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TRANSLATING THE NAMES OF GOD

In this issue we continue the series of articles begun in the last issue (April 1984) of Practical Papers. The first three articles here are on this topic.

As we indicated in the last issue, the purpose of the series is to provide a forum for discussion of how to translate the names of God in different languages and cultural situations round the world.

We expect that the series will continue for at least two more issues after this one. And we will welcome contributions to the series from translators.

—Editor.

BUKAS YAKABUUL

TRANSLATING GOD'S NAMES INTO KANYOK

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This is a practical article. It deals with the problems of translating God's names into the Kanyok language.

The cases discussed in this paper are all taken from the Book of Joel. Since there is almost nothing of the Old Testament translated into Kanyok (although a NT translation project has just started), I thought the Book of Joel would be a good starting point for this kind of pioneering work. We are working from concrete problems, and moving toward potential solutions. And it is our hope that other languages may find this discussion helpful for their work also.

The Kanyok language and culture relate to a group of Bantu-speaking people, speakers of a major branch of the Niger-Congo language family. Bantu speakers are today found throughout the Congo basin and most of eastern and southern Africa, but Kanyok is related to the languages of the West African forest and savannah regions. It is spoken by nearly 200,000 people. The Kanyok people are mainly found between the rivers Mbujimayi and Lubilanji in the Republic of Zaire.

THE BEARING OF A NAME IN KANYOK CULTURE

Our discussion on the translation of God's names into Kanyok language cannot be well understood if nothing is said on the subject of names in general. Therefore, we will try to provide some information in this section to help those who are not Kanyok-speaking people to see some connections between God's names and the names of people.

As a general rule, there are three kinds of names among Kanyok people: *diijin dya mund*, “the name of the womb”; *diijin diidik*, “a given name”, *diijin dya kwisaasul*, “a praise name”. Other forms of names may be derived from one or other of these basic types. Some people have all these three kinds of names together, but most people bear only two kinds: *diijin diidik*, “a given name”, and *diijin dya kwisaasul*, “a praise name”. What matter is of peculiar importance about these names?

***Diijin dya mund*, “a name of the womb”**

Kanyok midwives are trained to observe and recognize all the signs surrounding the birth of each child. They are supposed to acknowledge these signs and communicate them to the parents in order to properly care for the child. Some of the signs are so serious that if not observed, they can bring misfortune to the child or his parents. This is the case for twins for instance. In recent times this practice has tended to disappear because of births taking place in hospitals. The following are some of the “womb names”, and some of their implications on those who bear them.

(a) *Mahas*, “twins”. For Kanyok people twins are “twins”. They may look alike or not, that is not important. The first is called either *Mbuy* or *Cituut* whether it be a boy or a girl, except if there is a special regional practice. The second of the “twins” is called *Sanz* or *Kalong*. Once the first is called *Mbuy* the second automatically is *Sanz*; but if the name of *Cituut* is used for the first, the second must be called *Kalong*. The family and the whole village will be involved in some ceremonial practice for the purification of these children. It is believed that if the parents do not do something to keep these children alive, they will die. Beside these “womb names” children will also receive their given and praise names. There are other people who are called *Mbuy* without being one of “twins”. This is the only name of the four names for “twins” that can be found outside of this special birth. In other words, it is the only name which can also be used in the category of “given names”.

(b) *Tang* is a “womb name” for a child who is conceived in a special way. If the mother is a newly married person and has never menstruated since she was born herself, then the child conceived in these circumstances will be called *Tang*. He may have other “womb names”, but this condition is so special that the other names will be ignored. A mother of other children can also give birth to a *Tang* if she has not menstruated during the period of time between the birth of the last child and the newly conceived one; otherwise the child is not regarded as having a special birth.

This name is the name given to the second person of the Trinity in Kanyok traditional context. We will discuss this case later on.

(c) *Mwiik* is also a “womb name”. The child who bears such a name is born with the feet coming out first. *Mombel* is the name of a child who does not cry soon after birth. *Manyong* is the name of a child born after the mother has given birth to several others previously, but who have all died at birth or as babies. There are many other “womb names” describing circumstances like these, but these ones have been given as examples of what Kanyok people

identify as “names of the womb”. They are different from “given names” and “praise names”.

