

# Bible Translation and Politeness in Bali

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*(Because of certain important details mentioned by Dr Swellengrebel in an article on Bali in the April issue of The Bible Translator, the editor has requested the following article as a continuation in the discussion of a very important problem encountered by missionaries in many parts of the world. — Ed.)*

## Special Vocabularies

New Testament Greek is by Balinese standards an extremely impolite language. Consider, for example, the second person pronoun. When speaking to God, to a nobleman, to a friend, to a pupil, or to a slave, the same word is used. In Balinese this is completely different. In the above examples one would differentiate various social ranks and use terms which, more or less freely translated, mean "adored one" or "he who is borne on the head", "feet of Your Highness", "older (or younger) brother", "little one", and "you". The same word in Greek can be used to designate the house of a ruler, or of a nobleman, or of a relative, or one's own dwelling; whereas a Balinese would use many different words, and distinguish between the "palace" of the ruler, the "inner court" (i.e. closed to the common man) of a nobleman, the "house" of his cousin, and his own "hovel". We are familiar with such differentiations in Dutch and English, but to a much more limited extent, e.g. "palace", "house", "hovel", and so on. But in Balinese one has to cope with three vocabularies within the language, each of which, at a moderate estimate, includes some hundreds of words. One employs the ordinary common language ("Low Balinese") when speaking with intimates, equals, or inferiors; polite terms must, however, be used as soon as one begins to speak to one's superiors or to strangers; and "deferential" terms are obligatory in all cases when one is so bold as to speak of parts of the body, or the acts, possessions, and qualities of important people. The Balinese sums up the two last named vocabularies under the term *alus* ("fine", or "noble"); we say "High Balinese". Naturally these two are intermingled, since the person to whom one speaks politely has the right to use deferential terms in describing everything concerning his sphere of thought, action, and being.

Thus in Balinese one encounters many doublets and triplets which are completely, or almost completely, synonymous, but different in degree of deference, politeness, or familiarity. One who speaks familiarly to an important person or uses colloquial terms concerning a superior, is guilty of rudeness. Such rudeness can lead in some cases to an indictment in a court of justice, since the use of the deferential vocabulary is closely related to the caste prerogatives. One who uses the deferential terms to his equals or inferiors is naturally not punishable, but his speech is certainly regarded as ridiculous.

This phenomenon of the special vocabularies is indissolubly a part of the Balinese language. It can be expressed thus: what is for us one particular conception is for the Balinese divided into two or more conceptions, according to the rank and standing of the persons with whom he comes in contact. The abstract conception "house" cannot actually be expressed; it can only be put into words when one knows to whom that house belongs. It will thus be clear that one must reckon with this peculiarity in the Balinese translation of the New Testament if one is to be understood. One must not make a translation which is in direct conflict with the Balinese idiom and feeling for deference. That, however, is rather difficult, for one must then bring into the translation elements not specifically contained in the original text. In the actual translation many types of differentiations and shades of meaning must be introduced. As a basis for proper selection of diverse terms the context is frequently inadequate.<sup>1</sup>

### Choice of Vocabulary

It is often difficult to determine into which particular vocabulary, familiar or polite, a certain part of the text should be translated, since the choice is dependent upon the rank of those for whom it was originally intended. Low Balinese is used in the narrative parts of the Gospels, since it is the vocabulary used among friends and by a teacher in speaking to pupils. It is also, however, the language of the superior to the inferior. Thus, in the dedication to "the most excellent Theophilus"<sup>2</sup> in the first four verses of Luke's Gospel, Low Balinese is completely inadmissible. A similar problem arises in Paul's letters. A Balinese Paul would undoubtedly have written in Low Balinese to his "children in Christ" in the congregation at Corinth, but that would not have answered so well for the community in Rome with whom he was unacquainted.

In considering these linguistic questions one encounters deeper theological problems at every step. Here the relationship between the Bible and the Word of God, between the human witnesses of the Revelation and that Revelation itself, comes constantly into question. In so far as one considers the writers of the Bible primarily as ordinary human beings, one is obliged to reckon with all sorts of social and personal relationships. If, however, one works on the principle of the literal, almost mechanical, inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, one will obviously use Low Balinese in all cases. For the latter case we can call upon a good Balinese analogy. In the condition of being "possessed", the god is considered to have entered into the body of the medium so that the voice of the medium is actually the voice of the god. As such, the medium speaks Low Balinese, regardless of the rank of the priest whom he addresses.

