

## SUDANESE ARABIC BIBLES AND THE POLITICS OF TRANSLATION<sup>1</sup>

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### Part 1

Translation, in theory, entails the simple conveyance of meaning from one form of language to another. Translation, in practice, involves the selection and privileging of certain forms over others, and is therefore an exercise of power. The Sudanese Arabic Bibles of the British and Foreign Bible Society offer a vivid example of how power and politics can become enmeshed in the process of translation.

The British and Foreign Bible Society was a Christian publishing mission based in London that aimed to distribute Bibles by selling full editions or smaller “portions” at cheap prices.<sup>2</sup> Its founders believed that every person, everywhere, should have access to a Bible in his or her own language. This reasoning led the Society to sponsor what became a massive global translation enterprise, starting in 1804–1805 with its first non-English edition: a Gospel of John in Mohawk, intended for Britain’s Native American allies who had lost their lands and moved to Canada in the wake of the American Revolutionary War.<sup>3</sup> By 1965, the Society was able to claim that it had published Bible translations in 872 different “languages.” It made this claim in *The Gospel in Many Tongues*, a promotional publication that listed the Society’s imprints.

But what indeed was a language? The 1965 edition of *The Gospel in Many Tongues* counted nine Arabic “languages” in its roster of Bible translations, but listed a total of fifteen distinct Arabic versions overall. For example, the twenty-

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1 The author is grateful to Kathleen Cann for extensive comments on an earlier draft. She would also like to thank John Dean, Philip Stine, and Roger Omanson for their suggestions. This research was made possible in part by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York (Carnegie Scholars 2006), although the statements made and views expressed in this work are the author’s responsibility alone.

2 Leslie Howsam, *Cheap Bibles: Nineteenth-century Publishing and the British and Foreign Bible Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Stephen Batalden, Kathleen Cann, and John Dean, eds., *Sowing the Word: The Cultural Impact of the British and Foreign Bible Society, 1804–2004* (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2004); James Moulton Roe, *A History of the British and Foreign Bible Society, 1905–1954* (London: The British and Foreign Bible Society, 1965).

3 Joyce Banks, “The BFBS and Native Language Literature in Nineteenth-century Canada,” in Batalden, Cann, and Dean, *Sowing the Word*, 316–26.

sixth “language” listed in this roster was “Arabic: Moorish Colloquial (Mogrebi). Morocco.” But for the “Moorish Colloquial” language, the Bible Society had published two different versions: one portion in Arabic characters that came out in 1932, and that was intended for Muslim audiences; and another, in Hebrew characters that appeared in 1920, intended for Jews who spoke a Maghribi form of what linguists now call Judeo-Arabic.<sup>4</sup>

Arabic-speaking intellectuals were aware of the Christian missionary inclination to promote a plurality of Arabics through colloquial Bible translations.<sup>5</sup> By the mid-twentieth century, these linguistic interventions—together with a larger sense of threat associated with Western imperialism and its policies of divide-and-rule—had confirmed the resolve of Arab governments to promote modern standard Arabic in the service of pan-Arabism.<sup>6</sup> This article scrutinizes just one facet of this larger history of Arabic language politics, while drawing largely upon the records of the British and Foreign Bible Society that are now stored in Cambridge University Library. In particular, the following pages consider the British and Foreign Bible Society’s two translations into Sudanese colloquial Arabic—a 1927 northern Sudanese Gospel of Mark, and a 1955 southern Sudanese Gospel of Luke—both of which failed to catch on.<sup>7</sup>

## Part 2

To place these Sudanese Bibles in context, it is important to understand the Bible Society’s broader program in colloquial Arabic. The society published its first two colloquial Arabic Bible portions for Algeria and Egypt in 1908; it published its last, a complete New Testament in a kind of “union” Algerian and Tunisian Arabic, in 1965, after many years of development. It distributed them through a network of locally trained and recruited sellers, called colporteurs (in the case of men) and Bible Women, as well as through British and American missionaries representing several different mission societies. During the first half of the twentieth century, the Bible Society was able to pursue its mission among North African Muslims, Jews, and Christians because British and French imperialism in North Africa offered leeway and protection. But decolonization changed things. North African governments enforced policies to deter evangelization among non-Christians,

