

# Spreading *which* word? Philological, theological and socio-political considerations behind the nineteenth-century Bible translation into Yorùbá

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## Abstract

The nineteenth century saw not only a spread of Christianity throughout West Africa, but also the translation of Christian texts into local African languages. In present-day Nigeria, a small group of Anglican African and European missionaries responsible for translating the Scriptures into Yorùbá documented their progress and considerations in journals and letters. In this paper I reconstruct the considerations behind the translations and the often unexpected linguistic, religious, and political repercussions of missionary work. I show that the missionaries, by committing Yorùbá to writing, developing the Christian vocabulary, and by linguistically reinterpreting elements of native theology and cosmology, reconceptualising the native population's world, effectively wielded linguistic power over their target audience. By the examples of the Yorùbá translations of key Christian terms ('prayer', 'God', 'Holy Spirit'), I illustrate that frequently political and religio-cultural considerations governed linguistic choices while involuntary concessions to Muslim and native culture had to be made nevertheless. At the same time, as translation always entails the transfer of the message into the target language's cultural sphere, the act of translation meant relinquishing control over the message to Yorùbá Christians, thus partly handing over the missionaries' interpretational authority. The reinterpretation of the deity Èṣù as the devil backfired on the missionaries because it allowed converts to retain elements of their old beliefs in their lives. Thus, I argue that Yorùbá Christians were not mere passive recipients but also active and empowered creators of the message delivered to them.

## 1 Translating the message

“A missiologist [...] is a theologian who is *bilingual*.” (Mazibuko 2003: 226)

Great names spring to mind when Bible translations are discussed: the seventy translators and eponym of the Septuagint, the Carthagian Tertullian, who in the earliest days of Christianity developed the Latin Christian vocabulary, and eventually Martin Luther, whose Bible translation into the vernacular was a seminal step during the Reformation. Yet, even from the very beginning, as David Jasper remarks,

the Bible has always been a translated text, and indeed, within its own pages there are already translations. In Mark 15:34, Jesus last words from the Cross, ‘My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?’ are translated into Greek from Aramaic (2005: 107).

In contrast, in Islamic history, the translation of the Qur’an has generally been eyed suspiciously. As a literally revealed text, seen as relayed to the Prophet Muhammed by Allah, the Qur’an is regarded “untranslatable since it is a linguistic miracle with transcendental meanings” (Abdul-Raof 2005: 162). Arabic is held as the indispensable medium for the revealed message. A perceived intrinsic relationship between form and meaning thus causes translations of the text to be corrupt and has for a long time meant that Muslims across the world, irrespective of their native language, have encountered the Qur’an in Arabic. Here lies a significant difference between Islamic and Christian traditions; for the latter, the multilingual origins and composite nature of the Scriptures have generally meant an, if not unchallenged then at least receptive, approach to translation in order to ‘spread the word’.

Thus, Christian missionary efforts and translation have traditionally gone hand in hand. Announcing the Good News to all nations, as Jesus requests of his followers in Matthew 28:19–20, has been understood to mean translating the Scriptures and other Christian texts such as hymn books and prayer books into a formidable number of local native languages. It should be noted at this point that writing was not the only medium to transport the Christian message. Writing from Lékí on the Lagos peninsula, British missionary J. B. Read refers to a “wordless book” (23rd October 1877, CA2 O79 4) with

four coloured pages, black, red, white, and gold. The sequence of the colours symbolises Christian soteriology: black stands for the sinfulness of man, red for Christ's sacrifice, white for sanctification, and gold for the eschatological promise of eternal life (cf. Peel 2003: 168). Far from being reliant on verbal discourse or the literacy of the audience, the book with the coloured pages proved an immensely powerful tool of evangelisation. Initial verbal explanation was naturally required, but the immediacy of the symbolism of the colours and the—perhaps intended—coincidence with elements of Yorùbá symbolism and the non-verbal Yorùbá communication system of the *àrokò*, consisting of mostly symbolic gifts constituting and reassuring the relationship between sender and recipient, accounted for the great impact of the wordless book.

