

# Theologizing in Africa: With Special Reference to Bible Translation in Chichewa

**Ernst R. Wendland**

*Stellenbosch University*

## **Abstract**

To “theologize,” that is, to engage in theological reasoning and exposition when composing oral, written, or multimodal discourse, has been applied continually in Africa ever since the Bible was first introduced to this continent. Whenever God’s Word is conveyed in another language and cultural setting, the existential theological barrier must be broken as important scriptural notions and entire propositions must inevitably be reconceptualized semantically and frequently also reconfigured grammatically to be communicated. The focus of the present paper is the crucial activity of Bible translation and the various ways in which those involved in such a multifaceted endeavor always engage in theologizing, to one degree or another, while carrying out their work. This article focuses specifically on the *New Testament Study Bible* in Chichewa (2017 Bible Society of Malawi). The importance

of preparing such locally contextualized, scripturally accurate, and linguistically idiomatic study Bibles is demonstrated through manifold exemplification to be an indispensable means of ensuring the theological vitality and dynamic growth of the Church in Africa.

## **1. Historical Overview: The Chichewa Study Bible Project (CSBP)**

This overview will briefly touch upon the history, purpose, and methodology of the CSBP. Two primary aspects are then discussed in greater detail and illustrated. The first aspect is the translated text itself with respect to form and content. The second aspect is the paratext that complements the translation with explanatory, illustrative, or descriptive notes. These

## **Conspectus**

### **Keywords**

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### **About the Author**

Prof. Ernst Wendland has a Ph.D. in African Languages and Literature from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. A former instructor at Lusaka Lutheran Seminary (1968–2022) and a United Bible Societies Translation Consultant in Zambia, he currently serves as a thesis supervisor at SATS and several other academic institutions. His research interests include various aspects of Bible translation as well as structural, stylistic, poetic, and rhetorical studies in biblical texts and the Bantu languages of South-East Africa.

erwendland@gmail.com

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Bible-based. Christ-centred. Spirit-led.

include footnotes, maps and illustrations, book introductions, sectional summaries, chapter headings, cross-references, a key term glossary, and a short concordance. Examples of textual study material are taken mainly from chapters nine (dialogic narrative) and ten (didactic debate) of the Chichewa Gospel of John.

The CSBP was an inter-denominational project with a multi-national vision established by the Bible Society of Malawi in conjunction with the United Bible Societies at a foundational meeting in November 1998. This project was initiated in response to urgent requests by the Chichewa- (or Chewa-) speaking Malawian Christian community who saw the great need for various descriptive and explanatory notes to supplement the text of the new popular language Bible that had recently been published, the *Buku Loyera* (Holy Book) (Wendland 1998).<sup>1</sup> Such notes were required especially for the majority population who are largely rural, do not know English well, and/or are not able to access other biblical interpretive resource material other than the Bible they have in their homes. More specifically, the project *skopos*, or primary communicative goals, with regard to content and style, aimed to reach the following target readership:

- Congregational lay leaders and elders (persons with no formal biblical education) who are often called upon to preach and teach in the absence of a theologically trained pastor or priest;
- Rural ministers or catechists having little or no access to biblical resources (commentaries, Bible dictionaries) to use when preparing sermons, Bible studies, and other pastoral materials;
- Monolingual speakers of Chichewa or those who are not skilled enough in English to be able to make effective use of study aids even if they were available.

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<sup>1</sup> The *Buku Loyera* was published by the Bible Society of Malawi (<https://chichewa.bible/>).

In addition, a suitably composed study edition would also be of great assistance to those pastors who may be well-trained and fluent in English but who minister to their people for the most part in Chewa. It is not always easy for people, no matter how well-educated, to readily and/or accurately convert specialized terms and key concepts from one language to another. Thus, a reliable translation that is also annotated in the vernacular would take them at least part of the way along this formidable transformational exercise.

In this connection, while it is assumed that most consumers of a study Bible will be readers of the text, in an African setting this will not always be the case. The great majority of receptors for one reason or another (e.g., non-literacy, lack of funds to buy a Bible, unavailability of the Scriptures) *hear* the Word rather than read it for themselves. To a lesser extent, this would also be true for an annotated version in their first (heart) language. Therefore, it may be reasonably expected that a significant number of lay preachers, presiding elders, and even so-called bishops of local parishes, especially those in so-called independent African churches, would not be able to read at all or be functionally literate to the degree that they can readily process and apply a literary feature such as footnotes. In view of this need, it was important to compose explanatory and descriptive comments that are not only smoothly readable (i.e., easily articulated) but immediately *hearable* as well. When they hear an audio text it should be correctly understood without undue difficulty as it is being aurally perceived.

Furthermore, the CSBP's vision extended well beyond the borders of Malawi. It was the first project of its kind in the entire region of Southern Africa, and it was anticipated (and later proven true) that a carefully contextualized, annotated edition of the Bible would act as a vital model and guide for similar endeavors in many of the related Bantu languages of

South-Central Africa (e.g., Tumbuka and Sena of Malawi; Tonga and Bemba of Zambia). The hope was that the project would bolster the production of accompanying Bible teaching and learning materials written in indigenous languages aimed at reducing the level of biblical illiteracy in the Christian community, whether Protestant, Catholic, Independent, or Charismatic.

The full-time production team of the CSBP consisted of a project coordinator, two co-editors and drafters, a UBS translation consultant, and a typist, all of whom worked together in a centralized (Lilongwe) office provided by the Bible Society of Malawi. In addition, it was hoped that about twenty qualified draft reviewers and associated note composers could be co-opted from various academic and theological institutions in the country to reduce the time needed for completion, which was set at five years for the New Testament. There was a concerted effort to gain the participation of representatives from all the major church bodies in Malawi, but this aim was not fully realized. Each composer or part-time associate was assigned a NT book for which to compose appropriate study notes, not simply by copying or adapting those found in a published English study Bibles, but starting from scratch, based on a careful exegesis of the book at hand and in view of the stipulated target audience.<sup>2</sup> All completed drafts were critically reviewed multiple times by a colleague, by the translation consultant, and by as many pastors, teachers, and scholars recommended by Malawian church leaders as possible.

