

<b>Ref</b>	<b>1912 version</b>	<b>1977 version</b>
Mt 2.16	<i>abaana aboojo</i> "male children"	<i>abaana aboojo</i>
8.6	<i>omwiru</i> "slave, servant"	<i>omuheereza</i> "servant"
12.18	<i>omwana</i> "child"	<i>omuheereza</i> "servant"
14.2	<i>abairu</i> "slaves, servants"	<i>abagaragara</i> "palace attendants"
17.1 8	<i>omwojo</i> "boy"	<i>omwojo</i>
18.2	<i>omwana omuto</i> "an infant"	<i>omwana omuto</i>
18.3	<i>abaana abato</i> "the infants"	<i>abaana abato</i>
21.15	<i>abaana abato</i> "infants"	<i>abaana</i> "children"
Lk 1.54	<i>omwiru</i> "slave, servant"	<i>omwiru</i>
2.43	<i>omwojo</i> "boy"	<i>omwana</i> "child"
7.7	<i>omwojo</i> "boy"	<i>omuheereza</i> "servant"
7.32	<i>abaana</i> "children"	<i>abaana</i>
8.51	<i>omwisiki</i> "girl"	<i>omwana</i> "child"
8.54	<i>omwisiki</i> "girl"	<i>omwisiki</i>
*12.43	<i>omwiru rubaale</i> "slave"	<i>omuheereza</i> "servant"
12.45	<i>abairu n'abazaana</i> "male and female slaves"	<i>abaheereza ...n'abakazi</i> "men and women servants"
Jn 4.51	<i>omwana</i> "child"	<i>omwana</i>

\* The Greek term is *doulos* in this case.

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## TRANSLATING "SIN" IN PÖKOOT

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In this article I will discuss something of what I have discovered in a first study of one particular aspect in the world view of the Pökoot people of Kenya.

The simple fact that people around the world are involved in Bible translation indicates that no particular culture is regarded as the only possible carrier of its message. In his book *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* Lamin Sanneh has demonstrated that it is not necessary to learn another language in order to understand the Word of God, but that God's revelation of himself is equally valid in different cultures and languages. It therefore goes without saying that in Bible translation in Africa translators have to make use of terms that draw their meaning from the context of the world view of their own culture. Hence it is very necessary to study and analyze the culture and language in order to find the right terms to use in the translation. If we do not undertake

this study and analysis, there will inevitably be distortions of meaning and understanding.

### The Problem

The particular aspect that I want to focus on, drawing on experience with the Pökoot Bible translation, is the concept of sin.

Two translations of the New Testament have been published in Pökoot, one in 1963 by the Trinitarian Bible Society and one in 1988 by the United Bible Societies. The translation of the Old Testament has been in progress since 1986. Thus far, in all these translations, "sin", "transgression", "trespass", "offence", and words in the same area of meaning have consistently been translated by one word in Pökoot, the word *ngoki*. In what follows I will demonstrate how this leads to a distorted understanding of the biblical meaning, after which I will present some tentative conclusions with regard to the translation process.

### Sin/evil (*ngoki*)

Apart from its prominent use in Bible translation, the word *ngoki* is generally viewed as the most significant term expressing the idea of sin in Pökoot. Yet this is not always justified by the facts. There are other components of meaning involved, which show that *ngoki* cannot simply be seen as the equivalent for "sin". The following folk story, told by a grandmother to her grandchildren, indicates this clearly.

Once, long ago, there was an old widow living with her daughter in a lonely house. A hyena had come regularly to the other houses in the village and had eaten some goats belonging to the people. The people got angry. They wanted to kill the hyena, but it always disappeared and they did not know where it went.

One day the hyena came back and ate another goat. The people tried to kill the hyena again, but now they saw that it escaped to the house of the old woman and her daughter and hid in the barn. The people had followed the tracks of the hyena that led to the old woman's house.

They asked the old woman, "Did you see a hyena?"

"No, I haven't seen one."

The people left. When evening came the hyena told the old woman, "I am hungry."

"I will make food for you."