Dijin diidik, “a given name”

Every Kanyok has a given name. It is a lineage name: that means that the parents choose a name from the lineage of the father or the mother to give to a new-born child. This is a legal identification of the child. A given name in the Kanyok area can be compared to the surname or the family name among Americans. Each person of the nuclear family has his or her own last name. If it is necessary to distinguish the parents of the children who may have the same last name, the speaker will say, *Bukas a Kabw* “Bukas son of Kabw” or *Bukas a Ciband* “Bukas son of Ciband”, and there will be no confusion. In other words, the same nuclear family can have *Bukas, Mutombw, Ciband, Mwamb*, as last names of its members. The mother does not change her “given name” when she becomes a married woman. The “given name” then is the family name or the last name because it links its bearer with his/her lineage. This is very important for the understanding of God’s personal name. We will come to it later.

Dijin dya kwisaasul, “a praise name”

In the Kanyok community, a praise name is as important as the other types of name. These names can be given by the parents to their children in addition to their family names (“given names”). Most of the time people choose such praise names for themselves, to refer to their nature, by describing or identifying their essential characteristics. The following examples illustrate the peculiar character of “praise names”.

- (a) *Wakumangabw* “the one who carries the shield”, means a brave person, capable of facing all difficult situations. The person bearing such names feels, most of the time, that he should be able to face difficult situations.
- (b) *Kahond* “a trunk (shaft) of a mushroom”, means “a chief”. The name implies that its bearer has the qualities of being “chief”. He may sense it himself or people around him may call him this, because he obviously has great ability.
- (c) *Bamulonz* “one who can be shot by firearm” means a “finicky” man. He deals with things even in their small details.

Praise names are definitely important. They cannot be dissociated from their bearers because they distinguish one individual from others, and they describe, identify, and express the nature of those identified with them. They reveal what a person is in his/her innermost. They contain deep meanings and determine, most of the time, the situation in life of an individual. A “given name” links the individual with his/her lineage, while the “name of the womb” describes special circumstances at the time of conception or birth. All three names are important and play different roles in the life of an individual person.

KANYOK NAMES AND THE DIVINE NAMES

What kind of implications do Kanyok people make between the bearing of a name as explained above and the divine names? I want to answer this question in this next section.

An understanding of the Kanyok use of names sheds light on their attitude to the divine names. First of all, Kanyok people have an absolute monotheism: they believe in one God. Wymeersch, a Catholic priest, makes a note of this in his study: "This self-styled trinity is an authentically traditional element." (*The Kanyok—Culture and Tradition*, page 291)

Secondly, the divine personal and praise names are not found among human beings. They belong to a lineage other than that of men. Thirdly, there never has been any idea of family linked with divine being. The contradictions that seem to come with human language when speaking about God are due to the person referred to. For a man to understand what is not really understandable, he uses language that brings to his mind what he can perceive according to what he has available to him. That is why it does not seem right to speak of God's lineage. It is here used only to imply that God's names are referred to in the same terms as those of people for the sake of describing divine reality.

In concrete terms, the divine reality is known in Kanyok tradition as being threefold: *Mawej a Ngoy*, *Tang a Ngoy*, *Ngoy a Ngoy*. Are these three names referring to one single entity? A *Mwiin Kanyok* "a man of Kanyok people", will answer negatively. He will react that way because each *dijin diidik*, "given name", is supposed to identify only one person. The three divine names above are regarded as *majin miidik*, "given names", because of their forms. *Mawej*, *Tang*, and *Ngoy* are definitely *majin miidik*, "given names", coming with the term *a Ngoy* (literally "son or daughter of Ngoy"). In a normal context, this term brings some kind of precision in the identification of the person concerned. Only in a secondary sense, does it claim a relationship between the first and third element of the name. For instance, *Bukas a Kabw* is not *Bukas a Ciband*, nor *Ciband a Kabw*. *Bukas a Kabw* and *Ciband a Kabw* are supposed to be sons or daughters of *Kabw* while *Bukas a Ciband* is from a different family.

When we come to speak about the divine name, on the surface of it, the above three names would imply that *Ngoy* is the Supreme Being. He is the parent of *Mawej*, *Tang*, and *Ngoy*. Naturally, *Ngoy* is supposed to have a wife or a husband to be able to bear children. But Kanyok tradition ignores completely such notion of family in the divine order. Moreover, it is *Mawej a Ngoy* who is referred to as Supreme Being and *Ngoy*. *Tang a Ngoy* and *Ngoy a Ngoy* are always associated with *Mawej a Ngoy* in that strict order; but the relationship between them is not clearly spoken of in Kanyok tradition. It is the Kanyok Christian tradition which has tried to explain this difficult and complex issue in Christian terms.

