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EDITOR: William D. Reyburn

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W. JAMES MOORHEAD

## THE USE OF NON-BIBLICAL MATERIAL TO FOCUS ON BIBLICAL TRANSLATIONAL PROBLEMS

Dr. W. James Moorhead is a Bible Society Translations Consultant based in Manila.

One of the problems confronting translators of the Bible is the fact that their views of the Bible oftentimes prevent them from using good translational techniques in their work. The tendency is that the translator is often bound too closely to word-for-word correspondence to the original, with the assumption that the reader will understand. At the UBS Translations Workshop in 1969, Dr. W. D. Reyburn suggested the possibility of using non-Biblical material to focus attention on some of these translational problems. The idea was intriguing so in November, 1969, the following experiment was attempted.

### Participants in the Experiment

In May, 1968, we began five common language projects for five of the major languages in the Philippines. The project began with a major institute which has been followed up with seminars. The second of these seminars was held for two weeks during November, 1969, in Legaspi City. The twenty-three translators and five secretaries who participated in the seminar had one and a half years of translation experience in New Testament material. Some of the projects were ready to begin draft work on the Old Testament materials. In addition to their own language, all of the translators are proficient in English and most of them are proficient in Tagalog. Teaching staff for the experiment included Dr. Daniel C. Arichea, Jr. (Consultant-trainee), Rev. Louis Dorn (Coordinator of the Tagalog project), and Dr. James Moorhead.

### Selection of Materials

It was suggested in Spain that a cultural story from another setting be selected which would correspond as much as possible with the nature of the

material in the Old Testament. After examining various sources for such material, we finally decided to lift a story from *Out of the African Night* by W. D. Reyburn, pp. 3-7.<sup>1</sup> Since this story was written for a non-African audience, the author had built into the story much cultural information which would not normally appear in a story told to those of the same cultural setting. Therefore, to approximate the type of material found in the Old Testament, it was necessary to remove most of the added information. The resulting story retained a heavy cultural overload of information which would make the story difficult to translate.

In order to increase the effectiveness of the technique, it seemed that a local story would present a contrast to focus on the fact that not all translational problems are cultural. Therefore, we selected a story written originally in Tagalog and translated it into dynamic equivalent English.<sup>2</sup> The story, entitled "Tayong Mga Pilipino" (We [inclusive] Filipinos), was written by Mrs. Carmen Guerrero Nakpil, a popular Filipino writer. It was selected from *Intermediate Readings in Tagalog*, edited by J. Donald Bowen. The story concerned cross-cultural differences in gift giving and receiving between Filipinos and Americans.

The third story needed was a biblical narrative comparable in nature to the non-biblical material. We followed the suggestion made in Spain and used the story of Abram, Sarai and Hagar in Genesis 16 (RSV). This story was selected on the basis that it would not be over-familiar to the translators and that it would have a heavy overload of cultural information.

#### **Four Exercises**

##### **Exercise 1**

We began the seminar with the use of the African story. The story was first read to the group after which the printed copy was passed out to the participants and the story was read once again. As the story was read, the participants were instructed to ask themselves the following questions:

1. What do you need to know in order to understand this story? Note elements which are familiar to you, elements which are different, and familiar elements which may be different.
2. What do you need to know in order to translate the story? What questions are relevant to translation and what questions are marginal to translation?

After reading the story twice, the participants were given the chance to ask their questions and these were recorded on the blackboard. As the questions were asked, in some cases we asked what did they think that it meant, followed by the question about what it meant to the African. To the best of our abilities, we answered the questions which were raised. Many of them were answered on the basis of material which had been deleted from the original version. However, as with some biblical narratives, in some cases we had to say that we do not know.

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 1.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 2.