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4 British and Foreign Bible Society, *The Gospel in Many Tongues* (London, 1965), 10. On Judeo-Arabic, see Benjamin H. Hary, *Multiglossia in Judeo-Arabic* (Leiden: Brill, 1992); Moshe Bar-Asher, *La composante hebraïque du judeo-arabe algérien (communautés de Tlemcen et Aïn-Témouchent)* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1992); and Jeffrey Heath, *Jewish and Muslim Dialects of Moroccan Arabic* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002).

5 Heather J. Sharkey, “Christian Missionaries and Colloquial Arabic Printing,” *Journal of Semitic Studies*, Supplement 15: *History of Printing and Publishing in the Languages and Countries of the Middle East* (ed. Philip Sadgrove; Oxford University Press on behalf of the University of Manchester, 2004), 131–49.

6 Yasir Suleiman, *A War of Words: Language and Conflict in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 66, 82.

7 A copy of each of these editions survives in the Bible Society collections in Cambridge University Library. The classmark for the 1927 Sudanese Mark is BSS.310.3 F27; the classmark for the 1955 Sudanese Luke is BSS.310.3. F55. See also G. E. Coldham, *A Bibliography of Scriptures in African Languages* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1966).

while the politics of the Arab-Israeli conflict contributed to the dispersion of North African Jewry—and therefore to the disappearance of the market for Judeo-Arabic translations.<sup>8</sup> These changes contributed to the Society's decision in the mid-1950s to back away from colloquial Arabic translations, and to support only a "classical" Arabic version.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, most Protestant missionaries in North Africa—together with most of the Bible Society's own administrators on the ground—had neither approved of nor supported the Society's sponsorship of colloquial Arabic Bibles. From the outset, British and American missionary critics of the colloquial versions thought that the Bible should be circulated in a prestigious Arabic that would emulate the majestic language of the Qur'an. Missionary critics of the colloquial versions pointed out that only the most dignified Arabic Bible stood a chance to win respect from Muslims and from Arab elites.<sup>10</sup> Egyptian and Lebanese Protestant leaders felt the same way, and played an important role in reshaping the Society's Arabic translation policies in the 1960s.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, during the early twentieth century, missionaries who worked among very poor, minimally educated, and often largely female communities strongly supported the publication of colloquial Arabic Bibles. These colloquial advocates argued that if barely literate men and women were to understand the Bible, then the Bible would have to be translated into the vernacular that they actually spoke—and not in an inaccessible literary form.<sup>12</sup> This was an argument that the Bible Society's London headquarters found compelling, even if the Society's own agents in Algiers, Port Said, and Khartoum remained deeply skeptical about the colloquial versions.

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8 Heather J. Sharkey, *American Evangelicals in Egypt: Missionary Encounters in an Age of Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 179–214; Reeva Spector Simon, Michael Menachem Laskier, and Sara Reguer, eds., *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

9 Heather J. Sharkey, "The Gospel in Arabic Tongues: British Bible Distribution, Evangelical Mission, and Language Politics in North Africa," to appear in Heather J. Sharkey, ed., *The Unexpected Consequences of Christian Missionary Encounters*, manuscript under consideration.

10 This was the view, for example, of E. W. G. Hudgell, the Society's agent in Port Said. See Hudgell to Kilgour, "Sudan Colloquial (Roman Type) Arabic 'Mark,'" March 7, 1930, in Cambridge University Library, Bible Society Archives (henceforth CUL BSA) E3/3/24/1: Translations Department, Correspondence, Arabic: Sudan Colloquial. The Bible Society consulted prominent missionaries in Egypt, such as W. H. T. Gairdner of the Church Missionary Society and Andrew Watson of the American Presbyterian mission, who similarly emphasized the importance of literary prestige.

