

Languages in the Southern Provinces of the Sudan

C. L. Cook

The Situation Today

The Southern Provinces of the Sudan are a thinly-populated area with a large number of tribal groups with different languages. The diversity of language presents a problem which has had to be solved in some way both by the administrator and by the missionary. Traffic between the Southern Provinces and the Northern Provinces led long ago to the attempt to use Arabic in administering the South, and a very debased type of spoken Arabic, the 'Mongaltese Arabic' of the Mongala Province, was widespread amongst those men who had any dealings with the administration. Government policy until about 1945 did not encourage the teaching of any better type of Arabic, but envisaged the use of vernaculars for the earlier stages of education and the teaching of English for use in the later stages. From 1949 on, it has been the policy of Government to introduce Arabic into all school curricula, and the rate at which this can be implemented is determined solely by the provision of a sufficient number of qualified teachers. Vernaculars are still used for the first four years of schooling.

Missions, seeking to reach adults as well as children, have used vernaculars. An interesting exception to this general practice was the use of Bangala in Yei District. The District had been till 1910 a part of the Lado Enclave, under Belgian administration, and Bangala was a language of administration brought in from the Belgian Congo. Yei District presented a peculiarly complex problem, with a great diversity of language and dialect for its many small tribal groups. Bangala, already understood by those who had dealings with the Government, was a ready-made instrument for evangelism and education. Scriptures which were printed by the Bible Society for use by the Missions in the Congo were the earliest to be available in a language that the people of Yei District could understand, and there is to this day a large circulation of these books. But since 1936 there has been a steady falling-off of Bangala as a result of the introduction of books in a dialect of the predominant vernacular of the district.

The vernaculars of the area were not written down before the coming of missionaries. Hence the script used for writing them today is Roman. Government and Missions have co-operated to secure uniformity of orthography and a reduction in the number of dialects used for literature. The languages now in use for education and for printing of books for the area are: Nuer, Dinka, Zande, Moru, Bari, Acholi. (I omit Shilluk and neighbouring languages because they fall outside the area in which the Church Missionary Society has worked, with which alone I am familiar). Some indication must be given of the status of each of these languages.

The Status of the Vernaculars

ACHOLI is used for the group of people in the south-east of the country, not far from the Nile, who include Acholi and Madi. Books

have been translated and printed for the Acholi of Uganda, and these are available to the Acholi of the Sudan who find no difficulty in using them. Madi who come under Christian instruction readily learn Acholi, even if they knew none before. Thus the complete New Testament has been available to these people for many years now, and so has an admirable collection of Old Testament Stories.

BARI is used for the riverine Bari tribe and for their neighbours to the North, the South, and the West as far as the Congo border. Most speak dialects closely related to Bari, but a number of groups speak quite unrelated languages (e.g. Lugbara, Mundu). The use of a single chosen dialect for purposes of instruction and writing has been entirely successful, and even adults soon learn to use the literary language. In Bari, over the past twenty years there has been an increasing number of New Testament books in print, and this year the whole New Testament is available in one volume. Little Old Testament translation has been done, but stories from Genesis and from Exodus are printed.

The MORU DISTRICT is a conglomerate of tribes using numerous languages, the languages belonging to unrelated groups linguistically. One of the languages (not necessarily belonging to the most numerous of the tribal groups) has been used as the language of Christian instruction, and has to be learned by those of all groups. In this Moru language the whole New Testament has been printed for a year or two past. Scriptures in Bari and Moru are not used outside the Sudan.

The large group known as ZANDE is a part of a larger group spreading in from the Belgian Congo; the Zande tribe was a conquering tribe and imposed its language upon those it conquered. The area through which it is used contains people of other tribal groups, with their own languages, but these languages are not reduced to writing. The Zande language itself is thoroughly established and is used for instruction. Translation of the Scriptures has been carried out in conjunction with the missions working in Belgian Congo, and the New Testament has been in print for many years, while progress is being made with a programme of Old Testament translation.

DINKA people are found on both banks of the Nile, and their dialects differ considerably. The Bor Dinka dialect, used for translations, has to some extent established itself as a language of instruction, but the matter has been complicated in recent years by inability to secure a policy upon which Government and Missions could agree, and the dialect question remains open. The New Testament has been in print for many years, and an excellent book of Old Testament stories was reprinted a few years ago.

Little has been printed in NUER, which also presents dialect problems. Now that all the Mission work (non-Roman) is in the hands of the American Mission, no doubt some solution of the problem of unification of dialects will be found. There has been in the past very little village work, and no widespread demand for literacy, and the lack of printed matter has not caused great uneasiness.