The *Buku Loyera: Chipangano Chatsopano, Pamodzi ndi Mawu Ofotokozero* (Holy Book: New Testament, Together with Explanatory Words, BLCC) was finally published by the Bible Society of Malawi in 2017. At 1016 pages, it

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<sup>2</sup> This procedure was different from most other, non-western study Bible projects being carried out in the world at that time, where adaption from existing English publications, e.g., the NIV or GNB, was the norm.

is about the size of the entire old missionary version of the Chewa Bible (1922), the *Buku Lopatulika* (Sacred Book).<sup>3</sup> It took about twice as long to produce this NT study Bible as scheduled. The principal reasons for this delay are as follows:

- The periodic turnover of staff on the editorial team, mainly due to personnel leaving to do graduate studies either within Malawi or in South Africa.
- The lack of a project budget to remunerate potential, qualified note editors and composers sufficiently to either attract or retain them.
- The relative difficulty of composing what amounted to a mini-commentary of a biblical book in a timely manner and to the required standard.
- Various personal distractions or delays stemming from ecclesiastical commitments, family affairs, and/or financial challenges due to a limited salary or compensation.
- A certain misunderstanding concerning the amount of space that would be available for annotation in the future published edition, which turned out to be much less than anticipated (i.e., only 30–50% of a printed page). Had we known this from the beginning, the note-composition process could have been reduced in complexity.

However, the preceding does not detract from the high quality of the 2017 publication or its potential educative value to Chichewa Bible readers not only in Malawi but also in Zambia and Mozambique, where the language it

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<sup>3</sup> The centennial celebration of this groundbreaking version was held in Malawi in 2022. The *Buku Lopatulika* was first published by the British and Foreign Bible Society. Lightly revised editions have been published by the Bible Society of Malawi (<https://chichewa.bible/>).



uses is also a significant language that has official, government-recognized status.<sup>4</sup> To my knowledge, it was only the second NT study Bible produced in a Bantu language of Africa (after Swahili). From this general introduction to the project under consideration, we turn now to consider in more detail the subject of theologizing as it pertains to Bible translation, with special reference to Chichewa.

## 2. Theologizing in Bible Translation—*How, Where, and Why?*

In his insightful monograph *Doing African Christian Theology: An Evangelical Perspective*, Richard Gehman (1987, 26–27) writes:

In any successful effort to communicate the Gospel to a people across cultural boundaries there must be some measure of relating biblical truths to the known practices and beliefs of the people. Without translation, no communication is possible. And theology is translation.... Theology is reflection on God's self-disclosure contained in the Scriptures with the purpose of generating the knowledge of God and better obedience. As such, Africans have been reflecting on the Scriptures since the Bible was first translated into the vernacular languages. All Bible translations are interpretations of the text from which the Bible is being translated.

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<sup>4</sup> Chichewa is used or understood by an estimated twenty million first- and second-language speakers in the East and Southern Africa region. "It is the case that the number of people understanding and using Chichewa is much higher than the 12 million native speakers. Like Swahili, Chichewa is considered by some a universal language, a common skill enabling people of varying tribes and those living in Malawi, Zambia, and Mozambique to communicate without following the strict grammar of specific local languages.... It contains a considerable literature [*sic*], more than other local African languages" (Taylor n.d.).

As in Africa, so also throughout the world. The activity of Bible translation unavoidably involves the translators in a significant and sustained act of theologizing. It is not a question of if, but when—more specifically, *how*, *where*, and *why* in a text this specialized act and art of cross-cultural communication is manifested.<sup>5</sup> This principle holds true no matter what type or style of version is being prepared, from the most literal, formally correspondent reproduction of the biblical text to a highly idiomatic recreation in a contemporary language.<sup>6</sup>

However, genuine Bible translation is not merely one's private reflection on God's revelation as recorded in the Scriptures, coupled with a subjective, informal effort to communicate this message in the language of fellow speakers today. There is a crucial qualification that must be applied, namely, that such a communicative undertaking must always be directed by the criterion of the original intended meaning. This refers to that internal inventory of formal (literary-structural), semantic, and pragmatic (i.e., functional) significance that has been encoded in the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible and within their overall historical, sociocultural, linguistic, literary, and geographical environment. Especially challenging then is the need to accurately convey this essential sense-reservoir of Scripture with

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<sup>5</sup> Thus, *theologizing* is an important aspect of what is commonly referred to in missiological circles as contextualization. (For a thorough critical discussion of this key concept, see Hiebert 1994, ch. 4).

<sup>6</sup> I would agree with Gehman (1987, 87) that a much greater degree of creative contextualization, or theologizing, is manifested in an idiomatic, in contrast to a more literal, version of the Bible: "Once Scripture is translated into the vernacular, theological reflection by the people is then possible, free to draw upon the figures of speech, analogies, patterns of logic and arrangement, religious and philosophical concepts. Theology is proven to be contextualized by the response it evokes from the people. If the truth of Scripture is communicated by a medium [i.e., manner or style] which seems foreign, then it is not [adequately] contextualized. If the message pierces the heart and seems like their own, then it is contextualized."

reference to the conceptual framework of the new and, in many ways, alien worldview of a contemporary target audience.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, in addition to being compositionally creative, the communal, multifaceted process of contextualizing should be correspondingly controlled in a disciplined and relevant manner. This process of message transmission must always be guided, on the one hand, by the inscribed content of the inspired biblical text, and on the other, by a method that is appropriate for and acceptable to the designated consumer group. That is, where the interrelated *how*, *where*, and *why* issues become vitally important, and yet these are not always fully appreciated or practically addressed in current translation theory or practice.<sup>8</sup> In the following discussion, I will explore these notions more concretely as they pertain to the task of theologizing with respect to the text and context of Scripture translation in Chichewa, first in general and then with special reference to the extensive study notes that were prepared for chapters 9–10 of John’s Gospel in the NT Study Bible.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> It is often observed that the African worldview and social setting correspond in many ways to that of the Old Testament. On the other hand, we need to recognize that some noteworthy discrepancies, both large and small, do exist, such as the matrilineal and matrilocal character of a number of South-Eastern Bantu peoples, including the Chewa. See, for example, *Ruth in Central Africa* (Wendland 1987, 166–188).

<sup>8</sup> This is especially a problem in the case of more literal, formal equivalence translations, as opposed to those of a more meaning-oriented or functional equivalence nature (see Paul Wendland 2012).

<sup>9</sup> This Gospel was chosen because the notes were drafted by the late Rev. Dr. Bishop Patrick Kalilombe who was a leading practical theologian from Malawi and was active for several decades around the turn of the century (<http://www.ecmmw.org/new/2012/09/25/biography-of-bishop-patrick-kalilombe-missionaries-of-africa-m-afr/>).