11 Eugene A. Nida, American Bible Society, "General Report on a Possible Arabic Revision," n.d. [5/12/52], in CUL BSA/E3/3/18: Arabic Translation Papers, 1949–1957. One of the people involved in debates about revising the Van Dyck (literary) Arabic Bible in the 1950s and 1960s was the American Presbyterian John A. Thompson, some of whose letters are preserved in this same file. See John Alexander Thompson, *The Major Arabic Bibles: Their Origin and Nature* (New York: American Bible Society, 1956).

12 Percy Smith, "A Plea for the Use of Versions of Scripture and of Other Literature in the Vulgar Arabic," *The Moslem World* 4.1 (1914): 52–63; idem, "A Plea for Literature in Vernacular Arabic," *The Moslem World* 7.4 (1917): 333–42. The author was an American Methodist missionary in Constantine, Algeria. In Egypt, the strongest support for and promotion of the colloquial scriptures came from the interdenominational Egypt General Mission (EGM), a British organization. See George Swan, *Lacked Ye Anything? A Brief Story of the Egypt General Mission* (revised ed.; London: Egypt General Mission, 1932).

Judging from sales figures reported from the Maghreb and Egypt, colloquial Arabic Bible portions enjoyed modest but steady sales during the first decades of the twentieth century. By contrast, we know from the internal correspondence of Bible Society officials that the first Sudanese Arabic version, which appeared in 1927, utterly failed to attract local customers. The society sent 646 copies to Khartoum in 1928 (the year when it became available for purchase), but only sent 44 copies in 1929.<sup>13</sup> Demand died after that. The Bible Society's records suggest that two things consigned this version to failure. First, the quality of the translation was poor. But second, and more damningly, missionaries presented the translation in a way that British colonial officials believed would be politically expedient—and not in a way that native Arabic-speakers were likely to use it.

### Part 3

Consider more closely this 1927 Sudanese Gospel of Mark. In its 1965 roster of Bible translations, the Bible Society listed this text as “Southern Sudan Colloquial Arabic.” This was incorrect. In fact, the 1927 translation was based on *Northern* Sudanese Arabic, and specifically, on a form of Arabic spoken in Omdurman, the sister city of Khartoum. The translators were two British women of the Church Missionary Society (CMS), who based their translation on the Arabic that they heard from the illiterate Muslim women who worked as nurses and servants in the mission's hospital. Strikingly, the two translators had decided to render their Arabic translation in Roman characters—what officials called “Romanized Arabic”—and not in Arabic script. They did so for two reasons. First, most of the missionaries struggled to read Arabic script, if they knew it at all, and professed to believe that Roman print would be “easier” for Arabic-speaking illiterates. Second, the CMS mission, whose leaders had been worrying for decades about what they saw as a Christian “contest” against Islam in Africa, supported a British colonial policy that aimed to contain the spread of Islam in Khartoum but even more so in Sudan's rural peripheries. Proponents of this policy believed that Romanized Arabic would act as a buffer among Sudanese people and somehow, as one Briton put it, “cut them off from the Koran.”<sup>14</sup>

Such was the plan. However, the Gospel of Mark translation was barely off the press when a reshuffling of British colonial officials occurred. The new leadership thought that the Romanization policy had been foolish and scrapped it immediately.<sup>15</sup> In the long run, therefore, the only people who learned to read

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13 Hudgell to Kilgour, Port Said, May 20, 1930, in CUL BSA/E3/3/24/1: Translations Department, Correspondence, Arabic: Sudan Colloquial.

14 Heather J. Sharkey, “Christians among Muslims: The Church Missionary Society in the Northern Sudan,” *Journal of African History* 43 (2002): 51–75; and Editorial Superintendent to Hudgell, August 14, 1930, in CUL BSA/E3/3/24/1: Translations Department, Correspondence, Arabic: Sudan Colloquial.

