

FOCUS ON TRANSLATORS

The following discussion of an important translation project in Asia was prepared by Dr Joseph Hong, a UBS Translation Consultant based in Hong Kong. Much of the information given has been drawn from three articles which are listed at the end of the discussion.

– Editor

TRANSLATING AND REVISING TODAY'S KHMER NEW TESTAMENT

Since the establishment of a democratically elected government in 1993, and with the return of religious freedom, the war-weary country of Cambodia has been undergoing a series of relentless reconstructions and transformations. Missionary organizations have lost no time in starting evangelistic work and planting churches all over the country. The establishment of churches has been aided by the return of many Cambodian refugees who had become Christians in camps in Thailand.

This is the context in which the United Bible Societies have published and distributed the new *Today's Khmer New Testament*. This New Testament, an interconfessional translation in today's Khmer language, was officially dedicated on 10 October 1993 in a ceremony held at the Cathedral of Phnom Penh and attended by Christian leaders and representatives from various churches. Within a year 12,000 copies out of a total print run of 13,000 were distributed.

Compared to the old Khmer Bible version, this new translation is widely appreciated by Christian workers, since its text is clear and easy to understand for a largely non-Christian audience. However there are some voices of criticism against the new translation; and certain churches still prefer using the old version Bible, though they do not openly express disapproval of the new version. As a result of this, before a reprint of the NT was undertaken, efforts were made to revise the new translation to take into account a number of observations expressed by the Christian leaders concerned.

The Khmer language

Cambodian, or Khmer, the national language of the Kingdom of Cambodia, belongs to the Mon-Khmer group within the Austro-Asiatic language family and has about 10 million speakers. Small groups of Khmer speakers are found scattered in Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and even in India and the Nicobar Islands. The Khmer script is derived from an ancient form of Sanskrit of southern India, brought by Hindu colonizers early in the Christian era. Over the centuries, as Buddhism was introduced into the country, the Khmer language has borrowed a large number of words from Pali.

Although Khmer and Thai are thought to belong to two different language groups, linguists believe that the two current languages have about 60% of their vocabulary which has come from a common source, a consequence of frequent contacts over the centuries between the

two peoples who at various times occupied large tracts of each other's territory.

Like many other South East Asian languages, Khmer is rich in words to distinguish the social standing of people as they relate to each other, and the language has various levels. Men and women use different sets of words to address each other and to refer to themselves. Age is also another important factor governing the proper use of particular language levels. Khmer speakers use other sets of vocabulary when referring to the royals and monks. Shades of meaning and expression in the use of these different sets of vocabulary are carefully taken into account in the new translation of the New Testament, as well as in the ongoing work on the Old Testament.

Early translation efforts

The first attempt to bring the Word of God to the Khmer people in their own language was made by Catholics in the late 19th century. Passages from the Gospels were translated for liturgical use by a French priest, Marie-Joseph Guesdon, and were published by the *Presse des Missions Etrangères* in Hong Kong.

Later, toward the end of the 19th century, a Cambodian by the name of Vong, who was an interpreter for the King, translated the Gospel of Luke at the request of a French civil servant. Vong based his work on a French version and was assisted by James Walter from the British and Foreign Bible Society, which had the Gospel printed in 1899, again in Hong Kong. Around the same time, an agent of the American Bible Society by the name of J. Carrington who was working in Bangkok came across a Cambodian Buddhist monk called Nai Soon who spoke the Siamese language. Under Carrington's direction Nai Soon translated the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, which were published in 1900 in New York by the American Bible Society.

It was not until 1923 that translation of the whole Bible was systematically attempted. Two American couples sent by the Christian and Missionary Alliance arrived in Cambodia, and one of these Americans, Rev Arthur L. Hammond, was given the task of translating the scriptures. In 1925 Genesis was published. Hammond took four years to complete the New Testament, which was first printed in 1929 and was further corrected in a second edition printed in 1934 by BFBS in Shanghai. Other Old Testament books like Exodus, Proverbs, and Psalms were published in 1932–33. By 1940 Hammond had finished the Old Testament, but due to the Second World War the whole Bible was not printed until 1954.