### 3. Theologizing *within* the Translated Text

Bible translation is, or should ideally be, a corporately-run, community-based exercise in Christian communication. This is yet another variable that contributes to its great difficulty, namely, how to get so many diverse individuals and ecclesiastical groups to cooperate, let alone substantially agree, as they proceed in carrying out such an important and influential assignment. This consideration exists over and above the more obvious communicative problems that arise since two or more different languages, emerging from disparate physical and conceptual cultural worlds, are involved in the text-transmission process. The latter includes periodic formal and semantic interference from resource and bridge languages such as English and French.

Accordingly, Bible translation is a highly challenging (yet equally rewarding) venture. Translators function as impartial text mediators. They try their best to accurately re-express verbally in another tongue the *essence* of the biblical message as documented within the source books of Scripture. In order to achieve the most fitting, localized results, the task invariably requires some form of proactive and interactive message contextualization. This requires joint theologizing in a neutral way—attempting to remain as exegetically objective and doctrinally unbiased as possible while shaping the text for a particular audience. Though never perfect in actual practice, honest and able translators seek to ensure that no deliberate additions, subtractions, or changes in crucial content, whether expressed or implied, enter the work, especially those notions that would favor their own ecclesiastical position. Nevertheless, there will always be a greater or lesser degree of theological reconstruction that has to be implemented, since the use of another language automatically situates the primary religious and ethical sense of Scripture within the inclusive thought and experiential

world of the people who speak it. These include their current belief system, worldview, customs, values, traditions, social institutions, and physical and geographical environment.

How much theologizing occurs during the Bible translation process?<sup>10</sup> This is not an easy question to answer since it all depends on the circumstances, some of which we will consider further below with respect to John's Gospel in Chichewa. Again, the factor of the *intended audience* is of utmost importance because this will determine both the type and the extent of the adjustments and adaptations that are made within the scope of the vernacular text. A translation that is suitable for and acceptable to one target group may not be fitting for another in terms of grammatical style, wording, or even the spelling system that is used. There are some obvious differences in these respects that may be observed, for example, in the three major Chichewa versions that were produced in Malawi.

The venerable (1922) *Buku Lopatulika* (Sacred Book) translation was produced mainly for Protestant Christians who wanted the Chichewa text to be very similar in wording to the King James Version in English, which in turn follows the forms of the Hebrew and Greek texts quite closely. Another, older (1966) missionary translation, *Malembo Oyera* (Holy Writings), on the other hand, was prepared for Catholics in a style that was somewhat more idiomatic as far as the Chichewa is concerned. The more recently published (1998), ecumenical *Buku Loyera* (Holy Book) translation aimed to be appropriate for both Protestants and Catholics.<sup>11</sup> It was purposefully

composed so that the Bible's meaning would be expressed in the form of natural-, everyday-, "popular-language,"<sup>12</sup> Chichewa—without following the text of any English version.

Since I participated in the preparation of the current *Buku Loyera* version, I will take that as my principal point of reference. This is the basic definition that guided our committee's work: Bible translation consists in *re-presenting* as much as possible of the relevant communicative significance of the biblical text in the Chichewa language and cultural context in a dynamic, functionally-equivalent manner. Such a meaning-oriented version is one that the projected consumer, an average lay-Christian constituency, considers as being situationally most fitting in terms of both efficiency (relative intelligibility) and effectiveness (message accuracy, impact, and appeal). The general degree of acceptability had to be first anticipated and subsequently assessed, that is, carefully audience-tested, with respect to the primary socio-religious settings of Scripture use. Examples of these settings are evangelistic outreaches personal devotions, Bible study, and contemporary worship services.<sup>13</sup>

#### 4. Some Examples of Textual Theologizing

It is important to recognize that even a literal version will be theologically contextualized (rightly or wrongly) in the process of reproducing an original text that was verbally represented in a very different language and culture. This occurs either actively or passively, and often unpredictably as well. In the case of the *Buku Lopatulika*, for example, it was decided that the term *kachisi* (traditional ancestral shrine) should be used as a locally familiar

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<sup>10</sup> On the subject of theologizing with reference to Bible translation in general, see the recent works of Liu (2022a, 2022b). There are relatively few published discussions of this subject with specific reference to study Bibles. Among them, see Hill (2010).

<sup>11</sup> Regarding the rationale for and value of an ecumenical Bible translation, see Wendland (1998, 38–42).

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<sup>12</sup> On the theory and practice of a "popular language" Bible translation, see Wonderly (1968).

<sup>13</sup> I have discussed the various methods and groups involved in this testing process elsewhere (Wendland 1998, 199–217).



concept to designate the temple in Jerusalem. One wonders, however, what sort of an impression was conveyed, since there was only one central Jewish temple, but the land of the Achewa people was full of area-specific *akachisi* shrines. The respective modes of construction of these two types of religious buildings were also radically dissimilar. The latter are small, temporary, grass and stick shelters constructed at the base of a large shady tree somewhere out in the bush. In contrast with this the *Buku Loyera* employs a descriptive phrase to render temple, *Nyumba ya Mulungu* (House of God; e.g., John 10:22). In a similar creative, but misguided effort to contextualize the biblical text, when Satan takes Jesus up to the pinnacle (περὺγιον) of the Temple to tempt him (Matt 4:5), the *Buku Lopatulika* uses *cimbudzi* as a translation. This refers to the central tuft at the top of a traditional grass-roofed hut. Unfortunately, this archaic term is no longer widely known, but its homonym, meaning a public toilet, is in daily use.

The translation of Holy Spirit as *Mzimu Woyera* (John 1:32) is especially problematic in the Bantu language group. To begin with, the abstract concept of spiritual *holiness* is itself very difficult to convey (i.e., *woyera* means “a living being that is white, clean, light, pure”), but the concept *spirit* is even more problematic. *Mzimu* refers to a personal ancestral-spirit, (i.e., some known human being, usually a clan relative), who has died and has been existentially transformed to live on in a reduced and invisible, yet still proximate, state among the living. How this anthropomorphic term could apply to the immortal God (*Mulungu*) is not apparent; certainly, a great deal of extratextual theologizing in the form of pastoral church instruction is required to clarify this crucial biblical concept.