<sup>1</sup> Concerning the phenomenon of special vocabularies in Javanese, see J. Gonda, *The Javanese Vocabulary of Courtesy*, *Lingua*, International Review of General Linguistics, Vol. I (1948), p. 333-376. Some of the terms used here have been borrowed from Dr Gonda's paper.

<sup>2</sup> Moffatt uses the expression "Your Excellency".

Even after having decided what should be done in this situation, there still remains the problem of the terms of respect, the deferential words obligatorily used on account of the superior rank of the person with whom the text is concerned. This gives rise to many thorny questions, and the following paragraphs attempt to deal with some illustrative examples.

### “He”, “They”

In Greek and in European languages such as Dutch and English the third person pronoun does not present much difficulty. In Balinese the situation becomes more complicated, for one has at least four pronouns for the third person: two to indicate important and very important persons (*dané* and *ida*), one to speak of a person of lower standing but in a familiar manner, and one to speak of such a person in a polite manner (*ia* and *ipun*). *Dané*, the pronoun of the slightly less important person of the third caste, is also in use for people of lower caste who through their official position, age, or ability have a right to be respected or with whom one is trying to ingratiate oneself. In former days the common people addressed a Dutch civil official as *dané*, but the same word was used to address his office boy. Indeed, without the cooperation of the latter it was no simple matter to get a hearing with the government official. In the translation the word *dané* can generally be used for the prophets. I say generally, because there are exceptions. For example, Isaiah was a king's son, and John and Jeremiah were the sons of priests, and as such are regarded by Balinese standards to be equivalent to the castes of the aristocracy and the Brahmins, respectively. To address them as *dané* would be unsuitable, and the pronoun *ida* is used. Where the disciples are involved, most Balinese Christians use *dané*, taking into consideration the honorable position occupied by the disciples as apostles in the Christian church. But in the Gospel stories these simple artisans and fishermen were not of such high standing. So here *ia* and *ipun* are used. In the Acts, however, the position of apostles such as Peter and John could be expressed by the use of the word *dané*.

These and other distinctions in the Balinese language are based upon actual social differentiations. Ethics has nothing to do with it; a grasping priest or a hated ruler remains *ida*. When speaking of Satan, *ia* or *ipun* is too familiar. While telling a story for children one of the Balinese preachers tried to express censure for the evil character of King Herod by his use of pronouns. In the beginning of the story “his majesty” was indicated by *ida*, later degraded to *ia*, while Herodias never got any higher than *ia* or *ipun*. My Hindu-Balinese assistants did not consider this “moral” use of the special vocabularies advisable, and most Balinese Christians agree with them.

These differences in the third person pronouns sometimes make it difficult to translate the plural “they”. “When they were come down from the hill” (Luke 9 : 37) must be translated: “When He (*ida*) came down, followed by His disciples”. Sometimes it is possible to avoid such

cumbersome translations by being slightly more vague than the original text, e.g. "as they sailed" (Luke 8:23) can be rendered as "while sailing", because in the course of the story it is clear enough as to who were sailing. In other instances the translator is forced to be more explicit than the text. Thus, for example, in Luke 9:34 "a cloud... overshadowed them; and they feared as they entered into the cloud". Because of the fact that the two uses of "they" do not identify the same persons, the translator must distinguish between the different meanings of "they". In this case he is thus forced to be more explicit than the original text, which leaves the decision to the understanding of the reader.

### "To Say", "to Send", and "to Give"

When speaking to an important person an ordinary Balinese cannot just "say" something; he must "respectfully make a communication". On the other hand, every word from an important person is a charge or a command, and in such a case no difference is made between "to say" and "to command". This sometimes makes for greater brevity in the translation. Hence, for example, where it is several times repeated "He said unto them", or "They said unto Him", the different words used here for "said" make it sufficiently clear who is speaking and who is addressed. Accordingly, the addition of "to Him" or "to them" is superfluous and would make the sentence stiff and cumbersome. In this case the use of the vocabulary of deference makes the translation shorter; elsewhere usually the reverse is true. For example, there is no word meaning specifically "to answer" when the speaker is a very important person. One generally uses only the deferential word "to say". If it is necessary to clarify the fact that this "saying" is in answer to something else, then one must use the somewhat clumsy translation, "he answered, his saying was..."

