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Ngbandi Terminology in Translating Christian Ideas

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(The following article was prepared originally by Mr. Nelson at the request of the Native Language and Culture Committee for the 1954 Conference of the Mission Evangélique d'Ubangi, a mission in Northern Congo in which the Mission Covenant and Evangelical Free Churches cooperate. It is reproduced here because of the very suggestive manner in which the keen insights into the indigenous thought patterns are presented. Ed.)

Before being expressed in our local tribal dialects most concepts of the Christian faith have to travel through several different mediums. From the Greek text into English, from thence into the trade language, and finally from that into the tribal dialect. To complicate the picture, often the missionary's mastery of the trade language has been inadequate, and to complicate it even more, some of our African pastors and evangelists have had just as limited a knowledge of the lingua franca as the missionary. What have been the concepts that have emerged from the end of this long whirlwind tunnel? Are they really Christian? Are our teachers and evangelists getting the real Christian ideas across? What are they really teaching our African church? So long as we as missionaries keep ourselves untainted from the evasive tribal tongues, we can sit back in blissful ignorance with utter confidence that the church is being well nourished and instructed. But should we be presumptive enough or audacious enough to investigate a little, we might be completely shaken from our smug perch and our lazy attitude toward the tribal dialects. Such was my own experience when I began hearing some of our oldest Wasolo teacher-evangelists consistently translating "Holy Spirit" by terms meaning 'white mischievous soul of the dead' and 'three bad spirits of the dead'. How they probably arrived at such an unfortunate translation we will try to explain below under our consideration of the Holy Spirit.

Let us briefly consider some of the main Christian ideas or doctrines,

particularly with reference to how they are or can be translated into Ngbandi.

God

In the roster of Ngbandi deities are several gods: *Nzàpā*, *Kètùà*, *Lòmò*, *Bìbinò*, *Bàndòmbè*, *Yàyū*, *Sēsè*, *Gōgí*, and others. Of these *Yàyū* simply means 'sky', *Sēsè* means 'earth', *Gēgē* means 'atmosphere'. *Lòmò* seems to be a spirit they really do not know but still mention him for fear of forgetting one of the great deities. *Kètùà* is mentioned more than any of the deities with the exception of *Nzàpā*. *Nzàpā* is spoken of most often. He is the creator and the ultimate cause of all things. He rarely intervenes directly in the affairs of men but has created the spirits and they are his messengers and workers here below, interfering, meddling, or assisting in the details of life. The ancestral spirits in particular are important in the government of society. The Ngbandis speak of *Nzàpā* saying, *Nzàpā ká ndō zù* 'Nzapa is there above everything'. He is indeed conceived of as being quite detached and disinterested in his creation.

Of all of these deities, despite the Ngbandi's limited conception of him, *Nzàpā* personifies most clearly the Christian conception of God. It remains for us to bring Him out of the abstract and unknown into a knowable and personal relationship with the African. Our native pastors and evangelists have rightfully and successfully used this term.

The Holy Spirit

Without doubt the most serious and unfortunate translation in use among the Ngbandi, and which has been used for years by some of our teachers, is that used for the important doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Two terms have been used currently. One, *nyingō vūlūni* or *vūlū nyingō* means 'white mischievous spirit' or 'white soul of a dead person'. The other, *nyingō òtá* means 'three mischievous spirits or souls of the dead'.

Let us first survey the terms possible for translating "spirit." That used by the Roman Catholics to translate "Holy Spirit" is *Spirito Sankto*. This is obviously nothing but a transliteration. I have attempted to ascertain just how practical and effective such a solution is. The Africans are agreed that the term has meaning only to those who have attended Roman Catholic instruction and it is meaningless to villagers hearing it for the first time. It would seem that in the African's religion, where spirits play such an important role, one could find a better solution than transliteration. What terms, then, are available in Ngbandi? There are three. One is *li*, which refers to the spirits (evil) controllable by sorcerers. A second is *nyingō*, which refers to the spirit or soul of a wicked dead person or to shadow. These spirits have the capacity to do evil or mischief, but never do good. The third term is *tɔlɔ*. Of these spirits there are many, some of which were especially created by *Nzàpā* to do his work, and the others are the spirits of good ancestors who have gone to *Nzàpā*. The *tɔlɔ* have the capacity of good or evil. They are *Nzàpā's*

emissaries to the world and he has set them over the various forces of nature.