In many such cases, in the absence of linguistic or cultural equivalence where key theological ideas are involved, it is frequently necessary for less, rather than more, explanatory information to be expressed in the vernacular. This is because an in-text description often proves to be linguistically

unnatural and comparatively even more perplexing to the average person, e.g., *Muuya Uusalala* (Reddish Breath) for Holy Spirit in Citonga, a related language. Due to long usage in the Christian community, both Protestant and Catholic, and the lack of a better alternative, the expression first used in the old *Buku Lopatulika*—*Mzimu Woyera* (Pure Ancestor)—was retained by common convention in the *Buku Loyera*. This is an instance where textual theologizing in translation can go only so far. The communication of the biblical concept remains dependent on the subsequent preaching and teaching ministry of the resident churches and their various media of message transmission.

A similar example shows that a seemingly “safe” literalistic approach is not always the answer either in such challenging cases. In many such instances passive, unintentional, or unforeseen theologizing occurs. Thus, the Christological title Son of Man (e.g., John 3:14) was from the beginning rendered as correspondently as possible. But the result, not surprisingly, turns out to mean something quite different from what is biblically intended for those who are not initiated or catechized—*Mwana wa Munthu* literally means “a Child of Somebody.” It could be male or female, possibly even illegitimate! In modern idiomatic usage and a secular environment, this phrase would imply that the somebody concerned is an ethnic African, distinct from a white European (*Mzungu*). In such instances, the biblical text in translation, unless annotated, depends even more heavily upon initial and ongoing pastoral instruction to further describe and explain the foreign or otherwise misleading scriptural concepts in question.

A more idiomatic, functional-equivalence type of translation allows for comparatively more verbal adaptations to be introduced into the target-language text as the message is more thoroughly or deeply adjusted to fit its normal lexical and syntactic categories. It is important to point out, however, that ideally only the *forms* of the original Scripture (its sounds,

lexical structure, grammar, or discourse arrangement) may legitimately be changed in the process. At times the modification may be considerable (e.g., in cases of word order) so as to render the meaning in such a way that it may be more easily and accurately comprehended by a listening audience. But any potential addition, omission, or alteration with regard to the semantic content must be kept to a minimum—and then only in cases where there are no other options. An example of this is when more general expressions must be used, like *kumwamba* (to the place above; e.g., John 1:51) for heaven or *atumwi* (people who are sent; e.g., Luke 6:13) for apostles.

Where no agreement can be reached, a loanword is typically resorted to. But in these instances, the work of theologizing is simply transferred to local receptors, without any active guidance on the part of the translators. Thus, the Citonga term *bapositolo*, while it may be used to denote what *apostles* means in the NT, it commonly refers to the leaders and/or members of some contemporary African independent church body. How far the goal of formal contextualization is pushed (i.e., how much *controlled*-theologizing is allowed in any given case), depends on the related factors of usage and users—that is, the primary purpose and setting for which the translation is being made. Many times, it is necessary to reach a collective compromise, especially during the selection of certain prominent items of religious vocabulary, such as the designation for the new Bible itself (***Buku Lopatulika + Malembo Oyera = Buku Loyera***) or where individual denominational theologies conflict.

The *Buku Loyera* is intended to be a popular language version, one that is quickly understood and largely appreciated by all speakers of Chichewa, but especially the current, youth, and child-rearing adult generation. Therefore, it goes much further in restructuring certain biblical concepts and in naturalizing its manner of expression than either *Buku Lopatulika* or *Malembo Oyera*. The most obvious example of this concerns the personal,

covenantal name for God in the Old Testament (YHWH), variously rendered as Yahweh, Jehovah, or the LORD in English versions. Here, *Buku Loyera* employs the ancient, pre-Christian name for the High (Creator-Sustainer) God of the universe in the traditional cosmology of the Chewa people—*Chauta*, (Great-One of the Rainbow). This is an exceptional, and no doubt somewhat debatable, example of indigenous theologizing in action, but the term was not chosen to accommodate the biblical message to African ancestral religion. It merely represents the translation committee's best efforts to communicate who God (the generic term being *Mulungu*; cf. Swahili *Mungu*) has been and is to the Chewa nation today in a familiar and meaningful way. This rendition is both referentially and connotatively more recognizable and memorable than a loanword (*Yahve* for Catholic, *Yehova* for Protestant).<sup>14</sup> In one interesting case, to avoid referential ambiguity, a reference to Yahweh in the NT (the parallel passages Matt 22:44; Mark 12:36; and Luke 20:42), where the ambiguous Greek term κύριος is used, was rendered as *Chauta* in *Buku Loyera*.

Many other resourceful, less debatable, instances of conceptual contextualization are to be found in the *Buku Loyera*. Some examples (back-translated into English here, which sounds wordier than the actual Chichewa) include translating Sheol/Hades as “place of dead people,” high places as “shrines for worshiping images there,” Messiah as “that [well-known] promised Savior,” scribes as “teachers of Laws,” grace as “being favored in the heart by God,” propitiation as “a sacrifice for appeasing sins,” (sinful) flesh as “our character that is inclined to evil things,” and mediator as “one who stays in the middle.”<sup>15</sup> During these efforts to accommodate

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<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of this translation and some of the theologizing involved, see Wendland (1998, 115–121).

<sup>15</sup> cf. *Buku Lopatulika*, which renders mediator as “clan representative/negotiator.”



the text of Scripture in specific cases to fit the Chewa language and thought world, the procedure of local theologizing had to be delimited and guided by the consensus of reliable biblical scholarship, as expressed in major commentaries, handbooks, and Bible dictionaries, as well as by the opinions of various church leaders and Chichewa language experts. These consultants pointed out, for example, that the phrasal verb *kutembenuka mtima* (to be turned around in one's heart; e.g., Matt 3:2) was a much better candidate for conveying the biblical imperative *repent* than *kulapa* (to regret, feel remorse), which is used in the older missionary versions and has no element of life-change implied.

Such linguistic accommodation affects not only individual words and phrases, but frequently entire sentences needed to be restructured in the interest of greater intelligibility. This exercise, too, involves considerable biblical text affirmation and apologetic theologizing because an understandable version has the added benefit of preventing possible erroneous interpretations and indefensible doctrines. For example, the first part of Romans 3:22 in *Buku Lopatulika* reads (a back-translation): "... the righteousness of God which comes from faith on [sic] Jesus Christ to all who believe." Now, most untutored respondents think this means that human faith automatically brings the blessing of divine righteousness. This passage has been clarified in the *Buku Loyera* translation as, "The very way in which people are reckoned /deemed righteous in the eyes of God is that those people believe Jesus Christ." To be sure, the specific language *forms* of the original Greek (see KJV, RSV, etc.) have been noticeably changed. But as a result of this application of creative, yet controlled, theologizing, the projected message of the Scriptures comes through much more distinctly and naturally to the average readers, speakers, and, especially important, *hearers* of Chichewa.

