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TRANSLATING THE NAMES OF GOD: HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT NAMES IN THE TARGET LANGUAGE

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During my early years as translation consultant with the Bible Society in South America, I had the privilege of checking the translation of the New Testament into the Maquiritare language spoken in south-western Venezuela. As we neared the completion of that New Testament, I began to feel increasingly uneasy about the word for "God", *Diyo*, which the team was using. Each time I voiced my concern about the fact that the name was borrowed from a European language and not a Maquiritare name, the translators assured me that they too, felt uncomfortable about that name, but that there was nothing they could do about it, because the Maquiritare language just did not have an adequate word. There was, they said, a culture hero called *Wanaari*. He was spoken of as having done some of the things the Bible ascribes to God, but he was also the "lyingest", "cheatingest" and most immoral character in tribal folklore and hence totally unfit for the divine name in the Bible.

When we had completed checking the New Testament I still could not shake off my uneasiness about the divine name, so I asked that the team take several months to pray and to listen carefully to see if there really was no local name for God that could be used. I promised that if after three months of honest search on their part, they did not turn up an adequate answer, I would authorize the printing of the New Testament using the loanword *Diyo* to express *God*.

Before two months had passed I received an excited letter. The translators, true to their promise, had accompanied a team of evangelists to a remote corner of Maquiritareland. The evangelists preached and taught and the translators listened. To the surprise of the translators the evangelists, all Maquiritare church elders, dropped the name *Diyo* and preached only about *Wanaari* as soon as they got into the previously unevangelized area. The trip lasted several weeks and during the whole time the name *Diyo* was never used.

On the way home the translators confronted the evangelists with the question: "How come you always used the name *Wanaari* among these people while in our churches at home you always use *Diyo* to speak about God?"

The answer: "These people know no Spanish, so they have never heard the name *Dios* or *Diyo*. The only name for *God* they know is *Wanaari*."

“But what about all the deception and all the acts of immorality which Wanaari committed? How could he be the God of the Bible?”

The answer: “Oh, those things? Don’t you know that they are all bad gossip stories that the devil invented so that the people would not follow Wanaari’s way?”

With one bold stroke a whole tribal mythology of the now “bad” stories about *Wanaari* had been reinterpreted. And the end result was that the church decided to use *Wanaari* rather than *Diyo* to express *God* in the New Testament about to be printed.

Just as these Maquritare translators had to ask some pointed questions before they could reach the right answer in their situation, so I want to raise a series of questions in this article with the hope that they will help translators everywhere in making better choices of words to express the divine names in the languages in which they are working.

When may a translation use a loanword to express God’s name?

During my years of overseas service I have been surprised at how many groups I have met that either began to hear or are still hearing a gospel in which God’s name is a loanword. Sometimes God’s name has been borrowed from a neighboring or a related tribal language. Sometimes it has been borrowed from a trade or a colonial language. With my anthropological background I had a bias against loanwords from a different language in such important areas as the name of God. However, I have since realised if we take Exodus chapter 3 at face value, then the Israelite people only learned God’s name *yhwh* centuries after they had been worshipping him.

The circumstances which seem to have led evangelists, both missionary and national, to use such loanwords have been exceedingly varied. Among the Maquritare it was that series of negative myths that probably led the early missionaries to avoid the local name and to use the Spanish loanword *Dios* to speak about God.

In some cases early missionaries claimed that they had not been able to find a local name for *God* and so they were forced to use a loanword from a neighboring language in order to speak about God. In one such setting where I was asked to help locate a local word for *God*, I had to work for several months before I found it; and then we discovered it only by accident while investigating a totally unrelated matter. Why had it been so difficult to find? That is the question I cannot answer even today, but I understand that this is a common experience.

