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The Polygon of the Bible Translation Efforts in Eritrea 1880–2012

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Abstract

Since the late 1860s, the missionaries of the Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM) and their local colleagues initiated the production of dozens of literary works in Eritrea. The most notable of these is the translation of the Bible into four Eritro-Ethiopian languages: Oromo, Təgre, Təgrəññа and Kunama. This article attempts to present the Bible translation story from a polygonal view, a hexagonal view to be specific: (1) the pioneers of the translation works; (2) backgrounds of some of the key translators; (3) the cities (countries) where the works continued; (4) the time spent to complete and print the translated Bibles; (5) the years that some of these workers stayed for in the translation projects; (6) and some memorable stories of the translation and production process. The combination of these six lines of narration, like the connected sides of a polygon, will not only give a more interconnected presentation of the entire Bible translation works if considered as one big package, but also show how a work such as the translation of the Bible that requires the combined efforts of local and foreign workers can produce a worthy result when the respective contributions of both groups of workers are given their due space and recognition.

1. Introduction

Bible translation is probably one of the very few enterprises in Eritrea that has continued throughout the pre-Italian, Italian, British, Ethiopian and Eritrean government eras. To date, translations of the entire Bible have been completed in Oromo, Təgre, Təgrəññа and Kunama. A New Testament translation in Blin has also been completed in 2018 and the work on the Old Testament is progressing. Moreover, there exists in print a Saho translation of the Gospel of John. Due to limitations on the availability of resources on the history of the Blin translation project, this article will be limited to the translation works on the other four languages.

These translation works were mainly pioneered by members of the Evangelical (Lutheran) church of Eritrea since the arrival of the missionaries of the Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM) in the mid-1860s. The crown in the jewel of the outstanding[1] literary and scriptural productions[2] that began sometime before the 1880s

[1] Enno Littmann (1875–1956) testified to this great work as: "From the merely scholarly standpoint the work of the missionaries in studying these languages (i.e., Tigriña, Təgre, Kunama, Galla and Suaheli) and creating written literatures where formerly there were none, is of the greatest value and importance." (Lundström and Gebremedhin 2011:94) Edward Ullendorff also observed: "No praise can be too high for the scholarly work accomplished by the Swedish missionaries in Eritrea" (Ullendorff 1960:20).

[2] In 1918, for example, Jonas Iwarson and Alessandro Tron published the *Notizie storiche e varie sulla Missione Evangelica Svedese dell'Eritrea* (*1866–1916*) where they listed 66 scriptural and other literary works of the SEM published in Təgrəññа, Təgre, Amharic, Gəʿəz, Galla (Oromo), Kunama and Kiswahili in a span of 51 years (1866–1917). These publications were original texts or translations of foreign missionaries such as Dr. Karl Winqvist, K. G. Rodén, Agnes and Karl Nyström, M. Lutero, Norlèle W. Lundgren, Olof Eriksson, P. Ahlberg, Alessandro Tron, Jonas Iwarson, Dr. G.R. Sundström, Otto von Gerlach, J. Mayer, Renlund, August Andersson and P. Olsson and local workers such as Sälomon ʿAṣqu, Zärʾä-Ṣəyon Muse, Marəqos Gərmay, Dawit Amanuᵓel, Täwäldä-Mädəhn Gäbrä-Mädəhn, Gäbrä-Səllase aka *abba* Mäʿašo, *aläqä* Tayäläñ and Onesimos Näsib. (Iwarson and Tron 1918:36–39).

was the production of the Bible in local languages of the communities that the SEM worked within (i.e., Oromo, Təgre, Təgrəññа and Kunama). The focus on Bible translation owes itself to the SEM goal that "reading the Bible [in one's mother tongue] was the most important vehicle for the spread and consolidation of the Gospel."[3]

The missionaries of the SEM involved not only their own personnel but a host of indigenous people of varying backgrounds in the Bible translation task. A serious question is raised (Andemariam 2013) whether the SEM fell into the temptation of taking more credit than they deserved in contrast to the talent and labor of the local translators. Through this article, mainly based on the two seminal works on the history and works of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea (Arén 1978 and Lundrstöm and Gebremedhin 2011), the author proposes that the different Bible translation efforts be studied as one interconnected story. In this article the Oromo, Təgre, Təgrəññа and Kunama Bible translations are narrated from the points of view of six different sides so a polygonal (hexagonal, to be exact) image appears to give the story a more complete picture. These sides are: (1) the pioneers of the translation efforts; (2) backgrounds of some of the key translators; (3) the cities or countries where the work continued; (4) the time spent to complete and print the translated Bibles; (5) the years that some of these workers continued in the translation projects; (6) and some memorable stories of the translation and production process.

2. Pioneers of the translation efforts

2.1. Kunama

From the very outset, the SEM had, as one of its objectives, readied its missionaries to endeavour to immediately begin producing literary and scriptural works in the indigenous languages. Thus, when the first three SEM missionaries[4] arrived at the Port of Massawa on 15 March 1866 and, on the advice of Werner Münzinger (the Vice-Consul of the French Consulate at the Port of Massawa), changed their course from going to the Oromo land and went instead to the Kunama land, they immediately began working on the preparation of Kunama writings. Carlsson, one of the three, prepared a draft for a Kunama grammar and dictionary.[5] The desire of these and other SEM workers to start producing scriptural works in Kunama was thwarted by the withdrawal of the mission in February 1870 in reaction to opposition and killings. The work did not resume until December 1897 when the Rev. Johan Magnus Nilsson (1865–1949) returned to Kunama land. Nilsson was joined in 1898 by the Rev. August Andersson (1868–1952).

Nilsson and Andersson can rightfully take the credit for pioneering the preparation of Kunama scriptural works, including translation of portions of the Bible into Kunama. The first Bible translation product in Kunama was the Gospel of Mark prepared by Andersson and published in 1906. The Gospels of Mathew, Luke and John as well as Acts also existed in manuscript form without being printed.[6]

Nilsson and Andersson had started the translation of the New Testament into Kunama in earnest from around 1905. However, for a number of reasons including lack of qualified indigenous translators, the work lingered until the arrival in 1922 of the Rev. Olle Hagner (formerly Olof Andersson) (1895–1978). With the added input of native Kunama converts, the Kunama New Testament was accelerated and its first publication appeared in 1923 (or 1927).[7] In all these pioneering years of the translation of the Bible into Kunama, August Andersson shines as the engine behind the process. This untiring worker labored for 17 years among the Kunama people.[8]

[3] Lundström and Gebremedhin 2011:128.
[4] Carl Johan Carlsson (1836–1867), Per Erik Kjellberg (1837–1869) and Lars Johan Lange (1837–1911), documented in Lundström and Gebremedhin 2011:130–138 and Arén 1978:130,140.
[5] Idris 2003:54.
[6] Arén 1978:367; Lundström and Gebremedhin 2011:264.
[7] Arén 1978:369fn; Lundström and Gebremedhin 2011:264; Iwarson and Tron 1918:39; ƎmbayäHabtä-Əgziʾ 1966:14. Note, however, that the year of publication of the Kunama New Testament is different according to ƎmbayäHabtä-Əgziʾ and Lundström and Gebremedhin, i.e., 1923 and 1927 respectively.
[8] Arén 1978:146–148,364–365; Lundström and Gebremedhin 2011:240–244,255.