It is only where there is extensive village evangelism, coupled with a good response and desire for baptism, that demand for printed

Scriptures becomes pressing. These conditions have prevailed in most of the groups of tribes here discussed; with the Nuer there has not so far been the response which necessitated vernacular printed Scriptures, and it seems that this is true also for the tribes farther north, Shilluk and others. Amongst these tribes there is no extensive vernacular literacy.



Thus the situation now is that a full New Testament is available for the large block in the extreme south of the country where there has been a wide acceptance of the Gospel, and where there is considerable literacy amongst adults and children. Old Testament work is in its very early stages. The groups represented by each main language number from say one hundred thousand (for Moru) to something of the order of a million.

The Vernaculars in Relation to Colloquial and Classical Arabic

The recent decision to promote the use of Arabic in this whole area necessitates a new assessment of the importance of the vernaculars, and a consideration of the proposal to make use of some kind of colloquial Arabic for printed Scriptures. Responsible officials of the Sudan Government have stated that while Arabic is to be taught in all schools, beginning at the Intermediate and Secondary level (for which sufficient teachers are available already) and working down through the Elementary to the Village level (for which teachers are being trained at a slow rate), yet it is not the intention of Government to discontinue the use of those vernaculars which are already used for school work. It has further been stated that the position of English in education will not be adversely affected by the encouragement of Arabic. It is evident, however, that such policy statements are subject to amendment both as successive Ministers assume responsibility and as conditions in the country develop. At first, it seemed that the people of the provinces would themselves oppose strongly any threat to the continued use of their vernaculars, or any sign that they would be ousted by Arabic in the schools; more recently, there have been complaints by some that the vernacular schooling is useless, and there seems to be a growing desire to learn Arabic. In the early transition stages, any estimate of trends must be very speculative. It must however be supposed that for work amongst adults the vernaculars must retain their overwhelming importance for many years to come, and therefore the Missions will require a supply of vernacular Scriptures for a long time. Presumably also the vernacular Scriptures will continue to be used by those who are only able to have a few years of education, for they will at best get only a limited skill in Arabic and will always understand their own language better. But this group, of children with small schooling, will only use their own Scriptures with any confidence if they find them printed in a script which they are familiar with. Should the time come when the vernaculars (in Roman script) are no longer taught in schools, it would perhaps be necessary to print the vernacular Scriptures in a script derived from Arabic.

Two principal issues should therefore be discussed:

- (i) Should the Scriptures in the languages of the Southern Provinces be transliterated into an Arabic script?
- (ii) Should the Scriptures be translated into colloquial Arabic for use in these Provinces?

The first task would demand the preparation of a suitable modification of the ordinary Arabic script, just as the Roman script has been modified to suit African languages. The problem would not be easily solved, since the Arabic script, with its emphasis on consonants and its limited use of vowel symbols, is better adapted to the trilateral roots of a Semitic language than to (for example) the delicate and elegant vowel system of Dinka. Presumably an elaboration of the script to show a variety of vowels could be devised, but it is likely to be clumsy. However, once the system was agreed upon, the process of transliteration would be mechanical and presumably the re-printing of books could be fairly quickly completed. As to the necessity of undertaking these tasks, I should suppose that the matter will not become urgent for some years, if ever. Neighbouring countries to the south and west, with which Sudanese have considerable contact, use Roman script; any advanced education in the Sudan must involve the learning of English; those who have already learnt to use Roman script (and those who for some years at any rate will learn it) must give the script a considerable useful life. The Government, controlled by Northern Sudanese who have never had their own vernaculars written down in any script, whether Arabic or Roman, is not likely to embark on the somewhat academic task of reducing southern languages to writing in Arabic script. This seems to be a matter to be considered, to be discussed with Government if any approach is made from the side of Government, but otherwise to be left without any action taken, till conditions have changed very markedly.

The Problem of 'Colloquial Arabic'

The task of preparing Scriptures to be printed in colloquial Arabic is a far more difficult one, but it is also a task that is much more likely to be necessary in the changing situation. Two preliminary questions that must be asked are: 'What group of people would be served by such books?' and 'What kind of colloquial Arabic would be used for the translations?' As to the first, it must be noted that whereas a large number of the men in the Southern Provinces, and the women in the few townships, understand and speak the Mongaltese Arabic referred to earlier, very few understand the better dialects spoken in the Northern Provinces, and practically none could speak or read Classical Arabic. Mongaltese Arabic is generally reckoned to be unsuitable for any attempt at printed matter; it has a very small vocabulary, it has no grammar to speak of, and it is larded with locally introduced terms derived from any other convenient language so that the particular vocabulary of any one locality is of little use for people from any distance. Notwithstanding these handicaps, some use has been made of printed matter in Mongaltese, particularly for Christian services at which mixed tribes were present;