In other settings the evangelistic efforts began through interpretation, and the interpreters, having some difficulty with the technical language of the new religion, found it easiest to adapt foreign names to the phonology of the target language. In one such language I found that the people were using the name *Kang* for *God*. By the time I arrived on the scene the early missionaries were no longer on the field and the new missionaries had learned the language. However, even though they spoke the language fairly well, they had not recognized that *Kang* was not an indigenous name for *God*, but that it, in actual fact, was

a transliterated loanword from English. The language in question had no voiced consonants *b d g* and so the *g* of *God* had become voiceless *k*. The vowel *a* was a result of the Southern U.S.A. pronunciation of the word *God* by the early missionary, and the final *ng* resulted from the fact that many words in this language ended in a nasal sound, and in this way the word *God* had become *Kang*.

In sub-Saharan Africa we also find that there are non-native names for *God* in a number of languages, but here the reason is the influence of Islam which refuses to accept any name other than the Arabic *Allah* for *God*. Under no circumstances are tribal names considered to be an acceptable replacement for *Allah*. If a tribe has been heavily influenced by Islam, even many non-Muslims may be hesitant to use their local name for *God* because of the strength of the reaction of their fellow tribesmen who are Muslims. Thus translators in such tribes will find that even the traditional religionists will often seem to express a preference for the name *Allah* in the biblical context. The reason may be two-fold. Firstly, because of the local reaction already mentioned, and secondly, because they see Christianity, likewise, as a foreign religion which will not accept their tribal name for *God*.

In Central Africa the history of missions shows that there was a movement of missionaries from the southern into the central region of Africa. Often these missionaries were accompanied by African evangelists from churches established in the south. These evangelists felt much more at home using their home language name for *God* than the name for *God* in the language in which they were to evangelize. As a result the early Lozi evangelization in Zambia was done using the Zulu name for *God*.

While I have heard of tribes who have no name for *God* and have thus been forced to use a non-indigenous name for him, I personally have to confess that I have yet to find a language that did not have a good local alternative. Even though the local name often seems to be encumbered by many negative associations as was the name *Wanaari* among the Maquiritare, we should not reject even such names outright; first of all, because we need to recognize that the Bible will put this name in its own context, and the influence of this context can eliminate many of the negative things that were earlier associated with that name. Myth changing is a constant process, and as in the case of the Maquiritare, it can often provide almost instant sanctification of the divine name. Furthermore, we need to recognize that the local name always has a "home-feeling": it is "our God". Even groups that have used a loanword for the divine name for decades confess that it seemingly never fully loses its foreign flavor.

My personal answer therefore to the question: Are there circumstances under which we can use a loanword for God? would theoretically be *yes*. If there absolutely is no name for *God* or if the strength of feeling against the indigenous name of even early Christians is so strong that it should not be used, we may have reason to use an imported name. Usually, however, I have observed that even names with many negative characteristics were used by local converts when they spoke about God with non-Christians whenever they were away from the mission setting.

A second question should be asked here: If we are forced to use a loanword, does it make a difference from which language the word is borrowed? While we cannot make a really general rule in this regard, certain factors are worth considering. For example, the name *Allah* is often so loaded with theological and cultural ideas that usually the divine name from a neighbouring tribe is a better alternative for use in the bible. Again, the name for *God* from a trade language is often better than the name from a colonial language, because if a reaction should ever develop against the colonial language, the negative feeling would certainly also extend to God's name.

Is the local name for “God” a personal name or is it a class noun?

I remember how thrilled my wife and I were when we as new missionaries to the Waunana discovered that these people had only one word for *God*, namely *Ewandama*. As a young person I had heard missionaries from Asia speak about the great difficulties they had experienced in trying to choose a name for *God* in a culture that had a great number of divine names. So we experienced a genuine feeling of relief when we learned that the Waunana recognized only one God.

But before long, however, our enthusiasm cooled because we realized that the name *Ewandama* was not a class noun referring to *God*, but a personal name like *John* or *Peter*. In biblical terms, the Waunana had an equivalent for the name *yhwh*, but not an equivalent for *el/eloheim*. This became apparent when we tried to form such sentences as “there are many *Ewandamas*”, or when we attempted to speak of “the *Ewandama* of the Empera”, their tribal neighbors. The Waunana rejected all such statements outright saying that there was only one *Ewandama* and that he existed exclusively for the Waunana people. They insisted that the Emperas prayed to *Ankone* and not to *Ewandama*. In fact they even rejected the idea that one could say that *Ankone* was the Empera way of saying *Ewandama*. *Ankone* and *Ewandama* were two totally separate personalities.

