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RESEARCH ARTICLE

TRANSLATION AND THE RECIPROCAL IMPACTS OF YORUBA BIBLE AND YORUBA CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a text research designed to demonstrate that although the translation of the Bible into Yoruba language, which Bishop Ajayi Crowther coordinated in the 19th century, furthered the good purposes of Christian missionary expansion, it also had several incidental but significant impacts on the culture and traditional religions of the people. Several of these were laudable, others disagreeable. The work is significant in its effort to highlight some inadvertent reciprocal impacts of the traditional religious and Christian worldviews, categories and concepts engendered by the Yoruba Bible. Some aspects of this interchange have not been given ample reflection in existing academic discourse. It is demonstrated here that Yoruba culture and traditional religions have benefited immensely from the language, categories, graphics, liturgy, and forms of presentation of the Bible afforded by its translation into the vernacular. These transactions merit critical investigation to unveil the mutual impacts of the Yoruba Bible and culture.

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INTRODUCTION

Yoruba language, one of Nigeria's three largest spoken language groups is the native language of the Yoruba people. It is spoken in south-western Nigeria, Benin, Togo and among communities in Brazil, Sierra Leone and Cuba. Yoruba has over fifteen dialects which vary across the people by geographical distribution; and standard Yoruba is the written form of the language. It is the typical variety learnt in school. The latter has its origin in the 1850's, when Samuel Ajayi Crowther, the first African Bishop, published a Yoruba grammar and started his translation of the Bible to Yoruba (Anugwom, 2008).

Early efforts toward a standardized written Yoruba language were initiated by English missionaries and priests. An early system of Yoruba dating from approximately the 17th century was written in the Ajami script and developed by members of the Christian Missionary Society working among the Yoruba. This early work in the development of a written Yoruba language included compiling vocabulary lists and developing notes regarding Yoruba grammar. The work done at this time would later be expanded upon by the Bishop Samuel Crowther,

who translated a Yoruba language version of the Bible using a Latin alphabet rather than the old Ajami script and published the first Yoruba grammar.

Although there has been some controversy regarding what should be considered "standard" Yoruba, the written form that developed from Crowther's work is considered the modern standard for Yoruba by most scholars. Although it is based in part on the Ibadan and Oyo dialects of the Yoruba language, the written standard also includes unique elements not found in these other dialects. Today, this standard written Yoruba is used in most Yoruba language literature, taught in schools and used by media outlets including Yoruba language newspapers, television broadcasters and radio stations.

More pointedly, it was Crowther who translated the Bible into Yoruba in 1884, a momentous event in Yoruba's written development. His Yoruba-language Bible came to serve as the standard for the written Yoruba that was widely adopted by the majority of Yoruba dialects. With this development, the gates were opened for the development of a great body of Yoruba language literature (Idowu, 1991). It has been observed, and rightly so, that it was this process of Bible translation that actually generated the development of a standard form of the

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language. Since that milestone, literature in Yoruba language has provided the foundation for a cultural expression that is one of the most remarkable in Africa (Idowu, 1991). This paper is an effort in locating points of nexus and reciprocal influence between the Yoruba Bible and the Yoruba culture overtime.

It is also important that we underline the sense in which the term “translation” is conceived and used in this paper. There is the ordinary use of the term that suggests merely the rendition of a communication in another language other than the one in which the message currently exists. In that case, interest is focused on the linguistic dynamics and equivalences in the two languages concerned. However, there is a more inclusive sense that the term has been used by Sanneh (1989 cited in Smith, 2009) in his *Translating the Message*. Smith (2009) discusses several layers of translating the Bible and its message into numerous vernaculars trans-generationally since the historical and missionary beginnings of the Church. These include, but are not limited to, the textual, theological and leadership strata. It is in this comprehensive and accommodative sense that the term is employed in this paper.

This current effort underscores some inadvertent reciprocal impacts of the traditional religious and Christian worldviews, categories and concepts stimulated by the translation of the Yoruba Bible. Some aspects of this interchange have not been given ample reflection in existing academic discourse. It is demonstrated here that Yoruba culture and traditional religions have benefited immensely from the language, categories, graphics, liturgy, and forms of presentation of the Bible afforded by its translation into the vernacular. These transactions merit critical investigation to unveil the mutual impacts of the Yoruba Bible and culture.

