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ISIDORE DE SOUZA

PROTESTANTS AND CATHOLICS UNITE TO TRANSLATE THE WORD OF GOD

This article first appeared in French in Afrique et Parole, No. 20, June 30, 1967, and has been translated by Dr Heber F. Peacock. We believe that many of our readers will be glad to read this account of a joint translation project written by a Roman Catholic participant for a periodical circulating largely among Roman Catholics, whose editor has kindly given consent for its reproduction here. Ed.

Birth of the project

The translation of the Bible into Fon, now in progress in South Dahomey, is in my opinion an example of the providential action of God. In fact, a number of providential events converged at its beginning. On one hand, the Ecumenical Council produced a thaw in Catholic-Protestant relations and created a favorable atmosphere for a joint project. Ten or twenty years ago it would have been unthinkable. The Bible had been translated into other languages of Dahomey: Nago, Gun, and in part Mina. But these translations, completed more or less successfully, were the work of our separated brethren alone. This is not the case with the translation now in progress. It is being done jointly, as a result of the favorable conditions created by Vatican II.

On the other hand, the Synod of the Methodist Church, held in Porto-Novo, Dahomey in January 1966, decided, among other things, to proceed with an intensification of a program of evangelization among the Fon, only a few of whom had been reached until then. As everyone knows, the Word of God constitutes the basic element of the Protestant pastoral ministry. But neither the Protestants nor the Catholics possess a systematic translation of the Bible into Fon. The Synod decided to begin one. Desirous of eliminating duplication of effort and moved by an ecumenical spirit, the Synod agreed that the translation should be made jointly with the Catholics.

Contact was then established and conversations begun between Pastor Lewis (Cotonou) and the Abbé Michel Dujarrier (College Aupiais, Cotonou), who obtained the general agreement of Monseigneur Gantin, Archbishop of Cotonou. After the first contacts had been made, a meeting was organized for February 10, 1966, at the home of Pastor Wood in Cotonou. Pastors and priests who might possibly be interested in the project and able to

cooperate in its accomplishment participated in the meeting. The two groups did not really know each other, and this produced considerable reserve in the attempt to sense one another's position. Nevertheless, our exchange of views led to something concrete:

(1) The participants became conscious anew of the real need for the project and of the possibility of seeing it realized.

(2) Without much delay the first plans were laid: the decision was made to translate the Gospel of Mark first, and a list of possible translators was drawn up.

Thus, the translation project was born of a recognized need and a common desire of Catholics and Protestants. Its realization seemed to be favored by the Vatican Council and the Methodist Synod of Porto-Novo. But, in a more direct way, the initiative goes back to our Protestant brethren—they were the ones who took the first step, and it was the Bible Society who underwrote all expenses such as transportation, paper, supplies, etc.

The Co-workers

But the task is only begun with the expression of desire and the formulation of plans for a translation project. One has to have above all, people capable of working together toward its realization, that is, people who meet at least the two following conditions. They must have a significant knowledge of the Bible, and for the Gospels a knowledge of Greek or at least of French in a good translation; and they must speak the Fon language. Fortunately, the translators, taken as a whole, met these two conditions. The team included Protestant pastors and Catholic priests who had received a solid Biblical training, and laymen (catechists, evangelists, teachers) who had reached at least the educational level of the C.E.P.E. and who spoke Fon. Thus we had all the requirements for a good translation.

Why begin with Mark?

Some may ask why we decided to begin our work of translation with the Gospel of Mark.¹ There were two simple reasons: the first, and the least important, is that Mark is the earliest of the four Gospels we possess today; the second, and the most important, is that Mark is the shortest, and the Gospel for which we have at our disposal a valuable tool for the work, *The Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of Mark* by Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene A. Nida, published in French by the United Bible Societies, 1963. This book is excellent. Its aim is 'to provide help for nationals and missionaries engaged in the task of the translation of the Bible. In its sections on textual criticism and exegesis, it aims at facilitating the understanding of the original text. In the examples of translation which it provides, it shows how to apply the semantic transfers while keeping in mind the different cultural, linguistic, and social traditions.'² (page vii).