Despite such examples of non-verbal strategies, the written word, preferably in the readers' mother-tongue, traditionally has been the main medium of evangelisation. Particularly for Protestant Christians an individual's immediate access to the Bible's message has been of paramount importance, an heirloom of the Lutheran notion of scriptural primacy. According to Pughach (cf. 2012: 37), for nineteenth-century Protestant missionaries in Africa, many of them Germans with a distinct pietist background, nothing could bring the Good News alive to the native population better than providing them with the text in their own mother tongue.

Translation is not, however, a one-way street. Nor is it limited to linguistic aspects. Rather, the interdependency of linguistic forms and the culture in which they are developed and used, means that adopting the local native language is to a certain extent tantamount to adopting local cultural forms. In a process of "radical indigenization far greater than the standard portrayal of mission as Western cultural imperialism" (Sanneh 1990: 3) linguistic as well as cultural connotations, etymologies, forms and structures are transferred from the 'receptor' context to the translated message.

The context of the nineteenth-century translation of the Scriptures and other Christian texts into Yorùbá presents no exception. As elsewhere, German and British missionaries worked on the translation supported by the linguistic and cultural expertise of African agents. As Lamin Sanneh (1990: 5) accurately remarks, "it does not take long before what is a calculated, simple, short step brings the translator into the quicksand of indigenous cultural nuances". This paper will give a taste of the missionaries' dance on this quicksand by reconstructing the translation process using information

gathered from Church Missionary Society (CMS) incoming correspondence of the Yoruba Mission and letters to the General Committee and Editorial Committee of the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS).

## 2 Source material

The majority of the source material for this paper consists of African and European CMS agents' letters and journal extracts, kept in the Society's archive at the Cadbury Research Library at the University of Birmingham. When the CMS was founded in 1799, it was felt that "it is the duty highly incumbent upon every Christian to endeavour to propagate the knowledge of the Gospel among the Heathen" (resolution passed on foundation meeting, quoted in Keen 1999: 8).

Initially, the CMS endeavoured to fulfil this duty in Sierra Leone, to where former West African slaves and their descendants had been relocated by their British liberators. In the early 1840s, the Yorùbá-born among the inhabitants of Sierra Leone started returning to their home in the area of what today is Southwestern Nigeria (Figure 1), which subsequently led the CMS to establish the Yoruba mission in 1844 in order to further promote Christianity in West Africa.

As Peel remarks, "for most of the nineteenth century [CMS] agents were [...] expected to write journals or 'journal extracts' for dispatch to [the] headquarters at Salisbury Square in London" (Peel 2003: 9) in order for the Society's Committee of Correspondence to be able to monitor missionary progress and conduct. In addition, the missionaries corresponded with CMS officials by letters, in which personal matters or urgent issues would be discussed.

The archival filing system for the documents reflects the historical development of the mission in West Africa:

[The Yoruba mission] was set up as an administrative unit in 1844 [...]. The earliest documents for the Yorùbá area, however, are in the Sierra Leone mission [...], as that mission covered all work in West Africa until 1844 (Keen 1989: 2).

Accordingly, the documents for the Sierra Leone mission used in this paper can be identified by the shelf mark CA1, whereas the Yoruba mission correspondence is filed under CA2. In addition, every missionary's correspon-