2.2. Oromo

The most famous of the early leaders of the small evangelical community in the Ǝmkullu mission station near Massawa, the Rev. Bengt Peter Lundahl (1840–1885), stands out among the pioneers of the evangelical manuscript preparation and Bible translation works in Eritrea. His contribution was twofold: installing a printing press and leading by example by producing literary works of his own.

Realizing from the outset that his ambition of producing literary works would not succeed if his Ǝmkullu station did not own a printing machine of its own, during his stay in Europe in 1883 he bought a small printing machine and recruited a qualified printer. The machine operated using custom-made large and small size Amharic types and started printing in April 1885. The first book to be produced by the machine was Onesimos Näsib's *Galata Waaqayoo Gofta Maccaa*, a small book of one hundred hymns published in 1886 at that printing press.[9]

As far as producing literary works, since he continued to use Amharic as a medium for preaching and teaching at Ǝmkullu,[10] he produced the following Amharic books: his first hymnbook in 1881, which contained a collection of 41 hymns[11] set to music; a second hymn book of 93 members readied for printing at the time of his death in 1885; an exposition of the Gospel of Matthew; and a commentary of the Gospel of John.[12]

Lundahl had already begun assigning the drafting of the translation to his local converts. When he received his first convert and student at Ǝmkullu, Onesimos Näsib (*c.* 1855/56–1931) in 1870, he started to quickly prepare this prized convert for evangelical works and the preparation of manuscripts in Oromo.[13] Soon after his full conversion, Onesimos was tasked by Lundahl to revise the already-existing translations of different books of the Bible prepared since the late 1830s, mainly by the German missionary Rev. Johann Ludwig Krapf (1810–1881) and two Ethiopians, Rufo—a freed slave—and *Däbtära* Zännäb, a talented scribe (d. October 1876).[14] In 1880 Lundahl also assigned Onesimos the task of preparing the translation of the Old Testament into Oromo, a task which Onesimos successfully completed in 1897 along with his Oromo colleagues numbering between 15 and 20, including the brilliant Aster Gannoo Salbaan (1874–1964), his wife Lidia (Dimbo) Garbaa (~1872/1874–1941), Feben Hirpe (1860–1961), Estifanos Bonaya of Lamu (Kenya) and Nathanel Roro. The entire Oromo Bible, the *Mäčafä Qulqulluu*, was printed in Gəʿəz script on 10 June 1899 at St. Chrischona, Switzerland.[15]

2.3. Təgre

There are two different accounts on who actually initiated the Təgre Bible translation work.[16] Arén (1978:303) states that sometime before 1883, Peter Lundahl, who we mentioned earlier for initiating the Oromo Bible translation work, had set a young Təgre shepherd named Dawit Amanuʾel (1862–1944) the task of beginning to translate the Holy Scriptures into the latter's native language Təgre. Dawit, later *Qäššï* Dawit Amanuʾel, was the first man from the Mänsaʿə group of the Təgre to be converted to Christianity by the SEM, having been baptized at the age of 15 by Lundahl in the Gäläb River on 8 July 1877.[17] In his preface to the 1902 New Testament, however, K. G. Rodén (1860–1943) states that the translation of the New Testament into Təgre was initiated by the memorable Finnish missionary, the Rev. E. E. Hedenström (1844–1904), the pioneer of the SEM mission at Gäläb, who in 1880 set Dawit Amanuʾel and the young Täwäldä Mädḫən Gäbrä Mädḫən (1860–1930), his students at the time, the task of translating the New Testament into Təgre. Dawit, described by Musa ʾAron (1988:9) as the father of the Təgre language, began work by translating the

[9] Arén 1978:301–302; Bulcha 1995:40; Lundström and Gebremedhin 2011:176.
[10] Lundström and Gebremedhin 2011:176.
[11] 412 hymns according to Lundström and Gebremedhin (2011:175). However, the author is not sure if "412" is clerical mistake because Lundström and Ezra seem to have referred to Arén (1978:301), which mentions "42" hymns.
[12] Arén 1978:301.
[13] Lundström and Gebremedhin 2011:151–152.
[14] Andemariam 2013:103–105,108; Janko 2010:28b.
[15] Kassaye 2007:576; Arén 1978:385.
[16] For a more detailed narration of the story of the translation of the Bible into Təgre, see Andemariam (2012), "The Story of the Translation of the Bible into Təgre (1877–1988)."
[17] Arén 1978:215.

Gospel of Mark, with the assistance of Täwäldä Mädḫən Gäbrä Mädḫən[18] who would later be the first native evangelical worker to be ordained on the African continent.[19] Five hundred copies of the translated Gospel of Mark were printed at the ƎmkulluƎmkullu printing house in 1889 (Arén 1978:223).[20]

With Dawit carrying out most of the translation work and Täwäldä Mädḫən joining him after his four-year theological study program in Sweden (1883–1887), the translation of the New Testament was completed in May 1890 under the supervision of Dr. Karl Winqvist (1847–1909), about whom we will read in more detail in the subsequent section, and the first copies were printed in 1892 (Andemariam 2013:111).

2.4. Təgrəññа

The story of the translation of the Bible into Təgrəññа in general goes at least back to the early 19th century. A number of attempts were made to translate parts of New Testament in what is now Ethiopia. Attempts to translate portions of the New Testament include: British adventurer Nathaniel Pearce's (1779–1820) amateur translations of the Gospels of Mark and John during his stay in Ethiopia between 1805 and 1819; the Rev. Christian Kügler's (1801–1830) translation of the Gospel of Luke sometime after February 1830; and the Rev. Samuel Gobat's (1799–1879) translation of the Gospel of John. The most notable of these efforts, however, was the translation of the Four Gospels by *Däbtära* Matewos of ʿAdəwa[21] between 1835 and 1837 completed under the supervision of the Rev. Carl Wilhelm Isenberg (1806–1864),[22] polished by Isenberg and Krapf, and printed in St. Chrischona in March 1866. By September 1836, Matewos had completed 1st Timothy, and although not circulated in print forms, it has also been recorded that he had also prepared Təgrəññа translations of Genesis and Psalms.[23]

As far as the Təgrəññа Bible translation work in Eritrea is concerned, however, the pioneering credit goes to the indefatigable Rev. Karl Winqvist, not for actually co-translating but for incessantly pressing the local workers into production. Although he arrived at ƎmkulluƎmkullu's Bethʾel Congregation[24] towards the end of 1883 with his newlywed wife Elisabeth Winqvist (1863–1957) (or Elsie as she is commonly known) to assist in the missionary work by opening the first missionary medical facility of its kind in the horn of Africa, Winqvist was irresistibly captivated by the urge to join the Bible translation works initiated shortly before his arrival. The Təgre translation work had already begun, and in 1891 he decided to embark upon the task of translating and producing spiritual literature in Təgrəññа. To familiarize himself with the language, he first went to the highland village of Šəmanəgus Laʻəlay with his wife to the home of a recent convert Bäyən Rəstu and his "sweet wife" Əmbita and stayed there for four months.[25]

Winqvist then went back to ƎmkulluƎmkullu and in 1891 constituted a committee of local colleagues to produce Təgrəññа translations. The three prominent members of the committee were *Qäšši* Marəqos Gərmay (1862–1924), *Däbtära* Rufaʾel, a young famine refugee who had taken shelter at ƎmkulluƎmkullu,[26] and the exceptionally gifted *Qäšši* Gäbrä Ewosṭatewos—colloquially Gäbrä-tatyos—Zämikaʾel (ca. 1865–1905) who replaced Rufaʾel in 1894.[27] Chief among their assignments was producing a new translation of the four Gospels by

