

On Indigenous Agency

# Bible Translation in Historical Context

## The Changing Role of Cross-Cultural Workers

by Gilles Gravelle

### 1. Introduction

The cross-cultural transmission of God's Word into new languages and cultures began, as Andrew Walls points out, in the third century B.C. when the Jewish Bible was translated into the Greek language, and, we might add, into Greek conceptual schemes. Then it was communicated cross-culturally, so to speak, when Jesus the Logos came in human form to live among people and tell them in the Aramaic language things He received from the Father. Following that, the gospel made a cross-cultural quantum leap into the known world on the day of Pentecost when a group of Jesus' Jewish disciples began telling of the wonders of God's works in possibly a couple hundred languages. The Holy Spirit was establishing His universal church by means of cross-cultural transfer. This latter event illustrated a future practice when linguistic outsiders would communicate Scripture by means of the local language rather than their own language. This has been the pattern for over 2,000 years, but mostly so only during the last 200 years. The gospel is introduced by missionaries (linguistic and cultural outsiders) to live in new linguistic and cultural contexts. But the process of transmission is not complete at that stage.

Cross-cultural transmission usually takes place in partially assimilated ways.<sup>1</sup> If we believe the ultimate goal of mission is to make Christ live in new languages and cultures then it cannot end with cross-cultural transmission. Bible translation is only an activity that helps achieve that aim. The final stage of transmission would be the indigenizing stage when the people fully grasp the nature of Christ as prophet, priest and king, the one who holds the universe in balance, placates God's wrath, provides ultimate peace and delivers people from evil. That, it seems, is the point where the gospel has completed its migration into a nation of people.

First, we will briefly review what has been accomplished during the last 2,000 years to gain a fresh understanding of the cross-cultural workers' role in Bible translation. Next, we will examine how the practice and process of Bible

---

*Gilles Gravelle, Ph.D., is the Director of Research and Project Development with The Seed Company, a U.S. affiliate organization of Wycliffe Bible Translators. He researches, writes, and speaks on mission strategies in regard to Bible translation work, with special emphasis on emerging models of Bible translation practice and global partnerships.*

translation may look quite different during the indigenizing stage of translation. Then in light of that, we will discuss what may need to change in order for the cross-cultural workers in Bible translation to more effectively make Christ known among unreached peoples, train leaders and nurture sustainable movements among Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and tribal cultures.

## 2. The Stages of Bible Translation as a Process of Incarnation

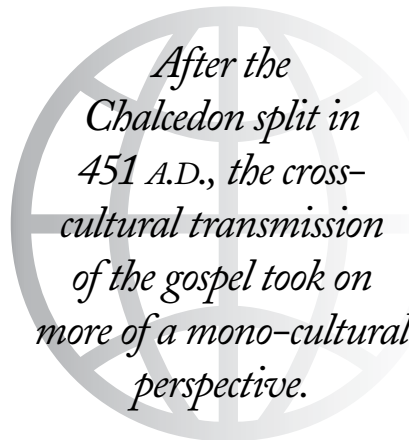
Scripture reveals that from the beginning of time it has been God's plan to create diverse peoples, nations, tribes and languages. Humanity's migration from the Garden of Eden to the uttermost parts of the earth has resulted in more people speaking more languages within more unique cultural and national settings. God is working to bring this diversification of people, languages and nations to a culmination in heaven. On that day a great multitude that no one can count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, will be standing before the throne of the Lamb worshipping God for their salvation.

The transmission of God's Word through Bible translation could be seen as a process of incarnation in that each stage or period of translation work resulted in a better understanding of the Word.

To understand the ongoing role of cross-cultural workers in Bible translation, it is helpful to review where we are in God's redemptive history. Although the history is linear in that it has a beginning and an end, the circular chart below reveals how the diversification process has proceeded for two millennia. It shows how the Church was launched through multi-cultural and multi-lingual means. Following that, it went monolingual and mono-cultural for a long time. Next, it broadly expanded by means of a cross-cultural stage. Now, during this current indigenous stage, this spreading of the gospel has come full circle to

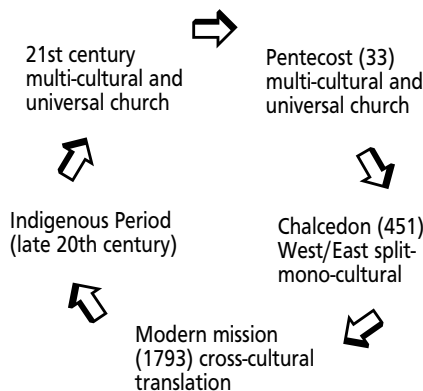
the sort of church that was first modeled in Antioch. This possibly reveals a nearness to that great culminating event as described in Revelation 7:9.<sup>2</sup>

The illustration below shows how, after the Chalcedon split in 451 A.D., the cross-cultural transmission of the gospel took on more of a mono-cultural perspective. That is, the messengers no longer typically communicated the message using the local language and culture of the people they meant to reach. Instead, they communicated the gospel through their own language and cultural worldview.