What makes things even more difficult is the fact that praise names are provided for *Mawej a Ngoy*, but not for *Tang a Ngoy* nor for *Ngoy a Ngoy*. In Kanyok Christian context *Tang a Ngoy* is associated with Jesus Christ and *Ngoy a Ngoy* with the Holy Spirit. This decision to associate *Tang a Ngoy* with Jesus Christ and *Ngoy a Ngoy* with the Holy Spirit is not an arbitrary one. The second part of these names, *a Ngoy*, brings a clear explanation for the whole enigma. *Ngoy* is associated with divine power and *force vitale*, "life-giving energy". Therefore, the additional term in the divine name does not imply a parent-child relationship but refers to the principle of divine power and life,

since the Bible identifies the Holy Spirit with the power of God and life-generating force (Joel 2.28–29, Jn 16.4–7, Acts 2.16–21). In this respect, the divine name is to be understood as meaning *Mawej*, *Tang*, *Ngoy*, of life-giving power.

The name of *Tang a Ngoy* is associated with that of Jesus Christ for it always comes second in chronological position. He is the second person of “trinity” in the Bible, therefore he should be the same person. Also, the name *Tang* refers to certain special circumstances of conception by a newly married mother. There is not a total correspondence between these two situations, but the similarities between the two situations have caused some Christians to make the connection between the circumstances of a child born *Tang*, *Tang a Ngoy*, and Jesus Christ. Should they make such a connection? I think they can. But, isn't it a dangerous venture and not worth it? I would say that understanding what is incomprehensible is mostly impossible. But, God always helps his people to come to know him in different ways. If he used that difficult process to reveal himself to Kanyok people, he provides for them today a better way of knowing him through Jesus Christ as portrayed by the Bible.

An interesting observation on these three divine names is that *Mawej a Ngoy* has features connected mostly with *dijjin diidik* “given name”. Praise names are added to it to give more information on who he is and what he is able to perform. *Tang a Ngoy* is also a “given name” but it contains features of *dijjin dya mund* “a name of the womb” in order to describe the circumstances of birth. But that is just a connection which cannot stand on its own for several reasons. A decision has actually been made to keep on referring to Jesus as Jesus in the Kanyok translation of the Bible. *Ngoy a Ngoy* is again a “given name” *dijjin diidik*; but it does have room for some of the features of the “praise name”. This name can be understood as saying: The One who has the power and life-giving force. However, no value judgements should be made on the basis of this observation.

THE TRANSLATION OF GOD'S NAMES

	RSV GNB	SEGOND	FC
Joel 1.1	LORD	Eternal	Seigneur

The Revised Standard Version (RSV), Francais Courant (FC), and the Good News Bible (GNB), as well as the German and Spanish common language translations, have followed the Septuagint in rendering the personal name of the God of Israel, *YHWH*, by translating the praise name *Adonai* “the Lord”. This practice was followed to avoid pronouncing the personal name of God because of God's holiness. In translation it seems good not to offend the Jews who may pick up the Christian Bible and find a grave lack of respect toward the name of their God. There may be other reasons, but that is not the issue here. The crucial question in translation is to decide whether we can translate the personal name of the God of the Bible by a praise name, even in an African language in which there is no fear of offending anybody by using

God's personal name from African culture background. Jacob Loewen seems to favour in at least one situation the translation of God's personal name by an African praise name when he observes:

Translating the name *YHWH* by meaning is a live possibility for many African languages which have traditional praise names of similar meaning for *God*. For instance Akan uses *Forever-Owner* . . . (Unpublished paper).

This is one of the most important and difficult decisions to make for the Kanyok-speaking people.

For the Kanyok people, God is always addressed by his personal name *Mawej a Ngoy*, or the shorter form *Mawej*. There is no other being in the world who may be called *Mawej* and even less *Mawej a Ngoy*. Beside this personal name there are some praise names. The most important, well-known, and used are: *Cakahang*, "The One who has created", "Creator", *Kabwitang*, "The One who cannot begin", "Eternal One", *Kady Cibish*, "The One who acts at the right moment" (literally "The One who cannot eat fruit before it is ripe"), *Katal Matung*, "The One whose art of seeing is perfect for he sees even from afar" (literally "The One who sees the nations"). Since the Kanyok language has a praise name "eternal One", which is the same as the French Segond rendering, "Eternel", would it be good to use it? According to Loewen's advice it could be used. But what then will we do with the personal name if the praise name takes its place? The question is even more difficult because God's personal name in Kanyok cannot be used as a class noun, since both have different functions. The first is the real name and the second is describing the essence of the being it refers to. That is why *Mawej* or *Mawej a Ngoy* means nothing but a personal name, while *Kabwitang*, "Eternal One", describes who *Mawej a Ngoy* is. The same thing is virtually true for the names given to human beings.

