


Understanding Christian translation and its missiological relevance

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Christian translation is integral to Christian missions that benefit the ingenious people and the gospel. Among early missionary activities, translations of the Bible to vernacular language have tremendous implications for the gospel propagation. Its roots are well spelt out in the early church, which endorsed Christianity as a universal faith. The researchers observe the historical and missiological perspective of Bible translation. They used library materials and internet sources to explain the meaning of translation, such as explaining a text language in the context of the recipients. This article contains a biblical basis for Bible translations, as it was from the early scriptures, and it concludes by explaining the relevance of Christian translation in terms of literacy, preservation of culture and freedom from slavery, among others. Christian translation has helped to create different versions of the Bible; the New Testament alone is available in 1551 languages out of over 7100 languages worldwide. Christian translation shows that Christian missionaries are not another form of a colonising agency because their activities resulted in actions that led to the end of colonisation in many parts of Africa. The author used a descriptive research method for this article.

Contribution: From the analysis, Christian translation is a vital part of Christian missions that has many benefits for the ingenious people by preserving their cultural practices and language, among others. It also made Christianity not to be perceived as a foreign religion that has no link with the African Belief system. Christians are to seek to translate more materials, especially the Bible, into other peoples' languages to have a lasting impact on the indigenous people.

Keywords: Christian missions; translation; relevance; cultural transformation; missiological perspective.

Introduction

Translation is simply converting text or words from one language into another. Christian translation is not new in Christianity. It has been part of the activities of the early apostles. Christian translation, also used as Bible translation in this article, is a significant focus of missionaries' enterprise's educational enrichments. The missionaries engaging in mission activities in Africa have brought about tremendous changes to the continent, which many people consider to be a positive change and others view as unfavourable. Christianity brought about various transformations in education, humanitarian services and access to good health, among other positive happenings. This article focuses on the assenting aspects of missionaries' activities, which is the Christian translation.

Christian translations preserved a core aspect of human living known as culture. Culture is all-encompassing; it is the way of life, shared, learned behaviour, and can be changed (Nanda & Warms 2018:30). For example, it includes people's food and feeding patterns, clothing and housing structures, plus verbal and non-verbal methods of communication. Language is an integral part of every culture. Currently, there are over 7100 spoken languages in the world (Leben 2016). Likewise, the Bible, the main text of the Christian faith, has been translated into only 717 languages, apart from the New Testament, which has been translated into 1582 languages (Britannica 2022:3). It shows that the Christian faith still has much to do with Bible translation.

The primary texts for this article are works performed by Lamin Sanneh, a Muslim convert who prophetically and historically views the impact of Christian translation. Lamin explained the cultural aspect of translation and the importance of language. Language helps people express their feelings and thoughts unique to a specific group (Sanneh 1984:2). Therefore, it is a way to express unique customs and ideas within different societies and cultures. This article explains Christian translation's biblical basis, history and relevance to Christian missions.

Biblical basis for Christian translation

To be specific about the biblical basis for Bible translations, two parameters are used: the character and nature of God and the biblical examples.

Character and nature of God

Firstly, God is a relational being (Kouya 2022). God's supremacy is clearly seen in the book of John, Chapter 17, when the incarnate Son, Jesus, prays to the Father, but the theme reverberates through the Bible. The fact that God created the universe (including humankind) finds its first cause in God's relational personality.

Secondly, God extends his loving hands to humanity. Instantaneously after the fall in Genesis 3, God came down into the Garden to check for Adam and Eve. He did not wait for them to look him up; he was proactive and went to find them. It is similarly noticed in Genesis 12 when God chooses Abraham, and through the Old Testament, God sends prophets and leaders to guide Israel; God is continually proactive. This proactiveness finds its ultimate expression when Jesus takes on human flesh and lives, dies and rises again to bring reconciliation.

God plans to reconcile the whole of creation to himself through the death of Christ (Col 1:20). Since the early chapters of Genesis, God has been at work bringing his plan for reconciliation to fruition; it is God's Mission, not merely that of humans. One of the outstanding things about God's Mission is how he has set out to do it (Col 1:20). For instance, God chose Abraham and his descendants to fulfil his purpose. The fact is that they were not very good at it, but he chose them. Likewise, God commissioned the church to go out into the world and make disciples after the resurrection of Jesus, knowing that they were not perfect people. The relational God desires to involve people despite all their faults because that is his nature (Thomas 2012:32).

