

# Some Reflections on the Revision of the New Testament in Lokele

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Sixty years ago missionary pioneers of the Baptist Missionary Society chose a site which they considered would be the most suitable for a mission station among the five or six tribes of the Upper Congo River around Stanley Falls. This site was accessible by canoe and forest path, not only to the riverine Lokele fisher folk, but also to the nearby Olombo forest tribe, to the Bambole hunters across the mile-wide river, and to their neighbors, the agricultural Foma, and also to the Bagenya who fish in the Stanley Falls of Kisangani (now Stanleyville). These latter are cousins of the Lokele and generally speak their language.

Yakusu was indeed a good center from which to proclaim the Gospel, not only a tactical center but also one of the strategic posts of the Christian church in its fight against animism and Islam. Soon after beginning work there and because of the help of a redeemed and converted slave girl named Salaamu, the missionaries were able to write down the Lokele language and then began to translate the Scriptures. Already in 1899 books of the New Testament were being made ready for the press, and the Gospel of Mark was printed page by page in Congo. This was eagerly used by converted cannibals to teach their friends and former enemies the Gospel of love. Slowly, because of intervening sickness and death, the New Testament and principal books of the Old Testament were published, read, and taught to the wild folk of the many tribes living in the vicinity of Yakusu. Since that time partial revisions have been made; but now, after more than fifty years' knowledge and study of the language and social habits of the people, and with the better text available, it was considered necessary to undertake a complete revision of the New Testament before remaking the plates to print further editions. This was the more necessary because a good deal of paraphrase had found its way into the Epistles and Acts.

## Christian Content in Lokele Words

In the early days of translation into Lokele there was some hesitation, of course, in using in a Christian context words whose connotation was dubious or suspect. Long usage by black and white in Christian teaching has winnowed grain from chaff, and some words have, indeed, been converted to Christian service during these years and can now be used without comment or explanation.

Here are some examples of the way in which words have thus acquired a fuller and deeper meaning.

-*kalangana* 'to turn back on, to rewill, to repent'. This word is now used with confidence to translate *metanoëó*.

-*mesele* 'to let pass, to overlook, to excuse a fault, to forgive fault or sin'.

-*sombola* 'to beg, to beseech, to pray', and so, when used in the applicative, 'to pray for, to intercede'.

-*inela* 'to bend towards, to praise in dancing, to praise in worship'.

-*semola* 'to give credit to, to praise with gratitude'.

-*imela* literally, 'to grunt at or in respect of something', so, 'to approve of and assent to, to believe'.

-*lendelo* 'to trust to' and so, 'to believe in, to have confidence in'.

-*endola* 'to redeem a pledge, to redeem from slavery'. This word is well known by Lokele folk. *Boendoli* is used for 'Redeemer', literally, 'He who buys back from slavery'.

-*sangola* 'to inherit', but nouns formed from this and other roots are not all suitable for Scriptural translation. *Lisangö* means 'inheritance' but includes the inheritance of the wives of a polygamous husband and is definitely not to be used in the translation of the Scriptures in all cases. However, *botiko* from the root *-tika* 'to leave behind' can be used for inheritance in the general sense and is suitable for our purpose.

### Incomplete Correspondence in Meaning

*Ikomya* is the word used for the chief's mouthpiece, *porteparole*, spokesman, and is almost equivalent to headsmen, but it is not good enough to translate *Paraclete*. Further research and long usage proved the fitness of the word *Bosungi* to take its place in the Johannine books. *Bosungi* is a 'Helper', i.e. 'One who stands by another in trouble, litigation, in sorrow or bereavement, and one who speaks on behalf of another'.

There are no pastoral folk in the Lokele language area, so that no word is available to translate "yoke" of Matthew 2:29, 30. If an artificial word were coined—and this is often possible in Bantu languages—there would still be the necessity of explaining the use of the yoke with domestic draft animals which are not found in the basin of the Congo. It was necessary, therefore, to find an equivalent. The most acceptable word seems to be *njembe*, which is the name of a carrying-strap or band worn around the head and across the chest or shoulders to support a burden of firewood, garden produce, or even a child carried by this means on the back or hip. There is, of course, no word for plow, so that "plow" in Luke 9:62 is translated by 'hoe' with no loss of meaning, since it is equally impossible to use this cultivating tool when turning the head in order to cast a look behind one.

Everlasting and eternal life are recognizedly difficult concepts to render into Bantu tongues. After consideration, use was made of three terms, according to the context to be translated. *Layalaya*, meaning 'season by season, year in, year out, everlasting', has been used; *lokato* means 'a state of persistent endurance, living on and on'. But perhaps the most satisfactory word is *loiko*, which means 'survival; enduring through crisis, catastrophe, and death'.