[18] Arén 1978:303; Lundström and Gebremedhin 2011:176,226; Voigt 2003:577b; Ullendorff 1985:71.
[19] Dege and Unseth 2010:877; Holmer 1986:134.
[20] Arén 1978:223.
[21] For a more detailed story of *Däbtära* Mathewos' life and his works as well as the story of his translation efforts, *see* Karl Knauß (1992) "Krapf, Johann Ludwig" in *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon*, 4.
[22] For a more detailed narration of life and works of Isenberg, see Charles Herman Gundert's (1885) "Biography of the Rev. Charles Isenberg, Missionary of the Church Missionary Society to Abyssinia and Western India From 1832 to 1864."
[23] Gundert (1885).
[24] Arén 1978:221–222,288–292. After Lundahl's death the name "Bethʾel" seems to have gone out of use and changed to *"Mädhane ʾAlem"* (Gəʿəz for "Savior of the World"—i.e., Jesus Christ) by pilgrims who used to visit the church on their way to Jerusalem (Arén 1978:322–323).
[25] Arén 1978:336. The principal reason for the Winqvists to move to Shmangus Laʿelay was to stay there until the handy August Bergman (1855–1923), a man of many gifts, could erect them a residence at the spot in Bäläza which was given to the SEM and to which the Winqvists moved in 1897 (Lundström and Gebremedhin 2011:278,280,471).
[26] Arén 1978:333,337.
[27] Arén 1978:377.

updating *Däbtära* Matewos' 1866 translation.[28] Thanks to the efforts of these three and other native workers, but mainly Gäbrä Ewosṭatewos and Marəkʾos, and the meticulous supervision of Karl Winqvist, the new four Gospels were printed in 1900 at the SEM printing press in ʾAsmära. The printing costs were covered by the British and Foreign Bible Society in London. Eight hundred copies—more than twice the number of the evangelical church members in the highlands at that time—were sold within a few months.[29]

3. Backgrounds of some of the key translators

A rainbow of stories appears when one looks at the backgrounds of the many people who were involved in the Bible translations. A number of factors can be used to depict the varying background of the people involved.

3.1. Women workers

Existing documents show that the Bible translation efforts in Eritrea involved women and men. It is worth noting that in light of the unfinished process of reducing or eliminating gender inequality in Eritrea, more than a century ago young women sat alongside—and in some works may have contributed more than—men in the translation work. Records indicate that the following notable women were involved in different translation works.

As mentioned above, Aster Gannoo, Lidia Garbaa and Feben Hirpe were actively involved in the Oromo translation.

Rəgbu Yosief worked diligently alongside her husband, Musa ʾAron (1930–2011) in producing the Təgre Bible.[30] Mention is made of a Miss Amanda Haglund who assisted the Rev. Karl Gustav Rodén (1860–1943) in preparing the translation of the Təgre Old Testament.[31] ʾAron also gives credit to a Miss Barbara Alvarez who was responsible for page markup and editing the material for typesetting at the Dallas headquarters of the Summer Institute of Linguistics.[32]

The extraordinarily diligent Elsie Winqvist shines in the sixty-six yearlong Təgrəññа Bible translation work, and Thérèse De Pertis (1876–1961) is also mentioned as having joined the work between 1937 and 1939.[33]

3.2. Academic backgrounds and training

The Bible translators came with varying academic backgrounds and trainings. Some of them had high-level educational backgrounds. For instance, Karl Winqvist earned a Doctor of Medicine with distinction in Edinburgh in 1883. His wife Elise was also a versatile and intellectual young woman from Frankrurt-am-Main and was called "one of the most pious and learned women in Germany" by Dr. Winqvist when she agreed to marry him. Elsie went to an institute that trained teachers for girls' high schools, which qualifications were "the highest that a woman could then attain." She mastered German, English, Hebrew and Greek on top of Təgrəññа that she aptly mastered when she came to work in Eritrea.[34] The brilliant worker in Təgre, Dr. Gustaf Richard Sundström (1869–1919), whom Lundström and Ezra (2011:235) call "scholar of international renown," was a highly trained language scholar and archeologist with multifaceted skills.[35] He was the first doctor in the Mänsaʿə district, composed nearly 200 hymns in Təgre, translated a

[28] In April 1897, the team published the first issue of the Amharic magazine *Yäsälam Mälə'əkt* (later changed in March 1909 to the Təgrəññа magazine *Mäl'əxəti Sälam*, the first Təgrəññа newspaper bulletin in Eritrea which continued to be published until the 2000s). In December 1900 a Təgrəññа Hymnbook was also published. See Arén 1978:334, Negash 1999:70.
[29] Arén 1978:334–335fn.
[30] Andemariam 2012:80–84.
[31] Lundström and Gebremedhin 2011:318; ʾAron 1988:12.
[32] ʾAron 1988:25.
[33] Lundström and Gebremedhin 2011:472; Ǝmbayä Habtä-Ǝgziʾ1957:4.
[34] Arén 1978:289 (see also n. 39 and 40). This author had the opportunity to see her neatly recorded, handwritten Təgrəññа manuscripts in the process of editing the Bible. From her records, he could observe that she may also have mastered Italian.
[35] Lundström and Gebremedhin 2011:481.

number of books of the Old Testament into Təgre and prepared a collection of sermons and devotions. By the time he died on 16 June 1919 due to cancer, he had prepared a Təgre grammar and a translation of the Books of Isaiah, Genesis and Exodus into Təgre.[36] He also collected 360—and Dawit Amanuʾel presumably another 195—of Enno Littmann's 717 Təgre poems. Arén adds:

> With due permission from the colonial government, though with little means, he undertook the first archaeological excavation of Adulis, the famous port and commercial centre of the Aksumite kingdom, and made some important discoveries which aroused such great interest that the Italian authorities ordered their experts to take over. Sundström's medical and ethnographic knowledge came to the fore in some articles on popular medicine and the treatment of illnesses in Mensa. He also gathered a large collection of Təgre texts: poems, proverbs, riddles, legends and historical traditions.[37]

Of the local workers only *Haläqa* Täwäldä Mädḫən Gäbru (1869–1960), who labored in the Təgrəññа work and taught himself Swedish[38] by comparing his Amharic/Gəᶜəz Bibles with the Swedish Bible, seems to have had a good scholarly background at the time he joined the Təgrəññа translation project. Called "a scholar from Mai Misham in [Təgray],"[39] he was a *Haläqa*, an Eritrean/Ethiopian Orthodox Church title which requires 'a great deal of experience' or is granted to a *Däbtära* who has "reached a high level of traditional education,"[40] a rank that Arén claims is equated to a "doctor of theology" (while referring to the famous *Aläqa* Tayyä Gäbrä Maryam).[41]

The other translators, mainly local people, however, did not have such colorful academic or professional backgrounds. Most of them had basic local traditional clerical qualification from the Orthodox Church or an elementary academic training or a teacher's training at the SEM bases and received no further training abroad. These include:

- Aster Gannoo, Lidia (Dimbo) Garbaa, Feben Hirpe, Estifanos Bonaya and Nathanel Roro, who were involved in the Oromo work;
- Gäbrä Ewosṭatewos Zämikaʾel, Mäzgäbä-Səllase Wäldu (1878–1965), ʾ*Ato* Bayru ʿUqbit, *Qäšši* Zärʾä-Ṣəyon Muse (1850–1940),[42] *Qäšši* Gubsa Tkʷabo, and *Qäšši* Ǝmbayä Habtä-Ǝgziʾ (1903–2000), who were involved in the Təgrəññа work;
- *Qäšši* Dawit Amanuʾel, *Mämhər* Ṭimotewos Fayd (Yoḥannəs) (1879–1956/7), *Mämhər* ʾAlʾazar Hədad (1871–1964),[43] *Mämhər* Yəsḥaq Ḥəmmäd [Ḥamd] (1866–), *Mämhər* Samuʾel (Fayd) ʿƎtman (1881–1940), *Qäšši* Yosef Ḥəmmäd (1881–1966), *Mämhər* ʿUqbazgi Mändal, *Qäšši* Yoḥannəs Emiləyos ʿUqəbaḥannəs (Musa) (1886–1942), Näffaʿ Wäd ʿƎtman (1882–1909) who is more notably mentioned in relation to his joint work with Enno Littmann, *Mämhər* Ǝyasu Bəʾəmnäet, *Mämhər* Natnael Täḵles Nägassi (Nəgusä) (1882–1939), *Mämhər* ʾAbrham ʿƎtel Jəm'ə (1881–1926) and *Mämhər* ʾAlʾazar Ṭimotewos, who were involved in the Təgre work; and
- Yosef Burru, Kimimi Burru, Natti Shangab, *Qäšši* Həzqʾel Gulay, *Qäšši* Daniel Luli and *Qäšši* Yosef Matti, who were involved in the Kunama work.

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[36] Ullendorff 1968:72.
[37] Arén 1978:358 (and n. 230 and 233). More on Sundström at Lindahl (2010) "Sundström, Gustaf Richard."
[38] Over and above Amharic, Gəᶜəz and Italian (Arén 1978:337fn).
[39] Arén 1978:337.
[40] Kidane 2003:191–192. Kidane states that "formerly, this title was only conferred on someone who had completed the study of the four *gubaʾeyat* (lit. 'gatherings', sg. *gubaʾe*) or traditional fields of learning: Old Testament, New Testament, the Prophets and the patristic and monastic writings, as well as liturgical texts and their commentaries."
[41] Arén 1978:288.
[42] One of the pioneers of the indigenous evangelical movement in Eritrea that began in the mid-1860s. He stayed in the evangelical ministry for about seventy-five years. After his return from Ǝmkullu to his home village Gärämi after nearly thirty-five years of persecution, he was elected to the honorable office of Täḥazz Däbtär (scribe and custodian) of the customary law of Karnäshəm.
[43] ʾAlʾazar Hədad is an amazing personality. In a summer 2011 interview with him and his wife, Musa ʾAron fondly spoke of ʾAlʾazar's brilliance of mind. ʾAlʾazar never went out of Eritrea but managed to master, speak, read and/or write as many languages as *Qäšši* Täwälədä-Mädəhən Gäbərä-Mädəhən was proficient in, i.e., twelve languages.

A few of the other local workers, however, had received advanced academic or theological training mainly in Sweden. These include *Qäśśi* Onesimos Näsib, *Qäśśi* Marəqos Gərmay (who became the first African to be ordained by the Archbishop of Uppsala (1870–1900), Anton Niklas Sundberg (in 1889 after also graduating with distinction from the Institute of Theology at Johannelund in 1888),[44] *Qäśśi* Täwäldä Mädḫən Gäbrä Mädḫən,[45] *Qäśśi* Gərma Ṣəyon Gäbrä (1877–1953)[46] and *Qäśśi* Musa ʾAron.

3.3. Couples working on the project

Some of the men and women who labored in the translation works were married couples. Onesimos Näsib, for instance, had the helping hand of his second wife[47] Lidia Garbaa. Elsie Winqvist assisted her husband Dr. Karl Winqvist in the Təgrəññа work and took over after he passed away. Musa ʾAron and his wife Rəgbu Yosief worked together in Nairobi and Dallas until the final production of the whole Təgre Bible in 1988. Given the awareness and diligence in the historic Evangelical mission centers (Ǝmkullu, Gäläb, Bäläza, ʾAsmära, Ṣäʿazzäga, etc.), it can also be assumed that the spouses of some of the other translators had assisted them in their respective assignments.

3.4. From starkly differing backgrounds to one table

The stark differences in the backgrounds of some of the workers add an exciting side to the polygon of the story. Most of the foreign,[48] and very few of the local,[49] workers came from average or higher class families. Most of the indigenous workers, in contrast, came from less than average or even lowly backgrounds. They included:

- shepherds—for example, Dawit Amanuʾel and Yoḥannəs Emiləyos;
- slaves—for example, Onesimos Näsib[50] and his female colleagues such as Aster Ganno were ex-slaves manumitted and handed over to the Ǝmkullu mission for teaching and training;
- youth running from pestilence—for example, Yosef Ḥəmmäd;[51]
- youth running from abuse at the hands of cruel employers—for example Marəqos Gərmay;[52]
- youth running from massacre and persecution—for example Täwäldä Mädḫən Gäbrä Mädḫən;[53]

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[44] Arén 1978:333–334; Mängəstu 2017:26–27.

[45] Undoubtedly the towering figure of the work, Täwäldä-Mädhən had an extraordinary linguistic gift: he mastered Təgrəññа, Təgre, Gəʿəz, Amharic, Arabic, Hebrew, Italian, and Swedish, and could tackle texts in English, German, Greek and Latin! He was ordained on 1 January 1909 in ʾAsmära by the SEM Director Professor Adolf Kolmodin (1855–1928). See Arén 1978:303.

[46] He was first called into the literary works of the evangelical mission as a replacement for *Qäśśi* Gäbrä Ewosṭatewos Zämikaʾel who had left to the Oromo of Wälläga in February 1897 to pioneer an evangelical mission. He was a man of remarkable language skills—he knew Təgrəññа, Gəʿəz, Təgre, Amharic, Arabic, Italian and Swedish.

[47] Onesimos' first wife Məḥrät Haylu died in childbirth on 20 November 1888 (Arén 1978:385; Lundström and Gebremedhin 2011:489).

[48] By way of an example, Elsie Winqvist was born to the Rev. D. A. Hefter, a well-connected Hungarian Jew who was converted into Christianity and served the Jewry in Jerusalem, Hungary, Russia and Poland before finally settling in Frankfurt-am-Main. The family was trilingual, speaking German, English and French (Arén 1978:285fn).

[49] Such as *Qäśśi* Täwäldä Mädḫən Gäbrä Mädḫən, whose father, *Qäśśi* Gäbrä Mädḫən Täsfay (d. 1876), one of the pioneers of the indigenous evangelical movement in Eritrea that began in the mid-1860s, was the high priest at the Church of Ǝnda Giyorəgis at Ṣäʿazzäga and ministered to the regional governor *Däğğazmač* Ḫaylu Täwäldä Mädḫən. The Gäbrä Mädḫən family was well connected (Arén 1978:182fn).

[50] Lundström and Gebremedhin 2011:164fn.

