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The Spread of Revealed Religions in West Africa and its Implications for the Development of Translation

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Abstract

This study examines the metamorphoses of West African languages into written status and subsequently the acquisition of translation skills by West Africans during the spread of Islam and Christianity. With the trans-Saharan and Atlantic contacts, literacy spread in the subregion and native languages became written, facilitating the translation of the Bible and the Qur'an into local languages, especially with Roman script. Africans who participated in the translations of the Scriptures became skillful translators and experts in both English and regional languages. This study concludes that the enthusiasm and dedication of the missionaries who developed local languages should be emulated to further enrich African languages to a competitive and international standard.

1. Introduction

Before the introduction of Islam and Christianity in West Africa, most West African languages were purely oral, and with each ethnic group a religion was associated. The need to spread the two religions in the sub-region led to the development of local languages at literacy level, and to the establishment of European languages. The Bible and the Qur'an were translated into African languages for the further spread of the two missionary religions that used different strategies to become dominant over the unwritten ethnic religions. An immediate consequence was the development of translation skills in some African converts, which was the departure point for current translation in West Africa.

2. Local languages development

Trans-Saharan contacts favored the establishment of Islam in Africa south of the Sahara. The Christian religion entered West Africa from the Atlantic. The two religions, missionary in nature, revealed (Munoz 2001) and universal (Davidson 1965:165), are religions of the Book, that is, the Holy Book (Crowder 1977). Consequently, both Islam and Christianity are accompanied by the virtues of literacy. Christianity was spread with the introduction of Roman script and Islam with Arabic script (Spolsky 2003:82).

The visiting Arabs and the converted West Africans presented Islam as a complete way of life with a distinct culture based on Islamic teachings, ideas, and values. Munoz proposes the same idea in no less strong terms:

> The encounter of Islam with Africa has been described as one of the most fecund human adventures in universal history. Islam has proposed what one may call "a choice of society"…. Certainly, it was a great challenge as it was a question of changing their culture and to become someone else. (2001:73)

West Africa was set for arabization, that is, total assimilation, by adopting Arabic in the subregion as the unifying factor in the Muslim empire or Dar al-Islam (Dalby 1970). Islamic education spread in West Africa in the sacred language, Arabic (Crowder 1977). Besides the adoption of Arabic as the language of communication in the Dar al-Islam, with Mecca as the center of influence, and Timbuktu, Kano, Khartoum, and Mombassa as regional centers, local languages were enriched with loanwords from Arabic (Dalby 1970). Knappert supported Dalby in the following terms:

> There are the peoples who live in the inner sphere of Arabic influence, and who have been largely converted to Islam. The best known examples are the Hausa, the Futa, the Manding, the Swahili, and the Somali. With Islam, a flood of Arabic words comes into the languages. (1970:85)

By adopting Arabic, some West African converts became erudite and left scholarly works. Ahmad Baba, Usman dan Fodio, Al-Hajj Umar Tall, and Askia Mohammed (Crowder 1977) are a few examples of the impact of the trans-Saharan contacts on West African education. They and many others benefited from Arabic education and transmitted the acquired knowledge to others. They were gifted writers and charismatic leaders who commanded the respect of all, especially the Sudanese Muslim and Arab traders (Cissoko 1966). According to Lilyan Kesteloot (1970), Africa had produced people who mastered the Arabic language to a level that would have helped them to invent their own alphabet, yet the visiting Arab or Islamic scholars did not encourage the move. This opinion coincides with that of Basil Davidson:

> Two important histories of the Western Sudan were also written by scholars of Timbuktu. They are the *Tarikh al-Fattash*, the Chronicle of the Seeker after knowledge, and the *Tarikh as-Sudan*, the Chronicle of the Western Sudan. Both were composed in Arabic, for this was the literary language of those learned men, just as Latin was the literary language of the scholars of Europe. (1965:168)

The attempt to adopt Arabic as the language of communication by the Kanuri, Hausa, Songhai, Bamana, Wolof, and Fulani did not yield desired results. According to Wauthier (1964:34), there was inconsistency in the adoption which resulted in massive amounts of borrowing from Arabic.

