

## THE TRANSLATION OF SOME FIGURES OF SPEECH FROM PSALMS IN BAMILÉKÉ AND BAMOUN

*The Psalms are poetic and heavily figurative in expression. Modern translators translating into contemporary European languages tend to translate metaphors with nonmetaphors. The heavy form of figurative expressions is cut away and the meaning shines delightfully through. The necessity for such adaptations is both linguistic and cultural. Readers of English do not see any connection between 'Thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows' and their own or any one else's custom of hospitality. Yet, for a translation to be meaningful such figures of speech must be translated by various means of adaptation.*

*In his article Dr de Waard suggests that many African languages have figures of speech which are sometimes clearly related to local practices and that where these exist it is possible to retain some cultural aspects of the Hebrew figures. This article first appeared in Flambeau, No. 21, February 1969, and has been adapted by the Editor for TBT.*

Translation frequently requires adjustments in idioms and figures of speech: metaphors are sometimes changed to nonmetaphors or to a different metaphor. A metaphor may be changed to a simile, and what is a nonmetaphor in the source language may upon translating be adapted to a metaphor. The vital question is not which form is satisfactory but what kind of addition or loss of information will be caused by the adaptation. A figurative expression in the source language may, when translated literally, give a wrong meaning or no meaning in the receptor language.

One of the factors which helps the translator to decide in the handling of figurative expressions is the cultural parallelism between source and receptor language. If the receptor language uses figurative expressions which are related in practice to contemporary speakers of the language so that they reflect actual behaviour, it is often possible to preserve a certain flavour of the original.

In the following examples taken from the translation of the Psalms into the Bamiléké and Bamoun languages of the East Cameroun we have found that a number of African languages can make similar adaptations in the translation of Hebrew figures of speech.

### **The Gates of Death**

In Psa. 9: 13b we find the expression 'the gates of Death', whereas the following verse conveys an opposite meaning in 'the gates of the daughter of Zion'.

The imagery of gates, and more particularly the gates of a town, so important in Semitic cultures, lacks a literal equivalent in many African cultures.

When translated in a more figurative manner, the expression 'the gates of death' denotes 'the sphere of death' or an intense loneliness and sense of being abandoned by God. On the other hand, 'the gates of the daughter of Zion' describes 'the sphere of life' or the proximity of God.

In translating 'the gates of death' it is possible in a number of African languages simply to replace the image of a gate by another image. As an example, in some languages one can speak of 'the mouth of death', for when a person is close to dying he is said to be at 'the mouth of death'. Again, when someone manages to escape from a mortal danger he is said to have escaped from 'the mouth of death'.

As to 'the gates of the daughter of Zion', it will not be possible here to find an equivalent expression retaining the parallelism with 'the gates of death'. The gates of the daughter of Zion most probably represent the gates of Jerusalem, where the social life of the city was centred. The essence of this verse is that the author of this Psalm is sounding the praises of the Lord, and this reminds us of the social centre of a village, the 'public place', the large courtyard at the entrance to a chiefdom where the chief makes his pronouncements, where the tribunal meets and community dances and other events are held. In one town there may be several public places of this kind, the dignitaries of different sections of the town each possessing their own; these public places serve the same purpose, but on a different level.

A distinction must usually be drawn between a 'public place' and a 'market place', for in various parts of Africa it is very unusual for the market to be held in the 'public place'. For instance, in the Bamiléké territory the only known exception is in the chiefdom of Bangoulap. Therefore, 'the gates of the daughter of Zion' would normally be translated by 'the public place of Zion'. It would, of course, be possible to omit any reference to a place as such and simply to say, 'I stand before the people of Jerusalem'.

### **Snared in the work of their own hands. Psalms 9: 16**

In verse 16 of the same Psalm we find the expression 'the wicked is snared in the work of his own hands', which is very difficult to render in an African language. Here the translator must look for an idiomatic expression in the receptor language which will convey the meaning of the Hebrew text. A good example is the following: 'the works of the hands of the wicked man throw him into the pit' (Bamiléké). 'To throw into the pit' is a figure of speech for 'betraying', 'condemning', and the pit symbolizes a difficult situation from which there appears to be no way out.

