

the Jerusalem Bible. In the 1973 edition the translation of Gen. 3.15, and the note which accompanies it, read as follows:

“Je mettrai une hostilité entre toi et la femme,  
entre ton lignage et le sien.  
Il t'écrasera la tête  
et tu l'atteindras au talon<sup>b</sup>.”

b) . . . La traduction grecque, en commençant la dernière phrase par un pronom masculin, attribue [la] victoire non au lignage de la femme en général, mais à l'un des fils de la femme; ainsi est amorcée l'interprétation messianique qu'explicitent beaucoup de Pères<sup>16</sup>. Avec le Messie, sa Mère est impliquée, et l'interprétation mariologique de la traduction latine *ipsa conteret* est devenue traditionnelle dans l'Eglise.”

I do not think that this note in itself could be taken as a model, but I am convinced that notes of this kind would have been useful in the past, and could be of some use in the future.

<sup>16</sup> Instead of this, the 1961 edition had the following statement: “ainsi est explicitée l'interprétation messianique qui est donnée par beaucoup de Pères”.

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## THE PSALMS AND GBAYA LITERARY STYLE

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The process of translation involves the transfer of a message in one language into a second language. This usually means the transfer of written text in one language into written text in another language, or “literature” in the classical sense of that which is written. However, as traditions of oral literature are increasingly being recorded and studied,<sup>1</sup> their significance in translation theory is becoming more apparent. On the one hand, the translator of oral tales must take into account all aspects of the oral performance, intonation, facial expression, gestures, and pauses which are all an integral part of the oral literature. He must attempt to recreate on paper what was a live performance. On the other hand, the translator writing in a previously unwritten language, as is frequently the case with Bible translators, must be cognizant of the esthetic principles of the literary tradition of the society for which he is translating.

The importance of oral literature as an aid in translation was pointed out in a very brief article by H. A. Brown entitled “Oral Literature and Bible Translating”, in 1968.<sup>2</sup> The forty-sixth issue of *Afrique et Parole* was devoted

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1970).

<sup>2</sup> H. A. Brown, “Oral Literature and Bible Translating” in *The Bible Translator*, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 16–17.

primarily to discussion of the significance of "oralité" in African societies, including suggestions for analysis of features of oral style and their application in translation and teaching.<sup>3</sup>

The church has existed for over fifty years among the Gbaya of central Cameroun and the Central African Republic. The New Testament has been published, as have sections of the Old Testament. During the past three years, a team of Gbaya translators has undertaken the task of revising the New Testament and completing the Old Testament. As work was begun it was necessary to determine what style would be followed and for whom the translation was intended.<sup>4</sup>

Although there are geographical dialects, the Gbaya language is not stratified as are languages with a long written tradition. Apart from the written form created in early translations, the language is relatively homogeneous, for there is no class of royalty, there are no classes or castes with their own jargon, and even baby talk is unknown, for the children are participants in the oral society of adults. When tales are told, the audience comprises infants and aged alike. Children may tell tales to each other; they may also tell them in the family setting to their superiors. Although their knowledge of vocabulary and their ability to use it is not as developed as that of adults, their language and esthetic principles are part of the same continuum.

Recognizing the importance of oral form in Gbaya society and thought, it seemed unacceptable to argue that there should be a written style distinctly differing from the oral style. Obviously, the fact of writing what had not been written would make it different, but the team did not accept the notion that it should develop a "correct" written style. Believing that a far greater number of people would hear scripture read than would actually read it themselves, the team decided to adopt the style and esthetics of oral literature as far as possible. Because of the numerous innovations and borrowing fads that may be found in certain areas and especially among the young, the speech of the Gbaya adult was taken as the norm.

It was then necessary to analyze oral style through a study of tales, parables, riddles, proverbs, and historical narrative and conversation. These were recorded, transcribed and translated into English and French, thereby identifying the problems of transposing the oral performance to the written page.<sup>5</sup> The literary form was analyzed and esthetic principles isolated. However, since the translators were all Gbaya themselves who had grown up within the oral tradition, as well as having studied the written tradition in French school, they recognized acceptable Gbaya form intuitively and were able to translate without having to rely solely on a written set of formalized principles. The test of the translation was reading the finished product to

<sup>3</sup> G. Calame-Griaule, "Projet de questionnaire pour l'enquête sur le style oral des conteurs traditionnels" and Equipe Missionnaire de Bongor, "Une expérience de tradition orale et de mémorisation des Evangiles en milieu traditionnel africain" in *Afrique et Parole*, No. 46, pp. 33-50 and 9-32.