Then in 1793 William Carey, a British missionary living in India, established the practice of cross-cultural transmission by translating the scriptures into the local languages. This was followed by the establishment of the Bible Societies, beginning with the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1804. Their mission was to provide the Bible for people living in pagan nations, at

Figure 1: The cross-cultural transmission of the gospel in history.



first in the colonial languages and then eventually in the local languages. Then by the mid-twentieth century, growth in cross-cultural Bible translation work began to accelerate with the emergence of parachurch volunteer organizations. Their mission was to provide the New Testament and some Old Testament portions in the local languages, particularly in places where the people groups had no access to Scripture.

Because of this largely Western cross-cultural mission effort in Bible translation, approximately:

- 451 languages have complete Bibles
- 1,185 languages have complete New Testaments
- 843 languages have some Bible portions

Therefore, of the world's 6,900+ languages, 2,479 have some or all of the Bible. And because many of these translations were done in large language groups, about 94 percent of the world's population have some Scripture in their language, with a full Bible in the largest languages. Remaining language translation needs stand at about 2,200 languages.<sup>3</sup> It is clear to see that the cross-cultural transmission of God's Word over the past 200 years has resulted in the injection of biblical information into many of the world's languages and cultures.

African theologian Lamin Sanneh expresses great appreciation for the dedication and sacrificial efforts of Western cross-cultural translators in accomplishing so much. However, he does not view the transmission of the gospel during the last 200 years as complete. Instead, he suggests that it laid a solid foundation for the structural shift from Western translation work to indigenous translation work.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Hwa Jung believes the process of transmission is not complete until the translation takes into account the deeper and more meaningful history and culture of the people.

There are signs that a shift from Western cross-cultural translation

work to indigenous translation work is occurring. Andrew Walls explains how Christian history shows advance and recession. “The recession typically takes place in the Christian heartlands, in the areas of the greatest Christian strengths and influences, while the advances typically take place at or beyond the periphery.”<sup>5</sup> So eventually the periphery becomes the Christian heartland and the heartland of old becomes the new periphery in serial fashion.

There is evidence that this is indeed the case. Many now view Africa, with approximately 45 percent of its population being Christian, as the new Christian heartland, or the center of Christianity, as some put it. Moreover, Africans, along with Asians and Latin Americans, are becoming the new cross-cultural missionaries bringing apostolic faith back to the West. They are doing that either through formal means as professionals, teachers and pastors or informally through immigration as service workers.<sup>6</sup>

By the mid 1980’s, over 1,000 language translation projects were launched worldwide cooperatively but still largely through the efforts of Western cross-cultural workers. Now the number of people training in the West to do Bible translation is on the decline. For example, new annual membership in Wycliffe Bible Translators USA has declined by about 45 percent since it peaked in 1988. Total membership of that organization has declined by about 27 percent since 1995 when membership was at its highest.<sup>7</sup>

Currently, there are over 1,900 translation projects where cross-cultural translators have a significant role in the translation work. Yet as this current generation of Western translators age, more and more of their incomplete translation projects are being turned over to the mother-tongue speakers. At the same time, new Bible translation projects being launched worldwide are led predominantly by the indigenous church and their own mother-tongue

**N**ow the translation periphery is becoming the translation heartland as the indigenizing process increases.

translators. However, they are not doing it alone. A mark of twenty-first century mission is greater global partnership efforts. This will be discussed further in another section.

All of this seems to indicate that the 200-year period of largely Western and cross-cultural Bible translation work begun by William Carey and others is quickly coming to an end. Now the translation periphery is becoming the translation heartland as the indigenizing process increases. If the new translators are now the mother-tongue speakers, how does this affect the process and practice of translation? And if this is indeed the pattern, then what is the role of cross-cultural workers in Bible translation during this stage?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to first review the stages of Bible translation during the last 200 years. We will review this in terms of 1) what the goal of Western mission was, 2) how that goal influenced translation practice, and 3) how translation practice may have been influenced by advances in linguistic theory.

## 2.1 The Mono-Cultural Stage

Translation practice carried out by cross-cultural translators during the mono-cultural stage adhered closely to Greek and Hebrew structures, terms and mental frameworks, so it was mono-cultural in this sense. Therefore, it was necessary for the people receiving the translation to understand the structure of the source language. They also had to grapple with the conceptual understanding of the source language words in order to make sense of their own translations. Naturally, mostly the pastors with extensive libraries were able to decode the meaning most accurately.