Of these three terms the catechists have been using *nyingō*. Apparently the term has come from the influence of a sister language, Sango, in French Equatorial Africa, just across the Ubangi River, in which dialect the term Holy Spirit has been translated *vūlū nyingō*. We do not presume to know whether or not it means the same in Sango as in Ngbandi, or if it was a missionary or African who was responsible for the choice. The disturbing aspect is that in the Ngbandi tribe the *nyingō* never does anything good or beneficial, but is always harmful and mischievous and must be humored and placated continuously.

One of the two adjectives is always used to modify the term *nyingō*. The one is *vūlū* meaning 'white' or 'pure'. Hence the term *Vūlū Nyingō* which would really be translated 'pure evil or bad spirit or soul'. How by modifying evil spirit by the adjective 'pure' or 'white' one can arrive at a correct concept of the Holy Spirit is rather hard to understand. But that is what our catechists have been trying to do.

The other adjective used to modify the term *nyingō* is even more fantastic. It is the numeral *ōtá* 'three'. Thus the translation of "Holy Spirit" becomes 'three evil spirits, souls or shadows of the dead'. What, you ask, could possibly have been the origin of this terminology? It is evident that it can be traced to an inadequate knowledge of the lingua franca, Lingala, by some of our first catechists. They read in the Lingala New Testament the term *Molimo Mosanto*, the translation of "Holy Spirit." Some apparently confused the Lingala numeral *misato* 'three' with the adjective *mosanto* (evidently a transliteration itself) used to portray the idea of saintly or holy. Perhaps in addition to this they had heard some doctrinal exposition somewhere of the Trinity. So, by making the simple substitution of 'three' for 'holy', hence 'three spirits', and by translating this into Ngbandi the net result becomes 'three evil spirits or souls of the dead'. Even today we hear some of our Christians praying in Lingala to the *Molimo Misato*. The singular prefix on both *Molimo* and *Mosanto* apparently is without significance to them.

The third term for spirit in Ngbandi is *tōlō*. As mentioned above, they are many and have the capacity to do both good and evil. They are thought to be the emissaries of *Nzāpā* on earth, he being far removed from his creation. They have been put in control of the forces of nature. It seems only logical to us that this should be the proper term to use. The *tōlō* is a neutral term. Whereas some do mischief, yet in general they can do good. They are *Nzāpā's* workers on earth and are sent to do his will. What more could one ask in seeking a basic concept for teaching the doctrine of the Holy Spirit? By modifying the term *tōlō* with the adjective *vūlū* 'pure' or 'white', it would mean that one has solved the initial problem.

During a two-week refresher course for all of our catechists this past year, the problem of translating 'Holy Spirit' into their tribal tongue was discussed. They unanimously agreed that *nyingō* was a bad term to use and that *tōlō* was to be preferred. They suggested

three possible translations: (1) *tɔlɔ tɛ Nzâpâ* 'the Spirit of God', (2) *tɔlɔ tɛlé Nzâpâ* 'the Spirit of the body of God', and (3) *tɔlɔ vûlûnî* or *vûlû tɔlɔ* 'the pure Spirit'. While all three of these expressions probably have their place in translating the various New Testament terms referring to the Spirit, *vûlû tɔlɔ* is perhaps the best direct translation of 'Holy Spirit'. The problem of getting our teachers to actually use this term for Holy Spirit still is very real, since the old term 'pure evil spirit or soul' had taken on a rather hallowed meaning. Just recently I heard one of our catechists preaching. He had substituted the term *tɔlɔ* for *Nyîngɔ*, but he still modified it with the numeral 'three'. I couldn't help wondering as I listened if he did not slip in *Nyîngɔ* too when I was not around to hear him.

Savior

The idea of "savior" is translated *wà sɔngɔ ázi nà kwá* or *zò tí sɔngɔ ázi nà kwá* meaning 'a person who delivers or resurrects people from death'.