<sup>4</sup> See Taber and Nida, *La Traduction: théorie et méthode* (Londres: Alliance Biblique Universelle, 1971), especially chapter 7.

<sup>5</sup> Philip A. Noss, "Description in Gbaya Literary Art" in *African Folklore*, Richard Dorson, ed. (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1972), pp. 73-101.

listeners who were able to recognize immediately where it was “smooth” and where it had “taken a left turn”.

The ideal which the team sought to achieve was a dynamic translation that remained true to biblical culture, thought and history without violating Gbaya expression and language. The Psalms, which were the team’s first major project, had to reflect their Hebrew origin while making sense to the Gbaya reader. The songs had to conform to Gbaya esthetics of style without being robbed of their historical character. This is, of course, the tension with which the translator always struggles, as reflected in the saying *traduttore traditore*.

Although the Psalms are poetry and song with distinct metrical patterns, the team did not try to approximate Hebraic meter, for to have done so would have been to violate Gbaya esthetic principles. Nor did the team attempt to recreate them following the norms of Gbaya song, which would have completely changed their character. Instead, they were translated in a form and style following as closely as possible the norms of Gbaya prose. Their literary character is thus preserved while also making them comprehensible to the Gbaya reader and listener.

Numerous grammatical and stylistic features such as conjunctions, methods for marking old and new information, and patterns of direct and indirect discourse, were important in the translation, but the following discussion focusses on four features of Gbaya style that were of particular relevance in the translation of the Psalms: (1) elision and assimilation; (2) grammatical structure; (3) description; (4) imagery.

### Elision and assimilation

The most prominent feature of oral language is its phonology, for this is what strikes the ear first and what creates an overall impression. To be pleasing to the Gbaya listener, language must flow, it must be *yaka* “smooth”, and it is the vowels, long and short, and their combination and modification that make the language flow. It is elision, contraction, and assimilation that create a sense of flowing harmony. Whereas written style tends to separate and break apart, oral style blends and merges into a whole. In its translation, the Gbaya team attempted to duplicate the flow of oral speech by retaining in the written form the elision and assimilation of the oral.

Reinforcing this decision was the fact that certain elision is obligatory. Where it was required, it was always used; where it was optional, the phonological esthetics of the phrase were the determining factor. Elision was avoided primarily where the contracted form might lead to confusion with another word or construction.<sup>6</sup>

Ps. 139.13a Mɔ mɛ tɛ'm lɛŋ, nɛ ɛnɛ'ɛ dea;  
           tɛ'm <tɛ+am (obligatory)  
           ɛnɛ'ɛ <ɛnɛ+a (optional assimilation)  
           things of self-me all, it was you-who made  
           It was you who created my inmost self, . . .

<sup>6</sup> Under the Gbaya version of the psalm is given first a literal translation, then the translation found in the Jerusalem Bible.

Ps. 61.1b Ene yeŋ zer'ne te wora'ne n'am wor'i.  
 zer'ne <zer+ene (optional but preferred)  
 wora'ne <wora+ene (optional)  
 n'am <ne+am (optional but preferred)  
 wor'i <wor+i<hũ (obligatory)  
 you give ear-you to praying-you that-I praying-there  
 listen to my prayer!

The most common occurrence of vowel assimilation is in the verb, above all the perfective where the suffix *-a* normally assimilates to the vowel immediately preceding it. In the first example below, the assimilation is obligatory to distinguish the verb *bi* "erase" from *bii* "burn, attack, sing" which does not admit assimilation, whereas in the second example assimilation is optional.

Ps. 9.5b Ene *bii* nin-wa yine ɓɔn ndo ndo ndo.  
 bii <bi+a "erase, blot"  
 you erased name them away remain forever  
 blotted out their name for ever and ever; . . .

Ps. 2.5a A *tɔ̃* wen hã wa ne ðaŋsee,  
 tɔ̃ <tɔ̃+a "speak"  
 he spoke words to them with anger  
 Then angrily he addresses them, . . .

**Grammatical structure**

The style of Gbaya narrative is free-flowing and fast with emphasis on action. Where the text of a psalm suggested action, the style of Gbaya narrative was adopted with verbs playing a very prominent role and frequently occurring in series. In the following line, four verbs are used in two clauses where the English translation uses one verb in a single clause.

