

THE PRAISE SINGERS

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Although difficult for the outsider to understand, the "praise singer" has a valid and vital function within the society of the small Nigerian town where we live. He is the one who adds charm and authority to the chief's announcements, singing and drumming them into everybody's mind. He is the one who praises and magnifies the success, courage and wealth of important men. It is he who reinforces their position, spreads their fame, and remembers their ancestors for generations. It is for these things that he is paid.

But he is also the man who sings the praise of the white man "whose money is every morning new". Embarrassing for the white missionary? Imagine him approaching you, advertising you as the best of all benefactors of mankind, singing with a brilliant voice and a convincing drum beat, accompanied by bright smiles—on everybody's face except your own!

Torn between an inborn conviction that he is quite correct in praising you, and a grim protest against this blunt, clumsy approach to your pride and purse, what do you do? Do you listen with a helpless grin? Or await the climax of this symphony of virtues (your virtues!) and then give him the smallest possible "dash" to prove that he is wrong? Or do you stop him harshly, and thus deprive the whole audience of an enjoyable occasion? Maybe just laugh? Enjoy it? We never know.

We are living in this African village in order to translate the New Testament into the language of the area. We cannot achieve this goal unless we live with the people and thus master their language. The translation of Luke is currently on the program.

Because we like music, we have analyzed the structure of the praise songs. Their pattern—meditative progression, repetition of the same line with substitution of one item, parallelisms, incentive language—rang a bell. We thought of Luke's poetic passages and the Psalms.

In a daring step we left our European style grammar and built the typical repetitions of the praise songs into Luke's text. We adapted Mary's song in Luke 1.46-55 to the structure of those beloved African praise songs. The idea captured the imagination of our Christian co-translator who translated the reshaped text into his language. He then called the best of the praise singers from the town and we presented our idea to him.

"Here is a song from the Bible. It is going to be difficult but we want you to make this text a true Busa song. Will you try?"

It certainly was difficult! For hours he lay under the tree, legs up, the text in his hand, reading and humming it in order to get it "into his head". He discussed it with the young men of the village. "How do we say this? . . . Do we say it like this? . . . Yes, it is true . . ."

In the end he asked us to make some changes, took the liberty of repeating four lines and of adding a great coda:

“ . . . All, yes, to all of them He has shown His mercy.”

The first session with the tape recorder was a disappointment. Anxious, hesitating, with no freedom, he did his best to get the correct words on tape. The melody returned monotonous and the rhythm was lost.

A week later he came back. “Load the tape recorder! Erase what we did last week! Let me sit in this corner . . .”

He started very softly, singing gently with growing volume and conviction, and in a beautifully clear voice he sang to the end. Only when the neighbours flocked into our house, keen to hear the recording and eagerly discussing it, did we suddenly remember that we are among Muslims. Mary's beautiful song of praise had been given to us by a Muslim praise singer.

A TRANSLATION OF MARY'S PRAISE SONG IN BUSA
as sung by Mallam Salihu Bata, praise
singer in Kaiama, Kwara State, Nigeria

I praise the Lord God in my heart
I praise the Lord God in my heart
I praise the Lord God and my liver is pleased
 My Lord God saves, he frees my head
 My Lord God saves, he frees my head
He has mercy upon me
He has intently remembered all my concerns
He has intently remembered the concerns of his pitiable slave

Today and in the future everybody calls me the blessed one
all tribes call me the blessed one

God the mighty King has done great things for me
God the mighty King has done great things for me
God the mighty King has a bright and supreme name
God the mighty King has mercy
 for people who fear him and
 for their children and
 for their grandchildren

He showed his hand of awful power
He scattered proud people
 and their proud plans
He scattered great chiefs
 from their positions
He lifted up the pitiable
He filled the hungry with food
He sent off the moneymen with empty hands
He helped his slave Israel
 as he had covenanted with their forefathers

He has intently remembered Ibrahim's matters
and his grandchildren
and his grandchildren's grandchildren

All, yes, to all of them he showed His mercy.

NOTES

Luke 2.36–37 How old was Anna?

Luke 2.36–37 presents a minor but difficult problem for the translator. Was Anna eighty-four years old as the Translator's Handbook on Luke tells us, or was she more than one hundred as TEV suggests? Was she a widow eighty-four years old or was she a widow for eighty-four years? The Handbook has the support of KJV, RSV, NEB, TT, as well as Goodspeed, C. K. Williams and W. Barclay. TEV has the support of RV, Knox, and Moffatt. (I am referring only to the versions I have at hand at present.)

Some versions, and many commentaries, indicate that both are possible renderings of the original. H. K. Luce, in the Cambridge Greek New Testament on Luke summarizes the problem effectively:

"Luke has made an awkward sentence out of the description of Anna: and it is not clear how old she is stated to be. If he means that she had been a widow for 84 years after seven years of married life, she is well over 100, an age not impossible, apparently, at the time. Others think that 84 years is her age, including her youth, married life and—in that case—about 60 years of widowhood."

Luke makes it clear in verse 36 that she was *very* old by the use of a pleonasm (*probēbēkuia en hēmerais pollais*). Then he mentions three stages of her life. The length of virginity is not stated. The married life lasted only for seven years. Then she was a widow for the rest of her life. The translator has to decide whether the eighty-four represents the "rest of her life" or the whole of her life.

If Luke, out of kindness for the future translator, had used the same construction for the "eighty-four years" as for the "seven years" there would have been no ambiguity. Since he describes Anna with remarkable detail, it is to be expected that he used his construction deliberately. Plummer, in the International Critical Commentary on Luke, recognizes that both renderings are possible, but considers it more likely that the evangelist intended us to understand that Anna was more than a hundred years old. His note on the passage seems to explain the Greek sentence more satisfactorily than any other comment that I have seen:

"She was of great age because she had lived seven years as a wife and eighty-four years *by herself* (Rom. 7.25) as a widow. The *heōs* draws attention to the great length of her widowhood, 'up to as much as' (Mt. 18.21–22). That she should be considerably over a hundred years is not incredible."