

Experiences in Translating the New Testament in Kui

Helen M. Evans

The Konds are one of the aboriginal tribes of India, who were driven by the Aryan invasion of the country away from the Plains, and into the jungle fastnesses of the mountains. Most of the Konds settled in what are now called the Kond Hills and Khondmals in the Province of Orissa on the eastern side of India, situated between the much larger Provinces of Bengal and Madras.

When they were discovered in 1835 they were in the habit of offering human sacrifices, believing that human blood was far more efficacious than any other in turning away the wrath or malice of the Earth Goddess, as evidenced by calamities such as drought, floods, famine, epidemics or a succession of deaths amongst either the villagers or their herds. Alongside their fear of the Earth Goddess had grown a fear of all the lesser evil spirits, who, they believed, inhabited the trees, rocks and rivers throughout their country, and were responsible for all the everyday troubles which beset a very poor and primitive people without any idea of sanitation, hygiene or contagion—a people trying to scratch a living from rather poor soil in mountainous country infested by panthers, tigers, bears, and, in some areas, by wild elephants.

It was to animists with this background that the missionaries went at the end of the nineteenth century, taking the Gospel of the love of God. The language was unwritten and had to be dug out laboriously, word by word, with continual alterations and emendations as further discoveries threw more light on the words already collected.

By the time I joined the missionary band the Gospels of Mark and John were in print, and the other two Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles had been translated by Luke Singh, a Christian working in the Kond Hills and the son of a man rescued by the British from being offered as a sacrifice. There was then a small community of converts, who, with the missionaries, were bearing such an active witness to their new faith, that, before long, an ever-growing number of people in different districts were asking for teaching.

As the community grew, educational as well as evangelistic work extended. Christian young men were sent for teachers' training so that eventually the entire staff in all our schools would be Christians. They and others became lay preachers, helping to answer the call for instruction from districts now far too numerous for the missionaries alone to supply. And as we trained them and tried to impart our knowledge, we were hoping that the time would come when they in their turn would be able to give us the words and phrases that we had sought so long in vain, and so make possible a really satisfactory translation of the Scriptures.

Preachers often spoke from texts in parts of the Bible as yet untranslated into Kui, and as they read from the Oriya version the sudden

lack of interest and attention, particularly amongst the women, was very noticeable. The need for the Scriptures in their own tongue began to impress itself on my mind, and I was glad to help when one or another asked for a Kui rendering of a verse, a chapter or a story in either the Old or New Testament. In church services, at funerals and weddings, in the Sunday Schools, in thinking of the young men who, we hoped, would become the leaders of the community, and their need of the Epistles to guide them as they sought to direct, govern, and probably discipline the church—at all these times the urgent need of giving the people the Word of God in their own language became more and more pressing. Problems increased in a growing community, and to help my husband in his teaching and preaching I looked for a pundit and translated Corinthians. By then the four Gospels and the Acts had been in print for some years, so, after Corinthians, it seemed natural to try to translate Romans, without, perhaps, much conscious expectation of getting very far with it. Translation began as a hobby and was indulged in at odd times between the visiting, teaching and nursing that fills the days of most pioneer missionaries—a hobby regarded with scant favour by some of my colleagues and one to keep out of sight as far as possible. Gradually it began to assume first place in the day as it must be given the early hours of the morning when both my pundit and I were fresh, and we felt it must only be undertaken as long as we were in accord. We always began and ended with prayer, and I very soon discovered that there must be no vestige of discord between us—not even an unexpressed opposition in the mind—and that work must stop immediately a difference of opinion arose. If this yielded to prayer, well and good, if not, translation must stop for the day. I believe that it is always possible to be mistaken, however carefully one may have thought the matter through. However logical the steps of the argument, however right one may feel the conclusion to be, as long as we are human we can always be wrong, and in translating, more perhaps than in anything else, I found it absolutely essential to approach the work in this attitude of mind, and to be ready to believe and acknowledge this, as only so could the mind be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Using the as yet imperfectly-known language of a people given to action and not to thought or meditation, progress was slow and the search for the right expressions exhausting, but the conviction grew that Kui was richer than we knew, and many of the words we wanted were probably there waiting for us if only we could get hold of them. I found it necessary to keep in the foreground of the mind that it was a translation we were engaged on and not an interpretation, so that there must be nothing in the way of explanation, nothing that might even distantly savour of personal opinion, no words or phrases used because one had a liking for them. The words of Revelation 22 : 18, 19 were continually in my mind, and whether they are applicable to all Scripture or only to the book of Revelation, as far as I was concerned they coloured all thought of the almost overwhelming responsibility of putting the Word of God into another language either orally or in writing. At the same time we were seeking to put the thoughts of a man like Paul, and his teaching

on spiritual matters into a primitive tongue admirably suited for everyday exchange amongst an illiterate people, but, as far as we knew, almost entirely lacking words to express abstract ideas.

