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YAHWEH – THE CASE FOR CHAUTA “Great-[God]-of-the-Bow”

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One of the more difficult problems facing the Chichewa Bible Translation Team was how to render the personal name of Israel’s God, commonly referred to as “Yahweh” or “the LORD” in English. This problem is not peculiar to Chewa of course, but is one that must be confronted in all languages, either by the actual translators or, if the translators have not adequately dealt with it, by the many readers and hearers of their version. The issue is crucial, for a person’s whole idea of and attitude towards the God of the Bible may be significantly influenced, either positively or negatively, by the particular expression that is chosen to translate this, the most frequent name for God in the Bible.

The general name for the Supreme Being (*’elohim* in Hebrew and *theos* in Greek) has a fairly close equivalent in most Bantu languages of Africa, namely, the traditional title applied to the so-called “High God”. His personal name, on the other hand, the Hebrew “tetragrammaton” *YHWH*, is unique in both form and meaning. It is, therefore, strictly speaking untranslatable.

But this fact does not automatically give translators the right to leave the term *YAHWEH* untranslated in the Bible; this should not be considered unless there is absolutely no other option. But this is what was done, for no apparent reason, in many places by the very first translation of the Scriptures, the Greek Septuagint, for example in Genesis 2.4-7 where *theos* is used for *YAHWEH* instead of *kurios* “Lord”. Similarly some modern versions such as the German Common Language version simply replace *YAHWEH* by the word for “God” as if there were no difference between them. This sort of policy may be necessary in a pioneer translation situation, perhaps to combat strong local polytheistic beliefs, but it would not be justified elsewhere. Throughout the history of Bible translation, the practice has generally been to maintain this key theological distinction in some way. Such has been the case regardless of whether a literal or an idiomatic version is concerned.

Disregarding, then, the option of not translating *YAHWEH* at all, the Chewa team considered five possible solutions to their problem. These are outlined below along with a brief discussion of the arguments for and against each choice. The one that was finally selected is left till last, since it is the most complicated and did not in fact become apparent until some of the other possibilities had already been tried and found unsatisfactory.

Transliterate or use a loanword

This is the procedure that was followed in the older, missionary translations into Chichewa. The question of whether this involved an actual transliteration (a representation in the closest corresponding orthographic characters) from the Hebrew original or simply the adoption of a loanword,

borrowed from the English-speaking colonialists, cannot be determined with certainty. In any case, two distinct traditions developed: one Protestant following the KJV, *Yehova*, and the other Roman Catholic, *Yawe*, in keeping with their preferred practice of transcription.

Despite its relatively long history of usage, the translation team decided against this solution (in either transliterated variant) since it introduces a culturally alien term and related associations into the core of biblical theology. Thus for many people "God" becomes the "white God" of the Europeans; for others, *Yehova* is clearly identified as the God of ancient Israel and the Bible, but nevertheless one who is quite different from the traditional Supreme Being whom the Chewa people have recognized and revered for generations. The Hebrew form *YHWH* clearly refers to a proper name, and although either *Yehova* or *Yawe* would no doubt be understood as such, this remains for the most part an unfamiliar personage, a god who was imported by foreigners at the dawn of the hated colonial age.

In most contexts, to be sure, especially where formal Christian teaching and practice has taken hold, the transliterated term has gathered a certain amount of reflected prestige and a feeling of reverence. But generally speaking it has very little personal significance to the vast majority, except in situations where intensive indoctrination has already taken effect, notably in the case of the clergy. This would have undoubtedly been the result even if the name for another well-known African deity, the Zulu *uNkulunkulu* for example, had been borrowed to render *YAHWEH* in Chichewa.

Translate as "Lord"

This is essentially a modification of the Septuagint's approach to the problem of translating *YAHWEH*. It has its basis in the pious Jewish custom of substituting the Hebrew expression "my-lord" (*'adonai*) for *YHWH* when reading the Scriptures orally since the latter was considered too sacred to pronounce. The Greek translation very carefully followed this convention, rendering *YHWH* by *kurios* "master," "owner," "husband," "lord" on virtually every occurrence. This practice naturally takes away the distinction between the terms "lord" (whether used in reference to God or not) and "Yahweh" in the Bible, which is a significant loss indeed, for in effect it results in diminishing the notion of God (see, for example, Exo 6.2-3; Psa 110.1).

