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# The Supreme Being in Ciyawo Bible translation and managing the choice of adequate terms for God

## ABSTRACT

*Planning for and managing a new Bible translation project is best undertaken when the context of the situation is well understood. This article uses Skopos theory and contextual frames as tools for understanding the Yawo contexts of Mozambique, Malawi, and Tanzania, as it relates to the choice of terms for God in Bible translation – particularly יְהוָה (‘Elohim) in the Hebrew Bible and θεός (theos) in the New Testament, but also applicable to other terms such as the personal name of Israel’s god, יהוה (yhwh). Skopos theory and narrative frame theory provide the theoretical basis of this article as African traditional religion and Islam are explored in the Yawo context. Special attention is paid to these narrative frames in application to translating adequate terms for the Supreme Being, or “God”, in Ciyawo Bible translation. This article shows that successful Bible translation in any context is possible when the relevant situation is understood and managed well.*



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Understanding what a particular tool is designed for is vital to its proper use. For someone unfamiliar with carpentry, knowing how to use the various types of chisels, planers, and saws properly will be a mystery. Inexperienced use will likely result in poor workmanship or even complete failure. In the discipline of Bible translation, the initiators and audience, knowing the intended use of a Bible

product, goes a long way in ensuring that it is well designed, and that the correct tools are used. In the case of managing a Bible translation in the Yawo context of Mozambique, Tanzania, and Malawi, managers must work hard to understand the context for a Bible translation product, in order to fulfil its intended purpose.<sup>1</sup>

This article uses Skopos theory (*skopostheorie*) and contextual frames as tools for understanding the Yawo context, as it relates to the choice of terms for *God* in Bible translation – particularly אֱלֹהִים (*'elōhim*) in the Hebrew Bible and θεός (*theos*) in the New Testament, but also inclusive of the personal name יהוה (*yhwh*). This article assumes that Skopos theory is a functionalist approach to translation (see Nord 1997; 2008; Reiss & Vermeer 2014) without elaborating on the theory in detail in this instance. The critical point to take from Skopos theory for this article is that it focuses on the intended aim (Nord 1997:27) or function (“skopos”) of the translation and formulating a brief for carrying out the translation task according to the intended purpose. The focus is not on equivalence theories of translation nor on domesticating or foreignising strategies as the measure of the success of a translation, but on whether the translation successfully fulfils the instructions of the brief. Narrative frame theory is also a disciplinary field in its own right (see, for example, Baker 2006, 2010). For this article, contextual (or narrative) frames function as a method of referring to, and delineating the relevant context of a given situation so as to validate the intended purpose(s). By understanding these contextual conditions in which Bible translation managers are working, the end-product of such projects has every opportunity of being used how it was intended to be used. There is no need for poor workmanship in Bible translation if the product is well-designed, has a clear purpose, and tools such as narrative frame theory are appropriately used.

## 2. YAWO SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Yawo are primarily a rural and homogeneous people group. Aside from sizeable Christian Yawo populations around urban areas such as Zomba in Malawi and the city of Lichinga in Mozambique, they identify primarily as Muslims. Ciyawo is a Niger-Congo language spoken indigenously by the Yawo people in Mozambique, Tanzania, and Malawi. Ciyawo follows a noun class system of concordance (Dicks & Dollar 2010:19; Steere 1871:6) characteristic of Bantu languages and is classified as a “developing” language in *Ethnologue* (Lewis *et al.* 2016). Ciyawo speakers are in contact with other language groups, including most predominantly Makhuwa, Swahili, and Chewa (Nyanja), but also Makonde and Ngoni. Besides being in contact

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1 For a model for understanding contexts for Bible translation projects, see Houston (2022).

with these indigenous languages, Ciyawo also interacts with the respective colonial languages of English and Portuguese, particularly in urban centres.

The traditional homeland of the Yawo people is around the area of Chiconono in the present-day Muembe district of Niassa Province in north-western Mozambique. Sometime during the early to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the Yawo migrated south to Malawi and north into Tanzania, partly to avoid slave-raiding parties and conflict with other groups such as the Ngoni (Alpers 1969:406; Thorold 1993:81). The etymology of the word “Yawo” seems to derive from a reference to a “treeless, grass covered area where their forefathers lived” (Dicks 2012:79). The most important historical issue relevant in this instance is the Islamisation of the Yawo people, which occurred towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and continues to dominate the religious landscape of Yawo society, with approximately 95 per cent of Yawo people in Mozambique professing themselves to be Muslim (Houston 2020).