The following questions were asked:

1. What is an evu?
2. What are raffia mat roofs?
3. Why is Mba Nnom called "White doctor"?
4. What does Mbolo mean?
5. What is a palaver house?
6. When do they circumcise? Why?
7. Why do they call the doctor "butterfly catcher"?
8. What is their custom of burial? Do they really bury under the floor of the house?
9. What is the significance of the clicking in the throat?
10. Why does a woman with an evu eat blood in the night? What does it mean?
11. What does "Your words are smoke from your mother's kitchen" mean?
12. How do you put a person to sleep?
13. Why does it say "... my two words ..." when there are four words?
14. What does "grunting of a pig or the cackle of some woman's chicken" mean?
15. What is the significance of the fire? How does it lie?
16. What is a plaintain eater?
17. How do you putt-putt-putt a motorcycle? What does it mean?
18. When does the moon die and why do the drums sound then?
19. What are "his deep orbs"?
20. Why does the story refer to her "proud pregnancy"?
21. What does "spat in the coals" mean as an action?
22. Why does Zibi say "My mouth has spoken"? What does it mean?
23. Why are the people described as "packed as they were flesh against flesh"?
24. What are the classifications of the people, "Fathers, brothers, men of Efulan"? Were women included?
25. What does it mean when it says that Avebe forced himself to hold his ground? Why did he have to do this?
26. What does Avebe mean when he says "My years are few"? Will he die soon?
27. What does "lesser men" mean? Why are they lesser men?
28. How do you cut out an "evu"?
29. Why will she be asleep in a box?
30. What is their concept of evil possession?

Dr. Arichea noted that they did not ask some very significant questions about the various participants and their respective roles and relationships. Also there were some materials of symbolic nature which were omitted such as the amulets on Zibi's arms and the leopard's teeth hanging from his neck.

Briefly we tried to classify the information requested. The following classifications were made:

*Formulas:* greetings, "My mouth has spoken", "Fathers, Brothers, men of Efulan", "my two words".

*Gestures:* spat in the coals, clicking in the throat.

*Symbolic Culture:* fire, evu, evil possession, cutting out an evu, eating blood in the night.

*Items of Social* plaintain eater, palaver house, raffia mat roofs,  
*Culture:* circumcision, burial, putt-putt of motorcycle, concept of age, death, etc.

*Emotional Language:* “butterfly catcher”, “white doctor”, “words are smoke . . .”, “grunting of pigs . . .”.

*Picturesque Language:* his deep orbs, forced himself to hold his ground, proud pregnancy, flesh against flesh, lesser men.

### Exercise 2

After recess, we continued the session by presenting to the participants the Philippine story in the English version, now entitled “That’s Philippine Custom”. They were asked to translate the story into their own language using the very best translational techniques at their disposal, and following the very best procedures. Perhaps because it was a story from the Philippines and because they felt that the time was limited, none of the translators read the entire story before they began their translation. Consequently, it was noticed that after they translated for a while, they had to return to earlier portions to make changes on the basis of later clarifications in the story. As they finished their translations, we gathered them up so that various staff members could examine them and so that the translators would not have their translations during the next exercise. The translations were found to be quite literal, but there were some significant adjustments in approximately forty per cent of the translations.

### Exercise 3

After lunch, we continued the session by presenting to the participants the Tagalog original of the Philippine story. Of course, they immediately recognized it and began to refer to some of the things which they remembered from the English version. Obviously some of the translation was being questioned, but we told them that we would come to a discussion later about the two versions. Then they were asked to translate it from Tagalog to their own language, with the exception of the Tagalogs who were asked to translate it into English. The same instructions were given as before, and again none of them read the entire story before they began their translation. However, this did not present the difficulty which the earlier exercise had because they were already familiar with the content. These two exercises focused attention on the fact that there are translational problems which are not cultural in nature, and that there is the possibility to break the pattern of word-for-word correspondence in order to preserve the meaning of the original.

After the exercise was completed, we asked the group which of the two versions of the story was the original, and what was the basis of their answer. Interestingly, the group was about equally divided in their opinion. Many questions were raised as to the equivalence of the various words and phrases in the two versions. When the name of the author was given, the group decided that the Tagalog version was probably the original but that the author displayed some strong English influence in one or two of her choices of words. They all agreed that it was very difficult to determine which was the original because the translation was so natural and the same meaning was conveyed in each version.

