

A Review of the History of the Kalenjin Bible Translation

Shadrack Chebet Rotich

Kabarak University, Kenya

Author's Email: shadrack_rotich@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper is a review of the history of the Kalenjin bible translation in Kenya. History has proved that the word of God both in verbal and in written form has made a visible practical impact in the Kalenjin community in her whole spheres of life: spiritually, socially, intellectually, morally, and economically. Christianity is not to be hidden or made complicated rather it should be accessible and available to all people as Sim in 1999 points out that “Christianity is open to the translation of its scriptures” (p.130) for everyone to be able to read and understand. In order for us to know more about God, he purposefully revealed himself to us through the Holy Scriptures. The Kalenjin people are among the people of God, and they too want to relate and fellowship with God. Hence, we should have the scriptures in their language and more so their dialect. This research paper was based on an interview from Pastor Edwin Suter, who is currently involved in Kalenjin Bible translation based in Eldoret (BTL). Therefore, in this paper, I will briefly explain about the Kalenjin people, an overview of the history of the translation of Kalenjin Bible, some factors necessitating translation, the impacts and finally conclude by giving some recommendations.

Key Terms: Bible translation, Kalenjin people, dialects.

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INTRODUCTION

Before the coming of Christianity, the Kalenjin people were monotheistic with their traditional religion which had a lot of similarities with the rules and regulation found in the book of Leviticus for instance; do not lie, do not steal, do not pervert justice or show partiality and many others (Leviticus 19:11-16). To avoid being questioned or known, many religions use various magic rituals and formulas that cannot be understood by ordinary people. Often they use a foreign language that is considered holy for their sacred writings, prayers and rituals like the Islam religion where most of her communication is in Arabic that makes an ordinary person not to understand. The fact that most people do not understand it makes it seem magical and powerful. ☒

Kalenjin People-their location

Majority of the Kalenjin people are found in the Rift Valley escarpment of Kenya. Some few other Kalenjins live in the major cities in Kenya while there are some related people in some parts in East Africa in areas like north-central Tanzania and across the Uganda border.

Their history

The Kalenjins don't have an accurate history of their origin, but there is a myth that they originated from Egypt. According to one of the Kalenjin historian Kipnyango Seroney in his weekly talk to the Kalenjin people in the Kalenjin vernacular FM radio station called Kass FM, he said the Kalenjin people came from Egypt (Kipnyango speech in Kass FM 8:30 PM 16th October 2009). They followed the Nile River area of Sudan through the western Ethiopian

highlands. However, there is no tangible written evidence about this history and specifically the Egypt origin.

The Kalenjin dialects

One may easily think that Kalenjin is a cluster of simple dialects. However, it's only when you research about them that you will discover that its one people with varying dialects. According to the detailed explanation by Mojola in his book page 27, Kalenjin speaking people are made up of many dialects, namely the *Nandi-Marakwet* branch which includes the *Nandi* of Nandi District, the *Kipsigis* of Kericho District, the *Keiyo*, of the Southern half of Elgeyo-Marakwet District, the *Tugen* of Baringo District, and the *Marakwet* or *Markweta* of the northern half of Elgeyo-Marakwet District (Marakwet is a cover term for six sub-dialects namely *Endo*, *Borokot*, *Almo*, *Kiptani*, *Sengwer Cherangany* and the *Markweta* from whom the whole is named; the *Elgon branch* which includes *Kupsapiny* of Uganda found around the Mt Elgon, and the *Sabaot*, i.e. the *Kony*, the *Pok*, the *Bong'om* sometimes called the *Elgon Maasai*, of the Elgon District on the slopes of Mt Elgon and the *Terik* (Nyang'ori) of Nyang'ori location in Kakamega district; the *Okiek branch* which includes the *Sogoo* (*Kipchorng'onik Okiek*) of the Southern Mau Forest and the *Kinare Okiek*, *Okiek* of northern Tanzania who are thought to have been assimilated as *Kisongo Maasai*; the *Pokoot branch* has the *Pokot* of west Pokot and Baringo Districts.

As earlier indicated, the Kalenjin "cluster is not all mutually intelligible there are varying degrees of intelligibility between them. In any case, there is no single distinct language called Kalenjin" (Mojola, 1998, p.28). Although

there are some translations done to cater for some of these dialects, they are only in the New Testament, and the rest of the Old Testament is in the current Kalenjin Bible which is not clearly understood by many dialects. Therefore, with the above background about the Kalenjins, it's important that the Bible be translated into the different dialects so that the different Kalenjin dialects may clearly understand Gods word. As was the original idea of adoption of indigenous terms and concepts to the understanding of the local people "vernacular translation of the Bible began with the adoption of indigenous terms, concepts, customs and idioms for the central categories of Christianity" (Stine, 1990, p.16).