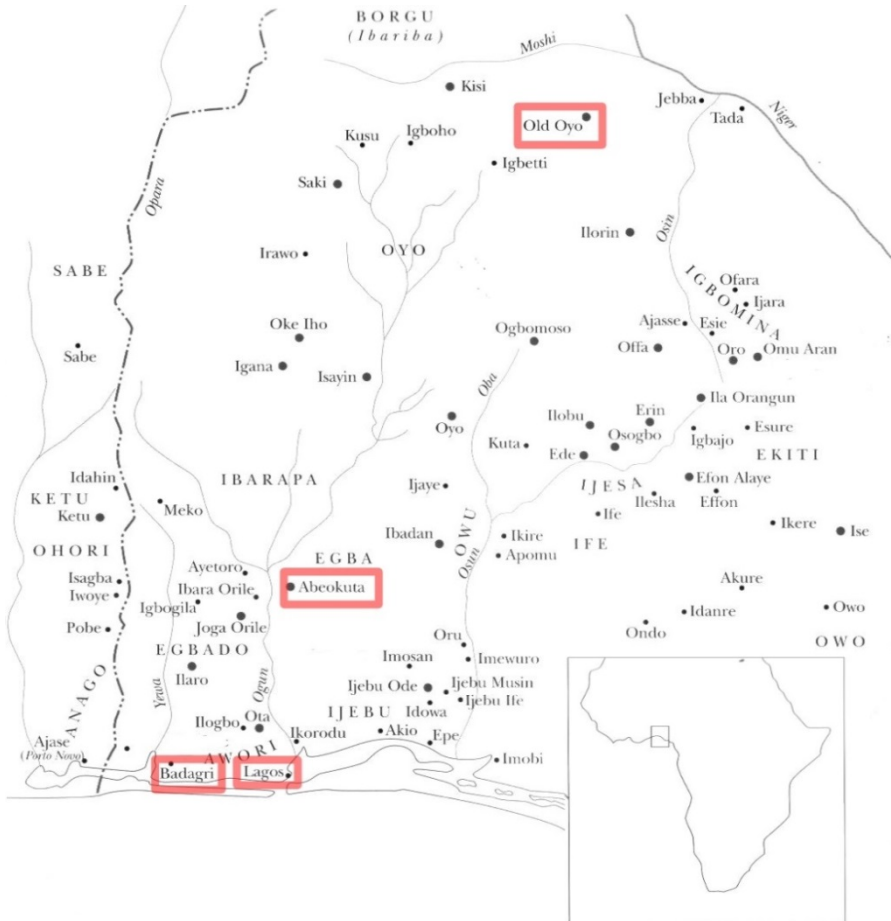


Figure 1: Map of Yorùbáland  
(adapted from: <http://www.randafricanart.com>)

dence was filed under an individual file number; Samuel Ajayi Crowther's Yorùbá mission correspondence, for example, can thus be found under CA2 O31.

Only a comparatively small group of missionaries were involved in the translation process in the early years of the Yorùbá mission. For the reconstruction of the philological and theological considerations behind the translation of Christian texts into Yorùbá and the repercussions on the development of Yorùbá Christianity, I focused on the correspondence of the Yorùbá missionaries Samuel Ajayi Crowther and Thomas King, the German agents Charles Gollmer and James F. Schön, and the Englishman Henry Townsend, involved in editorial work.

In addition to the CMS material, the BFBS archive in the University Library in Cambridge proved to be a valuable resource for this paper. Founded in 1804, the Society, not unlike the CMS, was very much a child of its time, which saw the foundation of a number of mission and bible societies (cf. Canton 1904: 3). Its objective in its philanthropy and catholicity was in accordance with its founders' efforts against the slave-trade and for the spread of the Christian faith: "To print the Scriptures without note or comment, to scatter them broadcast, not only in [the British Isles] but throughout the peoples of the world" (Canton 1904: 4). The Society's archive, amongst others, holds Samuel Ajayi Crowther's and Charles Gollmer's correspondence with the Society on the Yorùbá translation of the Scriptures and also letters by the Society's Editorial and Translations Department. The documents contain information on the translation timeline, the people involved in the various stages of the process, and financial and sales figures.

The archival work on which this paper is based involved transcribing relevant passages of this handwritten material. As far as possible, I have kept the original orthography and punctuation in my transcripts in order to document contemporary and idiosyncratic language use. Equally, I have not adjusted the spelling of place names or personal names, for example of deities, to modern Yorùbá spelling. Yorùbá was given a written form by Christian missionaries. Standardised orthography thus developed throughout the nineteenth century, which means that, particularly in early Yorùbá mission correspondence, the spelling of proper names varies.

### 3 Committing Yorùbá to writing

In early nineteenth-century Yorùbáland writing was virtually non-existent. A “few scraps of Arabic writing” (CA2 O85 227), as Henry Townsend mentions on 25th March 1845, were not uncommon because they were felt to be charms with apotropaic powers. Presumably especially in the coastal regions traders were familiar with English writing (cf. Sanneh 1983: 129). The *babaláwo*, Ifá diviners, used ideograms and symbols on carvings and written in the sand during divination. A systematical written form of the regional varieties of the language spoken in the area, however, did not exist and transmission and memorising of traditions and historical knowledge was oral.