The Islamisation of the Yawo is traceable to several favourable pre-colonial and colonial-era “political, social and religious pre-conditions” (Alpers 1972:181). Since at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century and prior to effective European colonisation in the interior of eastern Africa, the Yawo had been interacting with Islamic Swahili coastal peoples at Kilwa in present-day Tanzania (Alpers 1969:406). However, despite this interaction, it was not until the development of powerful Yawo chiefdoms such as those of Makanjila and Mataka in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that Islamisation among the Yawo really began to take root. These powerful chiefs used Islam to maintain control over liminal events such as *jando*, an Islamised initiation ceremony for Yawo boys. Before Islamisation, this event was known as *lupanda* and included only partial circumcision (Bonate 2012:3; Thorold 1995:128). These powerful chiefs linked initiation rituals to Islam which helped reinforce

their own position as custodians of Yawo tribal identity. The Islamisation of rituals emphasised the difference between the Yawo and others ... and confirmed the authority of the Muslim chiefs (Thorold 1995:130).

Furthermore, Bonate (2012:3) points out that being initiated under “ritual initiation controlled by chiefs meant achieving adulthood and becoming a proper Yawo”.

An added pre-condition to Islamic conversion was the economic threat of European colonial powers that impacted on the Yawo chiefdoms. The United Kingdom abolished the slave trade early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and as Britain’s influence began to grow in Yawo parts of Africa, this enabled foreign missionaries and explorers such as David Livingstone to actively fight against slavery. During this period, William Johnson of the Anglican Universities’ Mission to Central Africa had previously been welcomed into Muembe

(modern-day Mozambique) by Chief Mataka II Nyenje in 1880 and allowed to start Anglican mission work there. However, after the interception by British colonists of a slave caravan belonging to Mataka the following year, the chief ordered Johnson's expulsion under suspicion of espionage (Alpers 1972:184; Anderson-Morshead 1897:147). Mataka confirmed his allegiance to Islam at approximately this time (Alpers 1972:184), because his political and commercial needs were partly dependent on slave trading with the Islamic Arab Swahili traders on the East African coast. Thus, the economic benefits of the slave trade to Yawo chiefs and British interference in the trade led to a distrust of European colonial powers. This resulted in the acceptance of the Islamic package that came with the economic security of business with the coast and further rejection of British Christian missionary endeavours.

Despite these initial stages of Yawo Islamisation appearing to have hardly anything to do with spiritual concerns, this does not mean that the spiritual dimension does not have substantial influence now on the hearts and minds of the average Yawo person. As far as the possibility of Islam aligning with Yawo traditional religious thought is concerned, as long as God's oneness and supremacy were not challenged outright, the two were allowed to exist in parallel (even if more classical Islam does not tolerate syncretism). In this sense, Islam and African traditional religion practised in parallel among the Yawo is not as surprising as one might initially expect. I shall consider the nature of Yawo Islam in more detail below, after highlighting aspects of the traditional religious outlook of the Yawo people through contextual frames.

### 3. YAWO CONTEXTUAL FRAMES: AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

The first Yawo contextual frame to consider (aside from the overall narrative of history and language that can be contextual frames of their own) is that of African traditional religion and how the Yawo generally view *Mlungu*. This term is the most common designation for the Supreme Being in Yawo traditional thought. African traditional religion is both a descriptive term and a singular definition of what it is that many Africans believe and adhere to. Theologians and scholars have debated whether it is correct to refer to African traditional religion in the singular or the plural, due to the multiplicity and diversity of traditional beliefs (Oborji 2002:14). In this regard, African traditional religion can be spoken of as a plurality (Waweru 2011:8), for there are at least as many different traditional belief systems associated with African religious thought and expression as there are languages and ethnic groups. However, we are reminded that, although there is an "individual religious heritage" (see Meiring 1996:9) within each cultural group in Africa, there is also a certain commonality (Mburu 2019:25). It is, therefore, possible to speak in a general

way of African traditional religion in the singular. This singular notion will be how African traditional religion is understood in what follows: as a general term for common religious elements across much of Africa.

African traditional religion is usually monotheistic, mirrors the cultural system in which it finds itself (Lugira 2009:38), and follows an organic and holistic world view (Turaki 2019:355; Van der Walt 2003:62). This essentially means that there is no stark contrast between the spiritual and material worlds as in contemporary Western dualism. African traditional religion is very much centred on the present desires and foci of the community in the here-and-now. In this sense, “God and the rest of the spirit world exist for the sake of the human community” (Van der Walt 2003:64). African traditional religion is rarely oriented to the future in terms of a grand eschatology about where the universe is headed; instead, it finds itself looking continuously to the past, as it remembers and venerates deceased ancestors for a secure present and immediate future (Mbuvi 2009:665). Mbiti (1989:21) even suggests that the “African concept of time is silent and indifferent ... [meaning] that the future is virtually non-existent as *actual* time”. For the Yawo, in particular, innovation is undesirable and even shunned for the sake of “consensus over individuality” (Dicks 2012:264). Thus, future thinking for change is rare among the Yawo. A failure to remember the ancestors can result in calamity and misfortune for those still in the living realm (Pobee 1976:9-10). Unlike other world religions such as Islam and Christianity, African traditional religion is not a “book” religion in that it does not have prescribed doctrines or teachings (Agang 2008:22; Mbiti 1991:17). However, the wider community might consider certain people as keepers of traditional religious knowledge. Each expression of African traditional religion is dependent on oral traditions passed on over generations within the community.