LITERATURE REVIEW

History of the Kalenjin Bible Translation

An overview of Bible translation in Africa

Before we discuss the Kalenjin Bible translation, it is worth noting that Bible translation started in Africa as early as 2nd and 3rd century "Its earliest beginnings go back to Alexandria, Egypt about 200 to 300 BC when the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament was translated from the original Hebrew into Greek" (Mojola, 1998, p.X). Therefore, the history of Bible translations in Africa is as old as about 1700 years old. The reason why the Bible was translated from Hebrew to Greek was that Greek was the widest spoken language or lingua franca of that time. The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible was done in Alexandria called the Septuagint (LXX, Latin word for seventy) as it is believed by some to have been translated by 70 or 72 Jewish elders in the ancient city of Alexandria in Egypt "these seventy-two men were accommodated in secluded quarters on a coastal island and completed the work in 72 days" (Sim, 1999, p.4). Thereafter, the Bible was translated

from Greek into some of the languages of that period such as Syriac, Latin and Coptic, the language of ancient Egypt. These translations saw the people hear and read Gods word resulting in the church spread throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond.

By 18th and 19th Century, Protestant missionaries were coming to East Africa. Among the first missionaries to East Africa and who contributed to translation was Dr Johann Ludwig Krapf as well as his wife Rosina Dietrich and with Johann Rebmann who was in their company. Krapf's understood the centrality and importance of scripture translation into the vernacular language in his missionary enterprise "in recognition of scholarship in language, and translation work in Ethiopia, the University of Tübingen in Germany awarded him a doctorate on 1844" (Mojola, 1998, p.3). However Krapf's actual translation work on the ground lacked depth, and his translation was poor, hurried, unnatural, inaccurate, unclear against the basic qualities of Bible translation "at heart the three prime consideration for Bible translation quality are, in modern language; Accuracy, Naturalness, and Clarity" (Sim, 1999, p.265). However, this was a good start that led to the desire for the translation of the Bible.

The Kipsigis New Testament

It is widely known that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a step, that how the Kalenjin Bible translation began with the gospel of Mark being translated into Kipsigis dialect in 1912 by O.H. Scouten of the Lumbwa Industrial Mission and published by the BFBS, London. A.M. Anderson of the AIM embarked on the translation of the entire New Testament into Kipsigis, starting with Romans which was published in 1929. 1 & 2 Timothy in 1930 and 1931

and the Gospels followed this in 1932. Earl J. Anderson took over from where his father left off and revised the already translated books while translating the rest. By 1953, the entire New Testament had been completed. Earl Anderson was assisted by Douglas A. Mutai, Jason A. Munai and Paulo Claroigin.

The Nandi New Testament Bible

Although the Nandi Bible translation started after the Kipsigis Bible, it was completed earlier than the Kipsigis Bible, and there is no reason given for this. By 1926, the first Nandi Bible portion of the gospel of John was translated. This was followed by Romans in 1929 and Matthew in 1931. It's worth noting that in both the Kipsigis and The Nandi Bible translation was done under the leadership missionaries of the AIM who among others included Marie Hansen, Frances and George McCreary, A.M. Anderson and Signe Kristensen. Together with a new team composed of Stuart M Bryson of the Church Missionary Society (Australia) assisted by some Kenyans led by Samuel A. Gimnyegei, Reuben A. Seroney and Elijah A. Chepkwony the first Church leaders in the Kalenjin community revised the above portions and translated the remaining books of the New Testament. After the commitment and patience of these translators, in 1935 the New Testament in Nandi was completed and published by the Central Press at Sydney, Australia.

The current Kalenjin Bible

Thereafter, the Kalenjin Bible translation began in 1951 through a committee which was formed with Earl Anderson as its chairman. Other people in this translation committee included; Frances J. Mumford of the AIM together with Ezekiel A. Birech (the late Bishop of the AIC

in Kenya) as well as Erasto A. Sio and Daniel A. Salatt. Seven years later, Mojola states that the book of Genesis was published in 1958, Mark in 1960, John in 1963, Matthew in 1965, Luke in 1966, Acts to Revelation in 1968, and the Old Testament in 1969. With the completion of the complete Kalenjin Bible, the Nandi and the Kipsigis New Testament Bible was not used frequently. This made this translation not reprinted. However, "the Bible Society of Kenya has reported that it has recently received enquiries from church leaders for the reprinting of the 1939 Nandi Bible" (Mojola, 1998, p.30) for reasons the writer didn't explain.

