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TRANSLATING "GOD" INTO NGAJU: PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES

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The first complete Ngaju Bible was published in 1858 after the Ngaju Old Testament was completed in 1856 by Hardeland who did his missionary work at Palingkau in the interior part of Kalimantan. Ten years before, the Ngaju New Testament had been translated by Becker, a well known missionary to what was then called Borneo. The work of translation was made possible through the help of the British and Foreign Bible Society. Those missionaries were by no means unaware of the need to get anthropological knowledge of the Ngaju culture before starting their respective missions. However, a recent development in Ngaju community life has shown something new which the 19th century missionaries could never have foreseen. That new development will be referred to later in this article.

The immediate problem faced by a translator in translating the word "God" in the Bible is how to introduce the idea of God in the new language, in this case Ngaju. The Ngajus do not respond quickly to new ideas that come from outside their own cultural and religious environment. Through extensive anthropological studies Western scholars have found out that the Ngaju cultural character is much more introvert than extrovert. This is related to their sense of self-satisfaction in terms of cultural and religious values in life. It has been held by the Ngajus that their own belief about the highest being is not inferior to that of Christianity. "If the Christians consider themselves as the people of God," so they argue, "we, the Ngajus are the people of Ranying Mahatalla as well."

This sense of self-contentment, which could also be called pride, was reflected very effectively and successfully in their struggle to achieve religious recognition from the Indonesian government in 1980. Perhaps there has never been a recognition of a primal religion given by any government of any country in the world today compared to that which was given in Kalimantan, Indonesia. On their sense of self-contentment as such the Ngajus nowadays are enthusiastically organizing their own ancestral religion called *Agama Kaharingan*, meaning "Religion of Life". Using such a name for their own religion the Ngajus claim *Ranying Mahatalla* as the name of their highest god, and declare that this name should exclusively be used by them and not by any other religion. The Christians have, however, been "borrowing" part of that name, which is *Hatalla* rather than *Mahatalla*, for "God". However,

Hatalla is a popular name used by all the Ngaju people whereas Mahatalla is specifically used by the priests in religious ceremonies. The Kaharingans are not very happy about the fact that such borrowing—even partly—has caused a lot of conversions of their members from Kaharingan to Christianity. That is one of the primary reasons why the Kaharingans nowadays are resisting Christianity by all means, including organizing their religion and using modern structures. Nowadays the Kaharingans have organized “congregations” of their own. Beyond that organizational level they have also shaped a hierarchically higher organization by the name of *resort*, a sort of presbytery similar to the Christian Church, at the same level as the synod they have formed which they call the Council of Religious Leaders of Indonesian Kaharingan.

Another practical problem resulting from the “borrowing” of the name Hatalla is that those who change their religion to accept Christianity are bringing with them their old ideas about Hatalla, and they superimpose these ideas on their new religion, Christianity. So the truly biblical ideas about God are not immediately ascribed to *Hatalla*, as would be the case for other Christians. The traditional meaning inherent in the name of Hatalla is certainly far different from what the Bible means by God. As we consider the word *Hatalla* used by Becker and Hardeland in their Ngaju Bible translation, three immediate problems confront the present Ngaju readers. I will discuss them in the next three paragraphs.

The first problem is the human nature of Hatalla. Known among the Ngajus as their divine ancestor, Hatalla dwells in the sky and lives together with his wife Jata and their descendants. They live there in the upper world in exactly the way human beings live on earth. In spite of the fact that Jata, the female god, dwells in the underworld, Mahatalla is able to call her any time he needs to have union with her for the purpose of renewing and reforming creation. In former times, Hatalla was also known to have a father and a mother and in the family he was the first son of seven brothers. His father’s name was *Punggawa Hatue*, his mother’s *Punggawa Bawi*. *Hatue* simply means masculine and *Bawi* feminine. *Punggawa* is a name derived from Sanskrit, *Pandava*, meaning descendants of *Pandu*. The five *Pandavas* were well known in their war against their cousins, the *Kauravas*, who took over their kingdom.

Secondly, Hatalla is understood in its Hindu sense as supreme being. The poetic name of Hatalla in the Ngaju language is *Ranying Mahatalla Langit Kanaruhan Tambing Kabanteran Bulan Rajan Tuntung Matanandau*, meaning “Ranying the sovereign god of the sky shining its round light to the moon, the king who extends the brightness of the sun”. What kind of sovereign being is he that continues and extends the brightness of the sun? What is it that sheds its brightness to the moon? The answer is very simple: fire. Fire is the characteristic of Agny in Hinduism. According to Mircea Eliade, fire is even the characteristic of

Asian religions. This Hindu or Asian character of Ngaju's highest being is of course not purely Hindu but derives partly from Hindu and partly from Ngaju traditions. *Ranying*, the local name, means supreme, whereas *Mahatalla* is a composite name derived from two completely different sources, namely Hindu *Mahatara* and Arabic *Allah ta'alla*. *Mahatara* is also a name derived from *Batara*, which in Hindu means deva or deity, whereas *Batara Guru* indicates Shiva the teacher of the deity. The terms *Mahatalla* or *Mahatara* indicate that such a deity has power which is above any other deity, as much as *Maharaja* is a king or ruler whose authority is above any other king. In the same way that *Allah ta'alla* is known as the great God in Islam, the name *Ranying Mahatalla* is partly the result of ancient contact between the Ngajus and the Hindus about 700 years ago, and partly with the Muslims in the Middle Ages.