A compromise has therefore been tried as a translation of *YAHWEH* in a number of Central African languages. By this method the local term for "chief," "master," "sir," "uncle," and/or "lord" is qualified or classified by the most generic term used of the deity in a particular speech community. The result is a contrived compound expression such as the *Tonga Mwami-Leza* "Chief-God", which though distinct, understandable, and grammatically correct, turns out to be rather awkward in a number of contexts, especially where "Yahweh" occurs frequently (such as Gen 15:6-9), in combination with "God" (as in Gen 6), or in poetic passages like we have in the Psalms (Psa 34, for example). Furthermore, both

the intimacy and the impact of the Hebrew personal name is lost in this artificial title, and the uniqueness of terms that occur together in the original text, such as “Yahweh-God” (Gen 2), cannot be maintained.

The compound expression *Ambuye-Mulungu* “Sir-God” was used in the first draft of the Chewa Old Testament, with a limited measure of success. In other words, it was somewhat more meaningful to the average reader than the transliteration *Yehova* (see section headed **Transliteration** above). Nevertheless a certain amount of confusion did occur with this combination, especially in the early stages, since *Ambuye* is an honorific plural form while *Mulungu* is singular. And people never did really grasp the distinctiveness of the expression, for it was generally regarded as simply a praise variant of the common title for the deity.

Translate as “Lord” but use a typographical contrast

This option has been selected for use in many European language versions, especially English versions like KJV, RSV, NIV, NEB, and so on. It is usually employed in conjunction with the rendering of *YAHWEH* by the word “lord” (see previous section). That is to say, when “lord” is being used to translate the divine name *YHWH*, it is written in capital (upper case) letters throughout, “LORD”, in order to distinguish this special usage from the other two possibilities, “Lord” for the Hebrew *’adonai* with reference to God in general, or “lord” with reference to some human authority.

In the Chewa context, however, it was felt that this would not be a very effective solution in the case of either a transliteration *YEHOVA* or a compound expression *AMBUYE-MULUNGU*. For one thing, such a policy would do nothing for the hearer of the biblical text, and in Central Africa this would exclude the great majority of people. Secondly, it is doubtful that this typographical convention would help even the actual readers of the Bible very much, for testing has shown that most of them do not understand the significance of purely formal distinctions of this nature. In fact, words printed completely in capitals generally prove to be more difficult to read than those written in lower case letters, and hence this device would not seem to have any positive signalling value for the average reader.

Translate the meaning of *YHWH*

The two previous articles, and also the statement from the Study Group at Victoria Falls, make reference to the meaning or sense believed to underlie the name *YHWH*. What would be the result if one of these senses were translated more or less literally into Chichewa?

In short the result would be unnatural, or at best a rather strange hybrid form which would require some strong contextual signals that it was a reference to God. Therefore this option was attempted in only a few marked passages where there seemed to be a special emphasis upon the meaning or derivation of the name. Thus in Exodus 3.14 the Chewa reads (literally): “(As for) my name, I am I-AM-HERE (*NDILIPO*) ... The Israelites you must tell them, ‘I-AM-HERE has sent me to you.’ ”

Accordingly in John 8.24 Jesus warns the Jewish religious leaders with the testimony: "For if you do not believe that I myself am I-AM-HERE (*NDILIPO*), you will truly die in your sins."

Use a name from the culture

To begin with, do any equivalent "praise names" for the deity already exist in the language which would avoid the need for using some less natural contrived expression, whether borrowed or constructed of indigenous terms? The translation team considered this possibility and came up with a rather limited potential. On the one hand, no praise name or title (such as *Mutalabala* "the-ever-existent/present-One" or *Munamazuba* "Owner-of-days" in Chitonga for example) came very close to expressing either the sense or the significance of *YAHWEH*. And although it would be possible to find a partial formal equivalent to the literal meaning of *YAHWEH*, such as *Wamuyaya* "the-unending-One" or *Wachikhalire* "the-One-of-ever-existence", these would be regarded only in an attributive sense or as a title, and not as a personal name. Moreover the latter terms, while used primarily in religious literature in reference to God, could in many contexts also be applied to a venerated ancestor (as in a prayer for rain) or even to a great living human person, such as the nation's President.

For some reason, perhaps a deep-seated conservatism among certain committee members, the possibility of finding an actual equivalent name was not actively considered at the start of the Chewa Old Testament project. The practice of transliteration resulting in *Yehova* or *Yawe*, as observed in the old Bibles, was rejected in favor of the compound expression *Ambuye-Mulungu*. But in a language which does possess a number of names to refer to the single Supreme Being, this should have been the place to begin in the search for the closest natural equivalent of the Hebrew *YHWH*. About half-way through the Old Testament translation, however, this suggestion was finally made, and the team rather eagerly undertook a little research project that focussed on the various traditional names for God in their language.