¹ Published by *La Conférence des Églises de Toute l'Afrique*, 1967.

² From the Preface to the French edition.

Guided by this manual, we had to discover our own method of translation, put our hand to the work, and get used to working together in the common task.

The Organization of the work

The success of a work, once the basic conditions have been met, depends in large measure on its organization. We gave much thought to this, and here, in brief form, is what we adopted.

First of all, we chose the Greek New Testament as the basic text, and for those who did not know Greek, the text of the Jerusalem Bible in French or that of Segond. The development of the work was then arranged in three stages:

The first stage was that of the rough draft. The sixteen chapters of Mark were divided among the different translators. The translators then made a first translation, either in teams of two, or three, or individually, depending on what was possible in their geographical situation. A period of about two months was allotted for that task. The different translations completed in this way were then brought together, mimeographed, and distributed to all the translators. Each one, as a general rule, then reread the entire text and added his corrections.

The second stage, the most important, was that of the revised draft. This work was entrusted to a small committee of five or six members: a Protestant pastor, two or three priests, an evangelist, and a Catholic teacher. This committee received all the translations made in the first stage as well as the corrections suggested. They carefully reviewed the whole Gospel, chapter by chapter and verse by verse, with the constant double concern for the fidelity to the original text and the purity of the Fon language employed. It was a difficult task which took nearly two months of work at seven hours a day. The long vacation, July to October, was largely dedicated to the project.

The revised text which resulted, more or less definitive, was mimeographed and distributed, not only to the translators, but also to others, laymen, catechists, evangelists, priests, and Protestant pastors.

The third stage was that of testing. The primary aim here was the purity of the Fon language and its clarity. The text obtained by the second stage was now in the hands of a rather large public composed of all the translators and of completely new elements, educated and uneducated, both Protestant and Catholic. The reactions of this public were then gathered together. Was the text understandable? Were there mistakes of language? Were there passages which were obscure or open to misinterpretation? Was this expression good Fon, etc.? The text was then revised once more before taking its final form.

However, all was not finished yet. Before being sent to the printer the text was again mimeographed and distributed for temporary use in the liturgy and worship of the churches. The favorable or unfavorable reception by the larger public will determine whether or not another revision of the text will be necessary. Only after this will the Gospel be printed. At that time also the question of the choice of an orthography has to be faced.

What orthography have we adopted?

Until recent years we have used the Roman alphabet for the transcription of certain translations which were made. This orthography lacked precision and introduced uncertainties which often led to the wrong meaning or no meaning. Here is an example. A short phrase like this: // *E do ho* //, transcribed in the Roman alphabet without any other indication, can mean quite different things: 'He spoke', 'He cried', or 'He made a woman pregnant'. At times one finds even worse oddities. Further, it was almost impossible for a foreigner to read Fon when it was transcribed in this way. In order to avoid these inconveniences, we now employ the phonetic alphabet of the International Phonetics Association, revised by the International African Institute, and made available for South Dahomey by the meticulous work of R. P. Segurola (S.M.A.).

The use of this new orthography goes back only to 1963. It is confusing at first, but it offers the double advantage of exactitude and precision in rendering the sounds and the tones of Fon language. Thus, in writing / *É* ɔ̃ xó / there is no longer any confusion; that can only mean, 'He spoke'.

Obviously it is not easy to change habits. Certain catechists, priests, and laymen, accustomed to the Roman alphabet, showed considerable reserve at first; they were cool to the idea and refused to accept the change. This was understandable, for it demanded real effort, but once that is accomplished, the rewards are great. The opposition is changing rapidly and one could wish that from now on everything could be transcribed according to the new orthography. Moreover, it takes no more than a week or two to become familiar with it. The experience is there to prove it; an hour of instruction each day during a meeting of two or three weeks made it possible for catechists, who already knew how to read French, to read the new orthography correctly.

