopening cross-cultural experience. In that case, it was not the European who brought mission to the African, but the African who brought the European to the meaning of mission. One such European was the English Catholic Benedictine priest, Dom Bernard Clements, who served in Ghana. His missionary career coincided with the pontificate of Pius XI (1922-39) whose encyclical of 28 February 1926, *Rerum Ecclesiae*, issued directives ('it is our will and command', he wrote) to create an African clergy, and that was how in 1928 St Augustine's Training College was established in Ghana to train candidates for the Catholic priesthood. Dom Bernard Clements served there. He reflected as follows on his vocation in Africa:

I think God sent me to Africa five years ago so that I might learn from you some lessons of humility and love and service which my rough heart didn't learn in Europe and you Africans whom God has used as tutors to teach me these things I thank very much, because even when I have been very foolish and said sometimes hateful and stupid things to you, you have still gone on in great patience... And so perhaps in the end I have learned some of the things which God set you to teach me. 27

It must be stressed that for most converts the Bible that they knew was the vernacular Scripture, so that in the new vessel of a written sacred text converts heard God addressing them in the old, familiar idiom. An English missionary statesman commented on this phenomenon, affirming:

The urge to translate the Bible into every language may have helped to prolong the life of a dialect where reason suggested it ought to lose itself in a regional *lingua franca*... What is important [in this regard] is that men and women, not least women, without any schooling on the Western pattern, learned to read in their own language because the Bible was there. In the days before special adult literacy programmes inspired by Dr Laubach's methods, an old grandmother would come to Sunday School week after week painfully learning the alphabet, then short words, then sentences. Then came the day when, with a friend finding the place for her in the Bible bought at the market that week with her saved-up shillings, her face shone with the joy of recognising, as she read, treasured words learned by heart long ago – a sentence from the 14th chapter of John's Gospel or the story of the woman sweeping her room for a lost coin [Luke 15:8]. The Bible strengthened the Church among the people. It was a family business, the reading of the Word, as anyone knows who has been privileged to come out of the guestroom into the hall of a compound house as the sounds of dawn strengthen and the light of an oil lamp share [sic] in the Bible-reading and the family prayer. 28

In a study done at an early stage of the Christian renewal movement in Africa, David Barrett identifies the vernacular impetus in Bible translation with great cogency, writing,

Vernacular scriptures have far greater power to communicate and create religious dynamic than versions in *linguae francae* such as Swahili, Hausa, Arabic, French or English, which have been in circulation in many areas long before the onset of independency without fomenting disaffection. The vernacular translation enables the ethnic group concerned to grasp the inner meanings of... profound and intricate biblical doctrines... Further, it is clear that these vernacular translations – with all the attendant expenditure of effort on orthography, grammars, dictionaries, and studies of tribal cultures – have contributed markedly to the recovery by Africans of the cultural identity of their tribe, later expressed in such bodies as tribal political parties, welfare societies, and particularly in tribal independent churches. 29

## Panorama

Let us now consider the African theme within the broader picture of vernacular Bible translation. In Egypt and North Africa both Coptic and Punic were used in the early church, although the Scriptures were translated only into Coptic. Then the translation of the Bible into Ethiopic followed in around 650. Outside Africa itself the Goths, Armenians, and, later, the Slavs had the Scriptures and other religious literature available in their languages. The next major step came in the wake of the sixteenth-century Reformation. By 1550 portions of the Bible were available in thirty-three different languages of the world, including Ethiopic and Arabic, both used in parts of Africa.

In a report of December 1984 there was a dramatic increase in the languages involved in translation. At that date translations of the Scriptures were available in 1,808 of the world's 2,800 languages, with Africa alone claiming nearly one-third of these, with 522 different vernacular translations. 30 In the updated figures for 2006, modified in March/April, 2007, the world population is put at 6.5 billion and over 6, 900 languages spoken. Of these languages about 2,426 had some or all of the Bible translated into them, while 1,144 have the New Testament. Wycliffe personnel are reported to be working in 1,379 languages spread over 97 countries, which is 71% of all translation projects worldwide. In the more than seventy years of its history Wycliffe translators have been involved in the translation of 710 New Testaments and complete Bibles representing over 78 million people. 31 At one stage in the 1980s, for example, continuing efforts were being made to provide translations into an additional 238 African languages, so great is the demand. 32 The scale of the phenomenon places Africa in a separate category altogether.

This pattern of the correlation between indigenous cultural revitalization and Christian renewal is a consistent one in Africa, and as a theme it goes back to the very beginnings of the primitive church. In Africa, too, Christ died and descended into the ancestral Hades, to emerge in the exalted company of the elders. Africans have encountered this risen Christ in the glorious company of apostles and the goodly fellowship of prophets, and with the earnest voices of the white-robed "Cherubim and Seraphim", the name of one of the prophet movements in Nigeria, they went on to publish abroad "the wonders of His name" in all the thousand tongues of Pentecost flame. As they pored over the vernacular Bible, the new faith communities found scriptural sanction for joining the Old and New Testaments to the old and new dispensation of their own history and experience. The message of the Bible that God's work (*missio Dei*) is not concluded but continues in the new age gave an invigorating tone to primal societies as they confronted new challenges.