Initially, the European missionaries coming to Yorùbáland relied on interpreters for everyday conversations with the native population as well as in church services. On 18th May 1845, for example, Henry Townsend writes about his church service in Abẹ̀òkúta: “I then engaged in prayer. Mr. Marsh [an Ègbá catechist] following me in the Yorùbá language” (CA2 O85 228). Still in Freetown, Samuel Crowther started to translate the first chapters of the Gospel of St. Luke and the Acts for very practical reasons:

According to the Instructions of the Parent Committee, to commence preaching in the Yoruba language, in the Mission in Freetown, which I desire to put into practice as soon as possible, I commenced making some translations (CA1 O79 10).

While these first attempts were initially meant to avoid *ad hoc* translations during service, there was an appeal to devising a standardised translation into the local language. Translator interpretations and insufficient language proficiency on the part of the European missionaries constituted a threat to a consistent evangelisation and dissemination of the Good News.

Since the cultures in Yorùbáland were still by and large pre-literate in the early decades of the nineteenth century, the teaching of literacy and the essentials of a Western education came in close conjunction with the evangelisation of the native population. Apart from basic literacy training by means of the Yorùbá primer (*Iwe Ekinni*), which contained, for example, the newly devised Yorùbá alphabet, translated passages from the gospel of St. Luke and the Lord’s Prayer (*àdúà Olúwa*), the syllabus in the Abẹ̀òkúta mission station for example consisted of lessons in scripture history, geography, arithmetic, and English grammar and syntax (cf. Thomas King, 26th

December 1851, CA2 O61 42). Learning to read the Bible and other religious texts was a central part of preparing prospective converts for baptism. “It [...] seems very likely,” Peel explains, “that the large investment of effort required to become a ‘book person’ helped to fix converts in their new Christian identity” (Peel 2003: 230). A less positive stance towards Western education existed as well. Certainly, the civilisation mission inherent in introducing Western education could be seen to have an assimilatory effect, weeding out African oral culture and introducing the West as the cultural and religious benchmark. It is hardly surprising that Samuel Crowther, still in Sierra Leone, reports an attitude, particularly amongst older Yorùbá, that “book learning [was] for white people” (11th February 1837, CA1 O79 1) only.

While it remains debatable, therefore, “whether missionaries educated Africans to suppress them or to advance their welfare (there was indeed something of both)” (Sanneh 1983: 128), literacy, and also having access to the Scriptures in their own language, had an unquestionable impact on the interaction between the various social groups in Yorùbáland. Samuel Crowther certainly felt it to be “a very high favour conferred on [his] nation, that they possess the word of God in their own tongue” (1843, CA1 O79 10; exact date uncertain).

### 3.1 ‘*Clothing sounds into letters*’

Crowther therefore took on the pioneering task of devising a notation system for his native language. For an African whose first language of literacy was English, choosing the Roman script for committing his mother tongue to writing seemed unquestioned.<sup>1</sup> The only alternative script in the area was Arabic. Its close association with Islam<sup>2</sup> and the fact that there was no significant rate of literacy in Arabic in any case, would have made it an ahistorical choice not serving the Christian cause.

The phonemic inventory of English is to a large extent similar to that of Crowther’s mother tongue. However, there are a number of phonemes in

<sup>1</sup>My research so far has not discovered any correspondence or secondary literature in which the issue is explicitly addressed.

<sup>2</sup>In the case of Swahili, which already had a literary tradition before the beginning of the colonial period, this association with Islam led the Swabian missionary Ludwig Krapf to adopt the Roman script for his dictionary of Swahili. Mission schools subsequently continued to discourage the use of the traditional Arabic script.



Yorùbá which have no equivalent in English, for example the voiced and unvoiced labio-velar plosives [g̃b] and [kp̃] as well as the nasalised vowels [ĩ], [ũ] and [õ]. Finding a graphemic equivalent in the Roman script proved a demanding task. Attempts were made to express the Yorùbá phonemes using several letters of the Roman script but initially in a very unsystematic manner, as Crowther's first translation of Luke 2:14<sup>3</sup> shows:

“Ogo ni fu Olorung li oke-orung, ati li aiyeye alafia ife hin ohre si enia.” “Ogo ni fun Ọlọrun loke orun ati ni aye alaafia, ife inu rere si eniyan!”  
 (“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”)  
 (16th January 1844, CA1 O79 11a) (modern Yorùbá bible)

In the 1844 translation the nasal vowel [ũ] is still rendered in two different ways: in one instance the nasalised manner of articulation is not represented in writing at all (⟨fu⟩), in the other it is represented by ⟨ng⟩, the English graphemisation of the phoneme [ŋ] (⟨Olorung⟩).