There was not much question with regard to the generic name "God", corresponding to the Hebrew majestic plural *elohim* "god" or "gods". For this a rather widely used (in East-Central Africa) term was available, namely *Mulungu* (Swahili, *Mungu*). The original meaning of the word is uncertain and definitely no longer active nowadays. Some early scholars derived it from the verb *-lunga* "set in order" (in Chewa, *-longa*), perhaps a reflection of God's creative activity, others from a related root meaning "be straight, upright" (compare *-lungama* "be just, righteous"). Another proposal sees its basis rather in an old Bantu noun form, either *-lungu* "clan, family" or *-ngu* "ancestral spirit". Any of these would refer to God's essential spiritual nature and to his primary role as the originator of the human race. Such notions would probably incorporate the belief that all human "spirits" (*mizimu*) derive from God and eventually return to him again.

In any case, *Mulungu* is indisputably the most general term available in

the language (a class noun), as demonstrated not only by geographical range and frequency of distribution, but also by everyday usage. For example, the proposition:

“[insert any other divine name or title] is *Mulungu*” cannot be reversed, and *Mulungu* alone can be pluralized (albeit rarely: *milungu* “gods” as an occasional honorific designation of the ancestral spirits). In addition, only the latter may be modified by a “genitive” construction (such as *Mulungu wake* “his God”, *Mulungu wa Azungu* “God of the White-men”) or by one involving negative attribution (for example, *mulungu wonama* “false/lying god”).

In order to select an indigenous name that could possibly function as an equivalent of *YAHWEH*, a careful “key-term” type of analysis had to be carried out. The procedure involved three basic steps: selection of possible names, studying the contexts in which those names were used, then description and definition.

Selection. The first task was to prepare a list of likely “candidates” for the position. They had to be comparable terms so that an accurate analysis could be made, and thus a delimiting context was prepared that would hopefully eliminate most incompatible items. Therefore all possibilities had to sound natural when fitted into this general statement:

“Our God [*Mulungu*] named . . . is worshipped by all Chewa people.” A personal name is obviously required, thus excluding certain common nominalized attributives, such as *Wachifundo* “the-merciful-One” or *Wamphamvuzonse* “the-all-powerful-One”. The context of the utterance itself ruled out references having only a regional or ethnic usage (such as *Chamnji* of the Nyungwe people in Mozambique), those shared with other tribes (such as *Leza* in northern Zambia and Malawi), as well as prominent sub-deities, such as *Thunga*, the ancient serpentine representative of God, and *Mbona*, the famous rain-caller and prophet of the Phiri clan. This process of selection narrowed the field down to four: *Chauta*, *Mphambe*, *Namalenga*, and *Chisumphu*.

Contextualization. The next step was to record as many different contexts as possible in which each of the four key names of God was used. Some of these were gained through direct discussion: “Tell me what you know about . . . [name of god].” Other pertinent statements were obtained from a variety of texts, both oral and written, such as recorded prayers, mythological accounts, religious poems and hymns, dictionaries, ethnographic descriptions, essays on traditional religion, and so forth. Texts originating from both native and foreign (such as missionary) sources were considered, although the former were naturally regarded much more highly, as were those coming from an earlier period of history. Since the reliability of the next stage in the procedure was felt to be directly dependent on the quality of thorough contextualization, an extensive and varied collection of texts was gathered and arranged into categories of similar usage, that is, according to a given divine name.

Description and definition. Finally, on the basis of the texts collected during stage two in conjunction with any relevant facts about the meaning

and derivation of the names, a comparative study of the four key terms was made. This involved an examination of each of the names in relation to one another with a view toward listing both their common as well as their distinctive components of meaning. Components of form (the nature and attributes of the divine being) and function (his various activities and roles) were considered. Obviously these overlapped to a certain extent, for a god's characteristics are often shown by his actions in relation to mankind. Certain crucial emotive elements of meaning were also noted when possible; for example: do people have a positive (affectionate) or a negative (fearful) reaction when they hear such-and-such a divine name and why? A summary of some of the principal features of meaning that are associated with each of the four names for "God" in Chewa are listed below. It must be stressed that one and the same Supreme Being, *Mulungu*, is being referred to (and not four different gods!).

Namalenga - This term points to the deity primarily in his role as the creator of all things: definitely mankind, probably all visible elements in the universe, and possibly also the universe (earth and heavens) itself, though the latter is not explicitly recorded in any myth of origins. God's surpassing power and wisdom as revealed in creation (the verb stem being *-lenga*) are emphasized and so is his graciousness in providing for his "children". The latter is also suggested by the generic female personal prefix *na-*, which also invests the name with a decidedly positive connotation, similar to that of "mother" (a less frequently used "male" variant is *Mlengi*). However this name is also relatively restricted in usage and application to creation contexts, for example to supplicatory prayers in which God's primal mercy is appealed to.