The spread of Islam did not favor the development of local languages as such, but rather it encouraged the mastery of Arabic, considered a sacred language. Translating the Holy Qur'an into local languages was discouraged for fear of subtracting from or adding to the sacred original text. Therefore, Islam did not depend on the local languages for its spread because it had a plan to promote Arabic. Translation of the Qur'an was not encouraged because of the canonical rites of its Scriptures. This policy was not to the advantage of the local languages, as in the case of the Fulfulde language of the Fulani assimilated to an Islamized Hausa culture in the 19th century (Sanneh 1987). The following quotation supported by a verse from the Holy Qur'an explains better the untranslatable nature of the sacred Arabic words:

> Muslims believe that the Qur'an in Arabic is the purest form of the revelation, since, they say, it was the language used by God in speaking through Gabriel. Surah 43:3 states: "We have made it a Qur'an in Arabic, that ye may be able to understand." Thus any translation is viewed as only a dilution that involves a loss of purity. In fact, some Islamic scholars refuse to translate the Qur'an. Their viewpoint is that "to translate is always to betray," and therefore, "Muslims have always deprecated and at times prohibited any attempt to render it in another language," states Dr. J. A. Williams, lecturer on Islamic history. (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 1990:290–291)

The untranslatable nature of the sacred words of the Qur'an is also summarized by Spolsky in the following quotation:

> Islam is basically and strictly associated with Classical Arabic…. While speakers of many other languages follow Islam, Classical Arabic dominates the religion linguistically. The Qur'an—believed to be the actual word of God—can only be read or recited in Arabic. There is a dispute about the permissibility of translation. Prayers must be recited in Arabic five times a day. (2003:84–85)

Yet, because of pressing needs, the Qur'an was translated into some African languages using Roman script. A translation of the Qur'an into Yoruba published in January 1973 and called *Al-Kurani Ti A Tumo Si Ede Yoruba* is an example.[1] Nabeel A. Rana (1993) undertook a compilation of the languages into which the

[1]Yoruba is a regional language spoken in the South-West of Nigeria. The name Yoruba refers to People of Oyo. It is now used to describe the common language of different groups of the Ijebu, the Oyo, the Ekiti, the Ondo, the Egba, the Ijesha, etc. (Munoz, 2001). The translation of Qur'an into Yoruba was initiated by Alhaji Ahmadu Bello. The Muslim Council of Nigeria, Lagos branch, commissioned a Committee comprised of Imamu Lawal Augusto, Mr. I. S. Akanni, Alhaji H. Y. Dindey, and others for the translation of the Holy Qur'an into Yoruba. The Committee under the supervision of Alhaji Ahmadu Bello and Al-Ustas Kamilu Al-Sharif, members of the World Muslim Council, started its work in December 1962. The translation was edited by another Committee of eminent Muslims. They were Alhaji Abdul-Lateef Ahmadu, Alhaji Khidir Mustapha Ilorin, Alhaji Issa Ade Bello, and Alhaji Abdul-Wahabi Sanusi. The second Committee concluded its work in 1972. The third Committee for the final editing of the translation of Qur'an

Holy Qur'an has been translated and found that out of fifty languages, seven were of African origin and four West African. Syed Jaced Alam (2007) was more comprehensive in his article "Qur'an Translated into 119 Languages." According to him, the Qur'an had been translated into 119 languages of which twenty-six were African and sixteen of West African origin.[2] Today, the translations of the Qur'an are available in the Roman script of the Western world.

The second cluster of influences in West Africa was prompted by the Atlantic contacts. The first contacts with Spain and Portugal did not last long nor make much impact. Only later, as a result of the infamous slave trade, some West Africans were taken to Europe and the New World. A number of them eventually returned to Sierra Leone, Liberia, and the Gambia. Philanthropists and especially the churches helped in the relocation of the freed slaves and the recaptives. In Sierra Leone and Liberia, some slaves and their descendants benefited from the schools established by the missionaries. Among them were men such as Ajayi Crowther, James Johnson, Mojola Agbebi, and Africanus Beale Horton. The Churches trained the first West African elite whom the French called the *évolués* (Ayandele 1970; 1979; Crowder 1977; July 1968).

Christianizing Africa was the program of some devout Christians, also known as humanitarians, who believed that the only way to discourage the slave trade was to preach the gospel of Christ to Africans who were middlemen. To achieve their goal in West Africa, the European missions needed a structure that could be in line with the European-Christian way of life, with a system of education, government, and laws acceptable to Christian Europe (Crowder 1977), and especially the Roman script.

When the foreign missionaries introduced the Roman script into the forest region of West Africa, there was no form of writing except, occasionally, Arabic. In the coastal areas of the West Africa forest, in the absence of writing, the traditional society was oral. With the establishment of schools, Western literacy suppressed all other forms of script.