Because God's personal name is actually his identity and his force, determining his status, I think the divine name should be rendered by *Mawej a Ngoy* everywhere in the Old Testament when the personal name is intended. But in the passages like Ex 3.14 where its meaning is intended, it seems natural to translate it by *Kabwitang* "Eternal One" into Kanyok. Thus, the praise names of God in the Bible could be translated by the praise names from the Kanyok language and cultural setting. Moreover, for the sake of Bible translation, the Kanyok language can compromise in using the shorter form of God's personal name *Mawej* to become a class noun for divine beings strictly "gods" of people other than Israel, such as Baal, Zeus, and so on. In this respect, *Mawej* will always appear with a classifying word such as *Mawej a Baal* "God of Baal" meaning "God called Baal". If it is alone, without a classifier, it should refer to *Mawej a Ngoy*. Such a rule seems to avoid the confusion between *Mawej a Ngoy* and other deities when a person hears it or reads it. In doing this, the translator has to recognize that such a usage is newly introduced, but that it will probably not cause too much trouble for the reader. The translator is urged to be consistent in translating God's names.

The spiritual beings, other than Supreme Beings of different groups of peoples, cannot be considered as *Mawej* or assimilated to him, for such beings are named differently in Kanyok language. Many of them have their personal

names, while others may fall into the category of *bakish*, "spirits" (*mukish*-singular), *bafw*, "deceased", *baloj*, "sorcerers".

	GNB	RSV	SEGOND	FC
Joel 1.15	the Almighty		Tout-Puissant	le Dieu tout-puissant

In this verse there is another name of the Lord that we have to consider: "Almighty".

This is one of the oldest praise names of the God of the Bible. In this context, commentators note that there is a play on words between "destruction" and "Almighty". Moffatt tried to render this play on words "destruction from the Destroyer", while Driver said "an overpowering from the Overpowerer" (*The Interpreter's Bible*, volume 6, page 741). But such a play on words is difficult to render into other languages because of its poetic form and the priority the meaning has over the form in translation.

The Kanyok language does not have a traditional praise name equivalent to this one. It is *Cakahang*, "Creator", which has the features of "Almighty" in Kanyok; but its central meaning refers to creation. Therefore it cannot be used for the translation of "Almighty". A more natural alternative would be *Mwiin diikand dyosolol* "The One who has all the might". The sense of violence which is central in the Hebrew expression becomes implicit in Kanyok, because God is understood to subdue other pretending mighty-ones.

	RSV	GNB	FC
Joel 2.28	afterward . . . I will pour out my spirit on all flesh	Afterward I will pour out my spirit on everyone	Par la suite, dit le Seigneur, je répandrai mon Esprit sur tout être humain

This passage has a number of interesting problems. First of all it is important to make clear who the person speaking is, as does FC, since it is the beginning of a section. The second problem is to understand the relationship between God and his spirit. The understanding of this relationship will help to accurately render the action between God and his spirit before we try to translate "the spirit of God" into Kanyok.

The person speaking is, of course, the Lord and not the prophet. One way of making this clear is to make the prophet cite God's words. Concerning the spirit, the Kanyok language has different ways of translating what the French and English call "spirit". In Kanyok thought, there is one spirit, *Ngoy a Ngoy*, who is linked with the Supreme Being. *Ngoy a Ngoy* is his personal name, as *Mawej* is God's personal name. He is always equated with the Holy Spirit when using Kanyok Christian language. In this passage there are two problems: the first one is related to who the spirit is, and the second concerns the image of pouring out the spirit over everyone.

(a) **Who the spirit is**

In Hebrew, the word *ruach* means "wind", "breath", or God's power. It had nothing to do with the New Testament concept of the Holy Spirit. With this understanding in mind, it is very hard to translate the spirit of God in this passage by *Ngoy a Ngoy*, since the latter is related to the third person of the Trinity. Moreover, this very idea of spirit as a distinct person in God's being

was not developed at that time. Most scholars think that the notion of spirit as a distinct person is not generally spoken of in the Old Testament.