Impact of Yoruba Culture on Yoruba Bible

It may be easier to argue that the translation of the Bible into the Yoruba language stands out as one of the frontiers that helped to strengthen the language and culture of the Yoruba people. Nonetheless, the translation of the Bible into Yoruba itself could not have been said to be without any influence of the Yoruba culture. In many ways, the culture of the people bore strongly on the translation exercise.

Ajayi (1999) asserts that language relates to specific cultures and in translating the universal message of the Gospel into a given language, the issue of contextualizing the message into that culture cannot be overemphasized. This implies that translating the Bible from one language to another involves taking germane aspects of their cultural contexts and contents into cognizance. Mbiti (1986) thus submits that just as the Bible has been identified as a key contributor to the phenomenal growth of Christianity, especially among the Yoruba people, so also has their culture had influence on the translation of the Bible and its message.

Culture is used in this paper to refer, in the words of Ezeogu (1998), to the “appreciation and understanding of the literature, arts, music, dressing etc. of a group of people” as well as, according to Wilkinson (2006), “all of the unique patterns of behaviour of a particular people or society and unique flavor of a particular people’s way of life”.

Wilkinson (2006), citing *Culture and Gospel*, by Anastasios Yannoulatos, highlights seven characteristics or “constant elements” found in every culture. These are:

- (i) formation of a system of contact, of a code of understanding, that is of a language;
- (ii) solutions given to the very first needs for humankind’s survival, concerning shelter and maintenance, that is, developing of an elementary technical skill and economics;
- (iii) regulation of the living together of the basic human unity, man-woman, for the perpetuation of the human species;
- (iv) organization of a clan, race, nation, which means a regulation of social relations;
- (v) definition of what is good or bad, in other words, making social rules;
- (vi) artistic expressions of the beliefs and problematics of the individual and of society; and
- (vii) experience of the “Holy,” of what is beyond everyday reality, through a form of religious beliefs (Wilkinson, 2006).

These reveal the elements of culture and its all-encompassing characteristic.

Alaba (2004) defines the culture of the Yoruba people in these words

The aggregate of the ways of life of the Yoruba-speaking peoples of southwestern Nigeria and their kiths and kins elsewhere in the world. It is a continuum beginning from their subsistence, communal, agrarian life of the pre-literate and pre-colonial times to the capitalist, individualistic, free enterprise life of the literate, colonial and post-colonial, modern times. In other words, a continuum of the traditional and modern aspects of the Yoruba culture provides a true picture of this concept. It is a dynamic phenomenon (Alaba 2004).

Eades (1980) postulates that some of these cultural aesthetics have strong bearing on the choice of words used in the translation of the Bible into Yoruba as well as on the subsequent practice of the Christian faith among the Yoruba. Eades (1980) observes that,

In the process of diffusion of Yoruba society, Christianity and Islam themselves have been modified.

The new religions share organizational similarities with the old cults, and Yoruba rites of passage have been adapted to fit the new beliefs. At the level of doctrine, both Christianity and Islam emphasise elements which are also important in traditional religion, and there are similarities in the ways in which members of all three religious groups view the supernatural and their relations with it.

Some aspects of the Yoruba culture which this paper considers as having had remarkable effect on the translation of the Bible and its message include sexuality, respect for elders, community life, social relationships, veneration of divinity and resort to divination. Each of these aspects of Yoruba life is treated vis-à-vis its impact on the message of the Bible.

Sexuality

Anugwom (2008) express the views that being sexually active is a vital facet of being human throughout life that “encompasses sex, gender, identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction... Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, logical, historical and religious and spiritual factors” (Parker & Aggleton, 2007). Alaba (2004) argues that, in Yoruba culture, issues bordering on sex and sexuality are expressed mostly euphemistically, except when employed for literary and aesthetic effects in chants, songs, proverbs or aphorisms. In view of this cultural reverence, names of sexual organs are not mentioned directly and sex is not discussed openly. Sex is seen as an exclusive reserve for the married and premarital sex is frowned at. Fadipe (1970) observes that it is actually shameful not to find a newly married lady *virgo intacta* among the Yoruba. This understanding is reflected in the translation of the Bible into Yoruba, where sexual issues are translated euphemistically. It further underlines the message of the Bible on chastity as Yoruba people readily welcomed a faith that appeared to promote their cultural heritage.