"Commandments," "law of Moses," and "law" all need careful consideration in order to arrive at a translation which will adequately convey the meaning of Scripture without doing violence to the Lokele

words used. There are several terms available, and it may be interesting to give the whole list of possibilities. *Ekela* is a general term for 'rule', 'law', or 'commandment'. *Liti* is the negative term for 'prohibition, rule against action'. *Bokili* is an exclusive term for 'prohibition or taboo', usually concerning social intercourse or food. On the positive side, there is *ndola*, an 'order, command, or enjoiner to action'. *Likakanelo* gives very precise 'instructions, injunction, or advice' for action or conduct. *Ndokwa liti* means 'to fall under a prohibition', hence 'to be thus guilty of an offence against a particular rule or law'. *Ndotombola bokili, liti, ndola, ekela, likakanelo* is 'to break a rule, law, or taboo', while *ndotefola akela, liti, bokili, ndola* is 'to disobey the law or prohibition and so also affront and disobey or flout the lawgiver'.

*Skandalon, skandalidzô* are well-recognized puzzles for all translators, and not less so for those of Bantu languages. However, in this language there are words for 'bait-sticks' and 'traps', and for 'stumbling and tripping over obstacles' in one's path. One passage may be cited as giving interesting light on the way in which the Congo form of the problem is solved. 1 John 2:10 has been rendered as 'He who loves his brother basks in the sunshine and thus is no root in the ground over which his brother might stumble'.

Some words present a problem for which there seems to be no solution, and when one consults the variety of modern translations little further help is obtained. One such case is found in 2 Cor. 8:13 and *isotêtos*, the word for which one long sought an equivalent in Lokele. The idea behind *isotês* seems to be 'equality or equality of share', and this has been variously rendered by the AV, ERV, Moffatt, and Weymouth as "equality," "equalize matters," "give and take," and "equalization of burdens." Eventually a Lokele word was submitted and accepted by the Lokele group who review the translation; this word is *likelemba*, which denotes the equal and alternate sharing of one's share of food, wages, or ration. When one has none or lacks a fair share, then a friend gives his share, so that 'your abundance may supply their want at the present time, so that their abundance (on another occasion) may supply your need'.<sup>1</sup>

The lack of terms for points of the compass also presents a problem not easy of solution; and while it is possible to refer to the rising and setting of the sun for east and west, there is nothing which will adequately render north and south. It is necessary to employ non-Bantu terms for compass bearings, as in Rev. 21:13. Dr. Doke's recent article in this journal has been particularly useful in this connection.

The precious stones and gems mentioned in Rev. 21 are not known to Lokele folk, so that it is not possible to *translate* their names. These gems have to be described as 'beautiful stones of great value' and their names given either in Bantuized form, which results in a very difficult word of no connotation whatever, or in modern non-Bantu words which can be referred to in a dictionary available to school-attending Africans. Such a reference will give help in finding the color and

<sup>1</sup> *vide* also International Critical Commentary, *in loco* p. 245.

appearance of the precious stone and not a puzzle which holds up the understanding of the rest of the verse.

### Grammatical Subtleties

The richness of Bantu verbal forms and tenses sometimes facilitates the rendering of some of the subtleties of the Greek form and of the middle voice. Prefix, infix, and suffix may pile up in Lokele to make a long and sometimes forbidding word to Europeans, but one which in itself can express several English words, e.g. in Hebrews 1:18, *ebitilatombolomoko* 'which things shall not ever be falsified'. On the debit side, however, Lokele has no definite nor any indefinite article, so that demonstratives must sometimes be used to supply the lack in this part of speech.

It is interesting and often useful to compare the versions of a text, and thus the translator may be reminded of little-used vernacular words which exactly render the word under consideration. One such case is "purloiners" in Titus 2:10. Reference to Tyndale's wonderfully alive translation gives "be not pickers." This means 'petty thieves, sneak thieves'. The Lokele *wiya* is too severe a word, but *bokwangä* seems exactly to suit the sense required and means 'sneaking and taking off what was carefully hidden or set aside'.

The full and completed revision has been submitted to a group of Congo evangelists drawn from those tribes who speak Lokele as their mother tongue or who use it in market, school, and church life. This group met under the able chairmanship and counsel of Dr. J. F. Carrington, Principal of the Grenfell Institute at Yalamba near Yakusu, and amended and criticized the work as it proceeded. The senior Lokele pastor has also made frequent contributions to the vocabulary used and has been consulted on specific problems. The work, commenced in July 1954, was completed in July 1956, and the typescript is now ready for the press. The group of Africans at Yalamba are appreciative of words and phrases now used in the revision and say, "This is the Lokele that is being lost in our land," and are happy to find it now used in the service of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is indeed our desire, not merely that good Lokele should be read and used, but that the Word of God shall clearly be understood and believed, for the Church of Christ in Congo must here find her spiritual food and her message to Africa.

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## Check that Word!

Dr. Wesley Sadler, linguist, promoter of literature and literacy, and translator among the Loma people of Liberia, tells about asking an informant for the word for 'midwife', which he had forgotten. The informant immediately came up with a word which on investigation turned out to mean 'the middle one of three wives'.