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The Translation of יהוה in Dholuo: Overview and History

Mary Mercy Kobimbo
St. Paul's University, Limuru, Kenya

Abstract
The rendering of the divine name יהוה is one of the most debated issues in Bible translation. This is also the case in translation of the Bible into the Dholuo language of Kenya and Tanzania. Different solutions have been proffered in different Dholuo versions, but without a clear rationale. This raises important questions. To what extent do versions used as sources influence translation choice? Should traditional religion and culture provide guidance in the search for a solution? This study analyses renderings of יהוה in existing Dholuo versions against the background of the history of church and mission in the Dholuo context.

Keywords
יהוה, divine name, Bible translation, Dholuo

1. Introduction

The rendering of יהוה in translations of the Hebrew Bible continues to draw attention. The question of the names of God and other divine names in the worship, religious beliefs, and practice of any people group is and has always been a significant subject of research and debate in the history and practice of Bible translation. This observation is confirmed by the fact that more than fifteen articles on this topic have been published in *The Bible Translator* (*TBT*) since 1990; in 1992 a whole issue was dedicated to translating the names of God (see Fry 1992). That issue of *TBT* contains a statement of a study group of the United Bible Societies on the translation of the names of God (UBS 1992) that discusses explicit guidelines for

Corresponding author:
Mary Mercy Kobimbo, P.O. Box PRIVATE BAG, Limuru 00217, Kenya.
Email: pastormarymercy2012@hotmail.com

the translation of יהוה. Mettinger (1988) dedicated a complete study to the names of God; the tetragrammaton alone is also the subject of extensive study (Wilkinson 2015).

In this article I discuss the translation of יהוה in the three existing Dholuo[1] translations and attempt to identify the rationale behind the decisions that have been made in the translation process. In a second article, I will develop a new proposal for the translation of this key term that does justice to the biblical concept while also recognizing the significance of Dholuo culture. This part of the study will be informed by research and experience in other translations within the African context.

2. יהוה in the translations of the Dholuo Bible

Before we turn to the way the translation of יהוה was handled in the different Dholuo translations, a brief overview of the history of the Dholuo Bible will help provide background for the discussion.

2.1 The history of Bible translation in Dholuo

The Luo of Kenya and Tanzania are among the African communities that have enjoyed the privilege of having complete translations of the Bible since the 1950s. Three translations of the Bible (Old and New Testaments) exist in Dholuo:

- *Muma Maler Mar Nyasaye* (DLB68). The Bible in Luo, United Bible Societies; published by the Bible Society in East Africa (BSEA), 1968. DLB68 is the result of missionary cooperation, but with the involvement of a number of native speakers.
- *Muma Maler Mar Nyasaye* (DLUO76). The Bible in Luo, United Bible Societies, 1976, published by the Bible Society of Kenya and the Bible Society of Tanzania. In 1977 the same version was published with the deuterocanonical books as *Muma Maler – Kod Kitepe Moko Maler*. DLUO76 is an interconfessional translation primarily carried out by native speakers.
- *Muma Maler* (DLUO15). The Bible in Dholuo (Kenya and Tanzania), Biblica, 2015; digital version only.[2] Not much information is available about the background of DLUO15, except that "this translation uses, as is the practice of IBS, an informal language style and

[1] Dholuo (also known as Luo) is a Western Nilotic language spoken by more than four million people in the border area of southwestern Kenya and north-western Tanzania on the eastern shore of Lake Victoria.

[2] A revision of this translation is under way, according to International Bible Society 2018 (See footnote 4 below. –Ed.).

applies a meaning-based translation philosophy" (International Bible Society 2000).

Translation of the Bible in Dholuo was considered necessary in order to make it accessible to the Dholuo-speaking audience, who not only could not read and understand the language in which it was originally written, but also could not read or understand the English translations used by the missionaries (Greenspoon 2012, 89). The history of the Dholuo Old Testament translation is thus a narrative that provides details regarding when, why, and how publication of the Dholuo translation came about.

