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Bible Translation as Justice[1]

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Abstract: The translation of the Bible into minority languages has the potential to affirm the dignity and worth of translating communities as people created in the image of God (*imago dei*). For my own people—the Ghomala' of Cameroon—the use of the mother tongue was crucial for local acceptance of Christianity and identification as children of God. This article shows how biblical concepts of justice as both primary and restorative relate to the mission of God and the *imago dei* of all human beings. BIBLE TRANSLATION AS JUSTICE regards Bible translation as not just a pragmatic tool, but a fundamental issue of justice that enables people to have a right relationship with God and others. Minority language communities around the world bear witness to the potential for Bible translation to empower, transform, and contribute to a sense of value and confidence. As a result, Bible translation is not only a key to human flourishing but for Christians a way of following Jesus in his incarnation.

1 Ghomala'

While I currently serve as executive director of SIL International, I write this not as a business professional but as a native speaker of Ghomala', the language of a community of approximately 350,000 people located in the western part of Cameroon.

[1] An earlier version of this paper was first presented at the United Bible Societies World Assembly on 13 October 2023, in Egmond, Netherlands. My thanks to the participants whose positive responses stimulated the need to make this paper more widely available.

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The Gospel first arrived[2] in our area around 1914 through the efforts of the Basel Mission, which was succeeded by the Paris Mission Society after the First World War. Missionaries introduced the concepts of Christianity to people who, for the most part, practised their own traditional religion and spoke their own mother tongue. The arrival of Christianity co-occurred with colonialism that established European rule and promoted European "civilization". Many, including my grandfather, saw these as two sides of the same coin and chose to retain their ancestral beliefs, resisting the foreign religion of the Europeans to the best of their ability.

The first missionary attempts to introduce the Gospel using a foreign language backfired. Overwhelmed with the plethora of languages in the region, the missionaries decided to select one regional language which they would use for evangelisation; this language then would be imposed upon the remainder of the peoples throughout the area. The Ghomala' people struggled with the idea of worshipping God in a language not their own. They claimed the following: If God is indeed our creator and the giver of our language, we should be able to worship him in our own tongue. The missionaries insisted, however, and continued to enforce foreign language use in church, giving rise to a silent rebellion. For seven years, the Ghomala' people faithfully attended church services but systematically refused to partake in Holy Communion or commit to baptism (Kenmogne 2018).

In the end, the missionary church concluded that Christianity would not prosper among the people in a foreign language, so they agreed to adopt the use of Ghomala'. Church historian Van Slageren writes (2009:205):

> In 1949, it was decided to never again provoke conflict by stopping them from taking language-related initiatives, or by imposing a language for churches in a tribe that didn't want it, something that risked them shuttering their doors to us. The Bandjoun [Ghomala'] want books in their language and they'll have them with or without us.

Many decades later, the Bible Society of Cameroon, which was formed in 1959, assisted the Church to translate God's Word into the Ghomala' language.

Despite the use of the mother tongue, however, my father, like his predecessors, remained suspicious of the agenda of Christianity. He upheld the traditional religion in the way he raised his children. After high school I moved to the city and later became a Christian. Not only was this unusual, but my decision also to follow Christ was a serious breach of family tradition, which resulted in various forms of persecution for a number of years.

[2] The story of the arrival of the Gospel among the Ghomala' people is a slightly modified version of the one published in Kenmogne 2020.

The turning point in my father's life came when a local evangelist, fully versed in the cultural tradition and rooted in Scripture in the local language, befriended my father in his older years. The missionary tactfully drew from existing cultural rites of reconciliation the needed concepts and metaphors to help my father understand the essence of the Gospel and its relevance for him. More specifically, he likened the atoning death of Christ on the cross to a traditional reconciliation rite called *bvanye*. It consists of a potion of select herbs that two enemy parties have to swallow publicly in order to relinquish their differences and restore their relationship. The local evangelist asserted that the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, as the only son of God, is God's offer of *bvanye* to restore the relationship between himself and whoever acknowledges him and repents. This metaphor made sense to my father, yet he wanted to know more. He sought to discover whether God had other sons he could also offer for *bvanye*. Understanding that Jesus Christ was the only son of God, he concluded that rejecting this offer meant that God would have no other alternative for his salvation. This argument was compelling enough for my father to turn away from his ancestral beliefs and commit to Christ. Of note here is the fact that the Gospel did not make sense to him without appropriate use of his mother tongue and the cultural categories that had shaped and informed his worldview (Kenmogne 2020).