The remarkable work of Hammond still left much to be desired, and by the early 1970s, its text was regarded as too difficult to understand, especially for non-Christians. In 1973 a project for a new translation of the NT was launched by UBS in Phnom Penh. A committee of five members was set up, consisting of three Khmer translators, a stylist belonging to the Khmer Evangelical Church, and a French Catholic priest

well versed in Khmer and serving as exegete – Father François Ponchaud, who had already spent many years in Cambodia. A UBS translation consultant was assigned to help with the project. After a first draft of the whole NT and the correction of the first four chapters of Matthew had been done, the work came to a sudden halt on 17 April 1975 when Phnom Penh was overrun by the Khmer Rouge. The four Cambodian members of the committee fled and were never seen again, falling victim to Pol Pot's regime. Only a few chapters of the Gospel of Matthew were saved.

Father Ponchaud returned to France with the few remaining drafts, with which he pursued efforts to have the NT translated, assisted by some Cambodian Catholics settled in France. In 1983 this translation was published for use in the Roman Catholic Church serving Cambodian refugees. However Khmer Christians felt that this version was not satisfactory, because new terms used were regarded as too Buddhist in flavour.

A new project

In 1985, at the suggestion of the French Bible Society, a new Khmer Bible translation project was set up. Two consultative meetings were held in January and April of that year which were attended by leaders of Cambodian churches. As a result a new committee was formed made up of the following members:

- a Khmer translator, Arun Sok Nhep, who had been a pastor to Cambodian refugees in France.
- two Khmer stylists, and
- an exegete, Fr François Ponchaud.

The new committee held their first meeting in June 1985 and then met about every two months. As before, a UBS consultant was assigned to supervise the project. At the end of 1986 a first draft of the Gospel of Luke was sent to about forty Khmer reviewers living in Thailand, USA, France, and Cambodia. After taking their comments into account, the translator went on to finish the Gospel of Mark and 5000 copies were published in September 1988. Then the Gospel of Luke was corrected, and the Gospel of John translated, and 3000 copies of each were published in 1989. Then followed the Gospel of Matthew, with 5000 copies printed in 1990. When the book of Acts was completed early in 1991, it was printed (10,000 copies) with the four Gospels in one volume in August 1991. Because of strong demand from Cambodian evangelical Christians, a reprint of John (10,000 copies) was done in April 1992.

Until 1990 the four members of the committee worked part-time as volunteers, but as requests from Christians in Cambodia for the translation to speed up became more pressing, Rev Sok Nhep was made a part-time translator in November 1990, and then full-time in March 1992. Drafting of the whole NT was completed in November 1992.

Meanwhile, with the democratic development in Cambodia in full swing and the return of peace and freedom, Fr Ponchaud was sent back

by his Church to Cambodia. Eager to meet new opportunities in his native country and to prepare for the reception of the new version by the vast Khmer audience there, Rev Sok Nhep also returned to Cambodia in mid-1993, a few months before the release of the Today's Khmer New Testament in Phnom Penh.

The difficulties of translating into the Khmer language

While following UBS translation principles, the translator and the reviewers have encountered considerable difficulty as they have strived to combine strict Bible exegesis with the subtlety of the Khmer language. It is not easy to translate the message of the Gospel, set in a Jewish culture two thousand years old, and make it comprehensible to a culture impregnated with Buddhism. The Khmers have an entirely different understanding of basic concepts such as God, sin, life, heaven, and salvation. As their experiences have shown, the translators involved in the project realise how important it is for them to understand Buddhist thought in order to avoid exegetical errors or misrepresenting the message of the Bible.

As Fr Ponchaud has indicated in his article "*Difficultés d'une traduction en langue khmère*", there are immense problems in translating even such basic terms as "God", "God's love", or "holy". For a Buddhist believer, as most Cambodians are, religion is a "set of moral teachings" which lacks a clear sense of relationship with a supreme being. The Khmer language does not have an exact word to denote this unique, supreme divine Being, the source of all life and with whom human beings can establish an intimate, personal relationship. Inspired by an early Chinese loanword adopted by the Catholics, "Illustrious Master of Heaven" (*Preah Mchas Sour*), the translation committee has decided to use a non-spatial expression for "God" – "the Illustrious One who is Master" (*Preah Chea Mchas*).