To increase the level of literacy and the further spread Christianity worldwide, the Bible was translated into many local languages, totaling about 1800 languages, with Africa recording 522. The translation of the Scriptures into local languages had multiple consequences for both the missionaries and the natives alike. More converts were recorded. Christianity further spread. Also a vernacular alphabet was developed and its use facilitated interactions between visitors and natives. This development of the local languages to literacy level helped to preserve them from being overwhelmed by the forces of *lingua franca* (Sanneh 1987).

In West Africa, literacy was further encouraged with the production of primers, dictionaries, and grammars in local languages. One example is *The Grammar of the Bornu or Kanuri Language and African Narrative Literature in Kanuri* (1854) which was published by Rev. J. W. Koelle (Afigbo 1986:76–77). Another striking example is the work of J. G. Christaller, a missionary in the Gold Coast (now Ghana). He translated the Bible into the Twi language, produced a dictionary, and a grammar of Twi supported by a compilation of 3600 Twi proverbs and axioms. The *Christian Messenger,* a journal founded in 1883, helped to promote Akan life and culture (Sanneh 1987).

The first African Bishop in charge of the Niger Delta mission not only began the translation of the Bible into Yoruba, he supervised a Committee of Europeans and Yoruba to ensure the translation of the complete Bible into Yoruba in 1884 (Bible Society 2007:13–14). He also wrote a grammar and vocabulary of the Yoruba language (Crowder 1977:117).

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into Yoruba included Alfa Agba Alhaji Kamal-deen El-Adabiyy, Alfa Agba Alhaji Burhanud-deen Sanusi Alaka, Alfa Agba Alhaji Adama Abdullahi Ilorin, Alfa Agba Alhaji Abdur-Rahman Salahud-deen El-Adabiyy, Alfa Alhaji Mohammed Rajee Sulaiman El-Imam, and Alhaji Musa Aliy Yahya Ajetunmobi El-Adabiyy. The Committee concluded its work in January 1973 and the Qur'an in Yoruba was published.

[2]The sixteen West African languages into which the Holy Qur'an has been translated are Asante spoken in Togo, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire; Basa of Liberia; Bete of Cote d'Ivoire; Dagbani of Ghana and Togo; Ewe of Ghana, Togo and Benin Republic. Others are Fante of Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire and Togo; Fula in Nigeria, Guinea, Senegal; Ga in Ghana, Togo, Benin Republic; Hausa in Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, Chad, Ghana; Igbo in South-East Nigeria; Kpelle in Guinea, Liberia; Mandika in Guinea, Mali; Mende in Sierra Leone, Liberia; Tempe in Sierra Leone; Vai in Liberia, Sierra Leone; and Yoruba in Nigeria, Benin Republic and Togo (Alam 2007).

Under the pressure of Urhobo, Agori Iwe, the only ordained Priest in the CMS (Anglican) Church in Urhoboland, commissioned J. A. Emofe, Isaac Efedjara, and Enajero Arawore to translate the Bible into Urhobo.[3] This cumulated in the publication in 1951 of the New Testament (Nabofa 2002).

Today, with the dominance of Roman script in the subregion of West Africa, both the Bible and the Qur'an abound in local languages, witnessing periodical revisions. Leaflets on Yoruba Christian and Muslim Scriptures are available to communicate the message of God. The most important result is that the two religions have succeeded in taking the lead in West Africa, leaving the third position to the traditional African perception of God. Today again, Islam relies on the Roman script adopted by local languages to further spread in Africa. Wauthier confirms this point in reproducing the following words of author F. D. Sakiliba:

> C'est donc certainement en definitive l'alphabet latin qui fixera le mieux les langues africaines pour le role qu'elles ont désormais à jouer dans l'évolution de cent cinquante millions d'hommes. ("It is thus certainly ultimately the Latin alphabet which will better fix the African languages for the role they have to play from now on in the evolution of one hundred and fifty million people.") (1964:35)

It follows that the Roman script is the most widely used means of writing the spoken local languages in West Africa. Its success did not allow the invented alphabets in West Africa to be accepted for common use. These West African alphabets, mostly recent, were suppressed because no support came from inside. The external forces mounted by the spread of the languages of the Holy Books were also remarkable (Dalby 1970). There were, of course, exceptions to the above statement, as when Dalby (1970:109–112) mentioned that the Vai syllabary was standardized and used for correspondence, records, and translations of the Bible and the Qur'an. The Vah alphabet also got to the level of being used for correspondence and translations of the Bible. Diop's opinion (1960:140–141) may be relevant here when he elevated African writings to alphabetical status.[4]