Could this practice in translation be linked to the prevailing linguistic theory at the time? The theory was based on structuralism. Structuralism is concerned with signs and meaning, but it focuses more on the individual parts that combine to form meaning units, such as words, phrases or sentences of mostly Indo-European languages. The supposed underlying pre-existing rules that generate sounds and meaning units were also a focus of study. However, little focus was placed on understanding the speaker’s

---

### *On Indigenous Agency: Mother-Tongue Translation*

“Since we are dealing with a translatable faith and translated Scriptures, mother-tongues, new languages, and the potential of new idioms become central and are crucial in the opening up of fresh insights into our common understanding of Christology. On this side of the modern missionary movement and its intense commitment to Scripture translation, we may be tempted to take the subject for granted. We now recognize the critical impact that the Scriptures in the mother-tongues of converts have had in the spread of the Christian faith. But it is important to recognize that it is the modern expansion of the faith into the non-Western world that has alerted us to this phenomenon. What remains to happen, is the realization that this major event can have a significant impact in the actual Christian idiom in which we articulate our experience. In relation to Africa, Lamin Sanneh has argued that “Scripture translation imbued local cultures with eternal significance and endowed African languages with a transcendent range.” This means also that African pre-Christian religions had a theological significance in the whole process, for the centrality of Scripture translation points to the significance of local religions and cultures in which Christian faith now finds a home.”

Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, p. 81

own conceptualization of meaning and language use in general. In a similar way, translation practice during this period was also more concerned with source language structure, frequently at the expense of meaning in the receiving language. As a result, even if the gospel spread afar it lacked depth of understanding. And this, I suggest, equates with low assimilation.

## 2.2 The Cross-Cultural Stage

During this stage we see a shift away from literalistic translation. Cross-cultural translators during this stage sought to utilize the natural grammar and terminology of the receiving language to communicate meaning more faithfully and dynamically. However, they typically sought after a one-to-one form/meaning correspondence with words whenever possible. Therefore, there was still some adherence to the formal equivalence model of the monocultural stage. Moreover, if one-to-one correspondences did not appear to exist, foreign terms were commonly brought in to rectify that.

Linguistic theory during this stage seems to have contributed to the practice of dynamic equivalence translation as well. The development of functional descriptive linguistics, also referred to as basic linguistic theory, helps the cross-cultural translator gain a better understanding of how language users express nominal, verbal and adverbial meanings. In addition, the theory seeks to understand how linguistic universals are applied in the language. Even so, this theory still assumes that meaning is generally predictable based on an Indo-European understanding of language. As a result, it places significant constraints on a receiving language's lexicon in that meaning units were assumed to be based on specific word classes. However, meaning units in some languages, such as the Papuan languages of New Guinea, defy categorization based on this theory. This has had a significant effect on cross-cultural translation as well. It is why Hwa

Yung refers to this stage of translation as only partial enculturation.<sup>8</sup>

## 2.3 The Indigenizing Period

Now in the indigenizing stage of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, a significant portion of the people doing translation are non-Western mother-tongue speakers. While some of them have received instruction in linguistic theory based on Western frameworks, many have not. Is this an advantage or a disadvantage? It might present a disadvantage in the decoding stage, and that is arguable, but it may



be highly advantageous in the encoding stage.

If they understand meaning from the original language detached from the structure of that language, then meanings and their conceptual frameworks are more naturally expressed according to the language's own linguistic genius. Importantly, their lexicon will look quite different from that of an Indo-European language.

This has great significance for communicating important biblical concepts more deeply. This is because words in the source text may be expressed by simple words, complex words or phrasal constructions in the receiving language. Additionally, the words or phrases may be expressed in different ways in different genres. One might say it is more of a concept-to-concept equivalence with the Hebrew and Greek texts. This practice is not radical contextualization, where the

connection between forms and their meanings are completely irrelevant. It has more to do with the language users taking advantage of the linguistic utility of their language to fully convey the same meaning.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, the translators in the indigenizing stage may utilize more local material (cultural/religious terms and concepts) rather than trying to fit in Western material where the concepts appear to be missing or the local terms are deemed unacceptable, at least from the perspective of a cross-cultural translator.

During this current stage of translation, advances in cognitive linguistic theory help us understand grammar based more on how the language speakers conceptualize and express meaning units, particularly in specific contexts.

## 2.4 Three Periods of Mission Focus

Paul Hiebert mentions three periods in modern mission history, and those periods seem to parallel the three stages of translation.<sup>10</sup> During the nineteenth century, the goal of mission work focused greatly on outward signs of belief through behavioral change. This did not require people to have a deep understanding of Scripture. This stage seems to parallel the practice of literalistic translation which did not provide the average person with a deep understanding of Scripture. Then during the twentieth century, mission work focused more on people believing the right things. This focus required people to have a deeper understanding of Scripture. Therefore, the shift to meaning-based translation provided that deeper level of understanding for the average reader. Now in the twenty-first century, missionaries are placing greater focus on helping people undergo a worldview change through deep-level transformation. This goal requires a fuller assimilation of Scripture into the people's language and culture for such deep-level transformation to take place, hence the shift to the indigenizing stage in translation.