It was the prepositions that seemed to give the most trouble. In English one preposition seems to have several shades of meaning, and then again, two or three of them are so much alike they might be interchanged. 'Of' looked so inoffensive and yet frequently landed us in difficulties. Kui verbs are vivid and dramatic, an excellent medium for the telling of a story or of what people say and do, but there is no tense that expresses custom or habit; for example 'he sells cloths' can be translated either 'he is selling cloths' giving the idea that he is actively engaged in selling them now, or 'he will sell cloths' using the future tense, putting off the whole transaction to some future time, but there is no way of saying that it is his habit to sell cloths. The Pluperfect tense is used very often, where, in English, the ordinary Past tense would be sufficient. That there is a considerable difference between the two tenses in some verbs, was made abundantly clear when one of the Christians 'died' one night (in the Past tense), and early next morning as we hurried out to make enquiries about funeral arrangements we found him sitting on the verandah! It set us searching for an explanation, checking and re-checking possibilities of the meaning and usages of this and other verbs. The explanation was that he had not died (in the Pluperfect tense). The verb 'to die' used in this tense means that life is extinct, but in the Past indicates merely that the man or woman has lost consciousness. In the search for more words and an understanding of how and when to use them, the Konds were willing to help but they simply didn't have any idea, as a rule, what we were driving at. A habit that mystified us was that very frequently on entering a house or village, when we made a simple statement by way of greeting as the Konds do to one another, like 'I have come', the answer would be 'Yes, you came', changing the Perfect to the Past tense; and when we tried the same greeting in similar circumstances but using the Past tense, thinking to correct our previous mistake, then the answer would be given in the Perfect. As boys went through the schools and came back as teachers with some knowledge, at least, of our ideas about grammar, we hoped for an explanation, but all we could get was a shrug of the shoulders, a gentle smile, and 'Oh, we just do it'.

Kui is rich in words for the species but often completely lacking in any word to express the genus; for example, the Konds make at least twenty baskets of different shapes and sizes, and each has its own particular name and purpose, but they have no word for 'basket', so the gathering of the fragments had to be considered carefully, and the same whenever pots and vessels are mentioned. Similarly there are words for every kind of sin, but nothing for 'sin' itself, as a comprehensive noun including all sins. There is no word, either, for 'brother', it must be translated 'elder brother' or 'younger brother', and the same with 'sister'. This bothered us more than once, for example in Colossians 4:10, "Marcus, sister's son to Barnabas". Relationship is carefully worked out with different words for older and younger members, and those on the

father's side of the family quite different from those related in similar degree through the mother. The inability to speak of people in general terms raised a question in Luke 24 : 13 where "two of them... went... to Emmaus". There are inclusive words for a crowd including both men or women without reference to sex, but there is nothing for "two of them" which leaves the matter of sex in doubt. Another place where the need to be very precise made a difficulty was in Matthew 23 : 30, "...partakers with them in the blood of the prophets". 'Blood' would be translated differently according to whether it belonged to a living person, a wounded person, or one who had been killed.

The Kond Hills are situated between the Telugu-speaking area of northern Madras and the Oriya-speaking Province of Orissa. Many years ago Government issued an order that all work in the law courts and in schools in the Kond Hills must be done in Oriya. This had several disadvantages, but at least it gave me a language in common with my pundit in which the Bible had been translated, and with which he became increasingly familiar. As we went along quite a number of expressions like 'righteousness', 'justification', 'redemption' were found to be translatable even though there isn't the exact equivalent. For example, the Kui adjective *tiri* means 'pure, clean, shining, without alloy' and so could be used for 'righteous', and, by adding the appropriate suffix, for 'righteousness', and 'righteous people', and also to translate 'saints'. In considering 'to be justified' we finally decided to use a paraphrase which literally means 'to obtain release to become a righteous person', infinitives being used in Kui as various parts of speech and three together far from uncommon. 'Redemption' and 'salvation' were obtained by using the infinitive 'to save' as a noun. This particular verb was discovered by my husband in the early days when he happened to be sitting in the house of a Kond who was cooking some rice on the fire, and as it came to the boil and was about to spill over, he lifted it off the fire, whereupon came the ejaculation *Ethil*, 'You saved (it)', and the discovery of the verb *ehpa*, and from that by adding the masculine singular substantive came 'Saviour', a term we had been seeking previously without success.