In connection with these two exercises, on the following days, Rev. Louis Dorn gave a series of lectures on Philippine Semantic Kernels which were followed up with workshops in the afternoon in which the translators were asked to do transformations in their own languages. Sentences from the translations completed in Exercise 3 were used during the first workshop session. Later sessions concentrated on the translation of Psalm 37 and the use of transformation techniques on it. During the sessions on non-biblical material, the translators enjoyed the freedom which the transformation exercises permitted, but when it came to the biblical material they immediately objected, saying that this is the Bible. Through the discussion which followed, it was finally realized that in order to preserve the meaning of the biblical literature, it is necessary to exercise the same freedom in order to choose the proper transform to carry the right meaning in its most natural form.

#### Exercise 4

On the following day, we began with the biblical narrative found in Genesis 16. We followed the same procedure which we had with the African story. We read the story to the translators, then we had them to open their Bibles and read it again. As we read the story, the same questions were given as guide-lines for thought. The following questions resulted:

1. (vs. 2) What does "Go in to my maid" mean? Is this an idiom?
2. (vs. 6) Why did Sarai deal harshly with Hagar?
3. (vs. 9) Why does the Angel tell Hagar to return and *submit* to her mistress?
4. (vs. 12) What is the meaning of "Behold he shall be a wild ass of a man"?
5. (vs. 13) What does "God of Seeing" mean? Why did Hagar use this name?
6. (vs. 2) What is the custom reflected in "it may be that I shall obtain children by her"?
7. (vs. 3) What does "and gave her to Abram, her husband, as a wife" mean? What is a concubine?
8. (vs. 5) What does Sarai mean by "May the wrong done to me be on you"? Why does she say this to Abram?
9. (vs. 12) What does "dwell over against all his kinsmen" mean?
10. (vs. 6) "Behold your maid is in your power; do to her as you please." What was the meaning of this?
11. (vs. 13) What does Hagar mean when she says, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him"?
12. (vss. 7, 9, 13) Are the Angel of the Lord and the Lord the same?
13. (vs. 10) "I will so greatly multiply your descendants that they *cannot be numbered for multitude*." Why could they not be numbered? Is this an idiom?
14. (vss. 4, 5) Why did Hagar look with contempt on Sarai?
15. (vs. 5) What does "May the Lord judge between you and me" mean?

16. (vs. 5) "I gave my maid to your embrace." Is this an idiom? Does it mean the same as it would to us?
17. There were questions about style and Hebraisms.

There were no questions about why barrenness and fertility were credited to God. However, there was a significant change in the type of questions which were asked on this material as contrasted to the African story. Indirectly the questions centered on the participants, their roles and relationships, the events and their significance. All of the questions were directly related to translational problems. As answers were given, there were additional questions concerning how you can show the information in the text and if it cannot be shown in the text, then how much information is necessary for the footnote.

#### Follow-up Lectures and Discussions

During the next few days, material published by Dr. W. D. Reyburn in two issues of *The Bible Translator* ("Cultural Aspects of Translation", TBT, Vol. 20, No. 4, October, 1969, pp. 158-67; Vol. 21, No. 1, January, 1970, pp. 26-35) was used as a basis for discussion concerning analysis of cultural information. Linguistic solutions for some of the problems were mentioned, but primarily we centered on themes within the story. We dealt with such questions as: What information is required to make the story intelligible? What information can be included in the text through classifiers, descriptive phrases, borrowings, and adaptive replacements? What information is needed in explanatory notes? What should be included in the explanatory notes?

The model reported by Dr. Reyburn in the continuation of his article was presented in the following form as a structured approach to questions which need to be raised in an analysis of cultural activity. Not all of the

	ROLES (Function- Purpose) (Results)	VALUES (Ideal-subjective) (Real-objective) To participants To non-participants
<b>PARTICIPANTS</b> Primary Secondary Relationships		
<b>EVENTS (SPACE AND TIME)</b> Setting Place Objects Sequence of events Relationals		

questions would be relevant in every case, but pertinent areas for investigation are charted for the guidance of the translator. After the model was presented, the examples of eating and circumcision, as analyzed by Reyburn, were used with some adaptation to the Filipino scene. (Note: In some cases, because the language had a good usable word for circumcision, translators had previously decided that the glossary item would not be needed. On the basis of this exercise, they decided that there are significant differences which should be noted in a glossary.) We continued the presentation by examining the O.T. custom of concubinage, since this had been a question raised in the use of Genesis 16.