### 3. A Twenty-First Century Model of Bible Translation

As mentioned earlier, the number of people training in the West to become cross-cultural translators is significantly reduced in comparison to the enthusiastic 1970s and 80s. Yet, at a time when travel is easier, cost is reduced, global communication is instant, knowledge of language and culture greater and funding abundantly available, why has interest on the part of the emerging Western generation in doing Bible translation diminished? It seems this loss of interest has to do, in part at least, with the way it has been done.

The church of the Global South has been on the forefront of mission for quite a long time. But their focus has been more on church planting than on Bible translation. One reason for this is their perception of what the translation process involves. Many church planters view it as a theoretical and scientific task that takes many years to complete. They also consider it to be the work of foreign linguists and biblical language scholars.

In comparison, the Western translators have viewed Bible translation primarily as a method for spreading the gospel to new places. The theological and social reasons for doing Bible translation have been secondary, if they considered these reasons at all.<sup>11</sup> However, church-planting missionaries and pastors have had more urgent needs to address, and the slow pace of Bible translation usually meant that the task would be put off until another time, or not accomplished at all. Now these perceptions are beginning to change. As a result, more local churches and church-planting organizations are launching their own translation projects. Figures from The Seed Company reveal that, in the projects this organization has tracked from 1997 until the present, about 1,300 mother-tongue speakers have launched translation projects in over 500 languages.<sup>12</sup>

*P*astors in Africa view translation as a need-driven and urgent task simply because of their current circumstances.

The process and purpose of Bible translation during the indigenizing stage is more cogently defined by the Global South church and their theologians and missiologists. Consider their remarks:

- In Malaysia, Hwa Yung believes mother-tongue translation is necessary for developing local and practical theologies that are pastorally and missiologically relevant.<sup>13</sup>
- In Nigeria, Emmanuel Egbunu believes “the indigenizing principle ensures that each community recognizes in Scripture that God is speaking to its own situation.”<sup>14</sup>
- The Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako questions, “How can we minister the Gospel effectively if we are not equipped to reflect theologically in the languages in which we pray and dream?”<sup>15</sup>
- The Peruvian missiologist Samuel Escobar says that “the text of Scripture can be understood adequately only within its own context, and that the understanding and application of its eternal message demands awareness of our own cultural context.”<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, Yung states contextualization “is not a fad or a catch-word, but a theological necessity demanded by the incarnational nature of the Word.”<sup>17</sup>

Finally, Devagnanavaram, who worked for 26 long years as a cross-cultural translator in his own country of India, concluded that it would have been wiser to train mother-tongue speakers from the beginning because the translation would have been completed faster and would have communicated better.<sup>18</sup>

Some Western mission thinkers are getting it. Philip Jenkins maintains that Bible translation is no longer seen primarily as a Western method for spreading Christianity. Rather, pastors in Africa view translation as a need-driven and urgent task simply because of their current circumstances. They live and serve at a time when people are suffering tremendously because of horrendous civil and religious wars. They are watching the disintegration of their own social structures. Many people have lost loved ones to the rampant spread of diseases. Others are experiencing debilitating hunger during long-lasting famines. This current reality has led to the globalization of theology as well, and Bible translation plays no small role. In fact, it is indispensable to the work of mission these days.

Table 1: Two Bible translation models.

<i>Traditional Western Model</i>	<i>Emerging 21<sup>st</sup> Century Model</i>
Focus greatly on the NT	Focus on OT/NT mix
Provide rational biblical knowledge	Correct wrong understanding or bridge understanding to Christ
Focus on written media and growth through literacy training for access	Focus on end-user's media preferences for broader access and more immediate access
Small independent team with usually one Western translator	Community-oriented with multiple translators
Product/outcome oriented	Impact/action oriented

Therefore, it appears that a significant goal of Bible translation in the minds of the Global South church leaders is for immediate practical reasons, and possibly secondarily about spreading the gospel to other peoples and places. Could this be a mark of twenty-first century mission in regard to Bible translation? For two hundred years, the seeds of faith were scattered broadly through cross-cultural means. Now they are establishing deeper indigenous roots to yield more abundant fruit. The indigenizing period allows the gospel to live at home among a people, their language and culture. This then increases the people groups' practical understanding of the Word, which leads to hope and produces action.

The table on page 15 illustrates two different Bible translation models. The left column shows the traditional Western model. This model primarily seeks to provide rational knowledge of Scripture through the completion of translations. So it is product or outcome-oriented in this sense. The Western translator's assumption is that once people hear or read the translation, then they will respond to the gospel in the same way that western people generally responded to it.

The right column shows a new model based more on indigenous church thinking. This model seeks to deepen the people groups' understanding of the gospel, bridge traditional religious and cultural understanding to the gospel, communicate it more rapidly and broadly, and address their people's day-to-day social needs. So, in a sense, the model is impact-oriented. It also seeks to transform religious worldviews rather than replace them. The latter is more a mark of Western mission.