A common theme in African traditional religion is the notion of a cosmic life force (Turaki 2019:358) or “cosmic totality” (Meiring 1996:9). This refers to the belief that everything that exists does so in harmony or totality and interdependence with one another. A positive cosmic life force for the Yawo is explainable in terms of living in healthy relationships with others in the community and maintaining accepted societal taboos. When life is troublesome, or things are going badly, the cosmic life force is deficient in that community and may be due to broken relationships or societal taboos. This cosmic life force is available to all, but it is limited in quantity – there is only a certain amount of good to go around. This aspect of the traditional African world view might partly explain why it is difficult for Africans to implement, for example, improved farming techniques that should result in more robust harvests. To do so would, by definition, be to take away the cosmic life force from others.

The veneration of deceased ancestors is one of the ways in which societies such as the Yawo positively maintain the cosmic life force. Ancestor veneration among the Yawo is realised most predominantly in the practice of remembrance feasts at set times after death called *sadaka* (derived from the Arabic term for “almsgiving”, *zakat*). Many Yawo people believe that, on the fortieth-day *sadaka* after death, the deceased’s spirit can finally progress to its final dwelling place (Dicks 2012:175). Other customs associated with ancestor veneration include “sweeping the graves” (*kupyajila malembe*) and extra *sadaka* feasts in response to ancestral discontent (usually revealed through dreams), inviting the ancestors to involve themselves at events such as initiations and village headperson enthronements, and supplication to the deceased ancestors at rain prayer ceremonies (Dicks 2012:101-102). Ancestral spirits can have either a positive or a negative influence on the lives of their surviving family members. Positive, by blessing them with good health and fortune; negative, by causing sickness and accidents. If families remember their ancestors and treat them properly, people can ensure that life remains prosperous and healthy because “spirits of those who died recently are benevolent towards their families” (Mbiti 1991:79). On the contrary, many people typically link calamities to forgetting the ancestors or perhaps to malevolent causes such as witchcraft and acts of sorcery. For the Yawo, a term for deceased ancestors, *acinangolo*, is also a word used for living elders, and so the distinction between the living and the dead is not as distinct as it is from a Western perspective. A vital function of the deceased ancestors in African traditional religion is to act as mediators between the community and the Supreme Being under the assumption that they are now closer to this being. That is,

Africans perceive a distance between them and God or the Supreme Being. The ancestors are closer to the African people, whilst the ancestors are regarded to be closer to God (Manganyi & Buitendag 2013:4).

Living human beings cannot mediate directly with God because direct relationship “might ... crush the individual”. They are, therefore, dependent on the mediation provided to them by their deceased ancestors (Mbiti 1991:68).

#### 4. THE SUPREME BEING IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND THE YAWO'S "MLUNGU"

In contrast to some colonial-era assumptions, namely that Africans lacked a theology of God (Brown 1982:5), the vast majority of African cultures did assume the existence of, and believed in an invisible and omnipotent Supreme Being (Meiring 1996:8) who is the singular source and creator of all that is (Brown 1982:16). The Yawo use the term "*Mlungu*" in the designation of this Supreme Being. This so-called "God" in African traditional religion is usually at the top of a hierarchy with lesser divinities, ancestors, and spirits below (Van der Walt 2003:63). However, despite the existence of a Supreme Being in the traditional African world view, this Being is often considered to be distant from creation and one who delegates the responsibilities of maintaining the world to lesser deities and ancestral spirits (Meiring 1996:8). The delegation of tasks to lesser deities is well represented in a Yawo myth regarding *Mlungu's* agent of creation, *Mtangaluwembe* (Dicks 2012:338), who did the actual work of creating on *Mlungu's* behalf. Western Christian theology might consider this view as a form of deism: the idea that God left control of the world to other powers and natural laws after he had done creating it. In African traditional religion, the ancestral spirits are intimately involved in people's daily affairs because of the Supreme Being's perceived transcendence and lack of relational immanence (Meiring 1996:13; Oborji 2002:18). The deceased ancestors act as mediators between people and the Supreme Being, especially at difficult times such as drought and famine. Although the ancestors and other spirits are not to be worshipped (Mbiti 1991:69), for this is reserved for the Supreme Being alone, actual worship of the Supreme Being in African traditional religion is rare (Brown 1982:11). In fact, if it were true that Yawo people worshipped their ancestors, it is unlikely that monotheistic Islam would have taken root. Instead, we must acknowledge that the African traditional religion's world view does not challenge the core tenet of Islam, namely that God is one (Arabic, *tawhīd*). As long as God's oneness is maintained, the traditional Yawo belief system continues unchallenged by the vast majority of people. In African traditional religion, the Supreme Being is generally considered omnipresent and, therefore, unable to be confined to one place such as a temple or an altar. This view contrasts with the organised religion of the Israelites, who believed that *yhwh* dwelt in the sanctuary of the tabernacle and later temple (even if this is deliberate self-condescension on the part of *yhwh*). This does not mean that the Supreme Being is not important in African traditional religion. Instead, to the traditional African, this Being is *too* great and important to have need of, or derive pleasure from our measly and insufficient offerings (Bolink 1973:23). Indeed, in African traditional religion, the Supreme Being is viewed very highly

but is effectively neglected by people (Ubah 1982:92), because he seems disinterested in the affairs of humankind, preferring to remain estranged from creation (Oborji 2002:18).