### Evaluation of the Exercises

1. A new dimension is added to the classification of certain translational problems. Previously translators had techniques for analyzing exegetical problems in the areas of semantics and syntax. This provides a possible way to analyze themes which center in the area of culture.

2. Attention was focused on the problems of equivalence and non-equivalence. Oftentimes the commentaries do not give the necessary information. Sometimes elements can seem to be equivalent which are subtly different. With this guide for analysis of material, Bible dictionaries and non-commentary-type books can be used more intelligently to define equivalence and nonequivalence.

3. The method opens a way to determine what type of information is needed either in choice of words in the text or in footnotes and glossary. Also the extent of information needed can be more clearly defined.

4. With this analysis, it may be possible for the translator to view the situation from the standpoint of a participant so that words which give value judgments may be chosen more intelligently.

The participants saw the relevance of the presentation even though it was inadequately presented and did not answer all the questions. Sufficient questions were raised to reveal that they will find effective ways to apply the principles for better translations.

### Appendix 1<sup>1</sup>

Above the jagged edge of the forest floated a slender crescent moon. In Efulan village the long rows of mud and wattle huts slumped in the pale silvery glow of the night. The dry season with its chilly air was coming on. Bulla walked faster to keep warm.

Behind every hut stood a kitchen shack where women monotonously pounded cassava flour and where through the raffia mat roofs the smoke of supper oozed out reluctantly into the cooling night. Children at play ran in and out of the kitchen doorways, and scrawny hounds watched and waited to snatch a mouthful from an unguarded pot.

"Mbolo, Mfan. Mbolo, Akono." Bulla exchanged greetings with villagers as he passed.

<sup>1</sup> This material is taken from William D. Reyburn, *Out of the African Night*, Harper and Rowe, N.Y. 1968.

They had mixed feelings about this young man who had been away to school. He could read and had learned all sorts of white man's secrets, but no one was sure if he had really gained some power. They would be cautiously friendly. Maybe someday he would be useful to them. No one knew.

Halfway through the village he slowed his pace. Ahead, leaning in the direction of the dry season winds, stood the palaver house. Bulla edged up to the walls and peered in.

"Hear my words, Avebe. The fire does not lie to me. Your Enonga has an evu in her belly."

Old Zibi, the witch doctor-diviner, had been advancing toward this awesome pronouncement ever since the sun had set. Now, having received generations of clan history woven through a web of kinship complexities, he had finally said it with an authoritative thrust of his leathery black chin.

"An evu in her belly! You hear my words? An evu!" He stroked the leopard's teeth that hung at his neck. "A woman with an evu in her can destroy you, eat your blood in the night while you sleep." He cut his gaze from worried face to puzzled face until he had glowered at them all, packed as they were flesh against flesh around the fire in the palaver house. He searched their expressions from his deep orbs like one who beholds his fellow man from some mysterious depth where lesser men do not descend.

Bulla recalled that at one time Enonga was thought to be pregnant. Like the other women of Efulan, she had carried her proud pregnancy in the most conspicuous fashion, shoulders back and belly ahead. But her time passed and Enonga did not deliver. One rainy season came, then a dry, and again the rains. She grew thin, hollow-eyed, and frightened, the object of silent stares and suspicious whispers.

That night in the palaver house old Zibi had finally declared in public what had nested long in the minds of everyone. The result was a deep sigh of relief that found its expression in the agreement clicked in the throats of his listeners. At least in everyone except Enonga's husband, Avebe.

Bulla could restrain himself for only another minute. Then he went in beside the fire and began to speak.

"Fathers, brothers, men of Efulan. I am not a great one, like most of you. My years are few, and my circumcision lies not many years behind me."

There was no show of interest in what this butterfly catcher was trying to say. Bulla cleared his throat and forced himself on. "I have two words to say about this evu matter." There was a faint clicking from somewhere in the room. Bulla felt encouraged.

