

Problems of the Bible Translator in Connection with the Cultural and Religious Background of the People

by

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When in 1922 we first came to the Island of Timor we found that the evangelists were not making adequate use of the Timorese language. As a result there were relatively few Christians, and a number of basic problems had arisen because of an inadequate appreciation of the Timorese culture and use of words in their indigenous context. During the process of translation in the intervening years we have discovered a number of difficulties and this paper is designed to explain the problems and some of the solutions.

1. The Translation of Hebrew *pesel* "graven image"

In the earlier days the word *lunat* was used as a translation of "graven image" in Exodus 20 (the second Commandment). However, this word means primarily a design cut on bamboo or woven into cloth. It is true that these designs probably had an origin in some totemic use. But the religious connection with the cutting of such designs or the dyeing and weaving of cloth is no longer evident. These designs have only a social significance rather than a religious meaning.

Furthermore, the Timorese do not have any idols with the exception of a Buddha and an image of the Virgin Mary which came from shipwrecks of former days. The people might possibly venerate these objects, but they do not form a fundamental part of the religious life.

On the other hand, the people do have a term *le'u* which has deep religious significance parallel to "graven image". Primarily it designates some conspicuous tree or rock, especially something which is weird or terrible. It is used in connection with medicine and identifies the secret power associated with fertility magic in conception and birth. Certain trees, highly polished stones, and crocodile hides may be regarded as *le'u*.

In the Hebrew word *pesel* the primary meaning is the particular object, but we have chosen to take its secondary meaning which exists in the attitude of the people toward the *pesel* (namely the worship of an object), and in this way we find considerable parallelism between the Hebrew *pesel* and the Timorese *le'u*. This meaning of worship is clearly brought out in the following story:

An old man was once traveling when all of a sudden he saw in a vision a crocodile changed into the form of a beautiful woman. She promised him wisdom and success in head hunting. The woman gave him a transparent stone, and when he came to himself he found this stone in his little bag.

It is possible to argue that the stone is not a graven image because it is not shaped by human hands, but this stone has deep religious significance and is regarded as having its power from its magic association with the crocodile who was changed into the form of a woman, and thus it is related to the vision which he had.

Most unexpected objects may serve as *le'u*. Once a baby boy was born with a caul upon the head. Such a person is regarded by the Timorese as having special magic power and a visionary disposition, and from the time of babyhood he had a little bag tied around his throat. This enabled him to enter into a visionary trance during which time he could predict how many horses would be stolen during a projected raid. One time he went out without this little bag, was bitten by a serpent, and his life was in danger. A medicine man gave him a substitute bag which cured him and made him as prosperous as ever. When this young man became a Christian, he did not dare to give up the little bag, but once in a dream someone pointed to the bag, and told him to give it up. Immediately he went to the evangelist and explained his dream, but instead of insisting on the man's giving up the bag, he told him to wrap some money and put it in the New Testament. The New Testament was then opened and the money pointed to Acts 7:43 "Yea, ye took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of your god Remphan, figures which ye made to worship them: and I will carry you away beyond Babylon". The man was so much impressed that immediately he took off the bag from around his neck and would have nothing more to do with it.

In one of the tribes on Timor a kind of salamander is regarded as a *le'u*, and as long as the old word *lunat* was used none of the Christians gave up sacrificing to the salamander.

It is true that these objects are not technically graven images, though some of the *le'u* can be made by hand, but they have the same functional relationship in the Timorese religion as the graven images had in Hebrew religion.

When finally we introduced the word *le'u* in the second commandment, it was a great revelation to the Timorese people, and there was quite a new attitude, for they finally realized that God and only God should be worshipped.

2. Hebrew Messiah "Anointed One"

On Timor the idea of "anointing with oil" is completely unknown. However, they can understand the idea of "power being granted from God".

In Isaiah 45 Cyrus is spoken of as "anointed". Surely this does not mean that oil was poured on his head as in the case of David. However, because of the great importance of his decision to let the children of Israel return, he is called "anointed".

In order to convey the idea of Jesus Christ being anointed in the sense of receiving the power of God for his specific task, we have used the phrase *Neno Anan* which means literally "Son of heaven". Sometimes chieftains are called *Neno Anan*, and once some of the people wanted to call me as the translator *Neno Anan*, but I insisted that only

Jesus Christ is the true "Son of heaven". He alone is the one designated by God, the one on whom the power of God has come.

3. The Translation of Greek *Psuchê* and *Pneuma*

It has always been recognized that a completely consistent translation of these two words is very difficult, but in Timorese we have two expressions which in general make the distinction between *psuchê*, which refers to the human spirit in its earthly existence, and *pneuma*, which refers to the spirit in its religious existence and life beyond the grave.

In Timorese we translate *psuchê* by *monin tolon*. The first word refers to life in general and the second word really means a new sprout from plants. The primary emphasis is derived from biological existence, but the intellectual life is not lacking.

The word *smanan* translates Greek *pneuma* which refers to the human spirit, especially after this life.

4. Words for "Possessed", "Satan", and "Devil"

In Timorese the spirit of a dead person may enter into a relative, and such a person is regarded as "possessed". Literally "the dead body mounts". The fuller expression is "the *smanan* (i.e. spirit) of the dead mounts the living". The victim is thus possessed and the spirit of the dead person speaks through the mouth of the living relative.

The Portuguese for "Devil" has been borrowed by the Timorese. In the south of Timor, however, it means a small spirit which spreads fear by making people sick with fever. In the north of Timor it is a spirit which induces insanity. But neither of these words is adequate. Accordingly we have used "the chief of those who bring to ruin". Formerly the devil had also been called "the lord of all sin".