### **He puffs at them. Psalm 10: 5**

Verse 5b of Psalm 10 presents us with a very unusual expression: 'he puffeth at them'. As to the meaning of the word 'puff' we have here an exegetical problem. On the one hand there is the possibility of a magical puff, and this interpretation could explain the Greek (Septuagint) translation of the OT where this word is rendered by a verb having the meaning of 'to obtain authority over', 'to hold in one's power'. On the other hand, 'puff' could be an expression of anger or disdain. In the light of the context (cf. v. 6) the

Psalmist can very well be referring here to an action of disdain as in the following translation: 'he spitteth on all his adversaries'.

**The Cords of Sheol. Psa. 18: 5**

In verse 5 of the same Psalm we find the expression 'the cords of Sheol were round about me'. The powers of death are described here by a metaphor borrowed from hunting. Although hunting is carried out in nearly every African culture, and in spite of the clarity of this Semitic figure of speech, it is difficult to find the same kind of metaphor in African languages. One is therefore obliged to substitute for 'cords' another metaphor with the same force, such as 'odour'—'the odour of death had surrounded me'. Sometimes synonymous expressions such as 'odour of death', 'mouth of death' etc. are interchangeable.

**Thou anointest my head with oil. Psa. 23: 5**

The second part of Psa. 23: 5 reads: 'Thou anointest my head with oil' or, in what would be a better rendering, 'Thou refreshest my head with oil'. The oil referred to here was olive oil to which spices had been added, although spices were mainly used in worship. The head, the feet, or the entire body were anointed. In this verse we have three metaphors: a table spread, a head anointed with oil, and a cup running over—three pictures which call to mind the favours bestowed by a host. An element of demonstration is included, for the Lord, as host, bestows all these favours in the face of adversaries. This action brings to mind a passage in Amarna's letters where the vassal king addresses Pharaoh in these words: 'that he may bestow gifts on his servants while our adversaries look on'. These three metaphors may have originated in a banquet at the time of a sacrifice of thanksgiving in the temple. Be that as it may, the second metaphor describes the care and favour shown by the Lord to the persecuted.

In cultures which are unfamiliar with the practice of anointing the head or the body of a person with oil, the translating of this expression certainly creates some problems. In such cases one must search for an equivalent expression containing the idea of 'care' and 'favour'. In the Bamiléké translation the idiom 'thou clothest me' is a very good equivalent. In its literal sense this expression means 'to give clothing to someone' on a particular occasion, at some festivity or at a ceremonial dance. But it is also used figuratively in the sense of 'granting a favour to someone', such as a man giving his daughter to someone in marriage, or more frequently, when better living conditions are created by someone, we can say that he is granting a favour.

**Thou hast loosed my sackcloth. Psa. 30: 11**

Psa. 30: 11b, 'thou hast loosed my sackcloth, and girded me with gladness' recalls mourning clothes in particular and mourning customs in general. On receiving news of a death, the Israelite rent his garments and clothed himself in a coarse, dark fabric of goat's hair. This cloth was stitched around the waist or held together by a cord. Other customs accompanied this one, and

the mourner would also remove his shoes, pull off his turban, shave or cover his head and beard. The period of mourning appears to have lasted thirty days. Our text refers to a hair-shirt rather than to a garment of mourning. It should be noted, however, that the penitential practices of the individual and the community were identical with their mourning practices, so that the text should be rendered in mourning terms. In translating into most African languages the same identity should be preserved, for the ecclesiastical tradition is usually too short for penitential practices to have been developed, or it is against such practices. In other words, the translator must search for authentic mourning practices in the tribe in question. For example, in the past, and even today, the Bamiléké women carried, and still carry, a raffia bag slung on their arm or wear a rope round their neck and hanging often to their chest. Sometimes both are worn simultaneously. It is only recently that Western mourning customs have been introduced, especially in the big towns, and both men and women are beginning to wear a blue garment for a deceased husband or wife and a black garment for other relatives. The period of mourning lasts for at least a year, and can occasionally extend to ten years, the length of time depending entirely on a voluntary decision. In accordance with these customs the translator has the choice of two methods of rendering the first part of v. 11b into this culture: 'you have taken the bag of mourning from my hand' or 'you have removed the cord of mourning from my neck'. The fact that the Psalmist is a man, whereas these two customs apply exclusively to women, does not present an obstacle either in translating or in understanding. In keeping with the same cultural practices the end of this verse can be translated by: 'thou puttest a new garment round my loins'. Parallel solutions can easily be found in African cultures where mourning customs differ from the above.