The story of the people's rightful claim to use their native tongue, Ghomala', to worship God raises a fundamental concern with regard to the worldwide Bible translation movement. If all human beings are created in the "image and likeness of God", is it acceptable that some would have the joy of a full relationship with him in their mother tongue while others struggle to access the same God in a borrowed language? This question indicates that there is a fundamental issue of justice undergirding Bible translation.

We often consider Bible translation from a pragmatic perspective, focusing our attention on the processes of the transmission of the Bible (translation theories, training of translators, funding of Bible translation, etc.), or the processes of its reception (Scripture engagement, contextualisation, literacy, etc.). I wish to suggest, however, that *justice* is the solid foundation upon which we can find both the motivation and the perspective necessary to carry out the various aspects of the demanding task of Bible translation. For this reason, I will briefly explore the concept of justice as it relates to Bible translation and provide some examples of how Bible translation has promoted justice among minority language groups.

2 Justice and Bible translation

The bedrock of the biblical view of justice is found in the creation story as we read it in Genesis 1:26–27.[3]

> Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground." So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

As the masterpiece of his creation, God sets human beings apart from the rest of creation by making them in his own image and likeness. This means that, in his design, God expects all people to have equal opportunities to be in fellowship with Him, and each person, as a reflection of his image, is worthy of respect and dignity. Therefore, a breach of either of these two expectations constitutes a serious violation of the way God ordered the world. Two Hebrew concepts express this notion of justice in the Old Testament. Fileta (2017:17) reframes them as "primary" and "restorative" justice.

Tsedeka, otherwise understood as "primary justice", is the ethical standard by which we maintain right relationships between people and treat every person as an image bearer of God. But we live in a fallen world where oppression, exploitation, and injustice prevail. Hence, God is constantly advocating for a return to his rule of justice.

Mishpat in the Bible conveys the notions of both retributive and restorative justice. Retributive justice involves the punishment of wrongdoing so that fairness can be re-established. In human societies, justice is mainly construed as retributive justice that seeks to maintain social order, preventing people from taking advantage of others. But even our human attempts at justice are marked by our fallenness and corruption. Secondly, however, *mishpat* is about restorative justice. It means seeking the vulnerable and establishing the conditions that restore their dignity as human beings. Throughout the Scriptures, God is always advocating for the vulnerable:

- ***Proverbs 31:8–9*** Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves; ensure justice for those being crushed. Yes, speak up for the poor and helpless, and see that they get justice.
- ***Jeremiah 22:3*** This is what the LORD says: Be fair-minded and just. Do what is right! Help those who have been robbed; rescue them from their

[3] All Scripture quotations are from the *New Living Translation* unless otherwise indicated.

oppressors. Quit your evil deeds! Do not mistreat foreigners, orphans, and widows. Stop murdering the innocent!

- ***Psalms 146:7–9*** He gives justice to the oppressed and food to the hungry. The LORD frees the prisoners. The LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are weighed down. The LORD loves the godly. The LORD protects the foreigners among us. He cares for the orphans and widows, but he frustrates the plans of the wicked.
- ***Micah 6:8*** No, O people, the LORD has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

The incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ constitute the culmination of God's offer for just relationships between human beings and himself, human beings with fellow human beings, and human beings with the remainder of God's creation. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus satisfies God's requirements for humans to achieve a right relationship both with him and among themselves.

In a nutshell, our being created in God's image and likeness (*imago dei*) sets the basis and expectation of justice. Christopher Wright (2006) goes on to flesh out the missiological implications that flow from that. In his magnum opus, *The Mission of God*, he notes that the biblical narrative depicts God as a "God for people". Humans are the climax of God's creation, the centre of his redemptive activity, and they are uniquely invited into fellowship with the Triune God. He identifies four implications of the *imago dei*, all of which have significance for Scripture translation (2006:421–424):

- ***Addressability***: God speaks to all human beings and needs no permission or cross-cultural contextualisation.
- ***Accountability***: All human beings must answer to God who speaks to them. Our worship and theology as a response to the God who speaks to us must flow from the depths of our language and culture.
- ***Equality in dignity***: Only humans are created in the image of God and are therefore equal in dignity. This is a call to ethics in mission.
- ***Universality of the Gospel***: The universal sinful nature of man has only one universal remedy: the Gospel.

If this was God's intent and plan when he distinctly created human beings and endowed them with linguistic ability, it follows that God expects that the Bible is translated into the cultural and linguistic categories that allow each person or social grouping to enter into meaningful fellowship with the Triune God and flourish in all regards (Kenmogne 2022a). From the perspective of the minority-speaking communities, accessing God's Word in their own language has

always carried a meaning that runs deeper than the immediate goals of evangelisation and discipleship that generally motivate us.