[51] Yosef was a progeny of the SEM. When an epidemic (his daughter Rəgbu, interviewed 26 July 2011, believes it was cholera) afflicted the village where he lived as a child in the ʿAsawərta district in Southeast Eritrea, he lost his entire family to the disease and was taken to the SEM base at Ǝmkullu at the age of just two. He grew up under the care of the SEM and became one of its most indefatigable workers (Lundström and Gebremedhin 2011:493).

[52] For his complete biography, see Mängəstu's (2017) *Biography of the Rev. Marəqos Gərmay*.

[53] Holmer (1986:112–142) narrates in detail young Täwäldä Mädḫən's painful experience of losing his father, *Qäśśi* Gäbrä Mädḫən Täsfay, his uncle, the legendary *Qäśśi* Ḫayəläʾab Täsfay (1846–1872) who led the indigenous evangelical movement of the 1860s (Arén 1978:172–182,185–187,198–200), and many of his Ṣäʿazzäga compatriots and evangelical pioneers in the bloody battle of 16–17 July 1872 between *Raʾessi* Wäldämikaʾel Sälomon of Hazzäga and *Däğğazmač*

- ex-bandits—for example, Yəsḥaq Ḥəmmäd [Ḥamd];[54]
- ex-priests of the Orthodox Church—for example, Zärʾä-Ṣəyon Muse, Täwäldä Mädḫən Gäbru, Gäbrä Ewosṭatewos Zämikaʾel, Mäzgäbä Wäldu and Gubsa Tkʷabo;
- trained and ordained at the evangelical congregation—for example, Marəqos Gərmay, Ǝmbayä Habtä-Ǝgziʾ, Musa ʾAron, Daniel Luli, Həzqʾel Gulay and Yosef Matti.

3.5. Different nationalities

As far as nationality/origin, most of the foreign translators were Swedish missionaries and the local workers were—to use contemporary terms—Eritreans and Ethiopians. Estifanos Bonaya, who assisted Onesimos Näsib in the Oromo Bible translation work, was an Oromo hailing from Lamu, Kenya. Elsie Winqvist was a German with a Hungarian Jewish origin. Pastor Alessandro Tron (1887–1966), who was instrumental in rejuvenating the Təgrəññа translation project that had been discontinued when the Italian colonial government expelled the SEM missionaries in 1935, was an Italian missionary from the Waldensian (Italian evangelical) church. Mr. Ken Hubel and Miss Barbara Alvarez, who contributed a lot in the final stages of producing the 1988 Təgre Bible, were Americans.

4. Locations where the work took place

Understandably, most of the Bible translation work was carried out in Eritrea, but given the many other cities or countries where part of the translation was produced, one can appreciate the enormity of the task.

4.1. Oromo

The Oromo New Testament that was prepared before Onesimos (i.e., beginning in 1839) was translated in Šäwa and ʿAdəwa (Ethiopia) and Kornthal (Germany) and printed in London (England) and St. Chrischona (Switzerland).[55] The New Testament revision, Old Testament preparation and whole Oromo Bible production process carried out by Onesimos and his colleagues (1880–1899) took place in three countries: Eritrea, Sweden and Switzerland. The translation was done in at least three Eritrean cities/villages (Ǝmkullu, ʾAsmära and Gäläb) and in Uppsala. The printing was done in ʾAsmära and St. Chrischona.

4.2. Təgre

The Təgre work was similarly followed up in different countries. It began in the village of Gäläb (by Dawit Amanuʾel and Täwäldä Mädḫən Gäbrä Mädḫən) and the subsequent tasks of preparing and printing three versions of the New Testament (1892, 1902 and 1931), Psalms and Isaiah (1925) and the whole Bible (1988) were conducted in Kärän, Bäläza, Ǝmkullu, ʾAsmära, Uppsala, Nairobi, Dallas and Hong Kong. Thus the nearly 110 years work (~1880–1988) was carried out in at least five countries (Eritrea, Sweden, Kenya, the United States and China).

4.3. Təgrəññа

The same with the Təgrəññа translation. *Däbtära* Matewos' 1866 Four Gospels were translated in ʿAdəwa and printed in St. Chrischona. The subsequent translations (the 1900 revision of the Four Gospels, the 1909 and 1933 versions of the New Testament as well as the 1957 and 1998 versions of the entire Bible) were conducted mainly in Eritrea (Bäläza, Šəmanəgus Taʿḥtay, Ṣäʿazzäga, ʾAbbardaʾə and ʾAsmära) as well as Italy (Rome, after expulsion of Swedish missionaries in 1935)[56] and the books were printed in Eritrea

Ḫaylu Täwäldä Mädḫən of Ṣäʿazzäga. Holmer states that *en route* to his running away to the evangelical base at Gäläb, then run by the Finish missionary Rev. Erik Emil Hedenström (1844–1904), he was while in a cave met—but luckily not attacked—by a tiger. Once in Gäläb, his over fifty-year-long evangelical career begins.

[54] Arén 1978:325–326,356–357; Lundström and Gebremedhin 2011:171,215,226,449,493.

[55] Arén 1978:446–448.

[56] Lundström and Gebremedhin 2011:211–213,290–291; Ǝmbayä Habtä-Ǝgziʾ 1953:1–2, 1958; interview with *Qäšši* ʾElyas Habtä-Ǝgziʾ 5 May 2007.

(Ǝmkullu and ʾAsmära), the United Kingdom (London), South Korea and China. We thus have at least four countries involved in the process.

4.4. Kunama

The Kunama Bible translation was carried out in three Kunama villages (Kulluku, ʾAwsa Konoma and Halägin), Kassala (Sudan), and Nairobi (Kenya), and the printing was done in Eritrea and South Korea. The process thus involved at least four countries.

In conclusion, therefore, the Oromo, Təgre, Təgrəññña and Kunama Bible translation projects carried out between the 1880s and 2012 (when the whole Kunama Bible, the *Kitaba Kedusa: Kotafa Kitabette*, was printed) took place in at least ten countries: Eritrea, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Kenya, Italy, Sudan, South Korea, China and the United States of America.

5. Time spent to complete and print the translated Bibles

It has been stated earlier that the Oromo, Təgre, Təgrəññña and Kunama Bible translations in Eritrea were carried out between the 1880s and 2012. It has also been mentioned that four Gospels in Təgrəññña were already printed in 1866. An Oromo New Testament and other books of the Old Testament also existed at the time Onesimos and his colleagues embarked upon the project.[57] The following tabulated account, collected from a number of sources, reflects—but does not consider into summation—these pre-1880s works. Please also remember that the total years run from the year the work began until it ended, regardless of the years of interruption, suspension or no activity in between.[58]

Oromo

translation (revision) of book(s) of the Bible	When did it (they) start?	When did it (they) end (got printed)?	total time spent
[different books of and the entire] New Testament, Genesis, Exodus, Psalms	1839	Luke (1870), John (1871), Genesis and Psalms (1872), the Acts of the Apostles (1874), the Epistles of Paul, Mathew and Mark (1875), the New Testament (1876) and Exodus (1877)	38 years
revising the New Testament, translating the Old Testament	1880	Revised New Testament (1893), whole Oromo Bible (1899)	19 years
total years spent			19 years

Təgre

translation (revision) of Book(s) of the Bible	When did it (they) start?	When did it (they) end (got printed)?	total time spent
Mark	before 1880	1889	more than 9 years
New Testament (1st ed.)	before 1880	ended in 1890 and printed in 1892	more than 12 years
revision of New Testament (1st ed.) to prepare 2nd ed.)	1890	1902	more than 12 years

[57] Kassaye 2007:576.