How then are we supposed to translate “spirit” into Kanyok in this context? One possibility is to say *bukash bwa Mawej a Ngoy* “the power of the Lord”. This may be justified since God’s spirit is referred to as the power of God. A possible misunderstanding would be that of people thinking about the power to do special deeds removed from the context of prophecy. A still better possibility is to use *luheeh lwa a Mawej a Ngoy* “the wind of the Lord”. In Kanyok culture there is such a usage, with special reference to the situation of a sick person. People comfort the sick person by saying *i luheeh lwa Mawej* “it is the Lord’s wind”, meaning “it is not a harmful sickness for it is natural and not caused by sorcerers; therefore, the sick person will be healed”. The underlined meaning of this expression is that *luheeh lwa Mawej* sustains life and does not destroy it. On this positive note we can suggest that “spirit” in this context be translated by *luheeh lwa Mawej*. The translator has to recognize that this is a new extension of the meaning of this particular expression. It is new because the dimension of spirit has not been added to it in a systematic way. Another advantage in choosing “the wind of the Lord” is that the attribute of God’s power is understood from this expression.

(b) The image of pouring out the spirit

Having determined that spirit here is not equated with the notion of a distinct person of divinity, but with the “wind” implying the attribute of power, we have to discover the way to accurately translate the image of “pouring the spirit out”.

After a lot of research and consultation with Kanyok-speaking people we discovered that the word used for pouring out water can also fit for the wind. It has also the notion of abundance. Speaking about water to be poured out, in Kanyok thinking this has to be associated with a river containing more water than the normal level. It cannot be used of a small quantity of water in a bucket being poured out.

The translation of this verb into Kanyok would read:

Mawej a Ngoy uhingil waleeb ney, “Ku nyim kwa myand yiney, nateetenenwiin baat boosolol luheeh lwa mim. Ni bukash bwa mim abw, baan biinun baanbalum ni baan-bakaj biikaakal baleeb myand yiniibambambil mwa kuleeb; baat bakuluuh biikaakal balot myand, basangwilum naabw batal bilengazeel.”

The Lord said again: “After these things I will pour out my spirit (wind). With that power of mine, your sons and daughters will be telling things I ask them to tell; older people will be dreaming things and young people too will be seeing unusual things.”

CONCLUSION

This article gives some illustration of the problems related to translating God’s names from the Bible into Kanyok. Such matters are important and sometimes delicate in many languages. For instance, one project is now facing a difficult situation that could lead to a complete breakdown because of problems concerning the translation of God’s name. Another team still continues searching desperately for better ways of translating the name of the third person of the Trinity and other spirits. Each language has its own

particular problem, but the rendering of God's names is often one of them. In this article we have focused attention on one particular language. But we hope that other colleagues might provide examples and solutions on the same subject from other languages; and also that solutions found here might apply elsewhere.

DAVID HOGAN

THE NAMES OF GOD IN THE URAK LAWOI' SCRIPTURES

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Urak Lawoi' is spoken by about 3000 people of Malaysian stock, on the islands off the west coast of South Thailand. Since 1971 various portions and selections of Scripture have been published in this language, the most recent being Jonah (July 1983). During the preparation of Jonah for publication, the policy for translating the words used for God, His names and titles, into Urak Lawoi' was reviewed. For simplicity I will refer to them all as "names" in this article.

This paper first considers the various words available in Urak Lawoi', and contrasts the names of God used in the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures. The usage in the Malay and Indonesian Scriptures is discussed as Urak Lawoi' is closely related to these languages. Terms employed in Thai translations are also considered because of the impact of the national language on Urak Lawoi'.

The names of God available in the Urak Lawoi' language

The Urak Lawoi' have legends which speak of a God who is the Creator of the world, who exists in some vague form above the world, and who will be the final judge. Some of these concepts may have been imported from the Moslem faith, with which they have had some contact; but they claim their beliefs go back to their own ancient legends. These legends include stories of Adam and Eve and of Nabi Noh, who appears to be the Noah of the Scriptures. The younger generation is not familiar with the old legends, but have this general background of a God who is somewhere above the world, and who does not need to be worried about.

The Urak Lawoi' name for God is *Tuhat besal deq-atas*, "God great above", which occurs modified as *Tuhat besal*, "God great", *Tuhat deq-atas*, "God above", and just *Tuhat*, "God". The word *tuhat* also means "owner", but when used with this meaning it is usually linked with the object owned: *tuhat rumah* (the owner of the house), *tuhat tanah* (the owner of the land), and *tuhat prahu* (the owner of the boat). When *tuhat* occurs alone, it normally means "God". The four expressions are used interchangeably referring to "God", with no