Ps. 2.5b A *tufa* ðã a zu wa ɓɛɛ bele zar wa a nu.  
 tufa "exploded"  
 a "place, put"  
 zar "cause to panic"  
 a "place, put"  
 he *exploded* rage *put* head them and panic *panicked* them *put*  
 ground  
 in a rage he strikes them with panic, . . .

When several verbs follow each other in a sequence of related actions, the tense of the first governs the succeeding verbs. In the couplet given below, there are three verbs relating to one event. The actor of the first two is a single person, Phinehas, and the second verb follows the first in serial construction without either the perfective suffix *-a* or an explicit subject. The third verb which relates to a separate subject is not marked for tense either, although its subject *ɓɔne* "suffering, plague" is stated explicitly. Thus, through the verbal structure, the action of the two clauses is shown to be related and is unified into a single event.

Ps. 106.30 Nε mō nε Pinhas *kura gōn kita zu wa,*  
 βεε bōnε' i *kadi.*  
 Pinhas *kura* "Phinehas arose"  
 (Pinhas) *gōn kita* "(Phinehas) determines verdict"  
 bōnε' i *kadi* "the plague ends"  
 Then up stood Phinehas to intervene,  
 and the plague was checked; . . .

Certain Gbaya grammatical constructions are specifically literary, occurring only in narrative discourse. This pattern was used sparingly, but in two psalms, 77.17–20 and 78.21–25, it seemed appropriate. The form *nε* followed by the base form of the verbs lends a sense of intensity, of rapid successive action, and of immediacy, even though the action may have occurred in the past. In the following verse, the power of God is depicted in the imagery of Nature:

Ps. 77.17 O bu-zan *nε yeli a nu,*  
 aḡgasa *nε pi gēr nu,*  
 o goo k'εnε *nε gōm pamyala.*  
 the clouds melt onto the ground  
 the thunderclap throws its voice to the ground  
 your arrows fly in all directions  
 The clouds poured down water,  
 the sky thundered,  
 your arrows darted out.

A literary feature of Hebraic poetry occurring frequently in the Psalms is that of parallelism. Antithetic and synthetic patterns are not difficult to reproduce in Gbaya, but synonymous parallelism does not occur in Gbaya songs in the same way as in Hebrew poetry, making adaptation sometimes necessary. One solution was to allow the first line to make the statement and the succeeding to amplify or clarify it, in effect transposing synonymous patterns to synthetic patterns. In the following three-line verse, the order of lines is reversed to make a statement that God rules. The notion of transcending is then expressed in the two parallel lines with the nearly synonymous "greater" and "transcending" being differentiated by specifying first God's rule and then his power.<sup>7</sup>

Ps. 93.4 Gasa Wan ɔ kɔ' i wan ḡgōn mε,  
 βεε wan kɔ-ā gana pεḡaa ko gasa tɔp,  
 ḡgai kɔ-ā gana o gasa pεḡa-yi leḡ.  
 The Lord rules for his part above there,  
 and his rule is greater than the surging of a great lake,  
 his power is greater than all the big waves.  
 greater than the voice of ocean,  
 transcending the waves of the sea,  
 Yahweh reigns transcendent in the heights.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. the translation in Today's English Version,  
 The Lord rules supreme in heaven,  
 greater than the roar of the ocean,  
 more powerful than the waves of the sea.

A less satisfactory procedure was to collapse the two parallel clauses into one, but because this clearly violated the pattern of the original poetic expression, it was avoided as much as possible. In the following verse no alternative seemed acceptable. The verse is particularly difficult because of the shift from third person to second person, a technique not infrequent in the Psalms but very rare in Gbaya literary expression. For the sake of clarity, the shift in person was omitted and the parallelism was reduced to a single clause.

Ps. 24.6 S5 ko Jakob, ne o per wi no'i hii  
a kii'ne me duk in'nee.

God of Jacob, it is that kind of people  
who search you to be with you.

Such are the people who seek him,  
who seek your presence, God of Jacob!

A feature of Gbaya common to many African languages is the use of final particles to modify the semantics of the entire sentence. The particle modifies the tone of the sentence, it may soften a demand, it may indicate insistence, or it may merely provide emphasis. In the following two examples, the particle occurs after the second of two imperatives, in the first indicating a request, in the second emphasizing a plea.

Ps. 37.37a Me zok don mo ko wi-de-demo,  
me zok mo ko tanawi ai.

Observe the innocent man,  
consider the upright.