[58] For instance, between the end of the translation of the Təgre Old Testament in 1943 and resumption of the work in 1978, there is a gap of 35 years of silence. Similarly between the printing of the first edition of the Təgrəññña Bible in 1957 and resumption of its revision in 1985, there are 28 years of silence, and a gap of 68 years (1927–1995) between completion of the Kunama New Testament and resumption of the work to produce the whole Kunama Bible in 2015. The years of gap have been counted because the desire to produce an entire Bible in these languages persisted until the end.

preparation of 3rd ed. of New Testament	sometime around 1902	1931	nearly 29 years
Psalms and Isaiah	sometime before 1919	1925	more than 6 years
Old Testament (except the already printed Psalms and Isaiah	late 1920s	1943	more than 13 years
revision and preparation of whole Təgre Bible	1978	1988	10 years
total years spent			nearly 110 years

Təgrəññа

translation (revision) of Book(s) of the Bible	When did it (they) start?	When did it (they) end (got printed)?	total time spent
Däbtära Matewos' 1866 Four Gospels	early 1830s	1866	around 35 years
revision of the 1866 Four Gospels	1891	1900	9 years
First edition of New Testament	1900	1909	9 years
Old Testament	around 1900	around 1928	around 28 years
Second edition of New Testament	1926	1933	7 years
whole Bible (editing and printing) (first edition)	1932	1957	25 years
whole Bible (second edition)	1985	1998	13 years
adding 16 deuterocanonical books to the 1998 Bible	1998	2000	2 years
total years spent			over 127 years

Kunama

translation (revision) of Book(s) of the Bible	When did it (they) start?	When did it (they) end (got printed)?	total time spent
Mark	unknown	1906	
Mathew, Luke, John and Acts of the Apostles		not printed	
New Testament (first edition)	1920	1924	4 years
New Testament (second edition)	1924	1927	3 years
whole Bible	1995	2012	17 years
total years spent			over 106 years

6. Years that some of these workers continued in the translation projects

Some of the workers continued with the translation work for a few months while others, despite interruptions and suspensions, stayed for years or decades. The list below shows the longevity, in ascending order, of the devotion of some of the workers to the translation task:

- August Andersson started to work on the production of the Kunama New Testament sometime before 1906 and oversaw its completion in 1924, which translates into his persisting in the work for over 18 years;
- Onesimos Näsib committed himself to the translation work from 1880 up to 1899, a total of 19 years;
- The tireless Karl Winqvist laboured in the Təgre and Təgrəññа translations between 1883 and 1909 for a span of 26 years;

- Täwäldä Mädḫən Gäbru, who was endowed with a literary gift, worked since 1900 in preparing the revised Təgrəññа New Testament of 1909, the translation of the Old Testament, and preparation of the New Testament of 1933, thus staying for 33 years in the assignment.
- Mäzgäbä Wäldu committed 34 years (~1900–1934) to the Təgrəññа translation;
- Dawit Amanuʾel, who stands out in pioneering literature of the Təgre language,[59] began working since before 1880 and, given the traces of his involvement until the production of the 1931 third edition of the Təgre New Testament, he must have continued involvement in the work for over 50 years;
- Täwäldä Mädḫən Gäbrä Mädḫən, undoubtedly the giant among the indigenous translators, who since before 1800 was deeply involved in the Təgre and Təgrəññа works, spent over 50 years in the assignment, until his death in 1930;
- The greatly productive Karl G. Rodén began his work in 1889 in printing the first edition of the Təgre New Testament and stayed involved until his death in 1943, which means he dedicated around 55 years to the translation work;
- The longevity award must go to the relentless Elsie Winqvist, who persevered for around 66 years and worked until her early nineties (1891–1957) to produce the 1957 Təgrəññа Bible.

7. Some memorable stories of the translation and production process

One can expect that in a project that continued for nearly 130 years, a number of memorable events must have occurred. Following are some of them.

7.1. Singlehandedly hand-translating the whole of Old Testament until age 83

Karl G. Rodén, with a very fertile mind and indomitable[60] character, produced a number of literary works, showing his indefatigability perhaps in his translation of the Old Testament into Təgre. It has been mentioned that together with some local workers, Sundström translated and printed Psalms and Isaiah. Since the late 1920s he had begun preparing a draft translation of the Old Testament while in Gäläb. Omitting Psalms and Isaiah, he continued with the translation after he left to Uppsala. At Uppsala, at the age of 83, he singularly completed the translation of the entire Old Testament in 1943, which he then "copied in his own handwriting in 20 stout, well-bound manuscript volumes" (ʾAron 1988:14).

7.2. When time stands by one's side

The author has picked a couple of touching stories (this one and the next) when events materialized just before a disaster struck. The first one involves the unflagging Dr. Karl Winqvist, who succumbed to evangelical, pastoral, medical and literary overwork.

Dr. Winqvist, who worked on the translation of the Bible into Təgre (1890 New Testament) and Təgrəññа (1909 New Testament) since before 1890, died on 06 December 1909 of a heart attack two days (or one day according to Arén) after he had seen the last sheet of the manuscript of the 1909 Təgrəññа New Testament through the press.[61] It would need a work of nearly 48 more years (1909–1957) before the entire Bible could be translated and printed in Təgrəññа, a seed that he can claim to have planted. Lundrstöm and Gebremedhin (2011:283–284) detail the story of his passing away as follows:

[59] On top of his translation products, he also delivered a grammar book and a dictionary containing 8,000 words and collected a great number of heroic ballads, dirges, epigrams, songs, stories, fables, proverbs and laws of the Təgre tribe (Arén 1978:303,353,356).
[60] Regarding his bitter dispute with the equally indomitable Sundström and other Təgre workers, see Andemariam 2012:69–72.
[61] Arén 1978:337 (see also n. 129); Lundström and Gebremedhin 2011:463. Negash (1999:69) calls him "an exceptionally prolific Swedish missionary."

> Winqvist's workload was heavy. One Sunday morning, in the middle of 1906, he collapsed in his room due to a minor brain haemorrhage. He stayed in bed for three weeks, under the care of his faithful friend and co-worker Teklu.[62] He then returned to his work at the hospital and to his writing table.
>
> The leadership of the SEM was very eager to see the New Testament in Tigrinya in print as soon as possible. Winqvist appealed to the Mission Board to send a young doctor to assist him as soon as possible. However, seven years were to pass before a doctor could be sent.[63] Winqvist felt that he simply had to push on. He could not rest until the New Testament had been printed. His colleagues and his family urged him to rest, but he could not. He promised, however, that he would take a long rest once the New Testament was printed. Later, his wife, Elsie, recorded what had happened by the end of 1909, "Karl had just seen the last pages (of the New Testament) off the press when a new brain haemorrhage supervened, and in the early morning of December 6, 1909 he was called home. He was laid to rest with a copy of his beloved Tigrinya New Testament."