Charles Gollmer, who in the first years of the Yorùbá mission edited Crowther's initial translations and added an extensive philological and theological commentary, also struggled with the task “to ascertain the natural sounds, and to cloth them into the proper letters” (25th September 1844, CA1 O103). He could draw on the phonemic and graphemic inventory of his native German for this task:

I was led by a plain and common sound [presumably the phoneme [ɛ]], to adopt the German [...] Vowel ‘ä’, which some sought to express by the letters ‘ai’, and others by ‘eh’ (25th September 1844, CA1 O103).

Gollmer aimed at a one sound–one letter representation for Yorùbá orthography. In his commentary on Yorùbá orthography from 1847 (CA2 O43 94) he indicates that Crowther had initially rendered the phoneme [g̃b], a sound “beginning with g, flowing over and finishing in b” (CA2 O43 94), as ⟨gb⟩; Gollmer, however, in accordance with his own rule, preferred the notation ⟨b̃⟩, thus introducing the diacritical marks into Yorùbá orthography.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Unless otherwise indicated I quote from the King James Bible.

<sup>4</sup>The voiceless equivalent [kp̃] Gollmer represented as ⟨p̃⟩; it could not be confused with /p/ because the latter does not exist in the Yorùbá phonemic inventory.

The phoneme [ʃ], however, Gollmer suggests, should be rendered as ⟨sh⟩, “[a]s this sound is very common in the language and as it is desirable not to accumulate diacritical marks” (CA2 O43 94). Another major philological achievement of the Swabian missionary worth mentioning in this context, apart from introducing diacritical marks, is the notation of accents. Yorùbá is a tonal language and thus intonation patterns are relevant for distinguishing meaning. In 1847, Gollmer is still uncertain about a sensible strategy to fix intonation in Yorùbá orthography but nevertheless offers suggestions:

acute Accent to denote Elevation, whilst the Grave accent points out depression of voice, [...] Syllables without without [sic] either of those two marks must be considered of the Even voice (CA2 O43 94).

I would like to draw attention to two details at this point. The initial orthographical and grammatical inconsistencies shown above eventually led, in Henry Venn’s words, to the

Establishment of a Missionary Philological Committee for certain purposes connected with the preparation of foreign versions of the Scriptures, and for adopting an uniform system, as far as possible of orthography in these languages which are being committed to writing (2nd June 1848, BSA/E3/1/2/2 (General Committee letters Vol.2)).

The Philological Committee under the aegis of James F. Schön reviewed Yorùbá orthography and edited the translated passages where they felt it necessary.

This step indicates that evangelising the native population encompassed the missionaries’ meticulous, and in the true sense of the word philological, work of developing a less transient medium for the oral Yorùbá culture and studying and ‘developing’ the language by committing it to writing.

Also, Charles Gollmer, as pointed out above, was a native speaker of German and only started learning Yorùbá in early 1844 (cf. 20th February 1844, CA1 O103). In September 1844 he admits that “acquirement of the Yoruba language has taken up by far the greatest portion of my time during the quarter” (journal ending 25th September 1844, CA1 O103). Yet, in the same year Gollmer remarkably feels up to the task of translating the Lord’s Prayer, the

Ten Commandments, and the first two chapters of the Gospel of St. Matthew. The Missionary Philological Committee as well Charles Gollmer's dedication and alacrity concerning the task at hand make telling examples of the considerable external, non-African influence on the development of the language.