#### **Thou hast set my feet in a broad place. Psa. 31: 8**

In Psa. 31: 8b the text reads: 'thou hast set my feet in a broad place'. The Hebrew word *merchab*—a broad or wide place, 'a roomy place'—occurs only five times in the Old Testament. It is used once in a literal sense (Hab. 1: 6) and four times in a figurative sense (2 Sam. 22: 20; Hos. 4: 16; Psa. 18: 19; Psa. 31: 8). In the last four references the opposite meaning is always one of obstruction and oppression. At the back of this word is the feeling of freedom so dear to the nomadic shepherd of ancient times. In the Psalms in particular this word still plays a role, but in a figurative sense. This concept is not found outside nomadic conditions, which explains the absence of an appropriate word to describe it in the vocabularies of sedentary tribes. The idea must therefore be translated in a different manner. Some languages have the expression 'to cause someone's legs to spread out', which is used both in a literal and in a figurative sense. The translation 'thou wilt cause my legs to spread out' is a very good rendering of the Hebrew terminology.

#### **Sacrifice and offerings. Psa. 40: 6**

Psa. 40: 6 refers to a whole series of offerings. First of all, there is the 'sacrifice', which is the victim eaten at a meal following the sacrifice by the community; then comes the offering consisting of an oblation of agricultural

products: flour, oil and wine; 'the burnt offering' where the animal is completely burnt; and finally the 'sin offering'. This last expression poses the greatest number of problems for the translator. Lev. 4 gives us details of this sin offering in a case where the priest himself has sinned: 'If the anointed priest shall sin so as to bring guilt on the people, then let him offer for his sin, which he hath sinned, a young bullock unto the door of the tent of meeting before the Lord; and he shall lay his hand upon the head of the bullock, and kill the bullock before the Lord' (vv. 3, 4). Num. 15 gives us further details concerning expiation where the lay community or an individual has sinned: '. . . if it be done unwittingly, without the knowledge of the congregation, . . . all the congregation shall offer one young bullock for a burnt offering, for a sweet savour unto the Lord, with the meal offering thereof, and the drink offering thereof, according to the ordinance, and one he-goat for a sin offering', v. 24; '. . . if one person sin unwittingly, then he shall offer a she-goat of the first year for a sin offering', v. 27. These passages refer exclusively to unwitting sinning; for deliberate sinning there is no possible expiation.

It is always extremely difficult to translate the terms used for a highly developed sacrificial system like that of the Hebrews by the terms of a far less developed sacrificial system, as is the case with most of the African ancestral religions. For example, in the traditional Bamiléké religion there was only one sin offering, the 'Kon goat'. 'Kon' refers to the violation of a certain taboo forbidding children to have sexual relations on their parents' plot of land. In a case of violation the witch doctor has to be called, and he places a goat on the spot where the violation has taken place. The goat is put in the hut, or, if the violation has occurred outside, a small hut is erected around the spot. The door of the hut is closed and after a few minutes the witch doctor extricates the goat through a hole he has made in the wall. He then kills the goat on the plot of land in front of the witness of the violation and any other spectators. When he leaves, he carries away with him the meat, which he will himself eat. The goat as sin offering is therefore only the 'Kon goat', and sin offering is known only in connection with the violation of a sexual taboo. We are fully aware that the full import of 'sin offering' is greatly diminished when this is translated by 'Kon goat', but the only choice we have is to use a meaningful term which is a partial equivalent or to resort to an artificial, equivalent rendering devoid of meaning. The same problem is met in other African cultures, and the same choice has to be made.<sup>1</sup>

### Upon Edom I cast my shoe. *Psa. 60: 8*

In *Psa. 60: 8* (= *Psa. 108: 10*) we are dealing with an oracle of God in which he proclaims his right of possession not only on the territory of Israel, but also on the vassal states of Edom, Moab and of the Philistines. We find here an association of the Israelite ideas with regard to the holy war and the apportionment of the country, and the theology of the royal sanctuary in

<sup>1</sup> (It is necessary to determine in such cases what religious meaning the 'Kon goat' has for the reader today. If the use of the expression would shift too radically the religious forms, it might be better to use a descriptive phrase and reserve the 'Kon goat' as supplementary footnote information. Ed.)