Respect for Elders

Moreover, the Yoruba people cherish according due respect to elderly ones both in speech and in action. This informed some of the words used in describing elders in the Yoruba translation of the Bible. One notable example is the translation of lords as *Ogboni* in Ezekiel 23:23. *Ogboni*, in the traditional Osoogun Yoruba dialect, means an elder statesman different from *Baba* (father) or *Ijoye* (chief). This kind of veneration runs through the pages of the Yoruba Bible. This in turn served as a platform on which the injunction to honour one’s father and mother (Exodus 20:12) and other similar injunctions to respect elders could find a locale.

Community Life

Alaba (2004) further notes that a Yoruba, regardless of gender, goes through life as an integral part of his community, playing roles assigned to him by nature and his people in order to enjoy being human. The value placed on communal living by the Yoruba brought about the *Agboole* in which family members lived together without isolation. This evidently aided the *translation* of the concept of clans and tribes from the Jewish into the Yoruba context almost effortlessly. Also the biblical injunction not to forsake the coming together of one another could be *translated* or interpreted more clearly to the Yoruba Christian in the light of the communal living of the Yoruba.

Social Relationships

This is related to community life above. However, while the former has to do with immediate relatives and relations generally, the latter has to do more with associating with members of one’s age group. This is called *egbe* in Yoruba phraseology. The Yoruba *egbe* divides the community into smaller units according to age, sex and occupation. While this may not have any direct bearing on translation in terms of

language, it apparently served as a strong conceptual foundation for the church society, age grade Sunday school and other small group systems in the church. This patently is a form of *administrative translation* with contextual flavors and implications. Through these small groups, members are accessed more personally with the gospel message, at their cognitive levels.

Veneration of divinity

The Yoruba have a conception of the divine consisting of *Olorun* (God) and the *orisas* (divinities). *Olorun* is a somewhat transcendental figure, playing diminutive role in the day-to-day affairs of men. In explaining this relationship between *Olorun* and the people, Idowu (1962) uses the analogy of the Yoruba *oba* (king) who is responsible for the affairs of his kingdom but has little direct contact with his subjects, since most of his dealings with them are through the *orisas*. He argues that the *orisa* are, nevertheless, only the ministers of the deity, whose supremacy is unmistakably renowned. Idowu (1962:41) says that *Olorun* is “the creator, the final arbiter of heavenly and worldly affairs, omniscient, immortal and pure, and the source of all benefits to mankind”. Reviewing Fadipe’s work, Smith (1973:1821) remarked that “*Olorun*, the Yoruba name for the supreme deity, was not a remote concept in the minds of the people, as was previously thought, subordinate in every way to the worship of *orisa*, but a superlative and omnipresent being”. This obviously informed the translation of the Hebrew *Elohim* as *Olorun* and provided a platform for understanding the relationship between God and the angels, where God is the Supreme Being and the angels serve as his messengers. I am, however, of the opinion that angel is better translated *Irunmole* which represents the emissaries of *Olodumare* who run his errands on earth for him.

Similarly, the traditional Yoruba worship system has rubbed off on the gospel in terms of its liturgy and rituals. Awolalu (1970) submits that *orisa* worship involves three types of ritual. Firstly, there were private individual rites, carried out in the house, usually early in the morning. The worshipper greeted his *orisa* and divined with kola nut what the prospects were for the day. Secondly, there were the regular rituals at the *orisa*'s shrine, and the cycle of these was based on the four-day Yoruba week. Thirdly, Eades (1980) observes that there were the annual festivals, much more elaborate affairs involving a large proportion of the population of the town as well as cult members from elsewhere. This bears semblance to the Christian practices of daily communion with God, regular fellowship with other believers in the church and annual festivals like Easter, Christmas and New Year celebrations. This culture of venerating the deity and divinities paved the way for the Yoruba convert to *translate* appreciably well to his new found faith.