15 As early as 1930, a Bible Society official, reporting on Sudan from Port Said, called this policy a government “stunt” that “did not come off and [had] been dropped” (Hudgell to Kilgour, Port Said, July 9, 1930, in CUL BSA/E3/3/24/1: Translations Department, Correspondence, Arabic: Sudan Colloquial).

and write in Romanized Arabic were a few Sudanese women whom the CMS missionaries trained to be nurses.<sup>16</sup>

Aside from the artificiality of its Romanization, this 1927 edition of Mark had another big problem. Northern Sudanese Arabic speakers—and particularly educated male Arabic-speakers—regarded not just the translation, but also the dialect on which it was based, with some contempt. Bible Society officials noted that educated, northern Sudanese Muslim men liked to speak a colloquial language that sounded more like the Arabic of Egypt. In any case, to the extent that any of these educated Muslim men were inclined to read the Bible, they wanted to read it in literary Arabic or possibly even in English. Rather intriguingly, northern Sudanese men reported that the Arabic of this 1927 edition sounded too much like “kitchen Arabic” or “women’s Arabic,” suggesting complexities of gender in spoken Arabic. Yet even some of the illiterate Omdurman women who worked in the mission hospital, whose form of Arabic the translators had attempted to capture, commented that the translation was bad when they heard it. A Bible Society official reported back to London that, “There is distinct hesitation to use it on the part of the English Hospital Sisters, who have to train the Sudanese nurses, because they are told so often by the people, ‘Oh, this isn’t right.’”<sup>17</sup>

For all these reasons, the Bible Society deemed the 1927 edition a “fiasco.”<sup>18</sup> Judging from the Bible Society’s internal records, the CMS missionaries showed no inclination to revise it. In 1930, the Bible Society’s Sudan sub-agent reported that no one was interested in acquiring a copy—not even the CMS missionaries.

#### Part 4

In 1955, the British and Foreign Bible Society published its second colloquial Sudanese Bible translation: the Gospel of Luke in southern Sudanese Arabic. Once again, the Society was responding to government policy. However, this time, the policy-makers were northern Sudanese Muslim nationalists who were assuming power in decolonizing Sudan, and who were imposing a program of Arabization (*ta’rib*) in schools. These nationalists were dismantling the British language policy, dating from 1928, which had declared northern Sudan an Arabic language zone and southern Sudan an “African” language zone. In practice, this policy had supported the study of “tribal languages” (notably Dinka, Nuer, Shilluk, Bari, Latuko, and Zande) plus English in southern Sudanese schools, most of which were operated by Christian missionaries during the Anglo-Egyptian period (1898–1956).<sup>19</sup>

16 For an account of Kathira Abdullahi, a Sudanese Muslim midwife who learned to use Romanized Arabic, see Sharkey, “Christians among Muslims.”

17 Huddell to Kilgour, “Sudan Colloquial (Roman Type) Arabic ‘Mark,’” March 7, 1930, in CUL BSA/E3/3/24/1: Translations Department, Correspondence, Arabic: Sudan Colloquial.

18 This was the assessment of the Society’s sub-agent in Khartoum, Prince Albert Hamilton; see Huddell to Kilgour, “Sudan Colloquial (Roman Type) Arabic ‘Mark,’” March 7, 1930, in CUL BSA/E3/3/24/1: Translations Department, Correspondence, Arabic: Sudan Colloquial.

19 B. G. V. Nyombe, “Survival or Extinction: The Fate of the Local Languages of the Southern Sudan,” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 125 (1997): 99–130; Tagelsir H. Elrayah, “Arabic and English in Sudan: 1821–1985,” *Islamic Studies* 38.4 (1999): 603–20; and Liza Sandell, *English Language in Sudan: A History of Its Teaching and Politics* (London: Ithaca Press, 1982).