the best example of this is in the Township of Torit, which was the Army Headquarters and so gathered a motley of soldiers. This Mongaltese is not likely to be acceptable for printed matter when, as is now the case, a better type of Arabic is being learned by those who come into contact with the increasing numbers of educated Arabic-speaking Northern Sudanese officials, and by boys and girls in the schools. All who advance beyond the fourth year of schooling are now taught Arabic, and though the number who do go to this stage is not great it is being increased as rapidly as teachers can be trained to take the new classes. The teachers who are qualified to take the lower classes (years three and four of schooling) are being trained to teach Arabic, and it is to be expected that in a few years all Elementary School children will thus learn Arabic. The books used are specially prepared, and use simplified vocabulary designed to lead up to the understanding of easy Classical Arabic. What is now under consideration is that Scriptures should be prepared and printed in the same style of language as these school books, stopping short of the Classical and modelling themselves definitely upon the spoken language of the educated Northern Sudanese, or (for the sake of being specific) upon the Omdurman dialect which is highly respected. Vocabulary choice would have to be exercised, recognizing that the people for whom the books were designed will for the most part be people of limited education and will in any case have little interest in the Classical language. Arabic is admittedly a difficult language; it is also a widely spoken language, and the books would be aimed at those ordinary people who do in fact learn to use the language for all their needs. The kind of thing that is contemplated is similar in essence to the writing of the New Testament in common Greek, and perhaps more closely to the translation of the Bible into King's English at a time when English dialects were many and very various, while the language of the learned was Latin. But if this is granted, it might make the case for printing Scriptures in Colloquial Arabic for the Northern Sudan (where this is the language of common speech) but still prove nothing as to such a need in the Southern Provinces (where few speak more than the Mongaltese patois).

The Pattern of the Future

The case for pressing on with the production of Arabic Scriptures in colloquial, for use in the Southern Sudan, seems to rest squarely on the undoubted purpose of Government to forward the use of Arabic for education and for administration in these Provinces. Where a lingua franca is required (as for instance in Church Councils) the Christian Missions now use English, and a good deal of translation into the vernaculars is needed during discussions. Since the movement of the country is undoubtedly in the direction of greater use of spoken and written Arabic, it seems certainly wise for the Church to move in the same direction, and to see that the people of the country possess and understand the Bible in this language. To abstain from the effort needed to effect this, is to court the suspicion that the Christian missionaries are continuing to divide the country by insisting upon excluding the

predominant language, and by clinging to the language of the former administration, English. There are purely educational reasons which are amply sufficient to justify a certain place for the vernacular, and another but assured place for English, in schools. In the nature of things, it must be expected that the use of vernaculars will in the course of time decrease; a united country will more and more incline to the use of a single language; we may privately regret that English has not succeeded in being that single language, but we ought not to disregard the consequences of what is after all a perfectly legitimate political decision. If Scriptures in Classical Arabic alone are made available, they can never become the means by which the common people will receive the Word of God; they will reach only the most highly cultured. Colloquial Arabic Scriptures may have only a small part to play at first in this particular area, but their part can hardly fail to grow more important as time goes on. There is a strong case for familiarising the present generation of schoolchildren with the Scriptures in Arabic, even though for them the primary source of their knowledge of the Bible will continue to be their own vernacular versions. Ordination candidates should become familiar with the Arabic versions during their training, so that they may not be restricted to their own tribes during their ministry. The townships and industrial centres which are only now beginning to grow, have groups of mixed tribes and the children of these people are already to some extent detribalized; such populations already need Arabic Scriptures, and their numbers are increasing. It should not be claimed that the need is already a great one, measured in the numbers of those who would now use such books, but the opportunity to be abreast of a quite certain development is at hand now, and ought not to be missed.

Problems of Bible Translation

R. F. Henderson

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When the Holy Spirit was given on the day of Pentecost the disciples began to speak with tongues and Jews who had been born abroad, whose language was no longer Aramaic but that of the country of their birth, were amazed to hear, every man in his own tongue, the mighty works of God.

The gift of tongues might well be compared with the rocket which is used to assist a modern aeroplane in its take-off. When the plane becomes airborne the rocket is spent and the further propulsion of the plane is left to its own engines. In the same way we believe that the gift of tongues was for a time and for a purpose. That time and purpose are past and the work of making the Word of God known to every man in his own tongue has become the continuing task of generation