The significance of the step of giving the dialects which would later make up the Yorùbá language a written form can hardly be overestimated. The act of fixing the language, its words, sentences and idioms, in a lasting medium certainly must be called a milestone in the region's language and religio-cultural history. The ephemeral spoken word received a stable form. Its content and meaning could now be transmitted across time and space. For Peel, this constituted part of the "intrinsic 'magic' of writing" (Peel 2003: 223) and closely connected with the use of writing and ideograms in Muslim and Ifá divination respectively. The stable and physical form of the written words pointed to the actually existing power of their content. Consequently, written Christian texts, for example the Bible or the Yorùbá Primer, were seen as desirable instruments for unlocking the Europeans' perceived power. Moreover, granting access to this power by teaching the willing how to read and write certainly sent, if not a shock wave, then at least a tremor through a hierarchical, gerontocratic society.

It should be mentioned at this point that the positive assessment of giving an oral language a written form presented here has an ideological counterpart in discourse history. This is closely linked with the notion of the primacy of the spoken word and evaluates committing a language to writing as an act of pruning. Sound and visual performance crucial for memorising and (re-)telling of stories and traditions in oral cultures are lost in writing. Authors like Vansina (1985) and Sindima (1999) have heavily criticised what they feel is a process of impoverishing oral cultures by 'reducing' a language to writing. Also, and this is particularly relevant in the present context, introducing a European writing system and thereby often eradicating already existing systems like ideograms and other non-verbal communication systems, like the Yorùbá *àrokò*, has been criticised. It is in this spirit that Sindima remarks "[that] this 'blessing' Africa received through European writing must be seriously questioned, or at least seen from another perspective" (Sindima 1999: 113).

### 3.2 Standardising Yorùbá

In light of Sindima's criticism, the socio-political implications of committing Yorùbá to writing cannot be ignored. In the early nineteenth century, no homogeneous language was spoken in the area today called Yorùbáland. Instead, regional varieties existed which were to a certain extent mutually intelligible. Equally, the various 'tribes' in the area did not think of themselves as sharing a common identity, let alone a common ethnonym. The ethnic groups referred to themselves by autonyms such as Ègbá, Òyó or Ijesha. The notion of a 'nation' in the European sense<sup>5</sup> with a common name could hardly have evolved in the turbulent early nineteenth-century world of civil wars and slave raids.

The situation was different, however, for those living in diaspora in Sierra Leone, Brazil, Cuba or Haiti. Cultural and linguistic similarities became more relevant than the differences. Àkú was the term used for and by former slaves originating from Yorùbáland.<sup>6</sup> When Crowther published his 'Vocabulary of the Eyo or Aku Language' in the early 1830s, he took the meaning of the term Àkú even one step further while at the same time narrowing it down: He treated the diaspora ethnonym Àkú like a *totum pro parte* for the dialect of Òyó; the appellation *Yorùbá* would eventually perform the same task.

Originally, Peel argues, the Hausa term *Yaruba* was applied to the most Northern of ethnic groups in Yorùbáland, the Òyó, with whom the Hausa-speaking population in the area of the upstream Niger were most familiar (Peel 2003: 283). Samuel Crowther and his colleague, the German missionary and philologist Jacob Friedrich Schön, in their journals of the 1841 Niger expedition speak of the *Yorriba* (3rd July 1841, CA1 O79 32) and *Yaruba* (29th September 1841, CA1 O195 72) respectively to refer both to the Òyó and the various groups inhabiting the wider geographical area of Yorùbáland. The influence of their writing and the fact that the appellation Àkú had to a large extent only been a diasporic nomenclature meant that "the term Àkú hardly made it back to Yorùbáland" (Peel 2003: 284).

It is also worth pointing out that Crowther's mention of "the border of

<sup>5</sup>Elaiwu/Mazrui, for example, offer a definition of the term as "a stable, historically developed community of people with a territory, economic life, distinctive culture, and language in common" (1993: 437). Such a concept is clearly tailored to European political history and can only be applied with some reservations to the African context.

<sup>6</sup>Peel indicates that the appellation Àkú originates from "their mode of greeting, 'o ku'" (Peel, 2003: 284).

Yorriba” (27th September 1841, CA1 O79 32) adds a spatial dimension to the scope of the ethnonym: Not only the language of Ọ̀yọ́ and later the whole of Yorùbáland and the people living in the area are subsumed under the term; a geo-political component was introduced. This development corresponds to Sara Pugach’s observation that in light of contemporary European nationalism “language was an external projection of the nation” (Pugach 2012: 26). In the West African context, as mentioned above, however, the concept of a geo-political unit with a common language and shared culture was not readily applicable. The military conflicts in Yorùbáland after the fall of the once politically stabilising Ọ̀yọ́ empire in the last decades of the 18th century had rendered the area war-ridden and disjointed.