The Waunana are not alone in having only a personal name for *God*. To my mind the situation in which God's name is a personal name rather than a class noun holds true for many tribal societies in South America and Africa.

Can a personal name like “yhwh” or “Ewandama” ever become a class noun like “el/eloheim”?

Before we reject this possibility out of hand, we should consider the fact that many of the products we use today are known by an original brand name, rather than by a class name. In fact, often the brand name has become a class name in its own right. For example, I still find it easier to ask for a *kleenex* rather than a *facial tissue*; and I will be quite satisfied if what you give me comes from the box that bears the name *Scotties*, or *Royale Facial Tissues*. In the same vein, as new missionaries in Colombia we learned that baking powder was called *royal* from the *Royal* brand name which was the first to arrive on the market there; and sneakers were called *champions* from the brand name *Champions*. By the same token it is possible for the personal name of a divinity to become a generic name. This often happens when people become aware of

other divinities such as the gods of the peoples around them. We saw this happen at the height of our frustration in the Waunana situation with the name *Ewandama*.

As we began our translation efforts, I travelled across a range of mountains to visit one of the oldest living Waunana. He was a very famous story-teller and I wanted to learn many things from him. Usually he and I spent the entire day talking together, because during the day everyone else left the house to hunt, to fish, to go to the garden, and only the old man and I remained in the house. Once everyone had left I would try to "prime" the old man to tell me more Waunana stories.

One day I asked him to retell a story I knew well. It was the account of how God *Ewandama* threw out his uncooperative wife and took his sister-in-law for a wife. Such a marriage in our culture may be quite acceptable, but in their culture this is incest and one of the three unpardonable sins that damage the person's blood and turn the perpetrator into a devil. Since I knew the story well, I could respond with the appropriate audience reactions a good story-teller expects. The old man rose to the occasion and really delivered the story in an exciting way. Until he finished I behaved like a believing Waunana hearing the story ought to behave. But then I suddenly dropped that role, I banged my fist on the floor, I jumped up and down, I assumed a horrified expression and said: "I know you are a wise old man, I know you tell the truth, but my spleen refuses to accept that the *Ewandama* who made the world and the Waunana was evil enough to commit incest and so become an unredeemable devil." I paused dramatically, looking hard at the old man.

For a while he was stunned, and then suddenly he questioningly proposed "Maybe there is more than one *Ewandama*. I think I agree with you that the *Ewandama* who made the world surely wouldn't commit incest; it must have been someone else also called *Ewandama*." It was our first inkling that it might be possible for *Ewandama* to become a class noun. Several years later after our furlough I overheard a discussion in which a group of Waunana were discussing the *Ewandamas* of the various people they knew, and then I knew that what once had been only a personal name was, in actual fact, functioning as a class noun. It really should not surprise us if people who have been living in a totally isolated tribal setting should have only a personal name for their God and that they could lack a class noun for gods in general. In fact, it may be necessary for a people to become aware of many gods first, before they feel the need for a class noun to speak about such beings. Once this does happen and they are faced with a number of deities for one reason or another, then they may have reason to develop a class noun, and very often they may do it on the basis of a personal divine name just like North Americans have done it with the brand name *Kleenex*.

If "God" remains an individual, personal name in a given tribal setting, how can we handle "gods" in such settings?