#### 4. Is Indigenization Syncretism?

In the Thai Buddhist context, Kosuke Koyama comments, "For the Thai translators of the Bible, there was no language other than the language of the Buddhist-animist culture...With great care Thai translators insured richness. It is not a distortion."<sup>19</sup>

Koyama's comment reveals something important about the indigenizing stage of translation. Bible translation is not about replacing the religions of Buddhism, Hinduism or Islam with Western forms of Christianity. He asserts that this approach has had little success. Instead, Bible translation is to recover, reconnect and transform what already exists by way of the richness of the language and religious culture, and not the religion per se. This then allows for the contextualization of theology for practical needs. However, Koyama maintains that the process

*"For the Thai translators of the Bible, there was no language other than the language of the Buddhist-animist culture..."*

should include two movements: 1) "to articulate Jesus Christ in culturally appropriate, communicatively apt words, and 2) to criticize, reform, dethrone or oppose culture if it is found to be against what the name of Jesus Christ stands for."

This process of translation reveals a significant difference between what a Western cross-cultural translator would or could attempt in comparison to what a mother-tongue translator could and would like to attempt. But do traditional Western practices in translation prevent this undertaking? The indigenous stage of translation requires what Koyama refers to as "this dangerous and unavoidable task" for the appropriation of the gospel in local language and culture.

Kevin Vanhoozer comments on the decoding and encoding of meaning in translation. The Western cross-cultural translator, following the

meaning-based method described in chart 2, extracts propositional meaning from another language (e.g., English or the biblical language), and then encodes it into the local language and idioms.<sup>20</sup> This model presumes that contextualization happens at the encoding stage. But Yung suggests it does not because "cultural patterns are not easily decoded and encoded by outsiders... and it assumes that revelatory meaning can be detached from its culturally imbedded state."<sup>21</sup>

Nineteenth through twentieth-century Bible translation practice treated Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic and animist religious terminology as suspect at best and generally errant at worst. As a result, translators replaced important theological terms with other terms, usually those that mirrored the equivalent Western concept. They did this to avoid blending the message of the gospel with local religious beliefs. Indeed, many Western missionary translators considered indigenous languages to not even have the linguistic facility to express key theological concepts.<sup>22</sup> This perception was not uncommon nor has it been short-lived.

Holding this view created some difficulties for the translators. It often required them to borrow terms from other languages, such as a national language or some other contact language. In some cases, the translators had to produce creative descriptive phrases to communicate an important theological concept. They did this to avoid using local religious terms or for supplying supposedly missing theological concepts. Therefore, the recipients of the translation had to learn the meaning of a new foreign term or phrase. Then they had to figure out how to apply the meaning of the term in different translation contexts.<sup>23</sup> As a result, many Western cross-cultural translations are full of English, French, Spanish or Arabic key biblical terms, for example.

Andrew Walls points out the irony of this practice. After all, the writers of the New Testament, especially Luke and Paul, used the language,

terminology and conceptual schemes of the Greeks to communicate Christ faithfully and accurately. They did not use their own Jewish terms and concepts that would have been difficult for the Greek audience to understand. As Koyama’s argument would hold in this case, they had no language other than the language of Greek polytheistic culture.

Even so, Kevin Vanhoozer rightly warns that location should not be the essential characteristic of Christian theology. The primary source must remain in Scripture. When culture is the primary source for theology a theologian (or a translator) becomes a witting or unwitting revisionist. Liberals in the West are willing to revise the faith to make it more acceptable and intelligible to those in a particular cultural-intellectual situation.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, the indigenization stage of translation is not meant to make the Scriptures more acceptable. It is not accommodation, either. However, if a mother-tongue translator is prevented from using “experience-near” material as opposed to “experience-distant” material from the translation source texts, as Robert Priest puts it,<sup>25</sup> then it seems this would prevent the full enculturation of Scriptural meaning. This then puts the users of the translation at a disadvantage. The point is that a fully indigenized translation should allow the pastors, preachers, theologians and everyday users to “have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and

*In a partner-oriented model, there are a variety of Global Church organizations working together to achieve impact in a number of areas.*

deep is the love of Christ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that [they] may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”<sup>26</sup>

### 5. Cross-Cultural Workers in the Indigenizing Stage

Thus far I have attempted to provide some evidence that shows how the process of translation involves stages. The idea is that the stages are not serial, per se. The indigenizing stage would be the final stage, at least in terms of enculturation. Given that mother-tongue translators will likely carry out most of the remaining 2,200 language translation projects, how does that affect the role of cross-cultural workers in translation?

The chart on page 15 shows that translation practice in twenty-first century mission is community- or group-oriented. Indeed, most of the translation projects that started this year with The Seed Company participation involve a group of translators working together, rather than one translator working alone with one language. In addition, the projects involve broader partnership, with each person, church and parachurch organization contributing in their areas of calling, experience and ability. It is a Global Church covenant community of believers working together.