Chisumph - The name *Chisumph* is very closely associated with an ancient rain-cult that once flourished in southern Malawi and adjacent areas. The sacred rites of this cult were typically practiced in dense thickets at deep pools, for this is where his familiar, or physical intermediary, was often found, namely, the python *nsato*, normally referred to honorifically as *Thunga* (in the west) or *Napolo* (in the east). Such a divine serpent would occasionally make its appearance, suddenly welling up from beneath the surface of the waters, it was said, to survey the needs of god's people (compare the verb *-t/sumphuka* "to spring/leap up" like a fountain). In his role as the provider of rain, the most essential element of human existence, *Chisumph* was generally regarded as a benevolent deity. He would withhold the rains, causing a destructive drought, only when provoked by the sinful behavior of his people. But as in the case of *Namalenga*, so also the functional significance of *Chisumph* was quite limited in scope, in this case largely to a cultic setting, or reduced in authority, power, and prestige to that appropriate to a territorial wind-rain spirit.

Mphambe - This is a name that is commonly associated with god's manifestations of power in nature, especially by means of lightning and thunder, but also storms in general as well as earthquakes. In this connection we note that it may be related to the verb *-pambana* "exceed, excel". In this case it is not so much the actual blessing of rain that

is in focus, but rather its supposed natural vehicles in the skies, all of which stress the surpassing greatness of *Mphambe*. But lightning (and earthquakes!) can be dangerous to both life and property. Just about every rural dweller knows of someone who was killed by a bolt of lightning during the rainy season. Thus *Mphambe* is a name which bears a certain adverse connotation, namely fear, in addition to one of awe and reverence. This, together with its rather limited range of usage, render it unsatisfactory as an equivalent of *YAHWEH*.

Chauta - There are two major derivations of the meaning proposed for the name *Chauta*, which is literally "Great-One-of-the-bow". There is no doubt about the "bow" element (*uta*), but the question is: Which bow is meant? That of the hunter or its colorful image in the heavens? The hunter or warrior's bow was an essential instrument used for both provision and protection, especially in ancient times. Thus it is understandable that the term could be used symbolically with reference to these crucial activities of God. He was the great Provider and Defender of his people. On the other hand, and probably more likely, the rainbow (*uta-wa-Leza* "bow-of-God") was also an important symbol, again connected with the life-giving rains and hence God's concern for the well-being of all his creatures. The fact that this bow extends from one end of the sky to the other would suggest his control over the entire universe.

The divine name *Chauta* was especially prominent in rain-calling ceremonies or at other times of crisis when people felt the need to appeal to God as a corporate body. Evidence for this may be found in many of the ancient Chewa prayers which have been recorded. *Chauta* would usually be the name mentioned first and most frequently. It carried a highly favorable emotive connotation - when all other helpers (such as the ancestral spirits) failed, *Chauta* would be there to set things right. He was the refuge of last resort also for individuals in their time of distress. They would call out to *Chauta* in preference to *Chisumphu*, *Namalenga*, *Mphambe*, or even *Mulungu*, on many different occasions in life, for both petition (for a child, for example) and praise (for a good harvest). It seems as if the passage of time encouraged a liberation of this particular name from its celestial associations of meaning and situations of use so that it gradually developed into a more general reference to the deity, like *Mulungu*. In Chitumbuka, a language spoken to the north of the Chewa areas, the range of reference of both terms is merged into that of a single deity, namely *Chiuta*. As Nthala observed over two decades ago: "The name *Chauta* is known throughout this land (that is, Malawi)" (*Mbiri ya Achewa*, 1965, page 59). However unlike *Mulungu* which can also act as a general title or noun classifier, *Chauta* is regarded only as a proper noun - a most personal divine name.