Resort to divination

The Yoruba culture embraces consultation with diviners in times of difficulty or when one needs guidance and direction on knotty issues. Yoruba are extremely conscious of the supernatural. Hence, they attach spiritual meanings to virtually every situation, particularly the unfavourable ones. Thus,

according to Eades (1980), when there is a problem which appears to have defied human logic, Yoruba people resort to divination by consulting with diviners who they believe can provide information on the nature of the problem and help on both the physical and spiritual levels, as well as providing knowledge of the future. From this background, the biblical concepts of prophet, priest and sacrifices became easy to translate and understandable to the Yoruba. It also evidently helped in the paradigm shift from consulting with traditional diviners to consulting with pastors and prophets, especially in the African Instituted (*Aladura*) Churches. This presents the graphic of the fact that such influences as this were reciprocal: while the cultural milieu provided fertile ground for the translation of the Bible into the language and category of the Yoruba, the Yoruba Bible also has had direct and incidental impacts on the culture of the people.

Impact of Yoruba Bible on Yoruba Culture

It is remarkable that at the time Ajayi (1999) started translating the Bible into Yoruba, the people existed loosely. There existed more than a few sub-groups and dialects like Oyo, Egba, Egbado, Ijebu, Ife, Ijesa, Ekiti, Owo, Ondo, and others. Crowther came from the Oyo sub-group. Each of the sub-groups spoke commonly understandable dialect, while most of the royal families claimed sole origin from Ile-Ife. The process of translating the Bible into Crowther's Oyo dialect, and the consequent standardization of Yoruba into a written form gave birth to Yoruba nationalism (Idowu, 1991).

Esegu x-rays two perspectives of viewing the Bible and culture. Some employ dialectic model while others assume dialogic model. According to him, those who accept dialectic model see the Bible and culture as opposed to each other in perpetual conflict, and ultimately irreconcilable. The advocates of this view hold that the dichotomy between the message of the Bible and culture can be resolved in only one possible way, by culture yielding to the demands of the gospel contained in the Bible.

On the other hand, those who uphold dialogic model view culture and Bible as two compatible entities that could and should be reconciled. Daramola and Jeje (1967) argue that according to this view culture and gospel blended harmoniously, dialogued, and this resulted in their mutual enrichment and efficiency. Invariably, since the translation of the Bible into Yoruba language, there are notable ways in which Yoruba Bible has influenced Yoruba culture. Some of the ways are linguistic development, naming customs and ceremonies, marriage rites and conceptualization of the spirit world.

Linguistic Development

Idowu (1991) notes that the translation of the Bible into Yoruba engendered the development of a standard form of the language and that since then literature in Yoruba language has served as grounds for a cultural communication that is one of the most notable in Africa. Another way that Yoruba Bible has influenced Yoruba culture linguistically is in the area of semantics. For illustration, the cultural way to acknowledge a

prayer is by saying *ase* (so shall it be). In the Yoruba translation of the Bible, the word *amin* (transliteration of the Greek/English 'amen') is used instead of *ase*. Consequently, *amin* has become a prevalent word in Yoruba vocabulary today. To say *ase* to prayers today, rightly or wrongly, sounds syncretistic among Yoruba Christians.

In the same vein, the Greek word *angelos* (messenger) is transliterated as "angeli" in Yoruba Bible. Before the translation of the Yoruba Bible such a word was alien in Yoruba vocabulary. The Yoruba terminology for God's messenger is "irunmole" (the entities sent by God to complete given tasks who often act as liaisons between heaven and earth). Today, a number of Yoruba people do not know what "irunmole" means. Instead, the word *angeli* (angel) has become a popular Yoruba word.