In the third place, *Hatalla*, which is a name derived from different sources, also has a syncretistic character. It is syncretistic because it accommodates divine values from different sources and professes those values as its own. As a result of this syncretistic character, many Christian Ngajus think—much as the non-Christians do—that they (the Christians) can also worship their ancestral spirits beside worshipping *Hatalla* who was introduced to them in the Ngaju Bible. Furthermore Christians think of *Hatalla* in the Ngaju Bible in much the same way as the Kaharingans think about their *Ranying Mahatalla*. That is why many translators of the Bible would hesitate in using *Hatalla* as a translation for "God".

Let me now describe briefly how the Kaharingans or non-Christian Ngajus think about *Ranying Mahatalla*. It is impossible to speak about *Mahatalla* of the Ngajus without mentioning his partner *Jata* since the two deities are regarded as a united couple of god and goddess. The habitation of *Mahatalla* is the upper world (the sky) and that of *Jata* is the lower world (the earth). In spite of their different existence as male and female beings, they are nevertheless united in one personal being especially in the time of creating the whole universe. This event of uniting could be repeated again and again through the chanting of that first event of creation by Ngaju priests in a kind of religious ceremony. Whenever the two are united in an undivided personality, then the whole universe is also in the process of renewing and being restored to the existence it used to have at the beginning of time. But after the creation is completed the two are separated from one another and *Mahatalla* goes back to his habitation in the upper world while *Jata* goes back to the lower world. But whenever the renewing and reforming event is not handled by the priest(s), and the two deities are doing nothing, each dwelling silently in their respective habitation, the universe is governed by their subordinates, each of whom carries specific duties and

responsibilities given to them according to their specialization, title and rank.

There are five direct subordinates of Mahatalla, all kings, namely:

- (1) King *Pali*, the same as taboo or the *mana* of the Melanesians, specializing in traditional laws, the *adat*
- (2) King *Untung*, meaning fortune, who specializes in providing and preserving all kinds of material wealth
- (3) King *Sial*, or the king of misfortune, who brings all kinds of harm to mankind unless mankind offers him gifts, according to his wish
- (4) King *Hantuén*, the dracula or hex king, who searches for human blood to drink
- (5) King *Puru* or the king of plagues, who comes to earth once a year to bring contaminating disease to human beings.

Those are the five kings known as immediate subordinates of Mahatalla who direct the universe according to the will of the deity. Of course those kings also have their own subordinates who carry out their commands respectively, and under these subordinates are thousands of innumerable sub-subordinates including the spirits of trees, stones, rivers, landscapes, waters, caves, and so on. Therefore the Ngajus regard the whole universe as a sacred entity and everything therein has its own spirit for a human being to worship.

Such a way of thinking is held not only by the Ngajus; I believe it is true for Indonesians as a whole. This primitive concept of deity, of universe and of human beings is not only predominant in Indonesian thinking, but it is also reflected in the national life of the people under the state ideology of *Pancasila*, meaning five principles, or codes or pillars. Dr T. B. Simatupang, a man of outstanding position both in Indonesian churches as well as in Indonesian national life, hints that such an ideology by and large is a kind of elevation of an ancient Indonesian way of thinking. Take for example the first principle *Ketuhanan Yang Mahaesa*, the belief in oneness of the deity. *Ketuhanan*, which may simply mean deity, does not refer to any deity of any particular religion. It is simply a new formulation of the old concept of deity in Indonesian traditions. Indonesian scholars are trying to discuss this first principle of *Pancasila* scientifically, but their analysis is exactly the same as that of old people in the country with the difference that the latter do not use scientific categories.

As we become aware of all the problems in translating "God" into the Ngaju language, we can still be optimistic about the possibilities of using *Hatalla* in the Ngaju Bible. The first possibility is the inherent concept of the highest being in the Ngajus' *Hatalla*. *Hatalla* is the only authoritative being of the entire universe, the *Hatalla* of the whole human race and of all ages, and there is none like him. Nowadays this characteristic of a highest being, bearing the name of *Hatalla*, has been

recognized unilaterally by the Kaharingans in their religious teaching. Such a characteristic of this new Hatalla accommodated into traditional Ngaju thinking is obviously the impact of Christianity or the message of the Gospel. Another characteristic of Mahatalla which is explicitly known also in Christianity is the concept of creator and creation. Hatalla in the old Ngaju concept created the entire universe; the only thing is that he created it together with Jata, his spouse. At that point Christians can introduce a new Hatalla who is the only creator of the universe, creating things by himself with no other being assisting him.

The Christians adhere to a religion which recognizes a God who is divine as well as human. From the less divine characteristics of the old Hatalla, the Christians can now introduce a new characteristic of Hatalla—through the Ngaju Bible—a Hatalla who is fully divine and fully human. It should be made plain that he is not partly human and partly divine but fully and completely human and divine.