7.3. Again when time stands by one's side

A thrilling story continues from the one narrated above, concerning Rodén's handwritten Old Testament manuscripts. In October 1978, a team of two—Musa ʾAron and the Rev. Axel Berglund (1912–2005)—was selected to work on producing a complete Təgre translation. The two were to work in Nairobi, at the headquarters of the Regional Office for Africa of the United Bible Societies. For a start, Musa and Berglund had three Təgre Bible portions with them: the 1931 Təgre New Testament, the 1925 prints of Psalms and Isaiah, and Rodén's 20 hand-written volumes. The thrilling part of the story is how Rodén's volumes safely—and to refer to Musa, by God's definite plan—reached the hands of Musa and Berglund.

Sometime before the October 1978 commission, the SEM and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea (ECE) had—not for the purpose of completing the Təgre Bible but for apparently sentimental purposes—decided to send the 20 Rodén volumes from Uppsala to the village where he poured his heart's love, Gäläb. Musa continues the narration:

> …Rodén had prepared [by 1943] a set of his Old Testament material. This material was the one used by Berglund and Musa as guidance in Nairobi 35 years later.
>
> This single set of Old Testament draft manuscript was deposited in Sweden for some years; nobody thought of making another copy of it in case of fire, loss, damage, etc., but God guarded it and was sent to Eritrea and placed at the shelves behind the altar in Geleb church, a single set exposed to possible fire, loss, termites, etc. … God keeps his promises, the manuscript was intact.
>
> Not only that, when the [SEM] with the [ECE] decided to move the 20 volumes of heavy paper manuscript from Geleb to Asmara for better safe keeping,[64] it was God who guided the whole idea. Can you imagine, just some time after the manuscript was sent to Asmara, Geleb was a scene of destruction, fire, murder and theft by the then regime of Haile Selassie [of] Ethiopia? Soldiers came to Geleb and [accusing… Gelebites of harboring the Liberation Front] shot and burned several old and young church members in their homes. Even the Church building in [whose] altar shelves the manuscript was safeguarded was plundered. Other books, and old manuscripts of already-printed Tigré books which were in the altar shelves were destroyed, burned or looted. But the Old Testament draft manuscript was safely deposited at the literature department shelves in Asmara. This was definitely God's plan."[65]

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[62] Täḵlu ʿUqbay (1852–1935) was a faithful man who, in nursing patients, used to assist the Rev. Per Erik Lager (1837–1872), the Swedish missionary who takes the credit for establishing the link between the Swedish missionaries and the indigenous Orthodox Täwahədo Church priests who had been working for reform. Täḵlu was first an assistant to Lager and later on the "right hand" of the famous doctors of the SEM in Eritrea, the Swedish Karl Winqvist and the Italian Nicola De Pertis (1884–1931). Teklu became a popular native provider of medical services for forty years and was known by the name *Ḥakim* Täḵlu (Dr. Täḵlu) (Arén 1978:162–164; Lundström and Gebremedhin 2011:185,295).

[63] Lundrstöm and Gebremedhin are here probably referring to the Italian doctor Nicola De Pertis, who served as a physician in Bäläza and ʾAsmära from 1913 until his death in 1931. See Lundström and Gebremedhin 2011:290,295,305–312.

[64] In his interview with the author and his colleagues on 23 June 2007, Musa ʾAron remembered that the heavy manuscripts were initially taken away from the church in Gäläb on the back of donkeys. However, neither Musa nor his wife Rəgbu could exactly remember the day when the manuscripts were moved from Gäläb to ʾAsmära.

[65] ʾAron 1988:22–23.

7.4. ʾ*addä* or ʾ*ənno*?

Coming from different districts where the Təgrəññа vocabularies differ, the translators had to agree on some key works. The dispute between the two Təgrəññа giants—the two Täwäldä Mädḫəns—on whether to use the word ʾ*addä or* ʾ*ənno* for "mother" is worth narrating. ʾ*addä* is mainly used by the Eritrean Təgrəññа speakers while ʾ*enno* is mainly used in Təgray. Thus Täwäldä Mädḫən Gäbrä Mädḫən preferred ʾ*addä* while Täwäldä Mädḫən Gäbru opted for ʾ*ənno*. When his colleagues, led by Täwäldä Mädḫən Gäbrä Mädḫən, would not budge to use the word ʾ*ənno*, Täwäldä Mädḫən Gäbru asked them a series of questions which the author has recreated[66] in the form of question and answer as follows:

> Täwäldä Mädḫən: What is the word you use for "father"?
>
> Colleagues: ʾ*abbo*.
>
> Täwäldä Mädḫən: How about the word for "paternal uncle"?
>
> Colleagues: *ḥaw* ʾ*abbo* (colloquially *ḥawäbbo*). (*ḥaw* means "brother" in Təgrəññа and *äbbo* means "father"; hence, a paternal uncle is referred to as *ḥaw* ʾ*abbo* to mean "the brother of a father").
>
> Täwäldä Mädḫən: How about the word for "maternal aunt"?
>
> Colleagues: *ḥabtti* ʾ*ənno* (colloquially *ḥatənno*). (*ḥabtti* means "sister" in Təgrəññа; hence a maternal aunt is referred to as *ḥabtti* ʾ*ənno* to mean "the sister of a mother").
>
> Täwäldä Mädḫən: So why don't you use ʾ*ənno* for "mother" if you call your maternal aunt *ḥabtti* ʾ*ənno*, i.e., "the sister of a mother"? Or why don't you call her *ḥabtti* ʾ*addä* (or *ḥattddä*) if you prefer ʾ*addä* for a "mother"? Why do you insist on using ʾ*addä* which defies your own logic of naming parents, paternal uncles and maternal aunts?

Regardless of his logical argumentation, Täwäldä Mädḫən Gäbru was however outvoted and the term ʾ*addä* is most frequently used in the Təgrəññа Bible to refer to "mother"[67] and *ḥabtti* ʾ*ənno* to refer to mother's sister.[68]

7.5. Translating twelve books of the Bible in one year in a small house in a small village

It has been mentioned above that the translation of the Old Testament into Təgrəññа was carried out between 1900 and 1928 (1930 according to other records).[69] The task of translating the Old Testament was entrusted to the two Täwäldä Mädḫəns, with Täwäldä Mädḫən Gäbrä Mädḫən in charge.[70] Almost all of the originnal, handwritten translations of the Old Testament by the two Täwäldä Mädḫəns and others are still neatly kept in the archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea and were put in exhibition during the August 2007 golden jubilee anniversary celebration of the printing of the entire Təgrəññа Bible. It is therefore possible to identify which scholar translated which book of the Old Testament. *Haläqa* Täwäldä Mädḫən, for instance, translated the Pentateuch books, First Book of Chronicles, Psalms, Ezekiel chapters 40–48 and the prophecy of Daniel. *Qäššі* Täwäldä Mädḫən Gäbrä Mädḫən translated the Book of Job and the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah.