The greatness and transcendence of the Supreme Being is reflected often in the names given to him in African languages. The Gikuyu, Masai, and Wakamba of Kenya each use the name *Ngai*, which means “creator” and “giver of all things” (Brown 1982:9; Mburu 2019:32). One of the Nigerian Yoruba’s names, *Olorun*, is synonymous with a term for “sky” and reflects the profound loftiness of the Supreme Being. The Zulu of South Africa use *Nkulunkulu*, perhaps alluding to his ancientness (Brown 1982:14), but more likely to his great-greatness as being a “great-great grandfather” or “first ancestor”, due to the duplicated *nkulu*, normally meaning “great” (Amanze 2002:134). Although the etymology of the name of the Yawo’s Supreme Being, *Mlungu*, is disputed, a few suggestions include a connection to the word *kulangama* or *kulunga*, which, at least in neighbouring Chichewa, is related to the verbs “to be straight” and “to put together rightly”, respectively (Van Breugel 2001:31; Wendland 1992:433). However, the name *Mlungu*, as it is spelt in Chichewa, is generally recognised to be a term borrowed from another language such as Kiswahili, with the Chewa preferring *Chiuta* or *Chauta* for their Supreme Being. These terms mean “the big bow” or “the Great (One) of the Rainbow” (Van Breugel 2001:29). Another possibility for the etymology of the Yawo’s *Mlungu* suggested in this instance is that it may be etymologically related to the verb *kulungwa*, which means “to be big” or “great”. In this case, *Mlungu* could refer to the Supreme Being’s greatness. Regardless of the options, the various proposals regarding the etymology of *Mlungu* all point to his unfathomable greatness. We must also guard against the “root fallacy” – the notion that the current meaning of words continues to be made up of their underlying components (Carson 1996:28-33). Furthermore, although interesting for diachronic linguistic and historical studies, the etymology of *Mlungu* is no longer all that important now for Bible translation, because it is already widely recognised by the Yawo as a proper noun similar to the English “God” with a capital G.

## 5. APPLICATION OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION TO YAWO BIBLE TRANSLATION

As it relates to Bible translation in the Yawo context, the term *Mlungu* appears to be the most naturally equivalent term available to translate the generic biblical terms for deity (particularly *’elōhim* and *theos*). The fact that many traditional African terms are etymologically related to notions of greatness, or the sky, is hardly relevant, given that the same can be said for



the original connotations of the word “God” in English. Thomas (2001:304) reminds us that

new translations rarely use a word for the supreme being that differs from the common usage of the language group or from other available translations of the Bible found in the major languages of the area.

Whichever term is chosen will inevitably develop its own unique characteristics based on the narrative that is communicated through the biblical revelation. Given this reality, *Mlungu* seems to be a good choice for *'elōhim* or *theos*. An issue, of course, exists if there is another possible commonly understood term available such as the Arabic *Allāh* – particularly as the Yawo are primarily Muslim. In such instances, the Yawo stakeholders need to decide about which term is preferred and most acceptable.

As the stakeholders of a Ciyawo Bible translation project move forward with developing a brief and translating terms such as *'elōhim*, *theos* and *yhwh* in light of this African traditional religion contextual frame, it will become clear that there are distinctions between the character of God in the Bible and that of the Yawo's traditional conceptualisation of *Mlungu*. However, despite these differences, Bible translation project managers can move forward with confidence because there is already significant precedence in using existing religious and cultural terminology, even in the original languages of the biblical narrative. For instance, the Hebrew term *'ēl*, which was often used to reference the God of the Bible in its plural form of *'elōhim*, was also used as the proper name of the head of the Ugaritic hierarchy of deities (Baker 2003:361). Project managers should, therefore, not fear the possibility of adapting existing terms in working on new translations of the Bible into vernacular languages such as Ciyawo. For example, in writing about a Ghanaian Bible translation context, in which the traditional deity is not typically considered in trinitarian but certainly in monotheistic terms, Nathan Esala reminds us that it is important in functionalist, *skopos*-oriented translations to recognise that God is already working in these situations. In managing a Bible translation in the Yawo context, a manager should encourage the translators and other stakeholders that it is acceptable to take the existing vocabulary for the concept of one Supreme Being and transform it in light of the overall biblical narrative and concept of God. Indeed, no individual's view of God is identical in all its respects to the next person's view. The challenge, of course, is how to go about ensuring that a translation also pays attention to the Yawo's Islamic contextual frame because it is not simply a case of addressing the traditional aspect alone. This is not to say that a “Muslim Idiom Translation” would necessarily be essential as the defining *skopos* in a Yawo context, but simply to acknowledge, at the very least, that the Yawo's Islamic identity will have profound implications for

translating key terms. This is particularly a concern if the stakeholders were considering the possible use of the Arabic word *Allāh* in a Bible translation.