Jerusalem. In a forced metaphor the basin of Moab, that is to say the Dead Sea, is referred to as 'the basin of the Lord'. However, the following metaphor is the one which has often been translated literally or badly translated in African languages, in spite of the fact that many excellent equivalents are available. The text reads: 'Upon Edom I cast my shoe.' This picture of 'casting one's shoe' on a territory symbolizes taking possession of the territory. The 'shoe' is used in the same way in the expression 'drawing off one's shoes', which amounts to saying: 'abandoning one's rights of ownership' (Ruth 4: 7, 8). In translating it is necessary to ask oneself this question: what is the equivalent expression rendering the idea of 'taking possession of a country'? For example, in the Bamoun culture occupation or possession is indicated by planting a spear in the enemy's territory. This illustration gives us the following excellent translation: 'I plant my war spear in the land of Edom.' This solution can be applied in a number of Bantu languages. In other languages one has to translate this expression by: 'I place my seat in the land of Edom.' In any case there is no language where an equivalent idiomatic expression cannot be found.

It is not always possible to preserve some of the metaphorical aspects in translation, and one must not force a receptor language to use expressions which are not fully meaningful. In the remainder of the examples metaphors in Hebrew are translated by nonmetaphors.

#### **A scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup. Psa. 11: 6**

A literal translation of Psa. 11: 6b would be: 'a scorching wind, that is the chalice which is their portion', or 'let a scorching wind be the portion of their cup.' The main difficulty arises from the Hebrew idea 'the portion of their cup'. We have here a rather rare Hebrew metaphor which must originally have had some deep significance in worship. There is also the 'cup of salvation' which the Lord fills (Psa. 116: 13) as well as the exact opposite in the Lord's 'cup of fury'; both metaphors are most probably linked with the idea of judgment. Henceforward the 'cup' is a figure of the destiny which a man faces. Where this metaphor or an equivalent is not available, as in so many African languages, we must simply translate the notion of destiny which it conveys, such as 'their portion of misfortune' or simply 'their misfortune'.

The same decision should be taken with regard to the beginning of verse 5 of Psa. 16 where the Lord is referred to as 'the portion of . . . my cup'. The context describes a contrary fate, so the translation 'he is my happiness' is justified. The remainder of this verse, 'thou maintainest my lot', which is in abstract language, often constitutes a stumbling-block for translators. In the Bamiléké language a happy solution was found in the following idiomatic expression: 'Thou, Lord, dost guard the back of me', that is to say my posterior from my head to my heels. The predominant idea in this expression is one of protection, while continuing action is indicated by the verb 'to keep'. Similar solutions can certainly be found in other languages.

#### **The Lord is my rock and my fortress. Psa. 18: 2**

In Psa. 18: 2 we read: 'The Lord is . . . my fortress.' 'Fortress' is a metaphor used throughout the Old Testament, and especially in the Psalms, to convey

the idea of protection. The fortress in question is always a mountain fortress. Although there are many mountainous countries in Africa, fortresses are almost unknown there. Clearly this metaphor must be replaced by another one which similarly expresses the idea of protection. In some cultures a somewhat daring translation has been suggested: 'The Lord is . . . my lock.' The word 'lock' is not to be understood in the modern sense of the term: one should think rather of a bar or vertical beam fixed into holes in the ground and in the lintel so as to hold the door firmly closed. In some languages the identification of the Lord with a lock or other object creates no problem, but in others a metaphor of this kind would have to be changed into a simile: 'The Lord is . . . like my lock.' In the same verse the Lord is further described as 'the horn of my salvation'. Faced in a number of languages with the impossibility of translating this literally, one should remember that in Hebrew a horn is often the symbol of strength. As we realize more and more that the word 'salvation' is not an abstract but rather an event, the most suitable translation would be: 'The Lord is . . . the strength which saves me.'

#### **The cleanness of my hands. Psa. 18: 20, 24**

Verses 20 and 24 offer us the expression 'the cleanness of hands' which only occurs in two other places in the Old Testament: 2 Sam. 22: 21 and Job 22: 30. In many African languages a literal translation is meaningless, the more so as the semantic field of the notion of 'cleanness, purity' is completely different. 'Cleanness of hands' in Hebrew refers solely to innocence, so that the end of the verse, 'according to the cleanness of my hands hath he recompensed me', can be translated as follows: 'he did this to me because I am innocent'.

Scores of other examples could be provided but we hope we have given a sufficient number to show how complex are the problems of translation and where we can look for suitable solutions. The Bible has not only come down to us in a foreign tongue, but clothed in a culture which is foreign to us. In our translation work we must not endeavour to give only a literal rendering of the words of the Bible. We must clothe the message in a new garment which will make it intelligible to the people we are trying to reach. In other words, we must transpose the message into the framework of their culture.