With the written assurance thus provided, local Christians invested in projects of social change and renewal, unburdened by the suggestion that they deny their old traditions in order to claim the promise of Abraham. They saw their challenge as one of integrating the old and the new, not overthrowing the old assurance as a condition for embracing the new hope. The effect was that local agents rejected the demands of Western missions against the witness of Scripture and the church. That was as much the point of departure for the successful transmission of the Gospel in Africa as it was the logical conclusion of the mother tongue process of Bible translation. At that point African history became the history of Christianity in one of its recent specific manifestations, and that African perspective was no more exotic and remote than its Gentile equivalent in the New Testament, as the translators of the King James Bible contended.

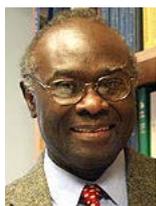
## **Broken but Valiant**

A teacher in Benin province in colonial Nigeria urged that greater attention be paid to the vernacular, lamenting the fact that no textbooks existed in the language in question, and no standard orthography, either, all of which meant that teachers and students were confronted with daunting challenges. The one ray of hope came from missionary efforts. The Benin teacher wrote, 'As for text-books the rudimentary but laudable efforts of Rev J Corbeau may be regarded as pioneer work.' 33

The writer made no claims about Europeans having the power to name new forms of humanity in order to promote their agenda of colonial hegemony, as Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff have argued. 34 Instead, the writer turned his attention to the imperative of developing an African consciousness radically different from the Western tradition.

We English-speaking Africans very often forget that the atmosphere, both physical and moral, which shaped the European mind is quite altogether different from ours; and that European literature is the written expression of [the] European mind and the atmosphere which shaped it. If an Englishman wants to study Latin or French he will not be required to make very strenuous mental efforts to enable him to 'think' a Latin or French sentence. The atmosphere is all European, it is there already. But with African languages the position is different; the gulf between the two intellectual developments is wide. 35

This suggests that the mother tongues played a mitigating role against the forces of alien control, and that Bible translation was a significant force for indigenous renewal. As William Sharp (under the pseudonym of Fiona Macleod) noted with respect to the old Gaelic race, the last tragedy for broken nations was not the loss of power and distinction, or even of country. 'The last tragedy, and the saddest, is when the treasured language dies slowly out, when winter falls upon the legendary remembrance of a people.' 36 Bible translation helped preserve the people's language, and thus averted 'the last and saddest tragedy' of defeat and loss. 37



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## Endnotes

- 1 The phrase, 'Englising the Bible' occurs in the title of a study of the effects of the KJV on English Catholic Bible translation. The 'cadences of the Authorized Version', writes Knox, were designed to be received 'with the ears of childhood' (Knox 1949: 41)
- 2 Hill 1994: 31
- 3 Fuller quoted in Coggan 1963:17
- 4 Tyndale 2000: 24. The work was first published in Antwerp in 1528
- 5 Smith *et al* 1997: 54
- 6 Smith *et al* 1997: 54
- 7 Elton 1964: 52
- 8 Dodds 1970: 121
- 9 Cited in Opfell 1982: 13-14. Erasmus declared himself in almost identical words. See Erasmus and Olin 1965: 96f. But the case for wide access was bitterly contested. Said the Duke of Newcastle: "The Bible under every weaver's and chambermaid's arm hath done much harm... For controversy is a civil war with the pen which pulls out the sword soon afterwards." Cited in Hill 1994: 47
- 10 Coggan 1963: 19
- 11 Cited in Manuel 1974: 36
- 12 Hill 1994: 31
- 13 Milton emphasized this sense of Scripture against privilege and hierarchy. 'Let them chant what they will of prerogatives,' he wrote in 1641, 'we will tell them of Scripture; of custom, we of Scripture; of acts and statutes, still of Scripture, till...the mighty weakness of the Gospel throw down the weak mightiness of man's reasoning and puts an end to tyranny and superstition.' (Hill 1994: 43). The contention that divine instruction was a plain tablet rather than a puzzle of arcane fragments placed by an inscrutable power

beyond the reach of ordinary mortals was a central conviction of the day. John Dod and Robert Cleaver, for example, in *A Plaine and Familiar Exposition of the Ten Commandments*, argued in the seventeenth century that the godly came mainly from the lower classes because God preferred poor, despised, industrious, and labouring people to titles, birth or genealogy (see Hill 1994: 73)

14 Smith 1929: 195

15 Smith 1929: 195-196

16 Smith 1929: 196

17 Livingstone 1857: 114

18 Westermann 1925: 26-7, 28

19 Cited in Smith 1929: 198-9

20 Livingstone 1857: 114

21 'The Bible as Poetry' in Whitman 1982: 1140-42

22 Barrett 1968: 260-1

23 Turner 1967

24 Bentley 1887: xxiii

25 Sundkler 1961: 30

26 Sundkler 1976: 250

27 Laing 1944: 31

28 Beetham 1967: 55

29 Barrett 1968: 133

30 United Bible Societies and American Bible Society. 1984: 7

31 For Wycliffe Bible Translators see [wycliffe.org.uk](http://wycliffe.org.uk) and for more recent data see [www.wycliffe.net/ScriptureAccessStatistics/tabid/73/language/en-US/Default.aspx](http://www.wycliffe.net/ScriptureAccessStatistics/tabid/73/language/en-US/Default.aspx) (registration required)

32 See *Christian Science Monitor*, 3 September 1985. For a linguistic account of the African continent, see Dalby 1977

33 Molokwu 1935: 53

34 Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 213-215, 311

35 Molokwu 1935: 54

36 MacLeod 1904: 223

37 For a study of languages under threat see Austin 2008