Expressing the idea of God's love has also caused some problems. Since the Khmer knows only about the Buddha as compassionate, the translation team was at a loss to find an adequate term to express God's love for humankind which is so great that God even allowed himself to become a human being. A solution was found which says that God "relates himself" to (that is, "interacts with") human beings, *srolanh*. In the same way, it is difficult to express the meaning of "holy" in Khmer. The word used in the old version, *borisoth*, conveys more the idea of Buddhist moralism or purity than the elements of meaning of "holy" in the Bible. In the absence of appropriate terms, the committee has chosen for the new translation a word meaning "unmixed" or "exceptional" (*visoth*) which rhymes with *borisoth*.

According to Fr Ponchaud, the correct choice of language levels poses another serious problem. The Khmer language has three distinct registers:

- 1) the religious language used by monks and by everybody when conversing with them;

2) the royal language used in court and by all those who may refer directly or indirectly to the royal "illustrious person" (*Preah*);

3) the ordinary language used by the commoners, which again is subdivided into various levels to distinguish social standings and degrees of politeness.

For God, there is no choice other than the royal language, derived from Brahmanism as well as from Buddhism (Buddha is referred to as king). However there is a dilemma when referring to Jesus. The use of royal language might seem to affirm only Jesus' divine nature and forget about his incarnation, whereas the use of ordinary language, even at a dignified level, might only present the human face of Jesus and sound too disrespectful. The committee has finally decided to make a sensible compromise: royal vocabulary is used when the text involves narrations about Jesus, such as those in the Gospels, since the four evangelists could only want to show their faith in the glorified Christ; but when it comes to people addressing Jesus or Jesus talking to people, ordinary language is used. There has been much hesitation when dealing with passages such as God the Father's voice heard at Jesus' baptism or John declaring Jesus "the Lamb of God". After thorough consideration, the committee has decided to use the royal language, though it seems to deny Jesus' humanity, but this does not rule out a return to the ordinary vocabulary in further revisions.

Acceptance and criticism

Since its release in October 1993, the *Today's Khmer New Testament* has seen wide distribution and acceptance in Cambodia. As the Old Testament is not yet available, many Protestant churches still keep using the old version and only use the *Today's Khmer NT* in a limited way. Once the entire Bible is published, however, the new version is expected to play more than a complementary role.

Indeed the responses to the new translation from its users have in general been positive, appreciating especially its clarity and understandability. Nevertheless there has been limited acceptance by a few churches, and even strong reactions from several individuals who openly criticize it. On the one hand, these reactions seem to come from attitudes such as systematic rejection of anything new, reluctance to change church habits, and objections due to self-interest and personal ambition. The motives of these detractors are questionable, since they do not bother to make any constructive comments or suggestions to improve the translation. On the other hand, the limited acceptance by some other individuals, especially those from missionary backgrounds, seems to be motivated by two other reasons: the project originating in a setting they are not familiar with, and the participation of Catholics.

However, the translation committee was not disheartened by the negative responses of a few people. Instead, the committee members have been encouraged by the positive feedback from many other users, such as mission workers, church leaders, and Khmer pastors. One

of these pastors has sent an 18-page letter filled with comments and containing an exhaustive list of omissions or differences in comparison with the old version. Interestingly, all the feedback so far received has touched only on the Gospels, and little comment has been received about Acts, the Epistles, or Revelation, texts which might be expected to raise numerous theological issues.

The Khmer Catholics have in general accepted this version in a serious manner. Students of the Catholic seminary in Battambang have examined closely the text of Mark and some chapters of Matthew and Luke, and have spotted some errors of inaccuracy and inconsistent use of vocabulary. The liturgical use of the text has also allowed its understandability when read and heard to be tested. One of the translators appointed to work on the Old Testament has also read through the whole New Testament and suggested a number of stylistic changes.