The Pokot Bible translation

The Pokot dialect already had its first scripture portion of Ruth and was published in 1936 by the AIM at Kijabe. Within the same year, and the Gospel of Mark was published. The portions of Matthew, Acts and Romans were published in 1963. Mojola explains that,

"The current ongoing Pokoot common-language translation was initiated in the late 1970s when it was acknowledged that orthographical problems, as well as those affecting naturalness and clarity, meant that the existing Pokoot New Testament was neither fully accepted by the churches nor fully readable and intelligible in the Pokoot speaking area" (Mojola, 1998, p. 31)

The Pokot New Testament Bible was completed by 1986 this time round the translation team was composed of native speakers only. Among those translators are; Daniel Tomkou (Anglican), Ronald Chumum (AIC), Elijah Nyeris (Lutheran), Joseph Murupus (Reformed) and Alston Toroitich (Reformed) and Francis Nalelio (Anglican) all

working under the direction and guidance of the United Bible Societies (UBS) and the Bible Society of Kenya (BSK).

The Sabaot Bible translation

Bible Translation and Literacy (BTL) started in 1981 the translation work of the *Sabaot* scriptures, and it's now ongoing. The gospel of Mark was the first portion to be published in this language in 1987. Thereafter, the Gospel of Luke was translated in 1990. In 1992, some selected epistles of Paul, James and John were dedicated for public use. The complete NT in Sabaot was reviewed in 1994 thereafter it was eventually published and released on the 14th December 1997 in Kapsokwony - Mt Elgon in Sabaot. After the completion of the New Testament, the BTL is now in the process of translating the Old Testament. In praise of BTL and SIL Mojola by saying "This project may be said to be the model SIL/BTL projects in East Africa" (Mojola, 1998, p.32).

The Marakwet Bible translation

According to Pr. Edwin Suter, a BTL representative in the Marakwet region, the Marakwet New Testament Bible was translated by the help of BTL and SIL, and it was dedicated in 21st February 2009. One of the factors leading to The Marakwet Bible translation is the revision of some words. Some words were omitted like "Jehovah" which was ambiguous according to the Catholics, and they included the word "Iryin" removing 'yain' which means the creator. Hence, Catholics have fully embraced the Marakwet Bible.

Cultural factors

Apart from the revision of some words, the complexity of intercultural communication is also a factor that was considered in the Kalenjin Bible translation. To illustrate this point, some words in the Tugen community are

obscene in Pokot and Nandi language, e.g. "Tarit" which is a bird in Tugen but means testicles of a male in Pokot language. Similarly, "busiek" is maize flour in Tugen but it is a female private part in Pokot and Nandi language. In addition, the two communities have rich proverbs that mean totally different things. This is why Hesselgrave proposes to missionaries which is also applicable to Bible translation that with "minimal intrusion of his own cultural understanding, he must encode the message in the culturally relevant form in the target culture so that the respondents will understand as much as possible of the original message" (Hesselgrave 1978, 68). Still, in the issue of culture and translation, Stine explains, "Christianity has become so culturally specific that it is incommunicable cross-culturally" (Stine, 1990, p.4).

Impacts of the Kalenjin Bible translation

Some of the major impacts of the translations are; enhancement of literacy among the people of the community especially the old who didn't have the privilege of going to school in their early age, unity of the neighbouring communities especially the Pokots, Marakwets and the Tugens who are engage in cattle rustling, and also unity between the protestants and the Catholics as seen during the launching of the Marakwet Bible, Church and spiritual growth was enhanced by the Kalenjin Bible translation.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, since we are Christ-followers, we should remember that our Lord Jesus came to earth and spoke particular languages like Aramaic, Greek, and probably Hebrew, so that people could understand him. He also lived in a particular culture, Jewish first-century culture, and communicated in the context of that culture so that the masses could understand him. For example, he spoke

about vineyards and fishing and shepherds, Roman coins and Old Testament passages, because his audience knew about these things. He didn't speak in French or talk about cell phones, cassava, or democracy. He used both the language and culture of the people to be able to communicate with them. Therefore, the trend for the future of Kalenjin cluster is to shifting away from the idea of a “union” language, to the local intelligible varieties in a move to maximize intelligibility and use.

Similarly, there is a need to have the history of the Bible translation in both written and electronic form. One of my observations was the lack of written material on the history of the Kalenjin Bible translation, and those available also are not updated.

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