In a partner-oriented model, there are a variety of Global Church organizations working together to achieve impact in a number of areas, and that sooner. Cross-cultural workers from church and parachurch organizations bring a wealth of experience and knowledge to the projects. However, their role is increasingly to equip mother-tongue speakers and the local churches to grow in their ability to begin, nurture and sustain the work. This model especially includes the work of Bible translation. The chart on this page illustrates this model being applied in India.

Ideally, if twenty-first century mission goals are to train leaders, foster faith communities, nurture and sustain movements, then the role of the Western church seems apparent. However, this may require some adjustments, if not complete framework changes, to the Western churches’ traditional ways of working. I offer four domains where Western cross-cultural workers may need to change their goals and methods to participate in the indigenizing stage more effectively.

### Translation Training

Much of a Western translator’s training has been theoretically and academically oriented, and in no small way influenced by a Western positivist epistemology. Therefore, the language of translation has been an academic and scientific language. Now many if not most of the mother-tongue translators are pastors or teachers or other people who hold other positions within the Church. This means the work of translation is fast becoming the work of the local and national Church and less so of parachurch organizations. The pastors’ language of translation is theological. Some of them will go on to become linguists and translation consultants, as is needed. However, many of them will resume their pastoral

Figure 2: The partner-oriented model of Bible translation in India.

New India Evangelistic Association	⇒	The project leaders
14 Indian Church-Planting Orgs	⇒	The impact workers
WBT Asia	⇒	Training & consulting
SIL South Asia Group	⇒	Training & consulting
OneStory	⇒	Story crafting consultant
Campus Crusade/The <i>JESUS</i> Film	⇒	Producing the film
Faith Comes By Hearing	⇒	Recording of Luke
Local and Global Bible Societies	⇒	Publication funding
Global Scripture Impact	⇒	Impact assessment
The Seed Company	⇒	Project planning, funding and monitoring

duties. In addition, they are language and cultural insiders. Given the differences between Western cross-cultural and indigenous translators, what would the training curricula entail for the indigenous translators? It will require rethinking what they need to know, when they need to know it, and how it should be communicated.<sup>27</sup>

### Scripture Access and Use

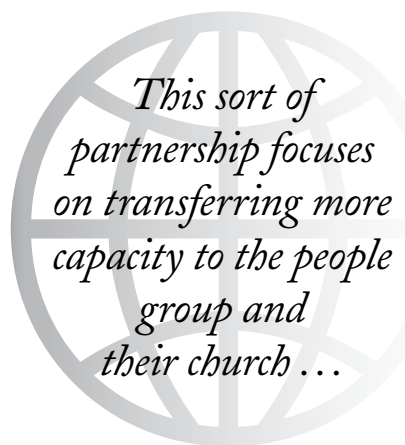
Western translation organizations still value literacy training for, among other things, producing a larger number of people who can read the translated Scriptures. Of course, learning to read is often a value for many of the local people for economic reasons, too. However, finding ways to provide Scripture translations in a medium that is most preferred by the people group is another mark of the indigenizing stage.

Darrell Whiteman comments, “Literacy is nearly always seen as the panacea for any development ills, when in fact the record is a mixed one. In some cases it has been helpful, in other situations it has not been.”<sup>28</sup> The fact is, while literacy is an important and ongoing need in any translation project, it has not really produced literate societies. Therefore, a translation team needs to place greater focus on communicating Scripture through other mediums as well. Alternative methods could be crafting oral Bible stories, producing audio recordings, audiovisual films, and putting Scripture into song or poetry. The important thing is that literacy training is balanced with other Scripture-access strategies.

### Project Planning and Implementation

It is generally true that Western translation organizations have focused mainly on completing translations. In this sense it has been product-oriented. The translators’ desired outcome was to get the translated Scriptures into the people group’s hands. Their assumption was that the people would immediately begin reading and applying the Scriptures in their lives. Their motivation for doing translation was

certainly so that God’s Word would have its transformative effect on people and cultures, and in many situations it has indeed had some very good effects. However, early planning for these effects to occur sooner and more broadly has not been the norm in most situations. Now the need is for the partners to determine at the start of the project the effects they would like to see stemming from the use of the translation. However, the translation outcomes that a Western translator desires may differ from what an indigenous church translator may desire, as the table in



section 3 illustrates. Therefore, the opinion of the indigenous church in translation planning is imperative.

### Funding

Today’s Western donors are concerned that the former type of Western mission planning has not always produced the sort of fruit they believe God desires from the translation projects. They want to be wise and faithful investors of the large sums of “talents”<sup>29</sup> (i.e., millions of dollars) that God has entrusted to them. Therefore, they look for projects that display certain wise planning characteristics. Before committing financial support for a project, they might ask if the translation team has clearly defined goals and schedules. Are the important roles and activities in the project well-defined? Does the project budget clearly show how they intend to spend the funds? Do they have a method to know how they are doing in reaching their goals during

any phase of the project? Today’s donors also desire to see greater partnership in a translation project. However, this sort of partnership is the kind that focuses on transferring more capacity to the people group and their church so they can launch and sustain translation work in new places. This is not what some people in the west refer to as “donor-driven” planning. The donor’s role has more to do with accountability relationships between all the partners, and they are also accountable for their role.