## 6. YAWO CONTEXTUAL FRAMES: ISLAM

Regardless of the factors and motivations discussed above regarding the initial transformation of Yawo society to an overtly Islamic one, the reality now is that Islam is the dominant contextual frame for the Yawo people in terms of their current corporate religious identity. One anthropologist counters the claims of some that Islam remains only a “vener” (Trimingham 1968:32) in Yawo society, by asking a revealing and insightful rhetorical question:

If the Yao have acquired only some superficial trappings of Islamic belief and practice, merely a veneer that has had little influence on them, then why does Islam appear to have such a tenacious hold on them? (Thorold 1995:3).

The fact that the Yawo are, at present, predominantly Muslim is a point that does not need to be laboured. However, the issue that is particularly relevant in this instance is how Islam as a contextual frame is relevant to the management of a Bible translation project and, more particularly, the choice of which term(s) to use for *ʿēlōhim*, *theos* and *ywhw*.

In contrast to African traditional religion, Islam derives its essence from sacred texts, namely the Qurʾān and Hadith traditions. Classical Islam also acknowledges the importance of the *Tawrat* (Pentateuch), *Zabūr* (Psalms of David), and the *ʾInjīl* (Gospels), but sometimes believes that Jews and Christians corrupted them and are, therefore, untrustworthy in their present forms (Ibrahim 1997:59; Morgan 2010:xvi). It is important to point out that the Yawo people as a collective are not necessarily aware of this viewpoint. In fact, one Yawo sheikh recently told me, in passing, that the *Tawrat* is about *ʾĪsā* and the *ʾInjīl* is about *Mūsā*. There is a great deal of ignorance and confusion among Yawo Muslims, even those in positions of authority. At the centre of the Islamic outlook is the concept of *tawḥīd* – the unity of God (McCloud *et al.* 2013:33). This notion is not simply a belief in monotheism but is the all-embracing view that God exists in “unique singularity” (McCloud *et al.* 2013:47), transcendence, and self-sufficiency. The strength of the *tawḥīd* concept is partly why the idea of a triune God, as in Christian theology, is so problematic for Muslims.

Islam among the Yawo is, in many ways, no different to classical Islam in terms of the centrality of the prescribed practices of the Five Pillars, such as the fast of Ramadan and ritual prayer (the two most practised by the Yawo). However, as is the case in many other parts of the world, the exact nature

of Islamic practice and belief differ significantly in each context. Among the Yawo, it is possible to distinguish between the “great tradition of the reflective few ... and the little tradition of the largely unreflective many” (Redfield 1956:70) in the sense that its own unique forms of expression characterise contemporary Yawo Islam. Yawo Islam generally falls under two predominant forms: *Qadiriyya twaliki* and *Sukuti* or *Qadiyani twaliki*. The term *twaliki* derives from the Arabic *tariqa* referring in this context to different pathways within Islamic tradition. For the vast majority of the Yawo in rural locations, the dominant *twaliki* is a form of *Qadiriyya*, deriving its name and teachings from the order’s 12<sup>th</sup>-century Persian founder Abd al Qadir al-Jalani. Many Yawo villages in rural Mozambique only have mosques of the *Qadiriyya* pathway. Those villages with the more “scriptural” form of Islam are in the minority. The Yawo *Qadiriyya* expression of Islam is a Sufi movement that allows the Yawo “to enter into Islam and participate and express their beliefs in ... tangible ways” (Dicks 2012:190). In other words, one of the attractive elements of *Qadiriyya* Islam for the Yawo is that it can be incorporated into many traditional beliefs and practices (Dicks 2012:189, 198). The more recent *Sukuti* pathway is far less comfortable, with many of these traditional beliefs and practices claiming to be “based on a more literal, scripturalist interpretation of the Holy Islamic Scriptures” (Dicks 2012:191). The minority *Sukuti* are an “anti-Sufi” movement, more prevalent in Malawi, that forbids some *Qadiriyya* practices such as holding *sadaka* (remembrance) feasts and singing at funerals. The word *Sukuti* itself originates from a Swahili word meaning “quiet” (Dicks 2012:191, footnote). Despite these differences in teaching and even animosity between the different pathways, the common thread between each is the profound Islamic identity that defines who the Yawo are as a homogeneous people.