To conclude this section, it is also necessary to call attention to the need for theologizing to be carried out with regard to the overall compositional style of a translation. In the first place, this is necessary in a popular version that aims to be linguistically clear and natural in the target language.<sup>16</sup> Such verbal care also helps to counter the mistaken impression often given by literal versions that the Scriptures and speakers in the text, including God, habitually talk like foreigners—for example, Europeans attempting to speak Chichewa. On the contrary, the Word of God should communicate idiomatically, so the texts of diverse genres, prose as well as poetry, sound as if they had been initially composed by mother-tongue speakers of the language!<sup>17</sup> To illustrate this, I have reproduced John 9:13–21 from the *Buku Loyera* below and boldfaced all those items in the text that are especially colloquial or have no correspondent in the *Buku Lopatulika* version, which I closely examined by way of comparison. This would include various lexical and grammatical features such as the word order, tense-aspect usage, conjunctive expressions and particles, additional vital pronominal references, more precise terminology, and related demonstrative, and emotive words that are typical in the polished direct discourse of competent speakers of Chichewa.<sup>18</sup> On the right side, I have provided my own rather literal English rendition of the Chewa to try and give an approximate impression of its rhythmic and colloquial stylistic character.

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**16** This type of meaning-orientated version is not only easier to understand, but it also serves to prevent the misunderstanding that all too often results from an overly literal, source-text-bound translation.

**17** For an exemplified argument in favor of this approach, see Wendland (2004).

**18** For a more detailed look at these and many other stylistic features in Chichewa, see Wendland (1979).

<p>13 <b>Tsono munthu uja</b> kale <b>sankapenyayu</b> adapita naye kwa Afarisi.</p> <p>14 Tsiku limene Yesu <b>adaakanda</b> thope nam<b>chiritsalo linali</b> la Sabata.</p> <p>15 <b>Tsono</b> Afarisi <b>nawonso</b> adamu<b>funsa</b> munthu <b>uja</b> kuti, “<b>Iwe, wapenya bwanji?</b>”<sup>19</sup> Iye <b>adaŵauza</b> kuti, “Anandipaka thope m'maso mwanga, <b>ine nkukasamba</b>, ndipo <b>tsopano</b> ndiku<b>penya</b>.”</p> <p>16 <b>Afarisi ena</b> adati, “Munthu <b>amene uja ngwo</b>sachokera kwa Mulungu, chifukwa <b>satsata lamulo lokhudza tsiku la</b> Sabata.” Koma ena <b>adati</b>, “<b>Kodi inu</b>, munthu wochimwa <b>nkuchita</b> zizindikiro</p>	<p>13 So that man who formerly could not see,<sup>20</sup> [other people] went with him to the Pharisees.</p> <p>14 The very day that Jesus had mixed mud and healed him was the Sabbath.</p> <p>15 So the Pharisees, they too asked that man saying, “Hey you, how is it that you see [now]?” He told them, “He put mud in my eyes, I went and washed, and so now I [can] see.”</p> <p>16 Other Pharisees said, “That fellow is not from God because he does not observe [i.e., follow] the Sabbath Day.” But others said, “Say you [all], could a sinful man perform [i.e., do] such</p>
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<sup>19</sup> This is a less vivid, indirect question in Greek and most English translations.

<sup>20</sup> A front-shifted focus construction in Chichewa, as are similar examples below.

<p>zozizwitsa zotere?” <b>Choncho</b> panali kutsutsana.</p> <p>17 Tsono <b>Afarisi aja</b> adamu<b>funsanso munthu uja kale sankapenyayu</b>, adati, “<b>Kodi iweyo ukuti chiyani</b> za iyeyo, m'mene <b>wakuchiritsamu?</b>”</p> <p>Iye adati, “<b>Ndi mneneritu basi!</b>”</p> <p>18 <b>Koma</b> akulu a Ayudawo sadakhulupirire kuti <b>munthuyo kale sankapenya ndipo tsopano</b> akupenya, <b>mpaka</b> adaitanitsa makolo <b>ake</b>.</p> <p>19 <b>Tsono</b> adaŵafunsa kuti, “Kodi <b>inu</b>, uyu ndi mwana wanu?”</p>	<p>amazing signs?” And so, there was a dispute among them.</p> <p>17 Now those Pharisees again asked the man who formerly could not see, saying, “Hey you, what do you have to say about that guy,<sup>21</sup> how he has healed you?” He said, “He must be a prophet surely!”</p> <p>18 But those Jewish leaders did not believe that the man, who formerly could not see, now could see, until they summoned his parents.</p> <p>19 So they asked them, “Say you [pl.], is this your child?<sup>22</sup></p>
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<sup>21</sup> The Pharisees are not respectful when speaking either to the former blind man (using a familiar full singular second person pronominal reference, *Kodi iweyo*) or when referring to Jesus (using a simple demonstrative form without any attribution, *iyeyo*). Of course, the rhymed character of these two forms serves to implicitly highlight their disparaging attitudes.

<sup>22</sup> The reference child is idiomatic in this context of direct speech since to specify a son would sound awkward: *mwana wa mwamuna* “child, male one.”

<p><b>Ndiye mukuti adaabadwadi</b> wosapenya? <b>Nanga zatani</b> kuti tsopano akupenya?”</p> <p>20 <b>Makolo</b> ake adati, “<b>Chimene tikudziwa ife nchakuti ameneyu</b> ndi mwana wathu, ndipo <b>adaabadwadi</b> wosapenya.</p> <p>21 <b>Koma kuti tsopano</b> akupenya, sitikudziwa <b>m'mene zachitikira. Zoti wamupenyetsa ndani kaya, ife sitikudziwanso. Mufunsemi mwiniwakeyu, ngwamkulu, afotokoze yekha.”</b></p>	<p>So are you saying that he was born not-seeing? What’s happened then that now he can see?”</p> <p>20 His parents answered, “What we know is that this one is our child, and he was born not-seeing.</p> <p>21 But that he can see now, we don’t know how that happened to him. About who caused him to see, we don’t know this either. Just ask the one concerned [lit. this very owner]. He’s an adult [lit. he’s big], let him explain himself.”</p>
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As the amount of the text in boldface above would suggest, the *Buku Loyera* is a completely new translation, one that radically changes the soundscape and, to some extent, also the sense (in terms of general intelligibility) of the original Greek account in Chichewa. The dynamic, conversational style and interpersonally engaging rhetoric of the biblical narrative are thereby preserved to an appreciable, functionally equivalent degree. In short, the Scriptures have now come alive in the vernacular! And I would argue that this stylistic factor, too, is an important, but often unrecognized, aspect of theologizing in Africa—that is, in cases where domestic translations of similar overall literary and/or oratorical quality are concerned.<sup>23</sup>