By changing the old ideas of Hatalla into new ideas which are in accordance with biblical ideas, we can safely use the name *Hatalla* in Bible translation. But changing old ideas is not enough in itself—the readers should also know all about the Hatalla of the Bible. So it is not enough to translate "God" as *Hatalla*. There must also be a consistent effort by the church to preach and teach the readers who Hatalla of the Bible is.

For the Ngajus, and perhaps for other cultural groups as well, understanding the Bible is always a serious business, and to understand God always demands serious thought. In order to illustrate what I mean, let me cite a recording I made in my study about how the Ngajus reacted to a missionary in the old time, when the missionary presented both the Christian and Muslim Scriptures.

The event took place in 1912 in a village named Tumbang Bunut, situated almost in the centre of Kalimantan. A missionary by the name of Alt happened to come to Tumbang Bunut and met Nahan, a prominent Ngaju in that village, with a specific questionnaire. He brought with him two kinds of Holy Scriptures, one belonging to the Muslims and another one to the Christians. When he met Nahan, he immediately presented the two "Books" and questioned Nahan as follows.

Alt: Please make your choice of which book you want to have. (He showed him Al Qur'an and the Bible.)

Nahan: (bewildered at first but then said) Which book is your book?

Alt: This one. This is my book. (He showed him the Bible.)

Nahan: So, that is the one I want to choose.

Alt: But if you want to have this book you will have to read it and learn from it.

Nahan: But I am an illiterate. I cannot write or read. Can you teach me

to read?

Alt: Of course I can teach you. But if you read this book and learn from it, you will have to become a Christian.

Nahan: (With complete astonishment he said) Can I change myself to become Christian like you?

Alt: No, you cannot change yourself to be like me, because you are a Ngaju and I am a European. But you can believe in Hatalla as I believe in him.

Nahan: Is your religion not a European religion?

Alt: No, my religion is for all men like you and me.

Nahan: Can I become a Christian now?

Alt: No, not now. You can become a Christian later, after you learn to read and understand what the book means for you.

Nahan: Is that all?

Alt: (Thought for a moment and said) Besides, you have to throw away all kinds of superstition from your house.

(Two years later Nahan and his family were baptized into Christianity after doing everything that the missionary told him).

Within that two year period between his encounter with Alt and his baptism Nahan had learned a lot about Hatalla of the Bible. It was only after he understood the ideas about the new Hatalla that he was able to throw away all kinds of superstition from his house. But that took a long time because his old understanding of Hatalla was very traditionally Ngaju. At first, when he was only able to read slowly, his understanding of Hatalla was still traditional. Some of his close friends coming from other villages who were more educated than he was once laughed at him because he read just like a child. But he warned them and said, "It is not me that you laugh at, but Hatalla himself, because I am reading the book of Hatalla. And Hatalla will punish you because you laugh at him." Not long after when those friends of his went down the river by boat to go home their boat was sunk by a strong current. When Nahan heard about it he was sure that Hatalla was really punishing them. I wonder if that was not his old Hatalla.

The personal encounter between traditional Nahan and Christian Alt was actually a religious encounter between primitive and Christian religions, empirically speaking. Such an encounter was very interesting because both Nahan and Alt were not familiar with each other previously. Let me conclude this article with three observations about the encounter.

First, both men were involved in discussion about religion. On Nahan's side, his religion is enough for himself and no other religion needs to be added to his. But on Alt's side Nahan needs a better religion than the one he has at that time. To convince Nahan that he needs a

better religion Alt shows him the Scriptures. But for Nahan, even if his religion has no book it does not necessarily mean that his religion is worse than other religions. Yet Alt succeeds in convincing him that by reading the Bible he will know that Christianity is better. It is because of Alt's suggestion that Nahan becomes curious about the content of the Bible.

Second, there was a process of interaction between Nahan and Alt resulting in a change of mind in Nahan's way of thinking. The change was made possible because of Nahan's curiosity as to what is inside the Bible. Knowing the content of the Bible is vital for Ngaju readers in making them understand about Hatalla of the Christians.

Third, Nahan's curiosity leads him to accept Christ as his Lord and to let himself and his family be baptized into Christianity. The best way to make people Christians is to let them read the Bible. It does not matter what name they use for God in the Bible as long as they read the Bible thoroughly and faithfully. Problems arise with the term Hatalla whenever people do not read the Bible. And if they do not read the Bible then they will never know who Hatalla of the Bible is. Without reading the Bible they will still understand Hatalla as they did in their traditional religion. Therefore using the name Hatalla in translating "God" into the Ngaju language is only a first step towards making God known—people have to be persuaded to read all about him in the Bible too.

FOCUS ON TRANSLATORS

In this issue we include two separate contributions, which discuss different aspects of a recent publication in the Kriol language spoken by more than 20,000 people in the northern parts of Australia. The book, published by the Bible Society of Australia, contained books from both the Old and New Testaments, making up about 30 per cent of the Bible overall.

Bible portions—a different approach

Until comparatively recent times Bible translators around the world have followed a traditional order for the translation of the books of the Bible. In this traditional order the gospels are translated first, then the