### 6. Final Thoughts

I have attempted to show how Bible translation has been carried out in stages over time. The process began as a multilingual and multi-cultural movement at Pentecost. Then the multilingual and multicultural aspect of translation more or less ceased—not entirely—during the monolingual and mono-cultural stage. The next stage saw broad expansion through largely Western cross-cultural translation. Now we see the emergence of the indigenizing stage at the end of the twentieth century. This latter stage is where the Word of God makes itself fully at home with a people and their culture. It is a first- and second-person communication with God rather than a third-person communication filtered through another people’s language or their culture. Jesus, the Word of God, is no longer a distant, vaguely understood person. He is now living within the community.

Bible translation is an imperfect science, and as we have seen, a person’s perceptions about other people’s religion and cultural can add to that imperfect practice. Even so, God is sovereign and therefore He has never been hindered in accomplishing His mission during any stage of Bible translation. However, I tend to think He is not satisfied until people can know Him more deeply and completely within their own language and cultural setting. Yet, this begs the question, what about the 1,726 complete full Bible or New Testament translations that are more or less only partially



enculturated translations? And what about the more than 1,900 translation projects currently in progress, most of which still heavily involve the faithful work of the cross-cultural translators?

This is something I've pondered since my wife and I completed work on two New Testament translation projects, which also included several Old Testament books. We were what Paul Hiebert referred to as insider/outsideers.<sup>30</sup> Over time we gained more of an insider view through extensive linguistic and cultural learning. Yet, we were intuitively still outsiders in that our cognitive insights were far less than that of a mother-tongue speaker. Like most cross-cultural translators, we worked closely with the speakers and the Church. Yet, the translations still bear their distinctive mark as a cross-cultural and hence partially enculturated work. Therefore, in the long term, the success or unsuccessfulness of these two translations will be judged by indigenous criteria.<sup>31</sup>

Now, one former associate translator, a mother-tongue speaker, is continuing work on the Old Testament. His translation has a different feel and sound to it. I believe it is a more pleasing and insightful feel and sound because he is the one working to communicate the concepts in terms of how he intuitively understands his language. He is also drawing from more cultural material than I was willing to draw from. So it seems in this case that the process of transmission is indeed continuing as it can only when it is squarely in the hands of the local church and their own mother-tongue translators. I tend to believe that someday a team of mother-tongue translators from these two groups of people will finish the translation process with their New Testament, too. They have already begun doing that as they theologize in lively conversations over what the current translations mean.

These days the Global South church and their theologians are contextualizing the message with whatever

translations are available. Indeed, they are freer to do that than a Western cross-cultural translator would be. So I believe that God continues to make Himself known more intimately in languages and cultures through the globalizing of theology and through the second-generation work of the mother-tongue translators. Each stage injects more biblical information and helpful insights into pre-existing indigenous theology.<sup>32</sup> **IJFM**

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Andrew Walls. 2002. *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, Orbis, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> The work of Andrew Walls on the cross-cultural transmission of the Gospel has been especially helpful in gaining this historic overview. Two resources are, *Bible and Scripture Use in Christian History* (unpublished manuscript) and *The Translation Principle in Christian History*, in (ed.) Philip C. Stine. 1990. *Bible Translation and the Spread of the Church. The Last Two Hundred Years*. E.J. Brill.

<sup>3</sup> Figures vary according to sources. This data is based on SIL International Sept 2009.

<sup>4</sup> See Lamin Sanneh. 2003. *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West*, Eerdmans, p. 23-24.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew F. Walls. 2002. *The Cross-cultural Process in Christian History*, Orbis, p. 30-31.

<sup>6</sup> See Samuel Escobar. 2003. *The New Global Mission. The Gospel From Everywhere to Everyone*. InterVarsity Press.

<sup>7</sup> This figure combines people retiring or leaving for other reasons with new people joining the organization. The 1980s-90s saw quite a spike in new membership, no doubt a result of the Jesus movement revival of the 1970s.

<sup>8</sup> See Hwa Yung. 1997. *Mangoes or Bananas?* Regnum Studies in Missions, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> See Paul Hiebert on the importance of this in, Form and Meaning in the Contextualization of the Gospel. In Dean S. Gilliland (ed.). 1989. *The Word Among Us*, Word Publishing, p. 101-120.

<sup>10</sup> Paul G. Hiebert. 2008. *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change, Introduction section*, Amazon Kindle electronic book. Baker Academic.

<sup>11</sup> For an example of this divergence in mission strategy, see Samuel Escobar, A Movement Divided. *Transformation: Volume 8:4*, October-December 1991.

<sup>12</sup> The Seed Company, 3030 Matlock Rd., Suite 104, Arlington TX, 76015.