## 5. Theologizing within the Translation *Paratext*

As has been suggested above, a serious communication gap, or even a complete breakdown in transmission, may occur due to the *conceptual interference* that takes place when an indigenous, culturally conditioned worldview is superimposed upon the biblical one as the text of Scripture is being read or heard. Such barriers to accurate message re-presentation may arise directly due to some formal lexical correspondence that lacks semantic equivalence. They also occur as the result of a more covert, unrecognized clash regarding the respective forms and/or functions of the biblical (Source Language) or the domestic (Target Language) entity, event, and situation that is under consideration.

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<sup>23</sup> Creative, idiomatic Bible translation practices also have the capacity to influence the local language at large: “Bible translation is transformative for a language, especially during the life of the project itself, when it engages some of the best minds of the community in solving formidably difficult problems in semantic mapping, orthography, metaphor, and language standardization,” linguist K. David Harrison wrote in a foreword to a recent academic volume on the effects of Bible translation on language. “But it also extends in influence far beyond the original project, and shines as an example of best practice in ensuring language survival” (Shellnutt 2019).



The hermeneutical activity of contextualizing a Bible translation, therefore, enters a new dimension when perceptive attention is given to the large quantity of information that lies implicit as part of the resonant conceptual framework of the author's intended meaning. There is obviously a practical limitation to the amount of verbal theologizing that can be produced within the actual text of any translation, regardless of how idiomatic in style and structure, to enable its readers to more fully and correctly comprehend what is being said. However, many different types of supplementary information can be readily conveyed in a parallel manner outside the translation by means of carefully composed explanatory and descriptive notes.<sup>24</sup> These may have various references to pertinent aspects of the setting which conceptually surrounded the biblical text. Some examples include history, customs and culture, peoples and places, geography, plants and animals, and prominent artifacts or works of art. Such selective comments serve to orient readers concerning the extratextual environment of the Bible when it was first composed and transmitted. A great deal of targeted theologizing can take place during this procedure too. For instance, this is what the *Buku Loyera* has to say in a footnote about the ubiquitous expression "unclean spirit." (πνεῦμα ἀκαθάρτου) that Christ had to deal with during his ministry. A back-translation of the note for Luke 4:33 reads:

*mzimu womuipitsa* (spirit defiling him): A defiling spirit is not the ancestral spirit (*mzimu*) of a dead person, no. This spirit is in the group of angels (*angelo*) of Satan, the very Satan who after rebelling against

God was thrown down here below (Rev 12:1–12; 16:13–14). These evil spirits are the ones that make people insane (John 10:20; Luke 8:26–29), cause them to be sick (Luke 13:11, 16), and they also rebel against God (Rev 16:14).

Honest translators have come to realize that, where possible, the provision of such background information is not optional. Rather, it is essential if people are going to be empowered to interact with the Scriptures in a meaningful way—that is, from a position of knowledge, where they are able to more fully investigate these sacred writings like the ancient Bereans did (Acts 17:11). They will thus be able to develop their own formal expressions of Christianity and doctrine (local practical-applied theologies) on the basis of a much firmer biblical foundation. In contrast to past procedures and traditions then, most modern translations include much more annotation in terms of both quantity and quality. It will be necessary, of course, for the translators and reviewers of such notes to take special care as they reflect upon (or theologize about) certain potentially controversial concepts and issues. Hence, they must not use this as a means to promote the views of one church body at the expense of another, for example, regarding the temporal and spiritual significance of the Sabbath Day (e.g., Mark 2:27) or the rock upon which the Church is built (Matt 16:18). In such cases it may be expedient to say nothing at all. This is best, since a comment will normally have to include a statement that is somehow representative of each of the major theological positions with regard to the matter at hand.

It is equally apparent that the text of a translation alone, even one that is augmented by a periodic footnote, illustration, glossary entry, or cross-reference, is not sufficient to prevent such misunderstandings from occurring. Therefore, it is best to point readers in the direction of a more reliable interpretation, one that is generally supported by the community

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<sup>24</sup> The specific methodology for producing this study Bible is outlined and exemplified in Wendland (2000, 2010). See also the unpublished set of general guidelines in Pritz (n.d.) and the entry "Study Bibles" by Sim in Noss and Houser (2019).

of recognized biblical scholars. Where possible an even more extensive co-text in the form of additional notes has to be provided in order to allow a wider frame of reference, or cognitive environment, to be conceptually evoked. Such conceptual framing will make possible a more accurate interpretation of the translation text itself by projecting readers back into the ancient world of biblical times, including its history, customs, places, and peoples.<sup>25</sup> This widespread need has given rise to a growing movement throughout the world to publish more fully annotated study Bibles, of which the CSBP is an example. This in turn provides an occasion for a great deal of domesticated theologizing to be produced. These study Bibles contain various comments designed to give the target constituency a better understanding of the original situational setting and historical backdrop of the Scriptures. As noted earlier, there is a wide variety of such supplementary helps available. However, with reference to the Chichewa, I will focus on paratextual notes since it is in this domain where the greatest degree of creative, contextualized hermeneutics can be applied by national scholars and first-language communicators.<sup>26</sup>

What is it that sparks or stimulates a particular note to be supplied alongside a translation? To a great extent, this process arises out of long, discerning personal experience in communicating the message of the Scriptures in the resident language and in varied ministerial or compositional settings. Examples include preaching, teaching, witnessing, counseling, literature development, music ministry, and Bible translation.

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**25** On the importance of this contextual dimension in current thinking on Bible translation theory and practice, see the various essays in Wilt (2002).

**26** I distinguish ten types of study notes in the Chichewa study Bible: exegetical, situational, thematic, structural, stylistic, functional, contextual, translational, intertextual, and textual (2000, 152-157). These may also be referred to as the biblical co-text.