But our difficulties did not come only from the new orthography. We had to meet some more serious ones.

The difficulties encountered and their solution

We had to face the question of time, first of all. All the translators had their own occupations and duties, already heavy enough and time-consuming enough, in the parish ministry, teaching, etc. No one was relieved of other responsibilities in order to give himself to this work, and this made normal progress in the translation impossible. That difficulty was increased by the geographical dispersion of the translators. Some live at Cotonou, others at Ouidah (some 25 miles from Cotonou), others at Allada (25 miles), others at Bohicon (more than 60 miles), others at Parakou (280 miles). Meetings during the school year were difficult and the work done as a team suffered from this. But our faithfulness to the Gospel message and our concern to translate it into a Fon that was at the same time correct, understandable, and accessible to everyone, were able to overcome the most difficult problems.

We had to recognize that, in spite of certain very real similarities, large differences existed between the Biblical mentality and our own. Certain realities found in the Biblical world either do not exist among us, or take

quite different forms. Finally, certain terms used by Catholics or Protestants have taken on meanings which make them unacceptable to the other community. Here are some specific examples of each of these difficulties.

(a) Mark 1: 3—‘A voice cries in the desert’.¹ This little verse required almost three hours in our discussion. A translation which wants to be correct must take account of the geographical significance of the term ‘desert’ (dry region where there is no vegetation) and of its sociological significance (apart from the crowd and from men).

But in Dahomey there is no desert and therefore no linguistic equivalent. At first we translated it with ‘*gbexome*’. This word is in current use in Fon and translates well the sociological meaning of ‘desert’. But from the geographical viewpoint, it gives an opposite meaning, for ‘*gbexome*’ is the forest, the dense forest. It was therefore necessary to find another term. After long discussion, we had to create a new term, ‘*Gbexololo me*’, that is literally, ‘an empty region’.

But that is not all. The literal translation of ‘a voice cries’ has little meaning in Fon. In order to make the text understandable, we had to translate, ‘one can hear someone crying out in the empty region, saying’.

(b) Chapter 4 was the most difficult one to translate. The parable of the sower presupposes sowing by hand-casting, which is not practiced among us. Further, the literal translation of certain expressions would have given to the parable a meaning that was at least strange if not ridiculous. In translating, for example, ‘along the way’ (Mark 4: 4; 4: 15) by ‘*Ali ji*’ one would make the reader think of a sower going toward his field carrying his seed in a sack or a basket with a hole in it which let the grains fall out along the path.

In the same way, to translate ‘rocky ground’ (Mark 4: 5) by ‘*awĩñã ji*’ would be to affirm that the sower was stupid. For ‘*awĩñã*’ means ‘rock’, and in our way of sowing, no one would sow on rock.

The same thing would be true if we were to translate ‘the thorns’ literally by ‘*ũgbome*’. That would mean that the sower had not cleared his field before sowing.

To avoid the danger of appearing ridiculous and also of being untrue to the Gospel text, we tried to adapt this parable to our method of sowing, while respecting the essential message of the teaching of Christ. So instead of translating ‘way’ by ‘*ali*’ (path, road), we translated it by ‘*huexlome*’, that is, ‘furrow’, for with us people generally sow in furrows.

Instead of translating ‘rocky ground’ by ‘*awĩñã*’ we preferred the term ‘*axeko*’ which designates an especially hard clay soil on which nothing can grow.

We translated ‘the thorns’ not by ‘*ũgbome*’ (growing thorns), but by ‘*ũ donu*’, that is, ‘place where thorns normally (habitually) grow’ whether that place has been cleared or not. The text obtained in this way becomes understandable, because it conforms with our agricultural methods.