The word "Satan" has been borrowed through Arabic and Indonesian in the form *syaitan*, but the primary significance is that of "the great opponent after death". We chose for Timorese a phrase meaning "chief of the dead". With this phrase the emphasis is upon the power of death. However, in some contexts such as in Revelation, we have employed "the chief of enmity".

5. The Translation of "Reconciliation" (Greek *katallagê*) and "Propitiation" (Greek *hilasmos*)

In Timorese one can translate "reconciliation" by "making the peace". This involves a background of Timorese customs. One time there had been a series of head-hunting raids, and there was enmity between the two groups. However, they wanted to bring the raids to an end, and so they sought out a person to act as mediator. They spoke of him as "the head of making even and the shoulder of making even". The ritual of reconciliation includes the use of certain sharp thorns from a particular type of palm tree. The points of these thorns are cut off while the people recite a ritual including the words, "The teeth of the dog were sharp, and the teeth of the palm were sharp. We throw away the sharpness of the dog's teeth and we throw away the sharpness of the palm's

teeth". In the process of reconciliation they on rare occasions exchange women in marriage as a kind of a symbolic reconciliation. In speaking of the reconciliation of God, however, we can use another phrase. Making peace between tribes is called: "the place (or the people) are made even", but to describe reconciliation between God and man one may say "their hearts were made even".

To translate "propitiation" we have attempted to follow the significance of the Hebrew *kaphar* with the meaning of "cover up guilt", for the Timorese expression has the same figurative sense as the Hebrew. There is, of course, a sense in which this phrase hints of sacrifice, but in its New Testament context the teaching points to the Cross.

6. The Translation of "Baptism"

Formerly in Timor the word used for "baptism" was *nasrami* which actually came by way of Arabic from "Nasarene". Its meaning was "to make a Christian" and the idea was that the one who baptized actually made Christians. Such an expression was obviously inadequate.

We have used for "baptize" the phrase *in antam oè* which means "to enter into the water". This phrase can be used for sprinkling, for water is used as a symbol of the new life, and being baptized means for the Timorese to enter into a new sphere of life.

Baptism is so frequently spoken of in connection with the giving of the Holy Spirit that the proper associations have arisen in the thinking of the people.

7. The Translation of "Disciple" and "Apostle"

Formerly the name for a disciple was *li ana sekolah* which meant only "a school child".

When we first went to Timor, we often talked with the non-Christians and encouraged them to come to church and to listen even though they might not want to become Christians. However, they said, "the religion of Jesus is only for school children"; and since the East India Company and later the Dutch government (both were called by the people "the company") had instituted schools, the people associated Christians with "the cult of the company". This was in contrast to what they regarded as their religion "the cult of the Timorese". Before sending their children to a school instituted by the "company", many people used to sacrifice and consult the oracles, for they feared "the cult of the company". When the children returned to the village, they would sacrifice again in order to reinstate the children in "the cult of the Timorese".

I explained to the people that the gospel existed long before the East India Company or the Dutch government, and that my own ancestors had been "heathen". They were amazed that my ancestors could ever have been non-Christian. I asked the people, "To whom belongs the sun? To the cult of the company or to the Timorese cult?" They answered, "The sun belongs to the heavens". The same question was asked in relation to the rain. And then I explained, "The cult of Jesus

Christ is as the sun, shining in the East and West, bestowed by the Lord of heaven to all nations". The message of the Bible had come to them from God.

It was remarkable how they seemed to understand the distinction between being a Christian and "the cult of the company". When the Japanese came during the Second World War, they were friendly to the non-Christians but threatened the Christians with death. The Christian people, however, remained firm in their religious faith, and understood that the gospel had not been brought to them as political propaganda of the Dutch.

In order to have an adequate word for "disciple" we formed the expression *asium lasi*. The verbal stem *simo* means "to receive", and the derived substantive means "the one who receives"; *lasi* means "cult". A disciple is thus "one who receives the cult of Jesus Christ".

To translate the word "apostle", we found that we had to avoid the former word *kulu* which had been borrowed from Indonesian *guru* meaning "teacher". In 1926 there was a religious movement in Timor in which a woman pretended to bring people back to life, and the house of worship for this group was called *kulu* "the house of mourning". We could not use *kulu* because of its meaning of "mourning", hence we translated *haëf*, meaning "messenger" sent by a chief. Often this person was in Timorese culture one who brought a message of death, but in the phrase *haëf Usif Jesus* "messenger of Lord Jesus", we were able to use this term as an adequate translation for "apostle".

8. The Translation of "Conscience"

An adequate translation of the Greek *suneidêsis* is almost always difficult, for it involves a kind of basic agreement of man with a transcendental reality.

In the Timorese language we found the word *nono*, which basically has to do with family magic, especially fertility in harvest and child birth, and it identifies the vital link between successive generations.

The word *namneo* means "to agree that something is true". The usual parallel expression in Timorese is *namneo ma namnono* "that which is right and acknowledged as such", and so we could use the form *namnono*. This implies a general recognition of the link between the seen and the unseen world. It involves the idea of cosmic magic and from the theological standpoint the word is difficult because of its connection with the past in Timorese religion. However, in the phrase *nek amnono knino* "the heart that agrees to the light" (*knino* "light" or "holy"), we have the basis of an expression which can be used for "conscience". It is true that *nono* was originally a word identifying only magic, but its association with the gospel message has meant that it has undergone a considerable change in meaning. The gospel not only means the rebirth of the soul but in a sense a kind of new birth of the language.