God using the imperfect medium for his mission

A translation is complex and it is an imperfect art. There is no perfect translation; at the very best, there will be little shades or nuances of meaning that are either missing or have been an addition to the original. Surprisingly, God would use such a deficient medium to propagate his message. He could force the church to learn Hebrew, Greek (and a little Aramaic) to solve the translation problem. However, the relational God reaches out to humanity (Janvier 2001:43). The one who came down to Adam and Eve in the Garden, called Abram in Haran and later was given birth to as a baby in Bethlehem, reaches out to people where they are. He does not expect them to take the initiative. However, God does this through his people, with all their faults and weaknesses. A translation is not perfect, but this is the way that God works; he breaks down barriers through his church. The Scriptures also gave examples of Bible translations that Christians can easily emulate.

Bible

The Old Testament was composed initially in Hebrew and some Aramaic. The New Testament portion of the Bible was written originally in Greek (Kouya 2022:3). For the reason that will be obvious later, the New Testament provides numerous biblical reasons for the Bible to be translated.

Paul's letters

In the New Testament, it makes sense that Paul's letters were written in Greek (Vaughn 2013:5). Paul travelled around the eastern Mediterranean, visiting many places and writing to groups of Christians from all over the empire. At that period, Greek was the *lingua franca* of the empire. Most people will understand Greek, and anyone literate will understand and be able to read Greek (Zone 2022:1). Paul uses Greek because it is the natural language for communication in the place.

Gospel writers

Jesus and his disciples spoke Aramaic, yet the four Gospels were written in Greek. It means that when Matthew, Mark, Luke and John organised to write their biographies, they were obliged to translate everything Jesus said from Aramaic into Greek. Christians do not have Jesus' original words; they have a translation (Merz 2010:10). As Sanneh beautifully said, 'Christianity seems unique in being the only world religion transmitted without the language or originating culture of its founder' (Sanneh 2003:138). The existence of the gospels demonstrated that there is no fundamental objection to words of Scripture being translated. Translation of the Scripture is imperative but not forbidden in Christianity.

Old Testament passages in the New Testament

The Old Testament was interpreted into Greek in Alexandria in the 3rd century BC, a translation called the Septuagint. Remarkably, when the New Testament quotes the Old Testament, it often talks about the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew original (Holladay 1996:43). It simply means that the New Testament writers often quote a translation of the Old Testament, for example, Matthew 1:22–23 quoted Isaiah 7:14, also Matthew 2:6 quoted Micah 5:2 and 4.

History of Bible translation

Translation of the Bible is highly essential to God's mission. A few of the first translations of the Torah started during the Babylonian exile when the language Aramaic language became the public language (*lingua franca*) of the Jews. Many people in the region speak only Aramaic and do not understand Hebrew. Therefore, Targums (paraphrases, explanations) were fashioned by Rabbis to allow each person to comprehend the Torah as it was recited in ancient synagogues (Pub 2022). However, today, only Jews from the Republic of Yemen continue to use the targumim ceremonially.

Nevertheless, the Scripture translation predates Christianity by a long shot. The Bible was first translated into Syriac, as

spoken in Damascus, circa 170 AD, during the Christian era. Over the years, Bible translations from Syria extended to Armenia, Samarkand, Georgia and other places. During this stage, the Old Testament's primary source text was almost invariably the Septuagint. Paul used this version of the Old Testament when he quoted Hebrew and Greek, finished around 130 BC for Israelites who spoke Greek (Elwolde 2009:17).

In addition, the pope hired Jerome, his administrative assistant, in 382 AD to create a fresh Latin version. The translation generated as a result, written in the people's Latin, is called the Vulgate. Terms from the Latin Vulgate, such as Scripture, justification, redemption and regeneration, found their way into the English language (Morgan 2022:3). The Middle Ages were the next translation period.

Translation in the Middle Ages, when Islamic activities were on the increase, instigated the church into a lockdown mode that caused her to look inwards.