Against this context, in 1952, a Muslim official in the Sudan Ministry of Education approached some American missionaries and asked them to prepare two simple textbooks to help teach southern Sudanese students colloquial Arabic. Northern Sudanese Muslim educators appeared to believe—as the advocates of the Bible Society’s colloquial scriptures had believed—that colloquial Arabic, rendered in print, could be a stepping-stone to literacy in standard Arabic. Working with the government’s “Inspector of Arabic,” the missionaries “decided on points of grammar and orthography.”<sup>20</sup>

This textbook initiative prompted a diverse group of Protestant missionaries in Sudan to meet in 1954 to discuss a Bible translation along similar lines—that is, one that might help southern Sudanese mission-school students to develop their Arabic in anticipation of the changing policy. Records show that the missionaries were divided on how useful such a translation would be, and indeed on how successfully Arabic would spread in the south. The only Egyptian Christian missionary in the group favored a “classical,” not colloquial translation. Meanwhile, some southern Sudanese students who were attending as observers objected to colloquial Arabic, too, because they saw it as a dead end—something that would take them nowhere on the road to functional Arabic literacy. If educational policies were changing, these southern Sudanese students reasoned, then they would rather learn from a Bible in literary Arabic.

Nevertheless, missionary supporters of a colloquial version persisted, and the British and Foreign Bible Society sponsored them. The result was the 1955 southern Sudanese translation of the Gospel of Luke, which did not correspond to a language that its target readers spoke. This Bible translation was intended to serve as a teaching tool, to help southern Sudanese mission-school students learn the Arabic that the Khartoum government was now requiring. But some missionaries concluded that even this colloquial translation of Luke was “too high”; something much simpler was needed for southern Sudanese students whose knowledge of Arabic was nil.<sup>21</sup>

How did this 1955 translation fare, and what responses did it elicit? Since the Bible Society’s records begin to fade out around this time, we are left to speculate. This translation’s prospects were certainly bleak. In 1955, Sudan was poised on the brink of a civil war in which the Khartoum government’s Arabization program became one of many sources of southern discontentment. In any case, in 1957, the Sudan government nationalized missionary schools. By 1964 it went further, and expelled all foreign Christian missionaries from the country on the grounds

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20 Letter to Martin Parr, January 7, 1955, in CUL BSA E3/3/24/2: Arabic, Sudan Colloquial, No. 2. Martin Parr had served in the Sudan Political Service, the elite British civilian cadre of the Anglo-Egyptian colonial state, from 1919 until 1942; during this time he held posts as Governor of Upper Nile Province (1934–1936) and of Equatorial Province (1936–1942). He then dedicated his efforts to the British and Foreign Bible Society, where he served on the translations sub-committee and in other capacities.

21 “Summary of Discussions on Colloquial Arabic,” Malakal, Sudan, October 21, 1954, in CUL BSA E3/3/24/2: Arabic, Sudan Colloquial, No. 2.

that they were supporting southern “rebels.”<sup>22</sup> These developments were hardly auspicious for the future of the Bible Society’s Sudanese versions.

Meanwhile, after independence in 1956, the Arabic language continued to spread in southern Sudan. Arguably, the spread of Arabic occurred less because of government policies, and more because of long-running processes of migration, urbanization, and cultural diffusion that were leading to changes at the grass roots. By the early 1980s, linguists were noting the development of something they called “Juba Arabic”—an Arabic centered in the southern Sudanese garrison town of Juba, and spoken by both Muslims and Christians—which they described as both a “pidgin-creole” and a regional lingua franca. Following the resumption of civil war in 1983, linguists noted, too, that Juba Arabic was spreading northward, carried by a wave of refugees flooding into Khartoum.<sup>23</sup>

## Part 5

In the Bible Society’s archives, some of the last references to Sudanese Arabic Scriptures date from the early 1960s. At a time when the Sudan government was beginning to threaten Christian missionaries with eviction, the Bible Society’s translations sub-committee in London registered a letter that a British missionary, the Reverend C. L. Cook of the CMS, had written in Juba in December 1960. Cook begged the Society for a new Bible translation in what he called “Simplified Classical Arabic,” and noted that the (Anglican) Sudan Diocesan Synod, early in 1958, had registered an urgent need for the same by unanimously resolving to convey to the Bible Society “their conviction that there is an urgent need to publish the Bible in a simpler form of Arabic.”<sup>24</sup> Reflecting the sentiments of the Synod, Cook did not want a colloquial version; he wanted something that would retain the grammatical structure of literary Arabic, but in a simple form.<sup>25</sup> In his view, this “Simplified Classical Arabic” Bible would have a “really drastic vocabulary

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22 Heather J. Sharkey, “Missionary Legacies: Muslim-Christian Encounters in Egypt and Sudan during the Colonial and Postcolonial Periods,” in *Muslim-Christian Encounters in Africa* (ed. Benjamin F. Soares; Brill: Leiden, 2006), 57–88.