Greek words like *Hades*, *Alpha*, *Omega*, *Amen*, which have been kept in the English translations, we felt might well be retained just as they stand. They would have to be explained, of course, just as they had needed explanation to English-speaking people originally, but in time would become part of the everyday language of the Christians. 'Sea', 'lion', 'pearls', 'marble', 'cinnamon', and other nouns mostly in Revelation have no equivalent in Kui, neither are the objects themselves known in the Kond Hills, so it was thought best to adopt the Oriya names for them. Where names of places or people have been in question, we felt that our guiding principle must be to avoid any suggestion of discrepancy between the Oriya and Kui versions, so that those reading both would feel that they are one and the same book. In taking the Oriya names, however, we wrote them as a Kond would pronounce them without the aspirated consonants and hissing sibilants of the Oriya tongue. Trying to keep the two versions as much alike as possible raised a difficulty when considering the translation of 'wolves', as the Oriya version

substituted 'tigers', these animals being common in Orissa. In the Kond Hills, however, though tigers are common enough, there are wild-dogs. These belong to the wolf family and have many of the wolf characteristics, and are considered fiercer than any of the cat tribe. We decided on 'wild-dogs', firstly because they are indigenous, and secondly, because they belong to the right family.

Kui idiom made one or two changes necessary, for example in Revelation 14 : 13, "their works do follow them". In Kui it is "their works go with them". Also in Matthew 8 : 34, "the whole city came out to meet Jesus". In Kui a man does not go to meet anyone, he goes to see him.

As the translation progressed and insight into the minds of the people increased, the conviction gained ground that a literal translation, however correct, is not necessarily a good translation. The object to be aimed at is to get the right reaction in the minds of the readers, and to get this the more knowledge and understanding one can gain of the working of the minds of the people the better, as the Konds, at any rate, do not think in exactly the same way as we in the West do. For this reason 'corn' was translated as 'paddy' (unhusked rice), paddy being the main crop of the country and rice the staple diet of the people—besides which, corn is unknown and there is no word for it, and it seemed to us that paddy and rice in the mind of the Kond stood for all that corn meant to the Jews. In Matthew chapter 10 where the twelve are being sent forth and are told not to provide two coats for the journey, the difference in Kui thinking is interesting. If a Kond said he was taking two coats he would mean that he was carrying two as well as the one he was wearing; so it had to be rendered 'another coat for changing into'. Verses 12 and 13 of the same chapter provided two more phrases that to Kui thought struck a discordant note—in Kui a house cannot be said to be worthy or unworthy, neither can one salute or bless a house, only the people in it; so in both cases instead of 'house' we put 'people of the house' as being the only phrase acceptable to the Konds. It is a usual custom for a child to be blessed by one of its elder relatives, but the idea conveyed in Revelation 5 : 13, "Blessing... be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne" is contrary to all Kui thought, for blessing is bestowed by the greater upon the lesser. I explained the passage at length, but it was quite evident that the very suggestion of the word 'blessing' being used towards God was not only impossible but abhorrent, so we substituted 'praise' as conveying something nearer the right meaning to the Kond mind.

There is no word for thanks in the language. The only way we have found so far of trying to give the idea of thanks is to use their term of greeting when they meet. This is sufficient when thanks are due to a man, but for thanksgiving to God their greeting *johari* combined with part of the verb 'to praise' has been used, either the adverbial participle which when repeated gives the idea of continued action, or the conjunctive participle, probably in more frequent daily use than any other part of speech.

Occasionally we found that an apparently correct word left in the

mind a wrong meaning, or a suggestion that detracted from the meaning intended; for instance, in John 17 : 17, "thy word is truth". To translate it "thy word is true-thing" (using the adjective 'true' plus the substantival suffix to form the abstract 'truth') immediately raised the query in the Kui mind that there might be other occasions when it was not true, so we used the substantival form of *tiri* meaning 'pure, holy, without alloy', which gives the right meaning and leaves no question. Only one good Kui word do I remember deliberately avoiding, and that was the word for sacrifice and worship, *laka*. We felt it was unwise to use it, at present at any rate, for anything connected with the sacrifice of Christ or the worship of God by Christians, as it is intrinsically bound up in the minds of the people with their animistic beliefs and ritual.