## 7. APPLICATION OF ISLAM TO CIYAWO BIBLE TRANSLATION

As regards translation and despite questions about whether or not Christians and Muslims worship the same God, there are conceptual and doctrinal distinctions between the character of God as portrayed in the Qur’an and that found in the biblical texts (Caner & Caner 2009:102; Richter 2011:47). Both Islam and Christianity embrace the transcendence, sovereignty, and unity of God, but Christianity differs from Islam in other key areas regarding God’s attributes and actions in the world. This is particularly prevalent in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and God’s immanence in the incarnation of Jesus (Netland 2017:446). The entire principle of the divine sonship of Jesus is abhorrent to Islam because God is “neither begetting nor begotten” (Qur’an 112:3). As mentioned earlier, trinitarian doctrine is likewise firmly rejected on

account of the Islamic understanding of God's oneness (Ibrahim 1997:47). However, despite these critical theological distinctions between Islam and Christianity, on a linguistic level, the distinction between the terms *Allāh* and *God* is more imaginary than it is real. The Arabic term for *God* is *Allāh*; it is used by Muslims and Arabic-speaking Christians "since it is the only word for 'God' in Arabic" and found in all Arabic translations of the Bible (Moucarry 2001:84). The word *Allāh* is synonymous with, and generally regarded by Western scholars as a cognate of the Aramaic ܐܠܗܐ (*'elaha*) and the Hebrew ֵלֹהִים (*'elōah*) (Massey 2004:1). The vast majority of Arab philologists agree that *Allāh* is derived from a generic Semitic word for God (*ilāh*) and combined with the definite article *al* to form *al-ilāh* (Thomas 2001:301). This word then contracts to *Allāh* and so simply means, in etymological linguistic terms, "the god" or "God". However, the propositional meaning of a term often has a great deal to do with how the people speaking the language conceive it (Baker 2011:11). A Bible translation manager must thus take into account how it is that the Yawo end users envision *Allāh* and, indeed, *Mlungu*. That is, although *Allāh* has pre-Islamic use as a word in the Semitic family of languages, some Islamic scholars assert that it is, in fact, an untranslatable proper name more in kind with the Hebrew *yhwh* (Al-Qaradawy 1997:45). This assertion relates to the oneness of God and the belief that, if one were to suggest that *Allāh* was derived from another source, this would challenge the central and most fundamental tenet of Islam (Geisler & Saleeb 2002:16).

The etymological issue is interesting from a linguistic viewpoint. Both *Mlungu* and *Allāh* can be justified as equivalent terms of *'elōhim* and *theos*, but this is irrelevant if one "correct" term evokes negative attitudes or creates disagreement and hostility. This might be a distinct possibility in the case that Yawo people consider *Allāh*, for example, a proper noun and not simply a general term for deity. So-called "church" Yawo would most definitely be uncomfortable with this. But, in formulating a translation brief with a clear purpose and for the vast majority of Yawo people, it is questionable whether "church" Yawo could be the primary audience. Those professing Christianity make up less than five per cent of the Yawo population and are even totally non-existent at many sites surveyed by Houston (2020:92). In this instance, the adequate term will be the one most accepted by the receptor community, regardless of any purely linguistic aspects, because both words are as linguistically acceptable as the other. In this sense, it is not simply important to understand that the Yawo already have the term *Mlungu* or have access to the word *Allāh*, but that these contextual frames also need to be understood. The reality is that there will be Muslim people in Yawo society who may object to using *Allāh* because of its perception as a proper name (or, on the contrary, they may embrace it for the same reason that the term is already recognisable to them). Therefore, it is not only about knowing the terms, but also about

understanding the broader context and balancing what the stakeholders want from the translation product. Do the initiators wish for it to act as an evangelistic bridge to the more “scriptural” Muslim Yawo or be embraced by the more syncretised majority? What do the Yawo stakeholders have to say?

In terms of precedent in Bible translation, *Allāh* has been used

in translations of the Bible not only in Arabic but also in the languages used by the majority Muslim communities in the Middle East, Africa and most of Asia (Thomas 2001:303).

This precedence includes the recent Chadian Arabic Bible that uses *Allāh* throughout in its translation of *ʿelōhim* but also for *yhwh* (*Al-Kitaab Al-Mukhaddas Be l-Arabi Al-Daariji Hana Tchad* 2019). With the exception of Bible translation, a diglot Qurʾān in Arabic and Ciyawo from Malawi retains *Allāh* in the translated Ciyawo text (2015). We can find an interesting exception to the use of *Allāh* in Bible translations in Persian regions, including parts of Iran and Afghanistan that use other terms (Thomas 2001:303). Another exception more relevant to the Yawo context, due to Kiswahili’s influence on the Ciyawo language, is that some Kiswahili translations use *Mungu*, a term similar to the Yawo’s *Mlungu*. Often, the term *Mlungu* is used by Yawo Islamic leaders when speaking Ciyawo, and so, it is likely that *Mlungu* would be adequate in Ciyawo Bible translations, even if *Allāh* is used in rituals performed in Arabic. However, the issue is making sure that the term chosen is the one the receptor community wants to use and responds adequately to the contextual frames relevant to the situation. Therefore, it is the manager’s responsibility to make sure that they handle it well, so that the community is in a knowledgeable enough position to make the call.