Ps. 54.2 Gasa Wan, ene zii kofamo ko'm,  
ene zii aia-nu ko'm wa!

God, hear my prayer,  
listen to what I am saying!

### Description

A descriptive device common to Gbaya oral literature that is not often found in translations of the Psalms is the ideophone. The ideophone may be identified with onomatopoeia and other sound words frequently seen in French and English comic strips, but in Gbaya and other African languages it comprises a class of words with a very wide range of meaning and usage.<sup>8</sup> They may function verbally, substantively, or in a modifying role similar to adverbs and adjectives. They describe anything that may be experienced: action, sound, color, quality, smell, or emotion. In oral literature they are used not only with great frequency but also with great creativity.

Conforming to Gbaya literary style, the team used ideophones in its translation of the Psalms, although an average of less than two per psalm is a considerably lower rate of occurrence than in Gbaya narrative. There were two

<sup>8</sup> William J. Samarin, "Determining the Meanings of Ideophones" in *Journal of West African Languages*, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 35-41, and "Perspective on African Ideophones" in *African Studies*, Vol. 24, pp. 117-121.

reasons for this limited usage. The first was that the Psalms are poetry rather than action narrative where their occurrence would be more common. The second was that in a tale being performed for artistic reasons, the ideophone may predominate over the action, whereas in the psalm the ideophone must complement without dominating or overshadowing the message. However, since the ideophone is an integral part of Gbaya literary expression, it could not be omitted. To do so would have rendered the translation colorless and unlitrary.

In the following verse with its contrastive parallelism, the ideophones clarify and heighten the opposition. *Samgbay* depicts people falling in unison helplessly: *key* indicates something solid and immovable.

- Ps. 20.8     Kɔ-wa nɛ hɔfaa tik nu *samgbay*,  
               bɛɛ k'ɛɛ nɛ yoraa *key*.  
               of them it's tumbling fall ground *samgbay*  
               but of us it's standing *key*  
               theirs to crumple and fall,  
               but we shall stand, and stand firm!

The following exemplify other occurrences of the ideophone and some of its meanings:

*duration of time*

- Ps. 39.5a     Gasa Wan, ɛnɛ zɔk;  
               ɛnɛ ɛɛ ŋgimbi dukaa kɔ'm zaŋ nu'ɛ *ŋgolak* bɛɛ;  
               Lord, you look,  
               you have made time life of me on earth here  
               *ŋgolak* (=very short) only

*action*

- Ps. 29.6a     bɛɛ a de hã kaya'i mɛ kpidi *zangule* hee ŋma be ndai ga,  
               and he makes for the mountain (Lebanon) to jump *zangule*  
               (=leap, bound) like a calf

*emptiness*

- Ps. 37.36a     dukaaa, hã'm fir yak fara'i woyo wo,  
               *yaa*, a bo bɔ na;  
               time passed, for me to cut pass the place again,  
               *yaa* (=emptiness), he is no longer

*emotion*

- Ps. 143.4     See-am gɔna *lasak*, bɛɛ mi ŋgai *kayiji* nɛ kii.  
               liver me stopped *lasak* (=abruptly),  
               and I harden *kayiji* (=become rigid) with fear

The following lines exemplify the ideophone in its descriptive role:

- Ps. 115.5–6     O sɔ nɔ'i ãã nɛ nu, bɛɛ wa tɔ wen na *mgbukum*,  
               gbaa yi-wa ãã sɛnɛ *zal zal*, bɛɛ wa zɔk mɔ na *tamtudum*,  
               zer-wa ãã sɛnɛ, bɛɛ wa zii mɔ na *mgberem*,  
               wa nun per mɔ nɛ zɔɔ-wa na mbet.

the gods there have mouths, but they say words not *mgbukum* (=there is no response when one speaks to them), they have eyes *zal zal* (=that should see clearly), but they see things not *tamtudum* (=the darkness of blindness), they have ears, but they hear things not *mgbarem* (=deaf), they smell scent things with nose them not either

In the last line there is no ideophone, because had one also been included there, the ideophones would have taken precedence over the meaning. With a simple unadorned final statement, the full weight of the uselessness of the false gods is underscored.