Lord

Two terms are available for translating the word "Lord." One is *gbîá* 'king' and the other is *nvɛ* 'owner and/or master'. *Gbîá* is used in speaking of the tribal chiefs and in general of those with governmental authority. *Nvɛ*, referring to proprietor or owner, is used for example in *lò nvɛ camion* 'he is the owner (or master) of the truck'. But the catechists also apply this term to Jesus, although they perhaps use *gbîá* most frequently. They say, for example: *Yézò lò nvɛ é zù* 'Jesus, he is the owner (or master) of us all'.

Sin and Righteousness

There are three terms applicable to evil or badness. The first, *sîo yé*, is a specific designation for 'bad thing'. The second, *sîo mgbàngá*, is the most inclusive term meaning 'bad affair'. It is something that involves several people, and society will judge it. A third term is *sîo kpâlê*. *Kpâlê* seems to have a deeper connotation, meaning an affair within a person or that which comes from within a person. It is an inclusive term used with the adjectives *sîo* 'bad' and *nzô* 'good'. Hence *sîo kpâlê* 'sin' and *nzô kpâlê* 'righteousness'.

To Forgive

The simple verb *ɔnzî* 'to finish' is used to express forgiveness. Hence, *Yézò à ɔnzî sîo kpâlê tɛ mbi* 'Jesus forgave my sins', and in Luke 17:3, *Sê lɔ gbiyâ bé lò kô mɔ ɔnzî sîo kpâlê tɛ lò* 'If he repents, forgive him'.

The term *kpô* 'to wash' is also used. For example, *Yézò à kpô sîo kpâlê tɛ mɔ zù* 'Jesus washed all your sins'.

To Confess

In order to arrive at the nearest equivalent of "confess," it is necessary to use one of two expressions. One is *pâ hɛ*, simply meaning 'to tell'. Hence, *Pâ sîo yé tɛ mɔ hɛ* *Yézò* 'Tell your bad things to Jesus'. The other, *yé*, means 'to agree'. Hence, *Sê lò yé sîo yé tɛ lò kô*,

Yézō à kpō sīō kpālē té lò 'If he agrees (admits) to the bad things, Jesus will wash his sins'.

Love

Two terms exist for "love," namely, *yēngō* and *sōngō*. *Yēngō* also means 'to desire, want, agree'.

Sōngō implies 'friendship', and when modified by the adjective *nzō* 'good', it becomes *nzō sōngō* 'beautiful or good friendship'. This is about the deepest relationship possible. Speaking of Jesus, one may say, *Yézō wà nzō sōngō* 'Jesus is a person of beautiful friendship'.

All three expressions can be used of the love of wife and husband.

Faith

Ngbandi seems poverty-stricken when it comes to expressing faith. There is one word, *yēngō*, that means 'to believe'. But this also means 'to agree, to want, to desire, to wish, to love'. Inadequate as the lingua franca, Lingala, may be, it has two terms, *kolina* and *kondima*, to express what must be expressed by the one Mgbandi term *yēngō*. How can one adequately express the depth of meaning involved in a real commitment to Christ?

Conclusion

These nine terms by no means exhaust the study, but serve perhaps to give an introduction to the problem. They show us the lurking pitfalls and some of the difficulties in translating Christian ideas into the tribal tongues, but also show us in some instances the force and meaningfulness of Christian doctrines when they must be expressed in simple and living terms.

Free Offer of Customs and Cultures

by Eugene A. Nida

Customs and Cultures by Eugene A. Nida, Secretary for Translations of the American Bible Society, has proven to be of increasing interest to missionaries, translators, and students of anthropology, for it attempts to introduce people to the field of anthropology from the standpoint of missionary experience and problems. Its special relevance to the Bible translator is the fact that its primary orientation is the position of the missionary or evangelist as one who must communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ in cultures which are quite different from those with which he is likely to be acquainted. The books *Bible Translating* and *God's Word in Man's Language* (both of which are available free of charge to Bible translators) were aimed at the task of producing the message of the Bible in the different languages of men. *Customs and Cultures* goes on from there and attempts to indicate how this message as framed in a strange language may then be communicated within the living context of a people's culture.

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