

# TRANSLATION AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

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When one of our Chol Indian friends first saw a big grandfather's clock, he asked: "From where does the wind come which makes that foot (pendulum) sway back and forth?" A little later he asked about a trolley car: "That going-thing with many feet (wheels) holds on to the wire up above with its one arm. Is that so it will stay on its path?"

Such questions as these show that many Indians are unacquainted with some of the very commonplace objects which are found in the cities. To the translators, however, it shows something else which is of greater importance in his determination to translate the Word of God faithfully for the tribes of the world. It shows that aboriginal groups interpret unknown objects or concepts in terms of their own culture and background.

In view of this, it is important that the translator know the culture of the people for whom he is translating. A few examples illustrate some of the practical aspects of this principle.

## *Stone of stumbling*

When translating for the Chols, the translator was aware that the phrase 'stone of stumbling' found in Romans 9:32, 33 and I Peter 2:8 could refer to a specific stone found on the trail to the town of Ocoingo, Chiapas, Mexico. Those who came to this rock with aching muscles from long hours of weary walking with heavy loads believed that by striking their foot against this rock they would be strengthened for the remainder of the trip and would not stumble along the way. It therefore became important to translate these two passages avoiding any ambiguity as to whether this rock prevented or occasioned stumbling.

## *Courtyard*

Each of the gospels refers to the courtyard of the high priest where Peter followed Jesus and denied Him three times. The Spanish text uses the word *patio* as a translation of courtyard. This word is also known and used by the Chol Indians so that it might have been tempting to use it, were it not for the fact that this borrowed word has taken on a specialized meaning for many of them. Instead of referring to an enclosure in front of or behind a house, it has come to mean any outdoor slab of cement on which coffee beans are dried. Translating this phrase as the *patio* of the high priest could have raised many questions as to how many coffee trees were owned by

the priest, who were his laborers, and why people would gather together in a place where coffee beans were usually spread to dry.

### *Bread*

The word 'bread' in Scripture primarily occurs as either a specific term for bread (including the Lord's Supper), or as a generic term for food. It is not surprising, however, that some aboriginal groups use something other than bread as the staff of life. The Chols, with their cultural focus on the cultivation of corn, use *waj*, a type of thin corn cake. Since a meal is not complete without this main item of food, the term has been extended to include any other foods which may be served along with *waj*. While bread is known to them, its use is limited to a few occasions during the year when it functions as a dessert. In translating this term in the Chol New Testament, consistent use has been made of the word *waj* wherever the function of bread as a basic food was in focus, John 6:35, "I am the bread of life," was thus translated with this word. If the word for bread had been used, it was feared that the Chol would compare Christ to the desirable, but not absolutely necessary, dessert.

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## THE QUALITY OF MEEKNESS

Every day, all morning, the search for words continues as, with Kopta my informant, I work on the Birifor language and especially on translating the Scriptures.

Some words come by the accidents God provides. For a long while we had searched in vain for a word adequate to express "meekness". Then we gave up (temporarily), and took a walk outside for a break. The grain-stalks left after harvesting were beginning to sprout again, so I said, "Look, Kopta, they're sprouting". "No," he said, "they're *iolo*". "*Iolo*? What does that mean?" "That is the word we use for new leaves when they are big enough and strong enough to bend and not to break. We use it for people too, who are so strong inside that they don't need or want to fight you. But if a person is hard and brittle like a dead leaf it means that he is not really strong".

And that is surely a better word for Bible meekness than anything we can say in English!

*(Extract from a letter from Mr. David B. Woodford, W.E.C. missionary among the Birifors in Haute Volta, W.Africa. We have since heard that Kopta, gifted Birifor informant, has gone to be with his Lord, while still quite young.)*