23 Abdon Agaw Jok Nhial, “Ki-Nubi and Juba Arabic: A Comparative Study,” in *Directions in Sudanese Linguistics and Folklore* (ed. Sayyid H. Hurreiz and Herman Bell; Khartoum: Khartoum University Press, 1975), 81–93; Ushari Ahmad Mahmud, *Arabic in the Southern Sudan: History and Spread of a Pidgin-Creole* (Khartoum: Fal Advertising and Printing, 1983); Catherine Miller, “Les enjeux de l’arabisation au Sud-Soudan,” *Peuples méditerranéens* 33 (1985): 43–53; idem, “Juba Arabic as a Way of Expressing a Southern Sudanese Identity in Khartoum,” in *Aspects of the Dialects of Arabic Today* (ed. A. Youssi et al.; Rabat: AMAPATRIL, 2000), 114–22; Catherine Miller and Al-Amin Abu-Manga, *Language Choice and National Integration: Rural Migrants in Khartoum* (Khartoum: Khartoum University Press, 1992). For a study of Arabic language policy that goes up to the post-2003 Darfur conflict, see Heather J. Sharkey, “Arab Identity and Ideology in Sudan: The Politics of Language, Ethnicity, and Race,” *African Affairs* 107.426 (2008): 21–43.

24 British and Foreign Bible Society, *Translations and Library Sub-Committee Minutes*, Vol. 88 (1961), 5 (held in the Bible Society collections of Cambridge University Library).

25 Someone who had, years earlier, proposed a similar idea about simplified classical Arabic was Arthur T. Upson, the British director of the Nile Mission Press, which published Christian Arabic-language tracts for distribution among Muslims worldwide. See Upson to Hooper, Cairo, October 6, 1917, in CUL BSA/E3/3/16/1: Translation Dept., Correspondence, Arabic. Upson wrote the following work under a pseudonym, Abdul-Fady, *Arabic Simplified* (Cairo: The Nile Mission Press, 1917).

limitation . . . plus the maximum permissible simplification or limitation of verbal forms.” He added that such restrictions would “be necessary if the Scriptures [were] to be intelligible to Southern Sudanese, even [those] with four to six years of education in Arabic. Such a Bible is already sorely needed in schools here,” he noted, “where Arabic has now displaced vernacular and English to a marked extent.” Following discussion of this letter, the committee in London “unanimously resolved” in 1962 “to convey . . . the urgent need” for a simpler Arabic Bible for southern Sudan.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, in 1964, the Bible Society sponsored the publication of a new Sudanese version of John in Arabic characters, in collaboration with other Bible societies.<sup>27</sup> But by then, the Sudan government was deporting foreign missionaries, adding to pressures that culminated in the nationalization of the local Bible enterprise and in the creation of an independent Sudanese Bible Society in 1967.

The British and Foreign Bible Society was most active in Sudan from 1900 to 1956, an age of high imperialism in the country that ended with Sudanese independence and the Suez Crisis. From 1956, political circumstances forced the Society’s efforts in the Nile Valley into rapid retraction.<sup>28</sup> In retrospect, one of the most astonishing things about the Society’s two translations into Sudanese Arabic is that they yielded to government policies so readily, and reflected language politics more than actual usage—notwithstanding the Society’s claim that its Sudanese translations were adhering to the “cultural facts.”<sup>29</sup> It is equally surprising that, throughout its half-century of active engagement in Sudan, the Society never supported a Bible translation that might have actually sold—namely, a translation into the “Juba Arabic” that Muslims and Christians were fashioning into a southern Sudanese lingua franca. This was a conscious policy of avoidance and reflected

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26 “Arabic, Simplified Classical (Sudan),” CUL BSA, B.F.B.S., E.S.C. Minute Cards, Vol. 1, ABBAI to BWAIDOGA.