Certainly no less varied is the Balinese rendition of the expressions "to send" or "to dispatch someone". One must reckon here with three persons: the sender, the one sent, and the person to whom one sends. The relation between their mutual social positions affects the words chosen. This made the translation of the first paragraph of Luke 7 a rather heavy task for me and my assistants. What was the social status of the different participants in this account? What were their mutual relations? The "caste" of the centurion was probably not worth much, but his position was certainly such that he would be entitled to *dané* and the vocabulary that accompanies it. But how did he stand with respect to the "elders of the Jews", who went to Jesus in his name? Can he "send" them, or must he "respectfully request" them to go? It was probably my not-very-warlike disposition that made me decide to elevate the civilian above the soldier. Then, how is one to regard the relationship of the centurion to his friends (vs. 6)? There was nothing actually definite in the context. We found later that (in connection with other details) it worked out better to translate the verse as though the friends

were of a lower rank or younger than the centurion. In this detail, at least, we felt entitled to choose the path of least resistance.

The social distinctions are probably most clearly indicated in the expressions "to give". The combined demands of politeness and deference result in the use of at least five terms. In English we can feel these differences to a certain extent, when in ceremonial style we distinguish between "to give", "to proffer", "to have the honor to offer", "to present", etc. When the donor is far superior in rank to the recipient, it is necessary in Balinese to use for his gift a word such as "favor", "grace", or "benevolence". In this way one indicates not only the act of giving, but also the disposition of the giver toward the recipient. On this basis it is understandable that the word meaning "to present" may also mean "to laugh". The benevolent, affable smile of a ruler is regarded as being just as much an expression of his graciousness to his inferiors as is his gift. Accordingly, the meanings of "to present" and "to laugh" can be translated by the same Balinese word.

The High Balinese terms mentioned above must be employed when God is the giver. For those who are used to the English translation of the Bible it sounds strange that in Balinese no clear distinction is made between "favor", "grace", or "gift". On the other hand, it is certainly not unbiblical if, when speaking of God's deeds, the primary concern is the indication of the thoughts and disposition from whence they are derived.

### **Double Translation**

Just as one must sometimes split the pronoun "they" into two words because of the differences in social status of the persons who form the group denoted by "they", so it may also be necessary to translate a process by two expressions. For example, "love" of a superior for an inferior must be indicated by one term and that of an inferior for a superior by another. Thus we must translate twice the word "love" in Luke 10 : 27, "You shall give respectful love to God, ...further, you must love your neighbor as yourself". Luke 2 : 52 is similar, e.g. "He was favored by God and loved by man". In Luke 8 : 3 there is mention of women "who ministered to them<sup>1</sup> of their means" (Moffatt). The service accorded Jesus consisted of respect, humility and attachment, which must be expressed in the Balinese word. With regard to the disciples this was not the case. Thus we were forced to translate as, "they used their possessions for the needs of Jesus and his followers, as a tribute of service to Him".

### **"The Son of Man"**

We are again bordering on theological questions when we inquire as to which vocabulary shall be used to translate the texts where Jesus speaks of himself as "the Son of man". One of the fixed rules governing the use of these special vocabularies is that one may never use the deferential terms in speaking of oneself. This would be the extreme of arrogance. Now if one considers the expression "Son of man"

<sup>1</sup>Greek text (Nestle) *autois* "to them"; AV "him".

primarily as a description of "I", then one must continually indicate the possessions or actions of the Son of man by Low Balinese words. In doing this the mystery of the expression is largely lost. In any case the vocabulary used in most of the contexts would betray that Jesus means the title for himself.

However, a distinction can actually be made in Balinese between the person and the exalted position he occupies. For example, the chairman of a judicial body may employ deferential terms when referring to this body and its chairman, without this being taken as an expression of arrogance. Considered from this standpoint, one may translate in such a way that Jesus is understood as using such deferential words and phrases in speaking of himself. The danger is, however, that the unity between his person and the figure of "the Son of man" is blurred by such usage.

On request, the New Testament committee of the Netherlands Bible Society advised that "the sublimity of this mysterious term be considered the most important point and thus High Balinese be used".