3 The worth of Bible translation to vulnerable language communities[4]

About one billion people on the earth speak 97 percent of the world's languages (Eberhard et al., 2023). Most of these languages have a relatively small number of speakers, are often unwritten, and lack the institutions and infrastructure to sustain their use. The following general attributes identified by John Watters (2013:11–12) characterise minority language communities. They are:

- ***Economically***—most often among the poorest.
- ***Medically***—most often in the bottom twenty percent of those receiving services.
- ***Politically***—most often among the most disenfranchised.
- ***Socially***—most often among the least valued.
- ***Educationally***—most often among the least educated.
- ***Justice-wise***—most often among the least informed of their rights and privileges.
- ***Human dignity***—most often the least honoured or considered worthy.

In this century, minority language communities live in a context dominated by another language and culture, are in contact with other language communities, and must be multilingual to survive daily. As a result, they have come to see themselves as second tier citizens in the world, as their languages and identities are threatened or endangered (Kenmogne 2020). Yet, it is important to stress the following:

- "A people's language is perhaps its most fundamental cultural attribute. Indeed, the very nature of language is emblematic of the whole pluralistic premise—every single language spoken in the world represents a unique way of viewing human experience and the world itself... The question of how to accommodate minorities is not of academic interest only but is a central challenge to any human politics... Indigenous languages continue to be the main medium of expression of aspirations, intimate desires, feelings, and local life. They are indeed the living repositories of cultures" (de Cuéllar 1996:59).
- "The speech that comes to people in their mother's milk is the most precious thing they have" (Sanneh 2008:179).

[4] This section adapts and expands on Kenmogne 2022a.

- "Every language is a temple in which the soul of the people who speak it is enshrined. If it is sinful to exterminate them bodily, it is sinful to destroy their individuality" (Smith, quoted in Sanneh 2008:179).
- "Language is more than morphology and syntax; it is the vehicle to assume the weight of a culture" (Pobee, quoted in Bediako 2001).

Because Bible translation acknowledges and values all languages, the advent of Scriptures in minority languages goes a long way to proclaim that the speakers of these languages are equal in dignity and are worthy to connect with their Creator in non-mediated terms. Around the world, people from minority speaking communities have expressed the value of Bible translation as justice in different ways.

- "Here is a document which *proves that we also are human beings*—the first and only book in our language," said an African Christian holding a translated Gospel in his hands for the first time (quoted in Sanneh 2008:177).
- "Now we see that our friends in the foreign countries *regard us as people worthwhile*," said a Christian in Angola holding Scriptures in his hands for the first time (quoted in Sanneh 2008:177).
- "I know that in my body I am a very little man, but today as I see the whole Bible in my language, I feel as big as a mountain" (quoted in Sanneh 2008:177).
- "When we go to the politicians, they don't know us. But now God knows us. Now we are counted among the children of God," said the Chief of Kpandai Wura as he tearfully evoked the marginalisation of the Nawuri people of Ghana (2012). This was a call for the Nawuri people to look beyond their current socio-political marginalisation and develop the confidence that comes from the knowledge of also being "children of God".

In this regard, Bible translation and the empowerment it brings becomes a critical organising principle and a practical tool for transformation. For a vulnerable and marginalised group like the Nawuris, being "counted as children of God" is more than spiritual transformation. It is a key to transforming their perception of themselves and unleashing their potential to flourish in all regards as people created in the image of God.

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, Bible translation is not just a strategic tool to ensure the cross-cultural transmission of the Gospel and enable the growth of God's Kingdom.

Bible translation is justice. It sets the context for people to recover their *imago dei* and regain the confidence to meaningfully engage with God and with others within communities and nations. Understanding the fundamental nature of Bible translation as justice has several implications for us all.

- In the face of fast-growing globalisation, we must seriously consider the plight of the vulnerable and linguistically marginalised people and follow the Good Shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep to go after the missing one.
- If Bible translation is so critical to achieving the primary and restorative justice of God, we must arm ourselves with courage and determination to engage the complex contexts of multilingualism, political and religious restrictions, and the prevailing culture of quick fixes to ensure that all peoples have equal access to God's Word in their language of choice (Kenmogne 2022b).
- Multilingualism, translanguaging (the mixing of different languages that gives rise to new varieties of language), and other realities make the delivery of God's Word in multiple modes (print, audio, video) the way to allow for adequate Scripture engagement (Kenmogne 2020, 2022b). As a result, the cost of Bible translation continues to rise. But we must always keep in mind that there is no cost too high to pay for Bible translation. It is a way of following Jesus Christ in the process of his incarnation to allow all peoples to be restored in their relationship with God, experience him for who he is, and recover their dignity as people created in his image.

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