But the hyena ate the old woman's daughter. The next morning the hyena told the woman, "I am hungry."

"I will make food for you."

But the hyena ate the old woman and disappeared.

As a good story teller the grandmother did not explain the moral of the story. But for the sake of analysis it is good to note that this story teaches the children not to give any opportunity to *ngoki*. The hyena represents *ngoki*. It comes from outside and eats you, if you don't deal properly with

it. You may be able to hide it for some time, but eventually it will finish you off. It is better to cooperate with the community in trying to eradicate it.

Apart from these stories, which are used as teaching materials for the young ones, the word *ngokī* is never explained in a general way, but it is always put into a context. From that context it can be determined what kind of *ngokī* is involved and what particular measures need to be taken in order to neutralize its harmfulness.

### **Peace/harmony (*pōghisyō*)**

Visser (*Pökoot Religion*, 1989, page 107) rightly notes that evil "is the opposite of peace or *pōghisyō*." Although this observation is correct, it does not sufficiently stress the close relationship between the idea of *pōghisyō* and sin/evil. And just as *ngokī* is never explained without a context, it can also never be explained without bringing it into relationship with *pōghisyō*.

This concept of *pōghisyō* or "peace" is also explained only in context. It is associated with "good life" in the broadest sense of the expression. The following contexts give some clues to understanding the meaning of *pōghisyō*:

1. The (extended) family is living peacefully in the homestead. There are no "bad words" that disturb the relationships.
2. There is harmony between human beings and nature. No wild animals are disturbing people. No "bad birds" are singing in the homestead, no snakes are entering the home. A good tree provides enough shade during hot days.
3. Nobody is sick or feeling uncomfortable, but everybody is in good health. Also the cattle, goats and sheep are in good condition.
4. There is peace in the land. Cattle raiders from neighboring groups (especially from Turkana) have not been around for some time. In fact the conditions are becoming ideal for going out on a cattle raid to bring "home" the cattle from the other groups.
5. God (*Tōroröt*) is not angry with the people. He is looking down upon them in favor from Mount Mtelö, the highest mountain in Pökoot.
6. Many children, calves, lambs and goats are being born and all in good health.
7. People are standing firm in life like Mount Mtelö.
8. There is, or has been, enough rainfall to make the grass grow for the animals and to grow sufficient crops. There is prosperity in the land.
9. People don't do anything wrong to one another. There is no stealing, fighting, adultery, witchcraft, bad words and the like.

### **The relationship between peace/harmony and God**

A good relationship with God (*Tōroröt*) is one of the elements of *pōghisyō*. However this relationship is not experienced in a direct way. The distant presence and favor of *Tōroröt* is only assumed because of the

existence of *pöghisyö*. The root of the word shows the distance that is felt: the word comes from *törör*, which means “high above”, “far off”.

*Töröröt* lives on Mount Mtelö. Every ritual has to be carried out while people are sitting in a half circle, facing this mountain. The main reason for doing so is attempting to please and appease *Töröröt*. He has different characteristics in the personal sphere, like listening, seeing and the like. Some of these are positive, in the sense of caring and providing. Others are negative, such as sending earthquakes and causing death and destruction. However there is often no clear and obvious relationship between human behavior and the deeds of *Töröröt* in the view of the people. He is usually experienced as acting in an arbitrary way. In fact the presence or absence of *pöghisyö* can be evidence for the attitude of *Töröröt* towards the people, or as one elder put it during a time of *pöghisyö*, “*Töröröt* seems to agree.”

Awolalu’s thesis (in *Sin and its Removal in African Traditional Religion*, 1976) that “Africans hold that man is virtually related to and even dependent upon Deity and his agents who watch over human behavior and can reward or punish man as the case may be” is to a certain extent confirmed by these observations. However the relationship between behavior on one side and reward or punishment on the other is less obvious among the Pökoot people.

### **The relationship between sin and peace/harmony (*pöghisyö*)**

Any breach of *pöghisyö* is considered as being sin. Yet there are no clear-cut rules and regulations that determine when a breach has taken place. The absence of *pöghisyö* is a clear indication for the presence of sin or evil. It thus follows that sin is only sin if its consequences become visible. And this can sometimes take more than a year after the actual breach has taken place.