Furthermore, certain phrases and clauses from the Yoruba Bible have crept into Yoruba phraseology. They have been absorbed into Yoruba grammar and literature. Such include phrases like "apple/pupil of his eyes" (*eyin-loju re*) in Deuteronomy 32:10 and Zechariah 2:8, "blind leading the blind" (*afoju ti n f'ona han afoju*) in Matthew 15:4, "Good Samaritan" (*alaanu, ara Samaria*) in Luke 10: 25-37, "thorn in the flesh" (*egun ni iha*) in 2 Corinthians 12:7, "O foolish Galatians" (*alainironu, ara Galatia*) from Galatians 3:1, "sweat of your brow" (*oogun oju re*) from Genesis 3:19 and "Vanity upon vanity, all is vanity" (*asan ninu asan, gbogbo re asan ni*) from Ecclesiastes.

Naming Customs

Yoruba people give various categories of names to their new born children. They have what is called *oruko Amutorunwa* (literally, names brought from heaven: preordained names), *oruko Abiso* (names given at birth), *Oriki* (cognomen), and *oruko Abiku* (names for children who die early and repeatedly). Today, most Christians no longer name their children after their cultural pattern but with Bible names. Hebrew names from the Yoruba Bible are names commonly given to children. Names like Esther, Elizabeth, Mary (which are usually transliterated into Yoruba characters as Esteri, Elizabeti, Maria) are given to female children. Others like John, Peter, Amos (Joonu, Peteru, Amosi in Yoruba transliterated forms) are for male children. Educated Christians use those names in their English forms.

Christians are no longer comfortable to give their children preordained names like *Ojo*, *Aina*, *Idowu*, *Alaba* and so on. This is fast becoming unpopular among Yoruba Bible readers. Even cognomens like *Ayinla*, *Akanbi*, *Ayoka*, *Asake and Iyabo*, *Babatunde*, *Babawale*, *Yewande* are speedily fading away with the influence of the Bible now available in the native tongue. Many Christians are even changing their family names or surnames that have Yoruba indigenous or religious undertone like *Ogunleye*, *Ogunniyi*, *Falana*, *Tifase* and others to *Jesuleye*, *Oluwaniyi*, *Olulana*, and *Toluwase* respectively. The former names are believed to be giving praises and tribute to indigenous divinities rather than God or Jesus Christ. The understanding of God that Yoruba Bible brought seems to suggest that they should not bear such names.

Marriage Rites

It should be noted that some aspects of Yoruba culture in regard to marriage have common traits with the near-eastern culture expressed in the Bible. Such include the extended family role, payment of bride price by the groom, chastity of the bride before marriage and several others. However, some traditional the practices, like the *Ekun Iyawo* (lit. bride's lamentation), have been abandoned as a result of the Yoruba Christians essentially patterning their marriage rites after that found in the Yoruba Bible and what the Europeans presented as the model.

The concept of the spirit world (especially Esu and other divinities)

The concept of *Esu* (Satan or Devil) in Yoruba Bible is essentially unlike that in Yoruba belief system. To the traditional Yoruba, *Esu* is a divine messenger, intervening between the heavens and the earth. Daramola and Jeje (1967) added that sacrifices are offered through him to *Olodumare*. The Yoruba Bible presents *Esu* as a disobedient, destructive being, who constantly seeks to incite people against God. He is an adversary. As a result, the concept of *Esu* in Yoruba Bible now dominates the cultural perception of many Yoruba people.

Idowu (1991) also remarks that the idea of mediator is not strange to Yoruba religious culture, they see Olorun, the Supreme Being, as transcendent and approachable through the divinities (*orisas*). The Yoruba Bible presents only one mediator (Jesus) through whom God can be approached. This idea is welcome among the Yoruba Christians and has impacted on their culture.

CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates that although the translation of the Bible into Yoruba language, which Bishop Ajayi Crowther coordinated in the 19th century, furthered the good purposes of Christian missionary expansion, it also had several incidental but significant impacts on the culture of the people. Several of these were laudable, others disagreeable.

The work highlights some inadvertent reciprocal impacts of the traditional religious and Christian worldviews, categories and concepts engendered by the Yoruba Bible. Some aspects of this interchange have not been given ample reflection in existing academic discourse. Both Yoruba culture and Bible have mutually benefited immensely from the language, categories, graphics, liturgy, and forms of presentation of the gospel afforded by its translation into the vernacular. These transactions unveil the mutual impacts of the Yoruba Bible and culture.

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