### **Disadvantages in the Vocabulary Distinctions**

It is apparent from the preceding pages that the phenomenon of the Balinese special vocabularies often presents a difficult problem to the translator of the Bible. The difficulties must, nevertheless, be overcome. It is important, however, to realize that one is sometimes forced to employ translations which render the Biblical text less clear.

In the first place, High Balinese is not nearly as rich in vocabulary as Low Balinese. The latter often has many different terms for closely related ideas, while the former may have only one. Hence, in High Balinese it is more difficult to express the finer nuances. Thus, for example, the equivalent of "to wish", "to demand", and "to ask for", is only one word in High Balinese, roughly translatable as "to express a wish". This is understandable, since to the Balinese the "wish" or "will" of a ruler is for his subjects a "command".

Furthermore, High Balinese is often more vague and cumbersome. It shuns calling unpleasant things by their names. To speak of a Brahmin as being "blind" or "dumb" sounds crude; one says rather that "His Reverence cannot see or speak". To "reprove" a king (Luke 3:19) is not fitting for a subject. It is better (and safer!) "to present something for (His Majesty's) consideration".

High Balinese always creates distance. Thus it gives something ceremonial and cold to Jesus' attitude to his fellow men, especially to his intimates such as the disciples or the women of Bethany. When the disciples "come to Jesus", one must, if one is not to appear disrespectful, use a word meaning something like "to wait upon Jesus"; "Jesus taught" becomes "Jesus was so kind as to impart instruction"; "Martha received him into her house" cannot be translated otherwise than by "was accustomed to invite him".

In this connection it will be obvious that the use of High Balinese tends to obscure the fact of Jesus' humility. His "form of a servant" becomes hidden behind all the deferential words which must be used

about Him. Where there was a choice between a somewhat more and a somewhat less deferential term, I tried to use the latter; but Hindu and Christian Balinese co-workers were unanimous in their blighting criticism of such experiments. The formal argument is continually, "Was not Jesus (according to the Gospels) a descendant of King David?" This to the Balinese mind closes the argument, and the translator must resign himself to the fact.

I discovered how dominant is this feeling about the deference due to important persons when I came to the translation of the passage, "the devil, taking him up into an high mountain" (Luke 4:5). In Low Balinese there is the word *ngadjak* "to bring or take (someone) along". In general this is not used in High Balinese, since it is naturally not courteous to suggest that an important person should be "taken" or "brought along" by another, especially an inferior. The Balinese assume that a nobleman is his own master and thus they prefer to say that he is "accompanied", although his inferior does the actual leading. In the above text my co-workers insisted on saying, "the devil accompanied Jesus..." This gives the impression that the initiative comes from Jesus, which is certainly in conflict with the meaning of the text. As a result, after considerable deliberation we chose the Low Balinese word *ngadjak*.

### **Advantages in the Vocabulary Distinctions**

Fortunately there are sometimes advantages attached to the use of the special vocabularies. These form a counterbalance to the disadvantages.

For example, the half-hearted attitude of Simon (Luke 7:36-50) gains liveliness in the Balinese translation by the change of vocabulary. When he addresses Jesus the Master, he naturally uses deferential terms. In his reflection, however, he speaks "within himself" about Jesus and does not use the deferential terminology. In this way he reveals what he really thinks of his guest.

In Luke 6:20-49 Christ addresses first his disciples and later a wider circle of listeners. This forces the translator to use two different forms of "you", first "children" (literally "little ones") and then a word more or less translatable as "friends" (used in general address). Thus during the whole discourse it is obvious to whom the words are addressed. Something similar is also found in the parable of the Prodigal Son. The younger son, who feels himself less than a slave, speaks to his father in High Balinese; the elder son may use the intimate Low Balinese. When, however, the latter severs himself from the intimate family community, he uses High Balinese to express his contempt, thus placing a gulf between himself and his father.

In Luke 2:48 Joseph and Mary are spoken of as Jesus' parents, and here the familiar words for "father" and "mother" are appropriate. But when Jesus speaks of being "about my Father's business" (vs. 49), thus indicating who His true Father is, He uses the High Balinese word *adji* "father".

These examples illustrate how the translation may be enriched by the use of the Balinese special vocabularies.