### Imagery

Best known of all the Psalms is the Twenty-third with its opening image, "The Lord is my shepherd". This is also one of the most difficult to translate because the metaphor is a well-known biblical image, the meaning is clear, and the translation appears to be obvious. In Gbaya literature, however, imagery is relatively rare with the exception of riddles which are nearly all metaphors. The translator must be careful not to transform the psalms and their images into riddles. And when it becomes clear that a straightforward translation of this verse makes good sense, except that it then conveys the wrong meaning, the task becomes very difficult. All the more so because one does not wish the Hebrew image to be lost.

The verse may be translated word for word, *Gasa Wan* "The Lord" *ne* "is" *Widaisami* "shepherd" *kw'm* "of me", but this means that God is the shepherd I have employed to care for my sheep. The possessive *kw* "of", unlike the English "my", allows only one interpretation, namely, that the psalmist is speaking about his sheep and the shepherd caring for them. An alternative appears to be a possibility, *Gasa Wan ne Wan-dai-am*, meaning "the Lord is the one who cares for me". This retains the idea of "caring for, raising" as one cares for his herds or his children, but the image of the sheep and the shepherd is lost. The translation adopted by the team, although not completely satisfactory because it shifts the focus from the Shepherd to the speaker, makes use of a simile to retain the image.

Ps. 23.1 *Mi duk hee sami ga, 6εε Gasa Wan ne Wan-dai-am.*

I am like a sheep, and the Lord is the one who cares for me.

Wherever a metaphor employed by the psalmist would be clear to a Gbaya reader, it was retained, but where it would not be understood or where it would be misleading it was sometimes possible to use simile or comparison.

Ps. 39.3a *See-am duka hee wi aṅa ne wee a sene ga,*  
*liver-me was like one had raked fire put in it*  
*My heart was smouldering inside me, . . .*

Sometimes, a Gbaya idiom, which might be an image adopted for use in everyday speech, was employed to express an idea in a psalm. This more than anything else heightened the tension between a dynamic translation and distortion of the original. The narrow line between what is good Gbaya



and what robs the psalm of its Hebrew character is not always easy to determine.

Ps. 40.2a A daka'm gbone kɔ daŋ gbongo,  
 A daka'm gbone dɔɔ gba *bɔte-bin-be-zɔŋa*,  
 he pulled me out of terrible pit  
 he pulled me out of great mud-founder-young-maiden  
 He has pulled me out of the horrible pit,  
 out of the slough of the marsh, . . .

The Gbaya idiom used in this verse is an image of mud from which the helpless person, represented as a young girl, cannot escape. While it is Gbaya, it contains no specific element that might not be found in another culture or time, for although the idiom is not Hebrew, the girl might as well be Hebrew as Gbaya. In the following, a Gbaya image is used which parallels the Hebrew, for Gbaya torches are made from dry grass stalks.

Ps. 7.13b O goo kɔ'ä'i tɛ kifi nɛ gee kan-du-wee.  
 the arrows of him will become mere stalks-light-fire  
 and his arrows turn into firebrands.

Another idiom which the team used is much more difficult and its merit in a translation of the Psalms may be debated. In Psalm 40.8 where the psalmist says, "I have always loved your Law from the depths of my being", the team chose to say, "Your Law is the *dua-see-am*", which may be translated "that which is dearest to my heart". In Gbaya the seat of one's emotions is not the heart or the entrails but the liver which is used consistently in Gbaya translation. The word *dua* has two basic meanings, "goat" and "spirit of sorcery"; the first is obviously inapplicable here, while the second may be related by suggesting that one's love for the person or object is very deep, far deeper than ordinary love. The literal meaning of the idiom is then, "the sorcery of my liver". On the basis of its dynamic equivalence and its appreciation by the Gbaya reader, it has been used, but the reference to a culturally defined sorcery makes it questionable. It conveys the meaning of the Hebrew text, but may not do justice to Hebrew culture.

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Through the use of phonological devices, grammatical structures, descriptive techniques, and imagery consistent with Gbaya patterns of thought and expression, the team attempted to use a written style that was close to the style of oral literature, hopefully without losing the Hebrew flavor of the poetry. The resulting translation has the drawback of being difficult for the new reader to read in the sense that he must be able to follow phrases and units of meaning rather than deciphering it word for word. Helping him in that task, however, is the fact that the patterns used are the same that he uses when telling tales himself. As he reads, there is an element of predictability for the structures follow patterns of Gbaya thought and syntax rather than Hebrew form. Most important, of course, is the conveyance of the message of the psalmist, and it was the team's conviction that that message is best conveyed to the Gbaya by using the principles and the esthetics that govern the literary tradition which is his own.