Moreover, this was the time of the Slavic missionaries and Bible translators Cyril and Methodius. With astonishing results, scripture portions were also being translated into Arabic in Seville, Baghdad and Damascus. Peter Woldo translated the Gospel of John into French, and Bede translated it into Old English (Pub 2022). The next is John Wycliffe's activities.

A prominent opponent of privilege and power in the church, John Wycliffe first gained notoriety in 14th-century England. In his later years, he translated the Scriptures for laypeople from the Vulgate into Middle English. Following his death, Wycliffe was excommunicated, and his body was dug up and burned. However, his legacy did not die there; Jan Hus and others in Prague produced scriptures in Bohemian and Hungarian (Barnstone 2022:2). Hus was labelled a heretic for translating the Bible and was immediately burned at the stake.

The direction of Bible translation was changed twice in the 15th century. Although it is often known that Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1443 (Guthrie 2010:1), the fall of Constantinople in that same year is often forgotten. The Western Church has lost access to and knowledge of the Hebrew and Greek scriptures. With their Hebrew and Greek scriptures in hand, intellectuals and scholars fled westward when Constantinople fell, having managed to preserve this ancient knowledge within the Eastern church. They eventually arrived in Rotterdam, London, and Paris (Cartwright 2018:3). Revolutionary works followed the activities.

Groundbreaking work

William Tyndale's translation of the scriptures into the language during the 1530s is noteworthy for English speakers. Over the next 200 years, Bible translation slowed down; however, in the early 19th century, it resumed because of the expansion of missions along the coasts of Africa and India. At the age of 31, Henry Martyn passed away in disarray in Armenia, but not before completing the translation of the New Testament into three different

languages. William Carey conducted shore work in 40 languages as part of his mission at Serampore, India. The first African mother-tongue translator was Samuel Ajayi Crowther, an Anglican bishop who spoke Yoruba and did so in 1880.

Organisations and women began to be involved in Bible translation thoroughly. Technology made a massive impact on bible translation efforts (Guthrie 2010:7).

The translation of the Bible faces opposition. Governments and various religious institutions are still fighting over how adequate a small number of global languages should be at the expense of others, and the translation agenda appears to be driven more by the needs of those with financial power than by those with local knowledge.

For the best part, modern missionaries have travelled from wealthier, more technologically advanced and militarily controlling nations to poorer and lesser advanced countries (Kouya 2022:7). However, a lesson from history demonstrates that the Bible translation movement's importance makes it challenging to put an end to it. If, as the late historian Lamin Sanneh, a Gambian, suggested, Christ is the ultimate translation, God became 'man' (Ngong 2019:3).

Principles of Bible translation

According to an article by the Forum of International Bible Agencies, Bible translation has seven basic principles (Forum of Bible Agencies International 2006:3). Every effective translation must follow the following principles as much as possible. They are as follows:

- to accurately translate the scriptures while preserving the original text's meaning
- to communicate the original text's informational meanings, attitudes and feelings
- to preserve the diversity of the original
- to represent authentically the original cultural and historical context
- all necessary steps must be taken to guarantee that the translation is not distorted by any means
- to identify that, it is often essential to restructure the form of a text to achieve maximal comprehension and accuracy
- we should use the original scripture texts as the foundation for translation, knowing that these are the primary authority.

Relevance of Christian translation to Christian missions

Translation of the Bible into other people's cultures goes with educating the people at least to read and write. Education is a powerful tool for the transformation of any society. Education allows people to seek freedom and liberation from every unwanted situation and leadership. Bible translation tremendously impacts the recipients, the missionaries and the cultural values.

Translation as proof that missionaries were not colonial agencies

God's mission brings freedom from all spiritual, mental and physical bondages. A misunderstanding occurs if missionaries are involved in missionary activities in Africa because God or the colonial masters send them (Gitau 2019:1). Mission effort was accused of being the willing tool of colonial rulers and settlers during the early post-colonial counterattack. It was believed that the missionaries had been sent there to pose as faux pious, assisting the Indians in becoming more docile and reducing their resistance to colonial rule. The impressive study translating the message: *The Missionary Impact on Culture* by Lamin Sanneh (1989:27) distinguishes the Christian mission from the claim that missionaries were imposing agents of ideology. The colonial empire included mission work.