In many cases, at least in Africa, I have found that languages which have only a personal name for God do, in fact, have an equivalent for *god/gods*; but in the dictionaries that exist in these languages, usually prepared by

missionaries, this word has been given the equivalent of *fetish* or *idol* rather than *god/gods*. If we take an African example and consider the Akan of Ghana we see that they recognize *Onyame* or *Onyankopon* as the supreme God. Both of these names are personal and cannot be pluralized, but they also recognize the *abosom*, called *idols* or *fetishes* in the earlier dictionaries, but now called *god/gods* by Akan scholars. *A* is the prefix which pluralizes a root, *bo* means “stone” or “rock” and *som* means “to worship”. Thus the word as a whole literally means “rock things people worship” (John Pobee). While the above example is from a single tribal society, the model it presents is duplicated in many, if not most West African societies. In such situations the local word *gods* will probably cover the domain of two Hebrew words *gods* and *idols*. However, in Akan one cannot say the supreme God *Onyame* belongs to the class of *abosom* even though both may be worshipped. They are felt to belong to two completely separate categories.

There are languages, however, that do not have a word for *god/gods*. If this is the case we usually have to resort to a descriptive expression such as “things people pray to” or “objects people make and then pray to”, or something similar.

How do we decide which name to use when a language has several names for “God”?

The African language I know best is Chichewa, which is spoken in Malawi and Zambia. This language has a whole series of names for “God”: *Mulungu*, *Chiuta*, *Mpambe*, *Mlezi*, *Chanjira*. How should we go about deciding which of these names for “God” we can and should use in the Chichewa Bible?

I would like to suggest the following steps in making a decision of this nature:

1. Make as complete a list of names for “God” as possible. Be sure to deal with the names in context, either in a story or in a meaningful sentence. In the process of establishing these contexts it will be very useful to see how many of these names can be substituted for each other in the same contexts.
2. In order to discover in what context these names can function, use the questions suggested by E. A. Nida in *Bible Translating* (pages 204–210). Study the questions listed there and use those that apply in your situation, and in that way you can map out all the contexts in which each of the divine names can occur.
3. On the basis of the above findings establish a definition for each one of the names for “God” and also note their major functions. The result of such an inquiry for Chichewa, for example, might yield something like the following:
Mulungu is the most widely used word, and most people automatically assume that it is also the God who is spoken about in the Bible. It cannot be pluralized or abstracted as a class noun; therefore it must be considered the personal name of God.

Chiuta is basically a praise name that refers to the great spaces in the sky which are considered to be God’s domain. The sign that *Chiuta* puts in the sky to show that he is there is the rainbow which he stretches out from one end of

the sky to the other. An English equivalent of *Chiuta* might be “the chief of the universe”.

Mpambe is a name based on the verb *to excel* and on the surface would seem to be equivalent to *the Most High* or *the Almighty*. However, when we consider the contexts in which it occurs, namely those of rain, thunder, and earthquakes, then obviously *the Almighty* seems to be the better choice of the two possibilities.

Mlezi is the name based on the verb *to sustain, to care for* and thus could be translated as *the one who sustains, the one who nourishes*. This name is most likely related to the name *Leza* which is very widely used for *God* in Central Africa.

4. Once you have defined the names in your language, see what possible correspondences there are with the biblical names. As already suggested, *Mulungu* will probably be the general name for *God*; *Mpambe* will most likely be *the Almighty*; *Chiuta* is certainly a candidate to be considered for the praise name *the Most High*, and *Mlezi*, based on the meaning of “to nourish” or “to care for” might be a potential candidate for the name *Yahweh*, especially if we interpret that name to be a praise name, as the KJV and GNB seem to do when they render it *LORD*. The meaning suggested for *Yahweh* is “the one who causes to be” and *Mlezi* might be “the one who sustains our life”, and therefore it could be considered as translation of at least part of the meaning of *Yahweh*.

If a name can potentially function in several ways (for instance *Mpambe* as “the Most High, or as the Almighty”), it will be necessary to find out for which context it is most suited. We can do this by selecting a number of biblical passages in which the biblical name occurs, and then making a translation of the passages using the two target alternatives and having mother-tongue speakers decide which of the two fits best.

The end result of such a name-research exercise should be that the translation team now has at its disposal a large portion of the resources of the language for developing a pattern of divine names to be used in translation.