(c) Mark 1: 17: ‘Come after me and I will make you fishers of men’. In Fon ‘fisher’ is expressed by ‘the one who throws the net’ or ‘the one who catches fish’. You can guess what kind of a monstrosity would be produced

¹ Mark 1: 3 *Phōnē boōntos en tē erēmō.*

by a literal translation! 'The one who throws the net for men' or even 'the one who catches men'! One would think rather of policemen: 'Come, I will make you policemen' !!!

To avoid these mistakes, we proceeded as follows: 'to fish' in Fon is expressed by 'throw the net' or 'draw the net'. The verb which means 'draw' also has the sense of 'attract, bring to oneself', and it is there that we found the key to our problem, and we translated: 'Come follow me; I will give you the power to attract men'.

(d) Mark 10: 6-8: 'But at the beginning of creation, God made them man and woman. So a man shall leave his father and his mother and the two shall be one flesh'.

The most difficult part of these verses to translate is the term 'flesh', not because there is no equivalent in Fon, but translated literally, it would mean: 'the man shall leave his father and mother and the two shall be one *piece of meat*', or what is even more ridiculous, 'they will be one wild animal'. That is a little too much. So we translate: '. . . the two shall become one being'.

(e) Mark 12: 1-11. The parable of the unfaithful laborers in the vineyard was also one of the most difficult to translate: 'A man planted a vineyard, built a wall around it, dug a wine pit in it, and built a tower'.

This one verse occupied us almost a whole morning. The Dahomean has no idea of what a vineyard might be. To resolve the difficulty, and still with a concern for clarity, we had to turn once again to the realities among us. The manufacture of palm oil provided us with a possibility for translating 'press', and the way of protecting the field of grain against the ravages of the birds, a possibility for 'tower'. As for 'vineyard', we had to adopt a transliteration. 'Grapevine' in Fon becomes '*viũti*'. Translated, the verse becomes, 'A man possessed a field; he planted vines (*viũti*) in it, he built a wall around it; he constructed something like a "*deto*", and he built a "*gbãũ*" in it'. The '*deto*' is a sort of tank with the sides made of beaten earth and the bottom covered with boards on which men trample the palm nuts with their feet in order to press out the oil. The '*gbãũ*' is a kind of tower or wood scaffolding from the top of which one can watch the fields of grain. Translated in this way, the text is respected, and at the same time, recognizable Dahomean forms are employed.

(f) Mark 13: 28 offers another example of our difficulties.

'From the fig tree learn this parable. As soon as its branches become tender and it puts out leaves you recognize that summer is near.' The fig tree does not exist in Dahomey; the division of the seasons is different. In order for the figure employed by Christ to have a meaning for our people, it is necessary to find an equivalent among the realities of Dahomey. So we translated: 'Take the example of the "*voti*" (a tree in Dahomey): when its branches begin to come alive again and its leaves begin to grow again, you know that *the long rainy season* is already at its beginning'.

(g) Mark 13: 26. How should we translate 'the Son of Man'? Here is a double difficulty. Literally, one would have to translate '*Gbetɔ*' (man), '*siviɔ*' (coming from the Son). But that would not mean very much. Another expression would be a happier choice, because it is current in Fon: '*gbetɔ viɔ*', but that only translates one aspect of 'the Son of Man', for that would

mean 'a true son of man' or 'someone who is truly man', in opposition to an animal. The divine side of the expression would not be conveyed at all.

Further, the expression 'the Son of Man' is followed by a third person singular construction. In Fon this would cause the reader to think of someone other than Christ.

In order to face these difficulties we decided to restructure the phrase containing 'the Son of Man' in the first person and also to employ the intensive personal pronoun, 'Ñe' (I). That emphasis would make it clear that the reference was not just to any son of man. So the expression turns out, 'I, the Son of Man, I . . . '.

We could give many other examples of this kind, but that would be tiresome. These show the reality and the complexity of the difficulties as well as the principle on which we tried to resolve them: remain faithful to the text, while adapting it to our mentality and our cultural circumstances.