This is one reason why study notes cannot simply be copied in translation from an English version. The local context and experience help to alert a capable note composer as to where a potential problem point with respect to specific elements of a certain passage may be, even when read in its literary context. In other words, there is a strong likelihood that the desired sense of a given word, phrase, clause, or perhaps the entire verse will be partially misunderstood or will be too difficult to understand at all, at least for the majority of hearers. This lack or loss of communicative quality is usually occasioned by some sort of linguistic, conceptual, or cultural mismatch that arises from within the overall sociolinguistic situation being referred to. Without some form of direction in the form of a footnoted explanation then, there is a good chance that the wrong sense will be suggested, even granting a certain amount of flexibility or leeway in this regard. Alternatively, due to the text's excessive difficulty or obscurity, no meaning at all might be conveyed to a majority of the envisaged audience for whom the study Bible is being composed.

Both the placement and the wording of notes throughout the biblical text are determined according to an implicit application of the communicative principle of relevance. Thus an appropriate balance must be maintained whereby the conceptual cost (i.e., effort) that is expended in mentally processing a given note is adequately compensated for by the cognitive gain (i.e., reward) that will be derived from understanding the content, intent, impact, and/or significance of the specific text being referred to.<sup>27</sup> This general assumption applies also in terms of both quantity and quality to the selection and formulation of the corpus of study notes

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**27** For a complete discussion of this principle of "relevance" with specific reference to Bible translation, see Gutt (1992; esp. chapter two)

considered as a whole. If too many notes are supplied, especially those that are not really very informative, the reader's interest and capacity to deal with the material will be diminished. The same outcome may be expected for notes that are conceptually too dense or stylistically difficult to comprehend.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, the exercise of critically testing and revising the notes for a given book is one that needs to be sustained for the duration of the editorial process and beyond, for example, in preparation for the production of an updated edition of a published study Bible, which should ideally happen within ten years.

Selected paratextual notes and other expository material from John 9–10 in the Chichewa NT Study Bible are given below to illustrate the wide-ranging nature of linguistic, cultural, and theological modification that may be required and the extent of local theologizing that might be incorporated. These examples are given in the form of relatively literal English back-translations. To save space, the actual Chichewa expression used will be reproduced only when it seems relevant to the particular feature being elucidated. These passages are merely suggestive of what might be accomplished in this vital area of encouraging a more dynamic, indigenous hermeneutical initiative through the mediating activity of an intelligent and insightful group of editors, along with their broadly constituted review committees. The quotes also serve to highlight by way of illustration the general character of the various problems that are encountered in this effort,

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**28** Study note composers and editors were encouraged to write in a colloquial (as opposed to scholarly) style, including the abundant use of idiomatic language, figures of speech, proverbs and well-known sayings, references to oral and written literature, and appropriate allusions to familiar aspects of the local geographical, environmental, and sociological setting.

especially with regard to the potential distorting influence of traditional religious beliefs and customary practices upon the average reader or listener.<sup>29</sup>

As in the earlier stylistic text example from John 9:13–21, the following selections also illustrate the attention to natural, even idiomatic, Chichewa linguistic usage that the new study Bible exhibits. In other words, it will not be some dry dogmatic exposition or overly simplified Sunday school lesson that people will be reading and hearing, but rather a captivating colloquial-speech style that corresponds well with that of the popular-language translated text itself. Thus, while the notes aim primarily to explain and inform members of the target audience, these comments perform the added goal of educating them with a greater level of communicative impact and appeal. Theologizing does not necessarily have to be tedious. As shown below, it can be expressed dynamically as well as beautifully in the language concerned. This localized stylistic feature will hopefully serve to give people some extra motivation to make an effort to actually *re-read* the notes that accompany a given Bible passage as well as any added supplementary information of a more specific nature. Unfortunately, space restrictions allow for only a few examples.

There are several overlapping semantic categories that could be identified and exemplified with regard to the marginal notes that are manifested in the Chewa text spanning John 9–10. However, the eight types specified below seem to capture the diversity found in this relatively small corpus. These explanations, inferior though they may sound in

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**29** Any supposed distortion of this nature must be evaluated on the basis of the source language text and the wider context of Scripture. A didactic or pastoral, contextualized life application, or transculturation, of the biblical message may also be carried out, but usually the space for such information is limited in a study Bible.



English back-translation (as opposed to in Chichewa), serve to illustrate some of the insightful theologizing efforts that the study Bible composers displayed in their work—Bishop Kalilombe in particular. Selected vernacular terms and phrases are given within parentheses (for those who may be familiar with a Bantu language), while my clarifying remarks are inserted in brackets.

### 5.1 Dogmatic topics<sup>30</sup>

9:35 **Do you believe** (*Kodi ukhulupirira*) **the Son of Man?**: By naming himself the Son of Man (*Mwana wa Munthu*), Jesus means that He is the one (*Iye ndi amene*) to whom the Father (*Atate*) gave leadership, glory, and kingship (*ulamuliro, ulemerero ndi ufumu*) that he might judge all people (Dan 7:13–14). In the rite (*mwambo*) of Baptism (*Ubatizo*), a person who wishes to be baptized is asked these same questions so that he might publicly confirm (*atsimikize poyera*) his [her] faith. (BLCC 2017, 306)

### 5.2 Ethical issues

9:4 **We must work during the day ... at night ... a person is unable to work**: The meaning is that he [Jesus] must do the work for which the Father sent him during this time while he is alive (*adakali moyo*). His death is coming when he can no longer do his work down here. But he says we must work (*tizigwira nchito*), showing that he is not referring to himself alone, but he is including his disciples (*ophunzira ake*). They too [implicitly including current reader-hearers] must not waste time (*Naonso sayenera kutaya nthawi*): they must do the work of

God energetically while there is still time (*mwachangu nthawi idakalipo*). (BLCC 2017, 302)

### 5.3 Exegetical explanations of biblical texts

9:16 **That man is not from God**: Now it so happened that (*Tsono ndiye kuti*) there was a controversy (*kutsutsana*) among the Pharisees. Some were saying that this man [Jesus] did not follow the Laws of God, so he's a sinner (*tsono ndi wochimwa*). But others objected saying, "If he was a sinner, how could he perform such an amazing sign (*chizindikiro chozizwitsa chotere*)?" This controversy arose from the words found in Deuteronomy 13:4–5. At that time Moses gave the people of Israel a test for determining whether (*muyeso wozindikirira*) a prophet (*mneneri*) was true or not. He said that "any prophet who tells you to rebel against Yahweh (*Chauta*), you must not obey him; that fellow is evil." ... It appeared that those two groups failed to resolve the matter. So, they thought that they should ask the person who had been healed, but their aim was to trap him in what he would say (*cholinga chomupala m'kamwa*). (BLCC 2017, 304)

### 5.4 Inter- and intra-textual references

10:16 **other sheep that are not of this corral**: Jesus is speaking about other people who are not Jews. At present, he is talking to Jews (*Ayuda*). But that is not to say that he came only for the Jews, not at all (*ayi*). In John 4 we have seen that he stopped in the land of the Samaritans (*kwa Asamariya*) so that they too might hear his words and believe. In John 12:20, we will also hear about some Greeks (*Agriki*) who asked to see Jesus; and Jesus in response showed joy because it was a sign (*chizindikiro*) that his full glory (*ulemerero*) had arrived.