After Romans and Corinthians were printed I was asked to finish the New Testament, but it sounded too fantastic to contemplate. I felt that Hebrews and Revelation would prove impossible to translate. In point of fact neither of these books gave as much trouble as the epistles of Peter, James and John, which, being short, I had expected would present comparatively few difficulties. The passage that gave more trouble than anything else in the whole New Testament and held us up for days was the first two verses of John's second letter.

After an epistle was translated I went over it again and again, and then left it for at least a year, so that I might come back to it with a fresh outlook to give it the final revision before submitting it to the Literature Committee. Sometimes the periods were of longer duration, as translation was subject to interruption by the manifold claims that are constantly made on the time of a pioneer missionary. The Literature Committee consisted of missionaries and Konds. They, separately and in pairs, went through the manuscript and brought their suggestions and criticisms to the Committee meeting, where they were considered. All alterations agreed upon were incorporated and the typed copy put aside as 'finished'. But owing to the continuing growth of our knowledge of the language during the eighteen years in which the translation was done, these 'finished' copies had to be corrected from time to time. The fact, too, that we were setting the spelling of Kui in Oriya script made very careful revision on this count also most necessary.

The Gospels had been printed with each verse beginning on a new line, and chapter headings in the centre of the page. When the Kond Christians were conducting services, I realised how difficult it was for them to judge just where to begin and end their reading. That led to the decision to arrange the new translation in paragraphs. Considerably later, in a discussion one morning with my pundit, I referred him to the Old Testament for the full story that lay behind the name of Balaam in II Peter 2, and as we read it together and I saw the interest in his face and the dawning comprehension of the fact that the Old and New Testaments are parts of a whole, and each the complement of the other, I felt how needful it was that references be inserted after all quotations throughout the New Testament.

Kui was first of all mostly written in Roman script. Then came a change in policy. Kui belongs to the Dravidian language group of South India,

so Telugu would have been the natural choice of script, and the sound values of our vowels and consonants would have been amply covered by their alphabet; but because Oriya is the language of all Kond schools and law courts, as well as being necessary for all traders who go down to the markets and towns of the Plains, it was decided to adopt the Oriya script, even though it belongs to the Sanscrit group of Northern India. This has entailed the use of many diacritical marks, the breaking of rules governing the combination of vowels and consonants in Oriya, and the cutting of special type for the printing of Kui. It also means that the compositors in the Press, who are all Oriyas, have to set up type for our work that uses many of their letters but breaks most of their rules, and this makes many difficulties both for them and us.

Through the years many discoveries were made as we strove to find the right words by which to translate the Scriptures, so many that I am convinced that even now there are many more still to be brought to our knowledge. It is inevitable that quite a number of the words and phrases used have little Biblical significance for many of the Christians at present, and certainly for the non-Christians, but these words will gradually assume, in the minds of believers, the special meaning that they are intended to convey, just as words like 'salvation' and 'redemption' in English have grown in significance since the days of King James.

Looking back three things stand out more than anything else; the amazing beauty of the thirteenth of Corinthians which shines through and glorifies the words, no matter what the language; the personality of some of the writers that seemed to emanate from the pages of their writings; and the sense of compulsion, both to go on and to stop, that brooked no questioning.

Questions and Answers

Question:

The Fulani Revision Committee would be grateful if you could help us in finding a word for 'priest'. As you know, Islam has no priesthood; the idea of a priest coming between men and God is foreign to a Moslem. Possibly the Imam of a mosque might be said to correspond as nearly as possible to a priest? The Fulani use the word *Limanjo* for such a person. Would you recommend using this word or coining a new word? And the word 'sacrifice'? The nearest we appear to get is by using the root, meaning 'to cut the throat', so that the noun would be the root plus the suffix for a sheep or goat, or a neutral form. What is done in other languages spoken by Moslems?

What about the word for 'Sabbath'? Do you recommend coining a word from the Hebrew, or using the word for Saturday, or the day of rest? Incidentally, can you please tell us whether or not the Jewish sabbath began at sunset on the day of preparation (Friday) and ended on the sabbath at sunset? Our Fulani reckon a day of twenty-four