"When you, Avebe, give your Enonga to Zibi you will begin to dig her grave in the floor of your house. Do I speak straight?" Someone clicked in agreement. "Why should she die? Those are my two words. Why should she die?"

Zibi hissed between his pointed teeth and spat on the coals. He did not deign to look upon this boy who had dared to speak about such things. "Do my old ears deceive me? Do I hear the grunting of a pig or the cackle of some woman's chicken?"

A twitter of laughter went around.



Bulla clenched his fists and forced himself to hold his ground. "You don't have to kill her. He can cut out the evu and give her back to you, Avebe. I know he can. He told me so himself."

"Who can?" asked Avebe.

"Mba Nnom, the white doctor. He can put a person to sleep, just like he does the moths."

The word moths brought old Zibi to his feet; a shadow of a smile played about his mouth. "And you, white man's moth catcher, what does Mba Nnom do with his sleeping moths?"

Before Bulla could speak, Zibi answered his own question: "Puts them in a box and sends them down to Kribi. They are put on a ship and sent home to his brothers. Maybe they are so hungry that's all the food they get in his American tribe . . . And Enonga, asleep in a box . . . ?"

Zibi's hint struck through to the bone. He knew it, so he delivered himself of the grin which he had been restraining. "Butterfly boy," Zibi disdainfully spat out, "Your words are smoke from your mother's kitchen. White men are not black men. Our ancestors told them none of our secrets. Your white doctor comes from another tribe. Maybe his fathers taught him how to putt-putt-putt a motorcycle, or how to stuff a plantain eater, but only ours know about the evu. That's a Bulu secret."

Zibi fingered the amulets that hung from his skinny arms. In the glow of the fire his chipped teeth gave him the look of a hungry hound. With a nod of his head he authoritatively concluded: "Listen for the drums when the moon dies. My mouth has spoken."

Bulla Mfum had lost his case in the palaver house, but the loss had only hardened his resolve. He waited until Avebe had gone toward his hut, then he followed.

## Appendix 2

### That's Filipino Custom!<sup>2</sup>

Sometime ago I went to a friend's house for a party. Since it was her birthday, all the guests brought presents. There were two foreigners there who were friends of the lady celebrating her birthday.

When we arrived, she accepted our gifts while saying such things as, "You didn't have to bring anything!" or, "What's this for?" Then she would take the gifts and place them on a table. The table had already been prepared for the gifts. After a few minutes the table was filled with packages of various shapes and sizes and wrapped in beautiful paper. Now and then she would arrange the packages that kept piling up, but other than that she didn't pay the slightest attention to the presents.

One of the foreign guests came over to me with disappointment registered on his face and remarked, "Why doesn't she open our presents?"

"Open them!?" responded another Filipina who was with us. "We never do that!"

"But isn't it considered proper for a person who has a birthday to show that she appreciates her presents?" my foreign friend asked.

<sup>2</sup> "Tayong Mga Pilipino" by Mrs. Carmen Guerrero Nakpil is taken from *Intermediate Readings in Tagalog* edited by J. Donald Bowen.

This needs a little explanation, I thought to myself.

So I told the American, "Here in our country, no one ever opens presents until all the guests are gone. And we have good reasons for this. First of all, we don't want to appear overly eager to receive presents. And in the second place, the person celebrating the birthday doesn't want to embarrass anyone. If someone has given something rather small or inexpensive, the others will notice that this was all he could afford, and that's very embarrassing to us."

"It's a good thing you explained that to me!" laughed the foreigner. "A person like me would never have thought of that. I wonder how many people's feelings I've hurt because I did things the way we do them in America. In my country, proper etiquette requires that we do just the opposite of what you do here. If we get a present, we open it at once in order to show that we appreciate the gift."

"That's the way it goes!" I told my Filipina friend. "For example, if a foreigner receives some clothing, she puts it on immediately. Or if it's a bracelet or some kind of jewelry, she'll wear it right away. She'll immediately use any kitchen utensils or decorative gifts, or else put them where everyone can see them. They really open themselves up to one another more than we do. We're more worried about what people may say, or that their feelings might be hurt."