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<sup>30</sup> Notes of this type are of course limited in scope due to the potentially conflicting doctrinal positions that may be affected if too much specific detail is given.

Now he wants us to recognize that his sheep are many, not only those who come from Judaism. For this reason, Paul (Gal 3:28) says “there is no difference between the Jews and people of other tribes” (*anthu a mitundu ina*) ... because we are all one (*amodzi*) in Christ Jesus (*mwa Khristu Yesu*). (BLCC 2017, 308)

### 5.5 Extra-textual settings of the Bible

10:1 **Into a sheep pen:** A sheep pen (*khola la nkhosa*) was built with rocks in which a family would keep their sheep, and it had an entranceway (*khomo*) in which those sheep could enter and exit. At the entrance they put a guard (*mlonda*) who would protect those sheep (10:3). A person who wanted to steal the sheep could not get in at that entrance, but [perhaps] at some other place. Jesus would have been thinking of the words in Ezekiel 34 which speaks about sheep and a good shepherd (*mbusa wabwino*). (BLCC 2017, 307)

### 5.6 Editorial/didactic reflections

9:40 **Could it be that we too are blind?** (*Kodi monga ifenso ndife akhungu*): It appears that these Pharisees were in the company when Jesus met up with that healed man (*wochiritsidwa uja*), and so they heard those words of his. Now they wanted to hear Jesus say, “Not at all, I don’t mean you (*Iyai, sindikunena inu*).” But they did not realize that Jesus was saying that they too are blind! (BLCC 2017, 306)

### 5.7 Sectional introductions

**The Jews reject Jesus** [heading at 10:22]: In this final section Jesus is at another festival: The Festival for remembering the rededication of the House of God (*Chikondwerero chokumbukira kuperekedwanso kwa*

*Nyumba ya Mulungu*). What happened then is that the Jews pressured him to confirm that he really is the promised Savior (*Mpulumutsi uja wolonjezedwa*). Jesus agreed, but he explained its real meaning, that he is the Son of God. To the Jews, this was the sin of despising God (*chimo lonyoza Mulungu*); so, some of them wanted to stone him as a sign that they rejected his words. However, some believed [him]. This was the conclusion of his work of publicly preaching his message. He left them and went into hiding, awaiting the time to arrive that he would die on the cross (*nthawi yake idzafike yokafa pamtanda*). (BLCC 2017, 309)

### 5.8 Topical studies

This section will analyze the **Good Shepherd** (*Mbusa Wabwino*), as per chapter ten. Here there are two important things. The first is that Jesus is the *Good Shepherd*; the second of great importance in his shepherding [or pastoring] work is that he gives up his life (*amataya moyo wake*) because of his sheep. By calling himself the Good Shepherd, Jesus is pointing at the Old Testament (*Chipangano Chakale*). For his people, Yahweh himself was a Shepherd, the true owner (*mwini weniweni*) of his sheep (see Psalm 80:1), each and every one (*iliyonse imodzimodzi*) (Psalms 23), but also the whole flock (*msambi wonse*), that is, all the people of Israel.... Now in speaking about his shepherding, Jesus adds something very important. He says, his shepherding is that he gives up (or offers) his life on account of his sheep, as he predicts in Mark 10:45.... Only in Isaiah 53:10–12 do we hear that a suffering Servant of Yahweh (*Mtumiki wozunzika wa Chauta*) offers his life so that it might be a sacrifice for forgiving the sins of [all] people (*nsembe yokhulukira machismo a anthu*). (BLCC 2017, 307)

The examples of the preceding section indicate some of the principal domains wherein the most overt and extensive amount of audience-centered theological reflection and adaptation normally occurs. Whether in these explanatory notes, the lexical glossary, or through selected illustrations, a translation team is provided with a wonderful opportunity to make the message of Scripture live locally in the minds of their anticipated listening audience or readership. A supplemental contextualization of the original ancient Near Eastern environment thus encourages a more exegetically based, appealing, suitable, and memorable life application of the biblical text to the contemporary timeline setting. Such careful scriptural commentary also enriches the ministry of those who produce notes that educate and inspire the Bible text consumers in their country, region, and/or parish.

In addition, this paratextual dimension of a translation provides a means where another, less obvious type of theologizing can be carried out, namely, via the particular medium and mode whereby the content of Scripture is being conveyed. Examples that come to mind here include the creative use of typography and format, more legible text-design arrangements on the printed page, and contextually influenced adaptations to an audio and/or visual dimension. Such applications include background music, sound effects, vocal characterization, and culturally specific evocative imagery and illustrations. Along with the requisite compositional creativity, however, an extra measure of administrative caution and control may also be needed in these areas simply because of the additional communicative power of these modern media, especially where both sight and sound are involved as an integral part of the message.

## 6. Conclusion

The primary aim of this article has been to encourage a greater measure of meaning-oriented, vernacular theologizing on all levels of Christian

engagement in the thousands of language communities of Africa through various Scripture translation activities. In particular, it is hoped that many more scholarly, yet also popular, study Bible projects may be actively undertaken, supported, and completed in the near future, before this relatively new century grows old. May this little Chewa case study serve as an example for similar educative endeavors throughout this dynamic, ethnically diverse continent. We close with the Chichewa study note (in back-translation), which in this case simply paraphrases John 20:31, yet also significantly serves to remind us of the central aim of all our Bible translation and communication efforts: “The purpose [of this Gospel] is that readers believe that Jesus is the promised Savior, but he is also the Son of God. This is the very faith that gives us eternal life!”

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