But at times some words have no equivalent in Fon. We then proceed to transliterate. But transliterated names must receive certain modifications according to Fon phonetics. So for example:

'Farizie'	for Pharisee
'Jeruzalemu'	for Jerusalem
'Judei'	for Jew
'Kolubā'	for Corban

We often add an explanatory word to names of places, rivers, etc. For example, the 'Jordan' is translated 'the River Jordan'. Since the passive voice does not exist in Fon, we had to transpose all the passive sentences into the active form.

Similarly, we always took pains to choose concrete words and verbal forms rather than abstract words. These are very rare in Fon and give to the sentences a style that is far more western than south Dahomean.

However there were times when our desire for clarity could not be realized. There are passages where the text itself is obscure and in need of explanation in order to be understood. But since our goal was to translate and not to write a commentary on the Gospel we contented ourselves with translating as literally as possible, even if it did not have much meaning in Fon. For example, Mark 9: 49-50: 'For everyone shall be salted with fire . . . have salt in yourselves'. The translation: 'For it is with fire that one salts everyone . . . have salt among yourselves'.

Our efforts bore their fruits. You have probably already noticed it in what has preceded. It is a real joy when we find expressions which are genuine Fon and which translate accurately the thought of the Gospel. I only give you one example, for this is without great interest for those who do not speak Fon.

Mark 7: 6-7; 'Isaiah prophesied well of you . . .

This people honors me with their lips
but their heart is far from me.

In vain they worship me,
teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.'

The literal translation of the Fon is:

'These people honor me with their mouth
but they have not received me in their heart.
They pretend to worship me, but there is
nothing serious about it (a Fon idiom).
That which they teach comes from the
back of their head (a Fon idiom).'

Difficulties resulting from the difference of mentality between Protestants and Catholics

The examples we have given so far attempt to illustrate the two primary sources of difficulty resulting from the difference from the Biblical mentality, customs, practices, and the lack of equivalent terms in Fon. We turn now to the differences between Protestants and Catholics. These must be attributed to two principal causes.

(a) *The mutual contamination of the Fon and Gun languages.* Protestants do not possess the Bible in Fon. Therefore they use the Bible in Gun in their meetings, Gun and Fon being sister languages. In this way certain Gun terms have entered into usage in the Fon Protestant circles. So it was difficult for them to accept the equivalent terms used in Catholic circles, even though they had the advantage of being Fon. This difference produced very long, evidently useless, discussions about expressions which each one held to be indispensable because he had become accustomed to them.

I only present here two of the more characteristic examples. The Protestants wanted to translate 'Holy Spirit' by '*gbugbo wiwe*', a term to which they are accustomed. But in the opinion of us Catholics, that expression is not acceptable, even though it is used in Gun Catholic circles (region of Porto-Novo). In Gun it is perhaps possible: '*gbugbo*' means 'breath' and '*wiwe*', 'holy, pure'. But in Fon '*wiwe*' means 'white' and '*gbugbo*' is not used except in expressions like 'He is out of breath', 'he gave up his last breath'. So for us it was difficult to accept the expression, particularly also because we were used to another: '*Ye sise*'. That translation is perhaps not very good, for '*ye*' indicates both 'shade' and 'spirit' in the sense of an invisible being. But the expression does have the advantage of being composed of words that are genuinely Fon.

How could we solve the problem? We first tried to find a completely new expression. Our search was long, tiring, even annoying, and in the end, useless. But the discussions were a blessing, for at last everyone accepted the expression '*ye sise*' with the conviction that we could not find a better one.

The same problem was encountered in the translation of the term 'pray'. The Protestants would have liked to bring in the term in current usage among them: '*Xode*'. But this expression with the sense of 'pray' is Gun. The proof is that it is also used by Gun Catholics. Indeed the same word is found in Fon, but with a different meaning. In Fon it means 'pronounce benedictions, formulate wishes, make a libation before the fetishes, etc.'. So the Catholics felt that it must be put aside, because the term was inadequate. They then proposed the expression '*xa yehue*' which they have always used.