Minor revisions

As a result of the feedback received during 1994, both local and from overseas, some changes have been made to the new version. It is estimated that these changes amount to about 5% of the text in the Gospels and even less than 5% for the rest of the New Testament. Aside from some stylistic modifications for Acts, the Epistles, and Revelation, most of the changes involve only replacement of particular words.

The following are some of the terms that have been the target of strong criticisms and have been changed as a result.

Fig tree – Since the fig tree is not familiar to Cambodians but the mango tree is commonly known and could be the equivalent (fruit-bearing according to season, and the problem of sterility), “mango tree” was used at first; but because of strong objections the term has now been replaced by an unknown Pali word, *otumpor*, which does mean “fig tree”. The word used in the old Bible, *lvea*, is rejected because the lvea tree symbolizes hypocrisy and its fruit is not edible.

Woman – Since what Jesus was condemning in Matthew 5.28 is adultery (taking someone’s wife, Exodus 20.14, 17), the Greek word *gune* was at first rendered “a man’s wife” (*propon ke*); but because of criticisms the expression is now changed back to simply “woman” (*strei*), though the committee considers this as biasing the text toward the idea of fornication (sin of lust for any woman, whether married or not).

Apostle – In the old version there is no distinction between “disciple” and “apostle”. In the new translation the Buddhist term *sassnatout*, meaning “messenger representing the religion”, was first used. Because this was felt to be inadequate, it is now replaced by a new construction, *Christtout*, meaning “messenger representing Christ”. There is however one problem: Jesus himself could never call his own disciples *Christtout*. In this case the term is simply rendered *Tout robas Preah Ang* “his messengers-representatives”.

Sabbath – The old version as well as the first new translation have rendered this term “day of rest” (*Thngai Chhup Somrak*). Considered inadequate to convey its religious meaning (not only about cessation of work, but also in honour of Yahweh as the Creator), the committee has decided to keep the Hebrew word and use its transliterated form *Thgnai Sabath*. The Buddhist word *Thngai Seil* “day of merits” used by some Catholics was once under consideration but was rejected because it did not receive unanimous support.

On the other hand, the translation committee has decided to maintain certain words in spite of strong criticism, such as:

Preah krou – Literally “illustrious master”, the term is equivalent to “rabbi” and its use is thus maintained in passages where the disciples called Jesus “rabbi”.

Khmaoch – Literally “evil spirit”, the term is considered most fitting to translate the Greek expression *pneuma akatharton*, and appropriate to the Khmer understanding. The expression *vigneau akrak* used in the old version does not sound natural to Khmer speakers, since *vigneau* always gives a positive sense to “spirit”.

Bocheachary – The use of this new construction meaning “priest” is maintained to translate the Greek word *hiereus*. The term *lauk sang* used in the old version actually means a “Buddhist monk”, and is felt to be theologically misleading. The Khmer considers the Buddhist monk as a “paddy field of merits”, a reserve of merits to be shared with other people. So a Khmer reader would find unthinkable that the *lauk sang* in the Bible killed animals, the gravest sin for a Buddhist; and what a scandal it would be to say that a *lauk sang* was married, had children, and drank wine.

Lastly, the names of persons such as *Yesou* “Jesus”, *Saoul* “Saul”, and *Mari* “Mary” are maintained, since they are more compatible with the Khmer way of speaking and sound closer to the way they are pronounced in the original language than their equivalents in the older versions – *Yesouv*, *Sol*, and *Marea*. In fact, the translation committee cannot understand why the final consonant “v” was introduced to the important name of Jesus in the old version, and wonders if Arthur Hammond may have mistaken the Greek letter nu for a “v”.

Articles consulted

Arun Sok Nhep & François Ponchaud, “*Révision de la traduction inter-confessionnelle du Nouveau Testament en Khmer Courant*”, unpublished article written in Phnom Penh, February 1995.

Arun Sok Nhep, “History of the Translation of the New Testament into the Khmer Language”, unpublished article written in Paris, April 1993.

François Ponchaud, “*Difficultés d’une traduction en langue khmère*”, article written in Aranyaprathet, November 1992.