<sup>13</sup> Hwa Yung, 1997, p.7

<sup>14</sup> Emmanuel Egbunu. 2008. Teach, Baptise, and Nurture New Believers, in (eds.) Andrew Walls and Cathy Ross, *Mission in the 21st Century*, Orbis, p. 25-46.

## On Indigenous Agency: Samuel Crowther

*Of Samuel Ajayi Crowther (ca. 1807-91), that gifted African missionary of the nineteenth century, Lamin Sanneh spoke of his considerable linguistic gifts, how he went everywhere scribbling down suitable words, tracing out their various usages within the customs and cultures, and boldly allowing the native assembly to frame the Christian message. He set an almost forgotten precedent for indigenous translators today.*

"Crowther recognized that translation was more than a mechanical exercise, and that something of the genius of the people was involved. Language was not merely a tool fashioned to achieve limited and temporary goals. It was also a dynamic cultural resource, reflecting the spirit of the people and illuminating their sense of values. As such it demanded to be imaginatively approached, with the investigator skillful enough in the sort of cultural archeology by which one may discover the stored paradigms whereby society represented and promoted itself. The translator should be prepared to dig underneath the layers of half conscious notions and dim familiarities to reclaim the accumulated treasure. Consequently, Crowther made a point of befriending ordinary people without regard to their religious affiliation, going on to pay close attention to the speech of the elders in order to get behind new inventions of the language and the colloquialisms that break the line of continuity with the original. He plunged after the widening consequences of the initial missionary contact, finding his way to the vital material...(he) was perceptive enough to realize that translation led naturally into developing a deeper appreciation for the entire culture, and he pursued this line to its logical conclusion. He wrote in 1844 that his linguistic investigation forced him to delve into other aspects of traditional African life...The sense of responsibility this created toward preserving the authentic forms of indigenous life and custom constitutes an enduring tribute to Christian mission."

Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, p. 165-166

<sup>15</sup> Kwame Bediako. 2002. The Challenge of Mother Tongue for African Christian Thought. *Journal of African Christian Thought* 5. no.1 (June), p. 1-60.

<sup>16</sup> Samuel Escobar. 2003. *The New Global Mission*. The Gospel From Everywhere to Everyone, InterVarsity Press, p. 21.

<sup>17</sup> Hwa Yung, 1997, p.13.

<sup>18</sup> Devagnanavaram. 2007. Why Have We Ignored the Mother Tongue Translator? *Word and Deed*, vol. 6.1. SIL International. Dallas, TX.

<sup>19</sup> Kosuke Koyama, 1999. *Water Buffalo Theology*. Orbis.

<sup>20</sup> See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 2006. "One Rule to Rule Them All?" Theological Method in an Era of World Christianity. In Craig Ott & Harold A. Netland (Eds), *Globalizing Theology*, Baker, Grand Rapids, p. 85-126.

<sup>21</sup> Hwa Yung, 1997, p.11

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Walls, 2002, p.39

<sup>23</sup> Missionary translators thought the Meyah language of Indonesia had no term for sin, so they borrowed one from a neighboring unrelated language. Unfortunately the Meyah thought it only referred to two sins: killing and adultery.

<sup>24</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, 200, p. 106-107.

<sup>25</sup> See Robert Priest, 2006. "Experience-Near Theologizing in Diverse Human Contexts." In Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland, (eds.), *Globalizing Theology*, Baker, Grand Rapids, p.180-189.

<sup>26</sup> Ephesians 3:18-19. The New International Version. Zondervan. 1989.

<sup>27</sup> Serampore College recently developed a new curriculum for training mother-tongue translators as on-the-job education. It is part of the translation process in many ways, rather than apart from the task. It also seeks to use less technical language, but rather communicate the important concepts in clearer terms.

<sup>28</sup> See Darrell L. Whiteman. 1990. Bible Translation and Social Development. In (ed.) Philip C. Stine. Bible Translation and the Spread of the Church. The Last 200 Years. *Studies in Missions*, vol. 2. p.135. E.J. Brill.

<sup>29</sup> The Gospel of Matthew 25:14-28

<sup>30</sup> See Paul Hiebert. 2006. The Missionary as Mediator of Globalizing Theology. In (eds.) Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland. *Globalizing Theology*, Baker, Grand Rapids, p. 100.

<sup>31</sup> Sanneh, 2003, p. 127

<sup>32</sup> Koyama 1999, p. 60

# Are you ready?

# Edinburgh 2010



\$19.95 • 358 pgs.

William Carey International University Press is proud to partner with the Edinburgh 2010 planning committee in publishing two books in advance of the 2010 meeting. *Springboard for Mission* is a helpful introductory text which surveys the past, present, and future of Edinburgh's impact on the global missions effort. *Mission Then and Now* features reflections on the eight commissions of Edinburgh 2010 from such distinguished authors as Andrew Walls and Samuel Escobar. These are essential volumes for all who eagerly await what God will bring about in this historic 2010 meeting.



\$8.55 • 90 pgs.

available now from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)