By the late 1960s and early 1980s, as Sanneh advanced in her academic career, Western liberal college circles had joined the damaging critique of missionary work. The shadow of this judgement exacted a heavy price of shame on mission agencies among mainstream church circles (Gitau 2019:2); this means that the hospitals, educational institutions and development initiatives that missionaries founded are invalid and such stands are troubled by religious enthusiasm and conversion. However, in addressing the issue, Sanneh does not negate that some missionaries' approaches towards local cultures were problematic. He demonstrates that there is a lot more to the story and has to do with the excellent news feature itself.

After evaluating the historical transmission trend spanning 2000 years and the local circumstances in which Christian missions were carried out, Sanneh concludes that communicating with the people in their mother tongue is the principal or crucial act in spreading the gospel. Any language may convey the Christian message, and any culture can understand it. Therefore, as has been the case for more than 200 years in Asia, Africa and Latin America, translatability is the key to the gradual spread of Christianity to other civilisations (Sanneh 1984:8).

Sanneh mentioned two ways a mission can be carried out: mission diffusion or mission translation. Muslims have practised a mission by diffusion, while a mission by translation is the missionary strategies of Christian missionaries (Sanneh 1989:23). The Islamic beliefs and practices have nothing to do with the translation of the message as all the laws and devotions from the Quran context are to be absorbed and obeyed irrespective of the recipients' culture. For instance, the Islamic sect known as Boko Haram is against the enlightenment of the people so that they can be in bondage to the Islamic laws and practices (Griffith 2002:3). On the contrary, the Christian missionaries translated the gospel into the target groups' languages; this made the gospels part of the recipients' culture as the Christian movement was conditioned by the atmosphere of the Diaspora. However, there are some cases where the nationals' enlightenment has led to clashes between the

missionaries and the nationals, which leads to the rise of indigenous churches in Nigeria (Chukwudi 2007:365).

The missionaries' enlightenment brought about the freedom of the nationals from the colonial masters' rules and any domineering practices of some missionaries. Therefore, the missionaries are not the colonial masters' agencies.

Converts began to interpret the translated scriptures differently, especially the Old Testament world with the local cultural customs; communities all over Africa used the gains of mission to offset or fight back against colonial domination; in this, mission work itself had the impact of equipping the nationalists themselves with a language of resistance (Sanneh 1984:4).

By positioning the people into the sphere of enlightenment that can bring about changes in all aspects of life, socially, economically and politically, the Christian Mission has acted as a catalyst for change. Christianity communicates its message effectively by using and considering the culture and worldview of the recipient (Alawode & Oluwasayo 2021:27).

Educational impact

Translation of the scriptures led to the missionaries' establishment of schools. 'Christianity is literary religion' (Ojo 1997:537). From 1884 to 1914, when colonial powers took control of Africa during the so-called 'scramble for Africa', missionaries were the primary educationists (Becker 2022:1). The Wesleyans started their first secondary school, the Wesleyan High School, now known as Mfantsipim School, in 1876 after establishing four schools for girls and 20 for boys on the Gold Coast in 1846 (Ade-Ajayi 1969:152).

The Church Missionary Society also established a Grammar School in Lagos in 1859, while the Wesleyans declared the Methodist Boys' High School in 1879. By 1890, there were 400 students enrolled in a school in Livingstone, Central and East Africa, along with a printing press, a workshop and translations of Scriptures, primers, simple lessons and stories about natural history and geography in Nyanja, Nguni, Tonga, Nkonde and Nyakyusa (Avison 1965:62). Furthermore, by 1835, the LMS reported it had 4000 children in its schools in the nation called Madagascar, and by the year 1894, 137000 of the populaces of the Merina plateaus of Madagascar were probably registered in Protestant schools. This proportion was similar to that of Western Europe at the same time (Curtin 1978:414).