The most important sign of a breach of *pöghisyö* is the sickness of one of the members of the community or among cattle, sheep or goats. Except for some very common diseases such as malaria and measles, diseases are always explained from the perspective of lacking *pöghisyö*. Treatment takes place in accordance with the type of breach that has been determined, sometimes by the people, sometimes by specialists in the society.

There are various degrees of seriousness of this breach; and different terms are used to give expression to the kind of sin or evil involved. Restoration of *pöghisyö* depends on the type of breach. This shows that sin or evil is not only the opposite of *pöghisyö*, but that it is closely linked with it, in the sense that any breach determines the kind of sin or evil and thus the way restoration takes place.

The range of the *pöghisyö* concept is limited to the Pökoot people and area. The obvious consequence of is that the scope of sin is also limited to the Pökoot community. This is particularly apparent in the case of killing. Within the Pökoot community the word *rī mö* is used. This sin has to be dealt with seriously, depending on the relationship between the killer and the one who was killed. Killing within the same lineage is subject to different rules than killing outside the same lineage. The term *para* is used

for killing outside the Pökoot society. This is not considered to be very serious; in fact if it is done during a cattle raid in neighboring Turkana, it even earns credit for the one who committed it. In this case cleansing is only needed because otherwise the spirit of the deceased might hunt the killer.

### Various terms for "sin"

Before discussing the particular terms it is good to point out that sin and evil in Pökoot only have a human dimension. A person can never commit sin or cause evil against *Töröröt*. Sin or evil are always related to communal problems or to disturbing the spirits, especially of the deceased ancestors.

Since there is not always a clear-cut distinction between sin and evil I will consider some of the more general terms that can be classified as belonging to this field of meaning. Numerous other more limited concepts can not be treated within the scope of this article.

1. *Ngoki*. Although some aspects of this term were discussed above, it is necessary to return to it again. It has already been noted that *ngoki* is consistently used to represent sin. However the analysis shows that it is doubtful whether it should be considered as sin or as evil. The folk story showed that *ngoki* can behave as an independent force, exercising power over others. The use of the term in the Pökoot language confirms this. The following can be said about *ngoki*:

- a. It takes revenge.
- b. It can return to you to "eat" you.
- c. People or animals can be chased by it.
- d. It can ripen before it exercises its destructive effects on the community.
- e. It can occupy and "fill" somebody.
- f. It makes you "dirty", unclean.

Its exact meaning again depends on the context in which it occurs. Taking all these phrases together there seem to be enough grounds for regarding it as an independent force. This is confirmed by the fact that somebody who is involved with *ngoki* is often not held responsible for it. It is quite possible that someone else has caused the *ngoki* to trouble him or her by means of speaking bad words, or witchcraft, or just by looking at a person. Rituals of purification are necessary to neutralize its harmful effects.

However there is also another use of the word: *ngoki* can be committed by somebody. However it is not very clear to what extent this involves personal responsibility. In these cases also purification ceremonies are necessary in order to cleanse the person concerned. This again is an indication that *ngoki* acts as an independent force from which persons have to be cleansed.

The end result of *ngoki* is death. Only if it is countered properly and at the right time do its effects not become harmful.

It also seems that liability to *ngoki* relates to whether the person is receptive. Somebody living a good life, having a good family, not doing

wrong to others, is not open or is hardly open to *ngoki*, while other people are notorious for being *ngokiyoon* (somebody who is occupied by *ngoki*).

There are many particular sins that can call *ngoki* into existence. Some examples are: theft, robbery, adultery, witchcraft, disobedience, murder, jealousy, greed, and so on. Each of these sins can result in *ngoki*, particularly if they are not countered. The way they need to be countered depends very much on the nature of the sin that was committed.

2. *Lelut*. This word has usually been translated as “mistake” or “error”. The meaning of this term too is explained from the context in which it occurs.