## 8. FURTHER APPLICATION TO YAWO BIBLE TRANSLATION

Formulating a Yawo Bible translation brief and, by extension, adequate choices for *ʿelōhim*, *theos* and *yhwh* must be made in dialogue with the Yawo stakeholders, whether or not they are the initiators. They are best equipped to understand the nuances of meaning and potential consequences of decisions within Yawo culture regarding the choice of key terms. This applies not only to the translation of terms for deity, but also to other cultural terms that may connote certain additional traditional elements and characteristics that could be unknown to outsiders. This might include the vocabulary associated with different types of Yawo spirits (*misimu*, *majini*, *masoka*, *yiwanda*), traditional diviners (*wacisango*), healers (*wamtela*), and “witches” (*msawī*). For example, how does one translate terms in the so-called witch of Endor narrative of 1

Samuel in light of the Yawo's involvement with the "living dead" – deceased ancestors? The Yawo have a rich vocabulary for these things that simply do not fully exist in English. Therefore, it is also necessary to carefully manage the translation of these terms, in order to avoid misunderstanding the nature of spiritual concepts in the biblical source text, which will also have its own collection of terms. In managing the Yawo Islamic contextual frame and considering *Allāh* as a possible alternative to *Mlungu*, the stakeholders need to be aware of this reality. It will be important to consider specifically whether *Allāh* can be said to be a proper name or whether the generic linguistic nature of the term is recognised. Do Yawo people who hear the term *Allāh* automatically associate it with the Muslim God and the *tawhīd* concept? Or do they recognise that it can function generally like "god"? If it is recognised as a proper name, perhaps its use in Yawo Bible translation could be tested on occurrences of *yhwh*, given that *yhwh* itself functions as a proper name in the Hebrew text in reference to the one and only covenant god of the Israelites. Or alternatively, perhaps *Mlungu* could be used for *yhwh* and *Allāh* for *ʿēlōhim* and *theos*. Of course, the tradition of using terms such as יְיָ ( *ʿādōn*) and יְיָנָא ( *ʿādōnāy*) and κύριος (*kyrios*) in place of *yhwh* will also have to be considered, along with occasions where such terms appear in combination with one another. On this issue, it is worth noting that using *Mlungu* for *yhwh* is not necessarily a completely radical idea, for it is not without precedent in the area. The Chichewa *Buku Loyera* translation of the Bible uses the traditional term *Chauta* for *yhwh* (Wendland 1998:120) and *Mlungu* for occurrences of *ʿēlōhim* and *theos*. It is clear that the Bible's authors were content to use pre-existing or generic terms for deity when referring to the character of God (Bray 2000:513). The common terms used in both the Old and the New Testaments, *ʿēlōhim* and *theos*, became generic terms parallel to the English terms "god", "gods", and "God" (even if they were not generic at first). *El*, of course, was the name of an ancient Ugaritic deity (Curtis 2005:134-135). Therefore, if a suitable word is available in Ciyawo, there is hardly any reason to resist using that term in reference to the one true God.

Furthermore, what about *ʿēlōhim* in the Hebrew Bible when used about other deities? It is appropriate to adopt the existing Ciyawo terms and fill them with new meanings coming from the translation of the biblical narrative. Of course, all of these proposals are simply suggestions that must be tested in the community, carefully considered from theological, linguistic, and practical angles, and managed accordingly to ensure that loyalty to the source text is maintained (and that it adequately fulfils the intended *skopos* outlined in the brief) (Nord 2014).

## 9. FINAL REMARKS: DEVELOPING THE SKOPOS AND A TRANSLATION BRIEF

The issue of developing the *skopos* ultimately comes down to dealing with the question: “What will this translation product do? What is its function?” It is not about whether a “foreignising” or “domesticating” strategy is better universally; it is more an issue of identifying which strategy is most suited to the function of the translation *skopos* at hand. It could be that “translators oscillate within the same text between foreignization versus domestication” (Naudé 2011:233), depending on the aforementioned combination of source text loyalty and understanding of the intended audience in light of the *skopos*. The different ideological positions between the various stakeholders make developing the *skopos* a difficult task. This reality is inescapable. Therefore, it is imperative to understand these contextual frames in the Yawo situation, so that managers will be better equipped to deal with the ideological challenges when they arise.

The decision about how the translation of terms for *God* is implemented will need to be managed carefully. This issue ultimately rests with the Yawo end users because their response is the measure of how well a term is accepted or rejected. They are the ones who should take the dominant position as key stakeholders because they are the ones who will actually use the translation. Suppose there is evident distaste in the community over a particular word choice (such as *Allāh*), and there are other acceptable terms available that still maintain loyalty to the source text and faithfulness to the *skopos*. In that case, the adequate term is probably the least offensive one. The acceptability of the translation as a whole often rests on these decisions. The manager needs to allow participation to give the receptor community and others involved the space and respect to voice their concerns and opinions. Translation decisions need to be evaluated and stand up to robust community scrutiny. Testing comprehension and acceptability is a staple task in Bible translation projects, with this being no different in a functionalist Ciyawo Bible translation project.