Another giant, *Qäššі* Mäzgäbä Wäldu, later joined the Old Testament translation work. Mäzgäbä was born in a small highland village called ʾAddi Goməbollo, his mother's home village, but grew up and spent most

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[66] Interview with *Qäššі* ʾElyas Habtä-Ǝgziʾ 5 May 2007.
[67] Probably by way of compromise, or because it was finally found to be more appropriate, or even because *Haläqa* Täwäldä Mädḫən Gäbru was assigned to it, however, the term ʾ*ənno* has been used in Psalms 22:10 in the phrase "Thou art my God from my mother's belly." *Ḥabtti* ʾ*ənno* (*ḥatənno*) has been maintained in preference to *ḥabtti* ʾ*addä* (or *ḥattddä*), for example, in Leviticus 18:13.
[68] For instance, in John 19:25 Jesus' mother and his mother's sister are referred to. The 1957 Təgrəññа Bible uses the root terms ʾ*addä* and *ḥabtti* ʾ*ənno* (*ḥatənno*). Similarly, "thy mother's sister" has been translated as *ḥatənnoḵa* (a shorter expression for *ḥabtti* ʾ*ənnoḵa*) in Leviticus 18:13.
[69] Not forgetting, however, that Gäbrä Ewosṭatewos had, by 1895, prepared the first translation of the Old Testament from Genesis to the Second Book of Samuel. We do not know if the latter translators had access to his translations.
[70] Lundström and Gebremedhin 2011:316.

of his life in a nearby village called ʾAbbardaʾə, his father's home village. Because his father was an Orthodox Täwahədo[71] priest, he learned to be a deacon in ʾAbbardaʾə's St. Gabriel Orthodox Täwahədo Church. When he was nearly twenty years old, he heard a sermon by *Qäšši* Zärʾä-Ṣəyon Muse, one of the indigenous evangelical pioneers, and was inspired to be an ardent student of the Bible.[72]

In 1902, Mäzgäbä joined the evangelical church, and in 1904 the mission enrolled him for a one year training to be a teacher. For the following nearly twenty years, he was assigned to be an evangelist. He travelled as far as the south eastern end of the Eritrean highland in the region of ʾAkkälä Guzay to preach the gospel. In 1926 he was brought in to ʾAsmära where he taught for one year, and in 1927 he was sent to Bäläza to train students who were being trained to be teachers. It was his coming to Bäläza that offered him the opportunity to have his name included in the list of translators of the Bible into Təgrəññа. Mäzəgäbä met the two Täwäldä Mädḫəns who had been translating the Old Testament and, in his free hours, completed the translation of the Books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. Then fully engaged in the translation work, Mäzəgäbä went to ʾAbbardaʾə in 1928 and in an astonishingly short time of one year completed translating the books of the Old Testament called the Twelve Minor Prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi) inside a small room no larger than three by two meters. The author on April 2007 personally visited Mäzgäbä's village home at ʾAbbardaʾə and his tomb there. He also saw Mäzgäbä's earth-made bookshelf carved into the earthen wall, as well as the inkpot he used for his translation. His son, Sälomon Mäzəgäbä, stated that Mäzəgäbä suffered from severe migraine headaches and his wife and children used to tie his head with a piece of cloth (a traditional treatment for headaches) so he could go on translating. In 1929 Mäzəgäbä was ordained priest of the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. When Täwäldä Mädḫən Gäbrä Mädḫən died in 1930, Mäzəgäbä was again recalled to Ṣäʿazzäga to resume the editing work being undertaken by Täwäldä Mädḫən Gäbrä Mädḫən and continued the editing work until 1934.

7.6. The bitter scholarly rivalry: Rodén v Sundström

Although narrated in an earlier article from the perspective of taking credit for the translation work,[73] the bitter rivalry between two of the most prolific Təgre scholars—Rodén and Sundström—gives an additional cue to the story. Their debate was orthographic and focused on the subject of vowel quality, i.e., to choose between the first and fourth conjugations of the Gəʾəz alphabets, the *gəᶜəz* and *rabəʾə* respectively, in cases of short/long *ʾa* sounds.

Rodén doggedly insisted on use of the *gəᶜəz* while his colleagues preferred the *rabəʾə*.[74] Rodén, described as "a man of strict disciple and an indomitable will" but also as a man appearing "to have too strong a tendency to wish to dominate,"[75] "was not prone to yield [in matters of opinion generally and] on this matter and the printing of the New Testament [whose revision was completed in 1900] was delayed for two years when his views finally prevailed."[76] His chief rival in the *gəᶜəz* / *rabəʾə* controversy was Richard Sundström.

[71] The Eritrean and Ethiopian Orthodox churches use the term *Täwahədo* (meaning unity) in their title to emphasize their doctrine of the union of the divinity with humanity after the Incarnation whereby Christ became one from the union of the two natures.
[72] Information in this section about *Qäšši* Mäzggäbä Wäldu is taken from Anon. (1965) "Biography of the Rev. Mäzggäbä Wäldu."
[73] Andemariam 2013:112–114.
[74] In recording the reservations of the local staff regarding Rodén's obduracy, Arén (1978:357) writes: "Ethiopian members of the revision committee questioned Rodén's 'discovery of the correct sentence structure' and his 'bold exchange of *rabe*, the fourth alphabet, for *ge'ez*, the first vowel.' With Rodén not willing to accommodate their comments, 'Tewolde-Medhin expressed hope that most readers would nevertheless grasp the meaning of the text'."
[75] Lundström and Gebremedhin 2011:233.
[76] Arén 1978:357. During a missionary conference held in Bäläza in October 1900, Rodén requested the conference change the spelling rules proposed by the local staff, but the conference, observing the disagreement between Rodén and the other group noted: "As brother Rodén did not want to yield in any way, the conference cannot take the responsibility for opposing his wishes. The conference wishes that he be allowed to follow his opinion, even if this is in conflict with the rules laid down by the Board […], as the indigenous teachers have asked for a definite answer in order not to delay the printing of the NT unduly." (Lundström and Gebremedhin 2011:229–230) However, "Professor Enno Littmann decided to use the fourth vowel of the Ethiopic alphabet whenever the vowel *a* came at the end of the word" and "this was the conviction of Richard Sundström."

Sundström, a graduate in Theology and Medicine, arrived with his wife in Gäläb in 1898 and soon thereafter "studied language, culture and traditional beliefs among the Təgre speaking people. With his keen sense for language, he composed hymns and started on the translation of some books of the Old Testament."[77] In the course of their common interest of producing Təgre works, however, these equally stubborn scholars displayed clash of egos and bitter rivalry in the choice between *gəʿəz* and *rabəʾə*.[78]

Nearly three decades after the printing of the 1902 Təgre New Testament, the second edition appeared in 1931, a work mainly spearheaded by Rodén. At this time, however, Rodén, possibly as a result also of the bitter debates he had with Sundström for many years on this very issue, or perhaps persuaded by his Təgre-speaking colleagues, seemed to have changed his position: The 1931 version used *gəʿəz* for the short *a* sound and *rabəʾə* for the long *a* sound.[79]

8. Conclusion

An attempt has been made by this article to look at the Bible translation story in Eritrea from different interconnected angles/sides in order to, among other things, depict the arduousness of the task, the perseverance of the workers, the impact of personal and cultural interplays in speeding or delaying the project as well as provide options for narrating the story. The author has also attempted to show how the Bible translation work that required the combined efforts of local and foreign workers produced a common and worthy result when the respective contributions of both groups were given/not given their due space and recognition. It is arguably one of the earliest social projects in Eritrea/Ethiopia where women, recognized or otherwise, had an active and leading role. The author believes that this story can further be exploited, with reference to the abundant archives and references mainly in Eritrea and Sweden,[80] as a melting pot of the interconnections among the historical, political, cultural, linguistic, religious and related underpinnings surrounding it.

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[77] Lundström and Gebremedhin 2011:233.
[78] Lundström and Gebremedhin 2011:233–235.
[79] Arén 1978:357 (also n. 227).
[80] The archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea (Asmara) and the Swedish Evangelical Church (Uppsala).

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