3. Development of translation skills

In West Africa, there are similar ethnic languages that could interact without too much difficulty because of similarities in meaning of the words. But the transformation of unwritten local languages to a literacy level created new demand for the Scriptures into the local languages to facilitate the spread of the words of God. This point is supported by the desire of both Christians and Muslims who, according to Davidson (1965:165), "believed that it was their duty to send out missionaries and convert everyone else to their faith."

The European missionary who came to spread the Gospel was intellectually equipped and prepared for the work of salvation. West Africans who benefited from the training in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Gambia, and later Ghana, Nigeria and others, were the first Africans who helped in the spread of Christianity. They also joined in the mission to train others who all together helped to develop the local languages. While the skillful Western missionary was busy training Africans and coordinating translations, he also learnt the local languages and cultures, because according to Sanneh (1987), translation implies culture.

In precolonial West Africa, the missionary followed the Biblical injunction to "make disciples of all nations,…teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19–20). This strategy involved translation of the Christian Scriptures so that the teachings of Jesus could be made available to all nations despite thousands of different languages.

Not only are languages, corresponding cultures, and word-meaning important in translation, but also the approach. Because of the complexity involved in translating into languages with grammatical systems different from the Indo-European languages, the theory of dynamic equivalence was widely adopted in

[3]Urhobo is a regional language spoken in the South-East of Nigeria. Okpe, Ethiope East, Ethiope West, Warry, Sapele, Ugele, Isolo, Abraka and Oghara are some of the local governments in Delta state where Urhobo is the spoken language. It is spread the most in Delta State, a South-East region of Nigeria.

[4]The indigenous scripts include, the Vai, Mende, Loma, Kpelle, Bassa, and Gola in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Others are the Ebibio-Efik alphabet and the Yoruba 'holy' alphabet in Nigeria, the Wolof in Senegal, the Manding in Guinea and Fula in Mali. A Bete syllabary and a Guro script were invented in Cote d'Ivoire (Dalby 1970).

Christian circles for clarity purpose. The theory was set to reckon with the meaning and not the form, with the simplicity, clarity, and explicit explanation of difficulties. All members of the translation team learnt one thing or another of the dynamic equivalence theory, which was adopted only because of the need for clarity and simplicity in the message the missionaries intended to get across to Africans who were not familiar with the Scriptures. The local language versions of the Bible have continuously attracted revisions with the application of the functional-equivalence, meaning-based approach on one hand, and the maximal equivalence theories on the other, with a view to adequately address the complexity of the Bible. Africans, members of the Translation Committee, were taught the required skills to do good translation. The techniques acquired were transmitted to the younger generation in the missions or schools. A practical example is the Committee of Europeans and Yorubas who translated the Bible into Yoruba (Bible Society 2007:14). A Joint Committee of all Christian denominations in Urhoboland, Delta State, Nigeria, called the Urhobo Joint Committee, was commissioned to translate the Old Testament. All denominations in Urhoboland were represented, to give it a national flavor (Nabofa 2002), as Bible translation is a collective effort where every member of the team contributed his quota and got trained in the process.

4. Conclusion

Christian and Muslim missionaries were able to introduce European and Islamic ideas and ways of life to the people of West Africa. Christianity and Islam were adopted, with the Bible and the Qur'an as reference books. By adapting the two religions of the Book to West Africa, literacy spread and the skills of reading and writing were taught. While Islam preserved the sacred words of the Qur'an in Arabic and favored the use of loanwords in local languages, Christianity instead applied the Roman script to native languages, enhancing them to a written level. Local languages could then be read and written in Roman script, which facilitated the spread of Christianity. The Bible was then translated into native languages by teams of both Western and African Christians. This facilitated the transfer of translation skills to Africans, thus marking the beginning of translation in West Africa. In the process of translating the Scriptures into ethnic languages, some Africans who participated in the exercise became skillful translators. Theories of translation were developed and taught to African missionaries with a view to transferring adequately the message of God. The enthusiasm, dedication, and courage of the missionaries who helped to develop local languages to written level are worthy to be emulated to further enrich African languages to an international standard.

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