Early Scripture translation into Dholuo by Christian missionaries in the Luo Nyanza areas of Maseno and Kendu Bay did not include a complete Old Testament in the period between 1910 and 1930. The first attempts at translating the Bible in Dholuo date back to the first decade of the 1900s. The Gospel of Mark was the first publication in 1911 (Mojola 2007, 156), with the entire New Testament following in 1926, published by the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS). The first book of the Hebrew canon was published in 1933, and the full Old Testament appeared in 1953, also published by BFBS (DLUO53; Mojola 2007, 156). This work was all done by foreign missionaries.

Dholuo Bible translations addressed specific perceived and voiced needs following the sociopolitical factors that shaped historical trends, including evangelism, medical missionary work, the abolition of the slave trade, and the colonial government's impact on the society and culture. Initial translations into Dholuo during the twentieth-century missionary era arose from the need for a uniform mode by which foreigners could communicate with the Luo people in Dholuo. Bible translation work was therefore anchored in the colonial government literacy and civilization programs for the "natives" (Barasa 2013, 372–73). To the colonial master, a Bible translation in Dholuo was to be a textbook in the hands of missionary teachers (agents of civilization) to enhance the dynamics of the management of the colonies. However, translation proved not to be a quick achievement because of illiteracy among the Luo population.

Arthur Carscallen of the Seventh-day Adventist Mission (SDAM), undeterred by this state of illiteracy, started a school in 1906 at Gendia in Kendu Bay, where he enrolled four native boys (Beardsley-Hardy 2017, 5). These four became the mother-tongue connectors who enabled Carscallen to learn Dholuo and successfully produce a Dholuo grammar text and Old Testament selections. Literacy started taking hold between the 1900s and 1910s (Okeyo 1970, 6). Mission churches benefited from collaboration with the colonial government on language reforms to achieve literacy among

the natives, which helped missionaries and foreign government officials to learn Dholuo (Waruta 1975, 4, 9).

Missionary evangelistic education and medical work were also started around 1906 at what is now the Maseno school, where Carscallen's Dholuo grammar was used by Archdeacon J. J. Willis, a CMS missionary from Uganda, to translate verses and narratives of the Old Testament which were then used as class texts. For the missionaries, the Old Testament in English was fundamental Scripture upon which Christian faith was based. The preaching, teaching, and spiritual life of the Christian church were entirely dependent on the Bible text (Hastings 1994, 278). Consequently, the use of Scripture as school texts facilitated evangelism. Some of the young men who had enrolled in the school were baptized. Although Willis worked among the Banyole Luya Bantu communities in the neighbouring Maseno area, his linguistic efforts and preference for the Nilotic Dholuo language contributed to the natives' ability to read the translated portions of the Old Testament and write about the word of God (Koteng' 2013, 5–6).

Meanwhile, Carscallen, based in Kendu Bay, served the larger area of Kenyan South Nyanza in Western Kenya and the Nyanza region of present-day northern Tanzania. He undertook to translate the Old Testament into Dholuo. The results were well received by the target audience, but his efforts were interrupted by the 1914–1918 World War (Hoschele 2007, 117). No single published item was available among the Tanzanian Luo at the beginning of the war; several manuscripts of the earlier attempts at the Old Testament translation disappeared, never to be found. Immediate post-war years had hardly any new publications of the Old Testament in Dholuo or in any of the languages spoken in the Lake Victoria region (Hoschele 2007, 117). In spite of the setbacks that came with the war, however, the Dholuo translation projects survived, through support from the colonial governments of Kenya and Tanzania, who needed native literacy to enable communication with their subjects (Fodor and Hagège 1983, 218).

The spirit of Africanization among the Luo freedom fighters in the same period also roused the urge for literacy among the population. Some who were already literate by 1910, like Yohana Owalo, started African Independent Churches such as the "Nomiya Luo Church," encouraging the Luo people to take education seriously. The people wanted to read the Old Testament as proof that they were literate. Owalo used sections of Scripture, especially Old Testament narratives, to teach reading and writing in religion classes. He taught of the greatness of God and reminded the people that he was teaching them about the God they had always worshipped (Opwapo 1981, 89–93).