If somebody has quarrelled with his neighbor and does not deal with it, the quarrelling can disturb the *pöghisyö*. However if the person concerned deals satisfactorily with the situation, the problem will not cause any disturbance. The next day he might go to his neighbor and just apologize for it and ask forgiveness. If the quarrel was more serious he may bring some beer, call two other elders, discuss the matter, and the case is then dropped. *Lelut* is a sin that can be forgiven without going through ritual procedures. The person committing it is held responsible. If he or she continues to hide it or does not want to solve the problem, it might eventually cause *ngoki* and thus become liable to the rules that apply to the different cases of *ngoki*.

If a person regularly gets involved with *lelut* that person may become an obstacle to the community, and hence end up in the field of *ngoki*.

3. *Sirip*. The difference between this and *ngoki* is not always clear. Different people may give different names to the same phenomenon. *Sirip* results from particular sins. A person becoming sick after a quarrel with somebody may be affected by it. It is seen as “heaping up of bad words by other people”. Then, because *sirip* follows you, you become a bad person. It is also seen as an independent force. The following observations demonstrate this:

- a. You can say to another person, “Don’t bring this *sirip* to my house.”
- b. “He has a bad mouth. It always makes others sick.”
- c. *Sirip* is related to a particular lineage. People in that lineage are known for having it.
- d. Some people are be aware of having *sirip* and warn others so that appropriate measures can be taken.
- e. It then follows that *sirip* can both be used for both intentional and unintentional behavior. It also follows that people causing it can be held responsible for it.

4. *Ghöyïn* or *ngala cho ghach* (literally “badness” or “bad words”). These terms are a rather weak and very general expression for things which are not according to expected behavior. Its contents have to be described more precisely in order for people to know how to deal with it.

5. **Other terms:** there are numerous other terms, which are usually related to a particular type of sin and which can only be purified in one particular

way, related to the type of sin committed. These terms have the meaning of sin or evil, but give a direct indication of the kind of deviating behavior involved. Some examples are:

- a. *Pan*, the term is used for witchcraft. This belongs to the category of very heavy sins for which purification is hardly possible. It involves only a few people. In some cases the son or the brother of the *ponin* (person committing *pan*) is called and has to hang him. The *ponin* cannot bewitch his own people. In other cases help is called in from specialists in the society to detect the *ponin* and take measures which eventually also result in his death.
- b. *Ptakal*, which is generally associated with deviating sexual behavior, such as incest, homosexuality, intercourse with animals.

### Conclusions

1. This study has covered only part of the process. The biblical material also has to be analyzed carefully in order to complete it. In particular the relationship between sin and peace (*shalom* and *eirene*) has to be studied carefully in order to make accurate recommendations.

2. Eichrodt (*The Theology of the Old Testament*, 1987, page 166) states that "in Israel every sin is a case of an offence against the will of Yahweh." It is at this point that the Pökoot perspective differs strongly from the biblical viewpoint. Any development in Pökoot of a concept of sin in the biblical sense has to focus on this element. This is also closely linked to a biblical understanding of the nature of God.

3. The analysis of the different terms for sin makes it clear that there is no basis for using only the word *ngoki* to cover the whole field of meaning of sin and evil. The term *lelut* in particular has relevant elements of meaning as a general term in this respect.

4. Since Hebrew (to limit myself to the Old Testament) uses in total about 30 words in the area of sin, with 3 terms being employed more prominently to refer to the breach of Law, it is recommended that in Pökoot attention be paid to the context in which words from this area occur, after which an informed choice can be made.

5. It also follows that the Pökoot translation should make more use of the range of terms that the language has in this area of meaning.

6. Additional research among the Pökoot people is necessary. More study is needed on the element of ritual as it relates to the various concepts in the area of sin. The meaning of symbols in ritual may reveal much about the nature of the concept of sin in Pökoot.

## NOTES

### An Attempt at Translating a Psalm

One of our greatest concerns when translating the Scriptures is to ensure that the people who read or hear our translation will understand it. In practice this means that we often aim at uncomplicated language.