This produced long discussions, fed by the second cause which we wished to indicate:

(b) *The difference of mentality between Protestants and Catholics.* In order to be more exact, one would have to speak rather of prejudice. If the expression '*xa yehue*' was not accepted immediately by the Protestants, it was because of the idea which it evoked among them. According to the view of some, it made them think of a Catholic counting his rosary or reciting some formula or other, while prayer itself is, before all and above all, the presence of God, a conversation with God.

In fact, the verb '*xa*' does mean 'count, recite'. But that is not sufficient reason to affirm that the expression '*xa yehue*' is only applicable to the recitation of the rosary or a formula. For in Catholic circles and in Catholic thought, it is a genuine expression to designate all forms of prayer, including extemporaneous personal prayer, the internal dialogue between the soul and God, as well as recited prayer.

So we agreed on the following compromise: (1) Everywhere where the prayer is specific, one should use an adequate term. Thus, for example, a prayer of supplication would be translated by '*savo*' and a prayer of request by '*bi*', etc. (2) In other cases '*xa yehue*' will be used with the understanding that it will be necessary to explain to people the essential content of the expression.

This compromise was approved by everyone, including Dr Peacock, representative of the Bible Societies, who is following our work with interest. In fact, we have had two meetings with him. Once in the month of March in the course of which he presented a number of interesting suggestions, the other in July–August, in the course of which he became acquainted with the substance of our work. He does not live in Dahomey, but it is he who has served as the intermediary between us and the Bible Society, which has borne the expenses of all this first work.

One must confess that the mass of all the difficulties indicated above leads at times to discouragement and to the desire to abandon the task. But in spite of this we continued to work, and are continuing, because we are conscious that it will produce valuable fruit of many kinds. The importance of these is quite apparent when one thinks of the needs that will be met, pastoral needs, needs of worship, of sanctification, ecumenical needs.

Pastoral needs. It was always true, but even more so since Vatican II, that the pastoral ministry, instruction, and liturgy are unthinkable apart from the Bible. These must be guided by the Word of God. But until now we do not have any translation to use in the evangelization of the Fons, who constitute at least one-fourth of the Dahomean population. It is that great lack that we intend to fill first of all.

Needs of sanctification. The second need which our work seeks to meet is related to the first. The pastoral ministry must have as its ultimate goal the sanctification of the people of God. But there is no real sanctification without a deep knowledge of Christ. And that is tied in large measure to the knowledge of the Bible. This is so true that Saint Jerome was able to say that to be ignorant of the Scriptures is to be ignorant of Christ.

How can the Fons know the Scriptures and have a share in Christ if one

does not give them the possibility of having contact with the Bible in the language that is their own and that they understand?

To make this means of sanctification available to them, in their services of worship, their Bible studies, preaching services, etc., our efforts, no matter how tiring they may be, need to be made.

Ecumenical needs. We want our work to be also a small stone in the building of Christian unity, for there is no possibility of agreement between Catholics and Protestants unless they know each other. And this knowledge of one another is made much easier if there is a common center of interest. When people have labored together and worked together, when they have produced something beautiful together, they are better able to meet each other as brothers. They know each other better, understand each other better, and the effort to level out the hills and fill up the valleys which separate us becomes less burdensome.

We have not yet reached that ideal, but the first step has been taken; that in itself is great progress. And I have the conviction that it will continue to increase, since together, as Catholics and Protestants, we will still have to work side by side for a long time. At the end of a year we have succeeded in translating only the Gospel of Mark. That is not very much material, but we have actually taken up the task, we have found a method of working together, and we have come to an agreement about a number of basic terms and expressions. That is to say, that if the task before us is still enormous, it has already been made a little bit easier.

It is with this optimism that we have taken up the work again with the translation of the Gospel of Luke. May the Spirit of God strengthen us, enlighten us, and lead us that we may not bring any harm to the Words that He inspired, but that we may live by them in meditation in order to be able to transmit them, unaltered, to our Fon brothers of Dahomey.