As a result of this little research project and exercise in key-term analysis, the name *Chauta* was selected to translate *YAHWEH* in the Old Testament, while *Mphambe* was reserved for the much less frequently occurring *El-shaddai* "God almighty" (perhaps involving a figurative reference to a mountain as a common symbol of strength in Hebrew literature). This was not a decision that was taken lightly, especially in view

of the long church tradition which supported the transliteration *Yehova* of the old Bible. But as the team's study showed, there were some compelling reasons for making a shift to *Chauta*. These may be summarized as follows:

Admittedly, *Chauta* does not reflect much of the literal form or sense of the "tetragrammaton" *YHWH*, namely, that of the verb "to be" having a more or less timeless reference. In other critical respects, however, we do see a relatively close correspondence in both meaning and sociolinguistic significance. There is, first of all, its function as a familiar personal name, in contrast to the generic title *Mulungu*. Furthermore, the name *Chauta* is also very widespread in Chewa-speaking areas and commonly used in a variety of religious settings. This distinguishes it from all of the other available personal and praise names in the language. And finally, there is the all-important positive connotation in its favor, and here is where it perhaps approximates the Hebrew *YHWH* most closely. Just as "Yahweh" was revealed as the actual name of Israel's God (and strictly speaking, his only unique "name"), so also *Chauta* has gradually grown in national prestige to refer to the deity of the Chewa people as a whole. It thus serves as a prominent focal point of cultural identity and a strong source of ethnic pride. Such associative aspects of meaning are an important part of the total meaning of any term or expression, but especially of proper names – and sacred ones in particular.

Yet in personalizing and indigenizing the name *YAHWEH* in Chichewa, the translators have perhaps run the risk of identifying it too closely with the traditional name for the deity. Some might object that this practice could lead to "transculturization" and a consequent loss of distinctiveness for the God of the Old Testament Scriptures. At worst, so the argument goes, this could in turn encourage a notion of God where elements of local, pre-Christian religious belief and practice become mixed in the minds of the untrained lay people with a proper biblically-based conception.

To be sure, it is dangerous to simply ignore the thoughts and feelings which come out of ancient tribal tradition as well as any extraneous components which may accompany the sacred terms of indigenous religion if introduced into a modern translation of the Bible. The feelings and attitudes of the constituency need to be thoroughly tested and evaluated in order to detect a possibly negative reaction to such current usage. Even a positive reaction needs to be carefully examined to see whether this has been manifested for the right reasons. This must of course be done before the version is finalized and published, perhaps in a trial portion or selection. In the case of *Chauta*, there has been relatively little opposition encountered thus far. Any expressed doubts have been quickly dispelled once the case for this indigenous term has been carefully explained.

What a difference a name makes! This is as true in the social and cultural context of the Chewa people as it is in the Bible. Personal names bear a close relationship to the unique individuals which they designate and represent. This applies to the Supreme Being just as much as it does to his creatures. Whether the term *Chauta* happens to be ultimately derived from

the ancient practice of hunting (the “bow” as tool/weapon) or from ritual activities connected with rain-calling (or both!), makes little difference in the final analysis. Current usage and opinion is the determining factor. In this respect the important revelation for Chewa people today is that the foreign deity *Yehova* (or *Yawe*) is really *Chauta*, the God they’ve always known and worshipped, and the God whom their ancestors also turned to for help in the day of trouble!

NITTOY ACHUMI

TRANSLATION OF “GOD” AND “LORD” IN SOME NAGA BIBLES

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The Nagas are one of the small ethnic groups of North-East India, who also spread over into the north-western part of Myanmar. There are as many as 22 recognized Naga tribes forming a homogeneous group, within which each tribe maintains its own identity and has its own definite boundaries. Each tribe has its own separate language, and in many cases there are sub-tribes which speak different dialects. The Indian State of Nagaland is the home of the majority of Naga tribes.

Ever since the arrival of missionaries among the Nagas, Bible translation has gone on side by side with evangelism and church expansion. A gospel of Matthew was first translated into the Ao language in 1883, and the entire New Testament in that language was published in 1913. Since then Bible translation has gone on steadily, with the whole Bible now available in 6 Naga languages and the New Testament in 15. Translation projects are active in 11 languages.

For the purposes of this article I have selected the first three Naga Bibles to be published: the Ao Bible (1964), the Lotha (Kyong) Bible (1967), and the Angami Bible (1970). All three of these Bibles have followed the RSV and KJV English versions in their translation; and my enquiries reveal that the translators of these Bibles had little access to training or to the Handbooks and other helps which are now available. Their translation work was carried out in very difficult circumstances.

In this article I will investigate briefly the traditional concepts of the deities and spirits associated with the tribes and the tribal terms used to translate the term “God”. I will also try to discover the meaning of the terms chosen for the translation of “the LORD” (*YHWH*) in these Bibles.

Traditional terms for deities used in the three Bibles

The Ao Naga translators chose the term *Tsungrem* to translate “God”. Traditionally the Ao Nagas believe in a number of supernatural beings who are directly or indirectly involved in the wellbeing and happiness of the individual and the community. The term *tsungrem* refers to a class of