27 This Sudanese version of John was translated by a team consisting of Leander Finlay (of the American Presbyterian mission), Faith Hamadain (a.k.a. Hamadein), William Masa’ad, and Su’ad Nadim. A copy is preserved at Cambridge University Library (classmark BSS.310.3.F64). A leading force behind this translation appears to have been Faith Hamadein, who died in September 1962 shortly after revising the draft translation. See British and Foreign Bible Society, *Translations and Library Sub-Committee Minutes*, Vol. 90 (1963), 8. Because of the fifty-year rule for archival materials, I have not been able to consult the papers regarding this edition. Note that this Bible appeared under the imprint of the “Bible Societies”; by this time, the British Society was cooperating not only with the American Bible Society, with which it had been coordinating activities in the region since 1937, but also with the National Bible Society of Scotland and the Netherlands Bible Society. Note, too, that the Bible Alliance Mission of Bradenton, Florida, published a complete New Testament in Sudan Colloquial, translated by Barbara Harper and Evelyn Stewart, in 1978. Although this last edition did not involve the British Bible Society, the Bible Society Library in Cambridge University Library holds a copy of this one as well (classmark BSS.310.3.F78). I am grateful to Kathleen Cann for drawing these last two translations to my attention. On the closer coordination of work among the British, Scottish, American, and Dutch Bible Societies, see Edwin H. Robertson, *Taking the Word to the World: 50 Years of the United Bible Societies* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996).

28 Regarding the impact of the Suez Crisis on both the American and British Bible Societies, see Heather J. Sharkey, “American Missionaries, the Arabic Bible, and Coptic Reform in Late Nineteenth-century Egypt,” to appear in *American Missionaries in the Modern Middle East: Foundational Encounters* (ed. Mehmet Ali Doğan and Heather J. Sharkey; Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, forthcoming).

29 Hudgell to Kilgour, Port Said, May 20, 1930, in CUL BSA/E3/3/24/1: Translations Department, Correspondence, Arabic: Sudan Colloquial.



the missionary fear that using any kind of Arabic in the south would lead to the “inevitable spread of Islam.”<sup>30</sup>

In many parts of the world, the translation enterprise of the British and Foreign Bible Society helped to create new print languages and to promote certain dialects at the expense of others. In some places the Society’s translations captured languages that ended up dying (like the Judeo-Arabics of North Africa), leading the Society to play an unexpected, retroactive role as a language curator.<sup>31</sup> Was the act of Bible translation always a gamble, then, involving calculations about which languages would prevail in the long run? Certainly in the case of the Sudanese Arabic translations, the Bible Society placed the wrong bets.

To conclude, the British and Foreign Bible Society’s Sudanese Arabic translations conveyed much more than the meaning of scriptures. They also carried the baggage of changing government policies, which sought, first, to cut native-Arabic speakers off from mainstream literary Arabic, and later, at decolonization, to connect southern Sudanese readers to Arabic for the first time. The Bible Society’s translations also carried the baggage of class, gender, and region, by producing Bibles for poor, largely female, and later preponderantly southern audiences, and by using language that lacked prestige and that confirmed low-rung placements on Sudan’s emerging national social hierarchy. In short, these two Bible translations failed to become *definitive* translations, because they failed to define, through language, new and separate communities of Arabic readers.

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30 Hudgell to Kilgour, Port Said, August 21, 1930; Editorial Superintendent to Hudgell, August 14, 1930; and Macdonald to Kilgour, CMS Akol, May 24, 1930; in CUL BSA/E3/3/24/1: Translations Department, Correspondence, Arabic: Sudan Colloquial.

31 Sharkey, “The Gospel in Arabic Tongues.”