That reminder was perhaps all the more necessary in view of the way translators chose to render the names of God in their translations of the Old Testament.

2.2 A history of the rendering of יהוה in Dholuo

So far, there has been no survey of the history of יהוה renderings in Dholuo translations, leaving a gap in background knowledge about the development of Dholuo translations of the Old Testament—knowledge that could inform translation decisions in the future. In this section I focus on renderings of יהוה as a personal name, starting from the initial attempts in the early 1900s and ending with the latest approaches.[3]

2.2.1. יהוה in the early Dholuo translations of the Old Testament. The divine name יהוה was first rendered as *Jehova* (Jehovah) in Dholuo in two books, *Kitabu Mokwongo Mar Musa Chakruok* (Genesis) and *Jolawi* (Leviticus). These books first appeared in 1933, the work of Grace A. Clarke of SDAM with the help of native speakers Sila Apola, William Ogembo, Paul Mboya, and others.

The first complete Dholuo translation of the Old Testament, *Muma Machon* (DLUO53), also rendered יהוה as *Jehova*. This translation was by a team of interdenominational Protestant translators including Clarke, W. E. Owen (CMS), and H. Capen (AIM), and was published by BFBS in 1953 (Mojola 1999, 110).

Although *Jehova* was used as a rendering of יהוה, this presumed transliteration in Dholuo is neither the closest correct pronunciation of יהוה nor is it the Dholuo deity name that would have been expected as an official equivalent. There are no records available to show why *Jehova* was preferred. However, the entire Dholuo translation suggests the use of the formal equivalence approach of the English Authorized Version (KJV). Dholuo Bible users who read and understand English may assume that DLUO53 reflects KJV. The use of the rendering *Jehova* in DLUO53 does not support that assumption, however, as the name *Jehova* appears about 6828 times in 6528 verses distributed throughout the DLUO53 translation, whereas "Jehovah appears in the Authorized version only seven times" (Carter 2008, 34; also Bray 2012, 142 n. 14). KJV mostly follows the practice first established by the Septuagint rendering of יהוה with κύριος (Lord), translating as "LORD," with an initial capital letter and small capitals for the other letters to distinguish it from translations of אֲדֹנָי as "Lord." If DLUO53 had rendered יהוה

[3] The name יהוה is not to be confused with the generic word for God in Hebrew, אֱלֹהִים, although one of the Dholuo renderings suggests equivalence between the two lexical items.

as "LORD" as KJV does, then it would have had 6821 renderings of יהוה as *RUOTH* (LORD).

It should be noted that all efforts to locate records of approaches used by the translation team have failed to bear any fruit. There is no documentation available showing what informed Clarke's translation choices or the DLUO53 translation committee's choice of the term *Jehova*. It is safe to say that the translators favoured the formal approach common in the English translations in circulation at that time. The team apparently opted for *Jehova*, which in itself is not a transliteration but a fusion of the Hebrew consonants of יהוה with the vowels of אֲדֹנָי (*'adonay*). If they had used the widely accepted reconstruction of the original pronunciation of יהוה, their rendering would have been the transliteration *Yahweh*. This may also suggest that the translation team did not necessarily follow the practice of early missionary translations, as suggested by Mojola (2014, 5–6), who observes that most early missionary translations did not use the source text for translation work, but mostly relied on European language texts (English, French, or German translations). They depended on their own European mother-tongue translations such as KJV (Pawlikova-Vilhanova 2006, 80–89).

Although the Old Testament in Dholuo was adopted with approval among the Luo who spoke English and could read the Old Testament, it was a somewhat bittersweet experience for native Luo ideologists. The coming of the translation of the Hebrew canon to Luo land, like in other African communities in the colonial and post-colonial era, was not plain sailing, as negative sentiments about the missionaries associated with the colonial masters existed across the continent. Although the political climate around and after independence motivated the Luo people to seek Scriptures in Dholuo as a demonstration of African patriotism, translations by missionaries were regarded as not entirely innocent projects, but as instruments of social control and social struggle. Desmond Tutu's sentiment, "When the white man came to our country, he had the Bible and we had the land. The white man said to us, 'Let us pray.' After the prayer, the white man had the land and we had the Bible" (Mofokeng 1988, 34), was echoed among many African communities, including those in Luo land.