With all of that said, how does a manager of a Bible translation project in the Yawo context go about putting theory to real-life use? Let us attempt to answer this question by discussing it whilst considering the possible *skopoi* that could result from the contextual frames pertinent to the Yawo situation. Let us say that there are four primary responses to the contextual frames discussed.

The first response is to take the Islamic frame as central and respond to it by accommodating Islamic sensibilities. This might happen by incorporating Islamic vocabulary such as *Allāh* for *theos* / *‘elōhim* / *yhwh* and, by extension, using Arabic names such as *‘Īsā* for Jesus and *Mūsā* for Moses. This is done so that the vast majority of the Islamic community is more likely to accept the

translation product within their world view and be more open to embracing evangelistic efforts by those who use Islamised vocabulary. From this, one of the key practical questions for a manager is: To what extent can or should the Yawo community retain Islamic practices and forms in light of the Bible product that inevitably introduces the Yawo to a new narrative, regardless of the care taken in choosing Islamic terminology?

The second response is to take the Islamic frame as central but respond to it aggressively by rejecting Islamic sensibilities – that is, by using Christianised terminology and avoiding Islamic vocabulary to bring Yawo Muslims into a new order of thinking, praxis, and community. This is a partial rejection of their existing world view regarding religious and corporate identity. Christians may view this as the “right” approach, but resistance among Yawo Muslims to the end product will be significant and probably fatal to the project’s success. A key question to ask in this instance is: How much can the Yawo afford to leave behind of their existing religious identity, in order to embrace the new narrative of the Bible? Why would they listen in the first place if their terminology is rejected outright?

The third response is to take the African traditional religion contextual frame as central and respond to it by accommodating traditional sensibilities – that is, by incorporating explicitly traditional terminology and expression. This is done so that Yawo people are more likely to accept the translation product within their traditional world view. The question, in this instance, is like the first response above: To what extent can or should the Yawo continue using terms from African traditional religion, such as those associated with the veneration of deceased ancestors?

The fourth response is to take the African traditional religion contextual frame as central and respond to it by rejecting traditional sensibilities, in order to introduce the Yawo to new ways of thinking. This would be done by rejecting the rich traditional vocabulary available in Ciyawo. The question, in this instance, is the same as point two above: How much do the Yawo need to leave behind?

Possible responses, beyond the four listed above, to the contextual frames in the Yawo situation could include combinations of the above responses, resulting in nuanced choices and variations. Such flexibility is likely far healthier and more productive than the rigid response above and could consist of, for example, the acceptance of the Islamic contextual frame and embracing Arabic terminology for the names of people (such as *ʿĪsā* and *Mūsā*) yet avoiding *Allāh* for *theos* and *ʿĕlōhim* and instead opting for the traditional Ciyawo term *Mlungu*. It is undoubtedly important for a translation project manager to embrace that the Yawo are Islamic and simultaneously



adherents of African traditional religion. Managers in this context must find ways to listen to the Yawo stakeholders, whilst continuing to hold on to loyalty to the biblical source text – without which the translation task would indeed be meaningless. For the project to be acceptable to the community and to satisfy those ordering the translation, the effort to listen to all stakeholders must not be only something that happens in the beginning when developing the translation brief. It must be something that carries on throughout the life of the project. The fact remains that the true test over a translation's success (in this case, whether or not the translation of terms for *God* can be said to be adequate) is how well it aligns with the *skopos*. Of course, managers must ensure that the *skopos* was properly developed in the first place. And so, if the chosen translation term (after considering the relevant contextual frames of the situation) is tested within the community, is understood, loyal to the source text, acceptable, and satisfies those ordering the translation, then it can be argued that the adequate term has been found. Although this is likely to be easier said than done, in that it is impossible to satisfy everyone involved in a project all the time, there is every reason to believe that a Bible translation product can be successful in Yawo contexts. Similar levels of success are also possible in other contexts, if similar care is taken to develop a satisfactory translation brief in company with the actual community for which a translation is designed.

Finally, the function and aim of a translation product will and must develop as people and communities change over time. An adequate translation *now* may not remain adequate in subsequent years. It is thus vital that the contextual frames are reconsidered afresh for each new generation.

## 10. CONCLUSION

This article used Skopos theory, a functionalist translation theory, alongside narrative frame theory as tools to deal with the choice of terms concerning the Supreme Being in Ciyawo Bible translations. After first considering the socio-historical background, the article investigated two significant Yawo narrative frames: African traditional religion and Islam. These two frames were then discussed in light of application to Bible translation in the Yawo context. Following this, some future directions and final remarks were made about navigating the creation of a translation brief and managing a Bible translation in the Yawo context with the various narrative frames in mind. By using such tools, successful Bible translation in Ciyawo is not only possible, but likely.

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