In Southern Africa, even greater attention was paid to education than in other regions of Africa, and appreciation was partly because of the grants-in-aid prearranged by the Natal and Cape governments during the period. The educational activities of the missionaries had been far more successful than their evangelical activities by 1870 (Leonard 1969:335). Not only had many elementary or village schools been established, but from as early as the 1840s, teacher-training and secondary institutions were founded. The Glasgow Missionary Society, for instance, established a

seminary at Lovedale in Natal in July 1841, to which an industrial department was added; this taught the researcher about masonry, wagon-making, carpentry and smithing; from 1861 on, he learned about printing and bookbinding (Groves 1954:135). Lastly, on the issue of education, the Roman Catholics had also recognised a monastery of the Sisters of the Holy Family with a school (boarding), primary school and home of refuge in Natal and an additional one in the Orange Free State by 1877. In 1868, the French missionaries established a teacher training institute at Amanzimtote and a seminary for girls at Inanda in Natal in the mid-1860s, and in 1880, the Anglicans established the St Albans College among the Zulu.

The ability of the nationalists to read and study not just the scriptures but also other materials has led to tremendous freedom, civilisation and development; over the years, African countries have been taking the gospels to other cultures as they have the grip of the gospel with adequate understanding. For instance, since the late 1970s, Nigeria has promoted a significant African initiative in cross-cultural missions. It was estimated that there were over 2000 Nigerian cross-cultural missionaries in other regions of Africa by the beginning of the 20th century.

The impacts of Bible translation on the missionaries' lifestyle

Even if one ignores the effect of colonialism and the power discrepancy between the West and the rest, missionaries communicate the Christian message with a small quantity of spin. For instance, Baptist missionaries plant Baptist churches and Methodist missionaries. Missionaries bring their background to their working condition; it is inevitable (Erwin 2010:15–16). To some extent, Bible translation provides a solution by the following:

The Bible emanates without denominational spin: There is no Baptist or Methodist Bible. Translators work firmly to ensure the text is interpreted faithfully without favouritism towards any specific confession. For most practices, translation teams are interdenominational, and no one assembly is allowed to dominate, even if they desire to. Although an investigation has shown that while the translated scriptures do not favour one denomination over another, the technique in which people read and study it is, to some degree, a product of their confessional context (Kouya 2022:2).

The Scriptures Judges Missionaries: There is nothing more chastening (or healthy) for a Bible translation team forerunner to see their mistakes being laid plain and discussed by proxy as the group grips with a Bible passage that addresses a specific sin. For instance, any illusions a missionary translator holds about their superiority get shattered at the translation desk.

The Bible addresses issues that missionaries do not: People in different circumstances see things in the Bible that others miss. Missionaries come with a whole weight of cultural baggage, and they may never be able to understand the Bible in the manner that people from a very different culture will.

By making the Bible accessible, translators allow people to dive into it independently and dig out things that the missionaries may never see in a million years.

The impacts of Bible translation on cultural values

Sanneh notes that missionaries left for various reasons in an 1897 essay titled 'Christian Mission and Pluralist Milieu: The African Experience (4–6)'. Among the less respectable but noteworthy ones is the importance missionaries placed on translating the Bible into regional tongues. Most missionaries boldly and novelly accepted local languages, supporting local cultures as vehicles for sharing the gospel of Christ in the process. They established schools, created the grammar, translated the Bible, taught nationalists to read and write aloud and preserved axioms, anecdotes and proverbs that were part of the region's wisdom. For example, they accepted the names that God was known by before and reinterpreted conventional cosmology in the context of Christianity.

Instead of wiping off native cultures, missionary work aided their preservation and advancement. Languages endangered by the rise of lingua francas were preserved with the aid of missionaries (Big Think 2022:3). The scientific community also benefited from their dictionaries, grammars, primers, readers and methodical collections of proverbs, tales and customs, which provided documentation for the contemporary study of cultures.

Conclusion

This article examined the impact of Christian translation from both historical and analytical points of view. The early church demonstrated that translating the scriptures is a noble art, as the Christian faith is global and must be propagated culturally. The Bible granted the basis for translating it into other languages because it makes the gospel acceptable and demonstrates God's wisdom and nature in his creations. Translation of the scriptures is relevant to both the recipients and their culture. It is genuine proof that Christian missionary activities are not another form or type of colonisation. Given the benefits mentioned earlier, it is necessary to translate scriptures into the remaining thousands of languages, even though it is demanding. This article primarily draws from the wisdom of Lamin Sanneh, a professor of world Christianity who has performed great work on Christian translation.

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A.O.A. declares that they are the sole author of this article.

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