Educated Africans in the early 1920s, like Esau Oriedo of Bunyore in neighbouring Bantu Kavirondo Nyanza, did not appreciate the missionary interpretation of the translated Bible that denied people their cultural practices and culture-specific terminologies (Hastings 1994, 579). Missionary translations were suspected of being part of foreign endeavours to get African peoples to dispose of their own cultures and identity (Sanneh 2003, 113). The Luo people were equally suspicious of the Bible, following the daring spirit expressed in the patriotic statements of local leaders, such as Jaramogi Oginga Odinga's "Kenya is *marwa* (ours) and *marwa* (ours)

alone." Yet the Luo Christians still wanted to sing the psalms in Dholuo, so much so that portions of particular verses in Dholuo are found to underlie some famous Dholuo spirituals that urged believers to anticipate the return of the Messiah.

2.2.2. יהוה in the first complete Dholuo Bible (DLB68). The Old Testament was again translated into Dholuo as *Muma Machon* (Old Testament), published by BSEA. However, it was not published independently, but in combination with the Dholuo New Testament as one book, *Muma Maler* (Holy Scriptures), in 1968. The translation team rendered יהוה as *Jehova*, thereby following the decision that had been taken by the translation team of DLUO53 and earlier contributors to the translation of the Dholuo Old Testament. As pointed out above, this presumed transliteration of יהוה in Dholuo is neither the closest correct pronunciation of יהוה nor is it the Dholuo deity name that might have been expected as an equivalent of the name יהוה. Similar to the earlier Dholuo versions, there are no records documenting the DLB68 translation team's approaches and strategies that informed their choice of rendering יהוה as *Jehova*.

2.2.3. יהוה in the second Dholuo Bible (DLUO76). The third complete translation of the Hebrew canon into Dholuo was done by a Protestant interdenominational translation team and published in 1976. The team and the churches it represented observed the need for purposeful communication (Nord 2006, 43) of the Bible to the Dholuo-speaking communities of Kenya and Tanzania. It was noticed that many Dholuo speakers did not readily understand some words and expressions deemed archaic in the DLB68 translation (Bible Society of Kenya 1976, iii–iv).

The Dholuo rendering of יהוה features in the larger story of DLUO76, which can be regarded as a retranslation. Although there is no clear evidence that the translators of DLUO76 set out to retranslate DLB68, the translation team constantly referred to DLB68 and sought to improve on it, as seen below:

> E ndalo mane okwongo lokie Muma a Dho-luo, ne nitie weche moko e dho-Hibrania gi dho-Grik mane ji ok ong'eyo tiendgi malong'o. To kaka pile ji medo puonjore weche manie Muma, joma somo Muma matut osetwenyo tiend wechego moko. Mano emomomiyo nitie kuonde manok bende mwaseloko manyien nikech wachni. (Bible Society of Kenya 1976, iii–iv)
>
> In the days when the initial Dholuo translation was done, there were some Hebrew and Greek words whose meaning the people did not understand properly. As usual, people have continued to study the Scripture, and theologians have come to understand those words better; that is the reason we have revised some words. (my translation)

As the Old Testament translation into Dholuo and the rendering of the divine name יהוה had been undertaken more than once before 1976, it would be expected that the translation team addressed the question of continuity in the DLUO76. However, based on the translators' position of reworking some words of DLB68 that were not readily understood, we can suggest that, although this is not explicitly stated, there is internal evidence of formal discontinuity (Venuti 2008, 282). As for the name יהוה, the rendering was revised from *Jehova* in DLUO53 and DLB68 to *Ruoth Nyasaye* (Lord God) in DLUO76.

The DLUO76 translation was aiming at improving the archaic nature of DLB68. The language was considered difficult for the postmodern generation of Dholuo speakers. The change of the rendering of יהוה to *Ruoth Nyasaye* is a conspicuous feature that ought to have been documented. As the change is not discussed in the preface of DLUO76 where other changes are mentioned, we have no option but to speculate about possible reasons for the change.

First, the translation team may have thought that the divine name change would not be recognized by the users and if they did notice, it would not be a significant concern to them. So, the team chose to keep silent about it. This position is unlikely because divine names are very conspicuous and significant and would not go unnoticed by people who relate and refer to God in prayers, sermons, and Bible studies.

Second, the translation team may have overlooked mentioning in the preface to the reader the significant change they had implemented as they rushed to submit the preface. This is again unlikely for a translation team dealing with such a sacred document as the word of God.

Third, the translation team may have reconsidered the divine name יהוה on the basis of English versions to which they had referred, but did not have the documents supporting the reason for the change, so they decided to keep silent on the change while assuming that the target audience would not question it. This reason has a degree of probability.

Fourth, the translation committee may have opted to use modern approaches to translation that were practiced elsewhere, as DLUO76 clearly presents a more natural translation than did DLB68. The translation team applied an eclectic approach to translation that brings in changes in word order and avoids obvious repetitions appearing in literal translations. I suggest that the translation team was influenced by Nida's dynamic equivalence approach, which aims at translating meaning.

However, the dynamic equivalence approach may not have been wholly or strictly applied in the rendering of יהוה. The translation team opted to render the name similar to most English and Swahili Bible translations (Bible Society of Kenya 1976, iii). If the rendering of the name applied an important dynamic equivalence principle, יהוה would have been rendered by a

personal name of a deity in Dholuo that alludes to the meaning of יהוה. That was not the case in DLUO76; instead, the word was rendered by the phrase *Ruoth Nyasaye*, composed of the term *Ruoth* (Lord) and the generic term *Nyasaye* (God). The use of "Lord" is similar to the practice found in most Bible translations; in Dholuo, however, the whole phrase is used both for יהוה and for יהוה אלהים (YHWH God).[4]

3. The future

Though a majority of Luo people now read English and some Swahili, they gain a better and deeper understanding when using a culturally relevant Dholuo translation. Being able to do so will also facilitate the development of a Luo theology when they study the Scriptures in Dholuo and see the Dholuo Old Testament speaking to the Luo ways of life. Language and concepts of the Old Testament appearing in Dholuo form would compellingly connect with social-economic aspects and resonate with all areas of Luo culture and history. There is a need for Luo biblical scholars to actively engage in Dholuo biblical interpretation and translation research in order to facilitate the Bible's incarnation in Luo land. This will yield a culturally appropriate and comprehensible indigenous Dholuo translation of the Hebrew canon. In the words of Coertze (2008, 78), "The production of accurate and culturally understandable translations, including the acceptance and application of the Bible by the African church, will be enhanced by the involvement of the African biblical interpreter in the Bible translation process." This also applies to Dholuo.

Bible translation in Africa has come of age, and Luo biblical interpreters, like other African Bible scholars, should be involved in the role of consultancy in revisions and retranslations (Kanyoro 1983, 101–6). The church in Luo land ought to stand up, sponsor, and show zeal for Bible translation or retranslation because without Luo agents' presence in Bible translations, Luo theology will have no genuine theological validation. Answering to the call for Luo biblical scholars' active engagement in Bible translation research, the second part of this study will consider possible alternatives for rendering the divine name יהוה in Dholuo translations.

ORCID iD

Mary Mercy Kobimbo https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2533-4763

[4] The translation sponsored by Biblica was left out of this study because currently only a digital copy exists, and it is not accessible, as it is under revision. (The revision has just been released in 2021. This version uses *Jehova Nyasaye* for יהוה. See https://open.bible/resources/. –Ed.)

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Abbreviations

AIM	Africa Inland Mission
BFBS	British and Foreign Bible Society
BSEA	Bible Society in East Africa
CMS	Church Missionary Society
DLB68	*Muma Maler Mar Nyasaye* (1968)
DLUO15	*Muma Maler* (2015)
DLUO53	*Muma Machon* (Old Testament, 1953)
DLUO76	*Muma Maler Mar Nyasaye* (1976)
KJV	King James Version (1611)
SDAM	Seventh-day Adventist Mission