The missionary endeavour to develop a written standard for Yorùbá can therefore be seen as more than mere practicality. It had political intentions and effects as well. The sociocultural role or status of a particular language or variety develops through the language users. This development is not a conscious process. If, therefore, a conscious decision is made to influence this role, this constitutes an “intervention in the self-adapting process of language” (Karam 1974: 106). The regional variety of the language on which the orthography and certain element of lexis of the Yorùbá Bible and other Christian texts was based was that of Ọ̀yọ́, interspersed with elements from other dialects. With the not-so-distant memory of the Ọ̀yọ́ empire still in people’s minds, the variety was perceived as prestigious and possessing a purity that other varieties lacked (cf. Peel 2003: 286). These associations with the Ọ̀yọ́ variety indicate that it was chosen as the desired standard for the missionaries’ translations and the language-engineering work involved because language was recognised not only as a medium of communication but also as a societal resource and status symbol.

Other ethnic groups in Yorùbáland, especially the Ègbá, objected to the normative stipulations of choosing the Ọ̀yọ́ variety as the written standard. Particularly the double use of the term *Yorùbá* as denoting both the Ọ̀yọ́ variety and people, and a larger group, which included the Ègbá, was cause for discontent. They objected to the overtone of continuing Ọ̀yọ́ dominance, particularly in light of the threatening rise of the Ìbàdàn empire in the late 1840s. With its rapid extension, Ìbàdàn was seen as the successor to Old Ọ̀yọ́ and its important defeat of Muslim troops from Ìlọ̀rín in 1840 instilled in the “inhabitants of Ìbàdàn the attitude that they were the saviours of Yorùbáland” (Ajayi 1974: 153). Ègbá discontent of being called Yorùbá and

through the term being politically and culturally associated with their enemy Ìbàdàn remained a potential for conflict in the area and was not lessened by the fact that the British administration sided with Ìbàdàn in the 1850s, increasing Ìbàdàn's military power and political influence.

#### 4 Developing Yorùbá Christian vocabulary

Translating lexemes, units of meaning, is at a first glance probably the most straight forward aspect of translation. In many cases we ask ‘What does X mean in language Y?’ and we are able to consult a dictionary to find the direct equivalent. Problems arise in cases where no linguistic equivalent of an object or concept in the source language exists in the target language. In these cases in particular a translator might reach an impasse of a theoretical nature, namely the notion that translation should not be possible at all. The concept of linguistic relativity, in essence telling us that “each language has a distinctive way of segmenting its experience by means of words” (Nida 1969: 20), can be read to suggest that these differences in conceptualising the world and clothing these concepts in words rule out the possibility of equivalence between languages and therefore the possibility of translation. How then can we account for the fact that people nevertheless translate texts?

Pym (2010: 9) offers an avenue of escape out of this deadlock. “One suspects,” he states, “that equivalence was never really a question of exact values.” He invokes Nida’s notion of dynamic equivalence instead. Rather than focusing on formal aspects of the translation, that is, on finding the direct equivalent, dynamic equivalence focuses on evoking effects and images in the reader of a translation which are similar to those of people reading the source text. Nida thus shifts the focus away “from the form of the message to the response of the receptor” (Nida 1969: 1). In short, Nida suggests that a translation has the best effect if the target audience is familiar not only with the words used but also with the imagery they evoke.

Nida’s approach has been heavily criticised, particularly by translators of religious texts, as “profoundly simplistic” (Prickett 1993: 8). One does not, however, have to fully accept Nida’s approach to recognise that if the recipients’ cultural context is not respected in the translation, the Scriptures become mere literature and cannot be interacted with in the way the translators intend. Research into Swahili Bible translation by Peter Renju can

serve as an example at this point. Renju explains that in initial attempts to translate the term ‘covenant’ a word in Swahili was used which represented a promise or pledge, however, without serious social or political consequences should it be broken. The Swahili term could not convey the binding nature of this covenant and the severity of a possible breach. Correspondingly, the recipients of the translation could not be aware of the immense scope of God’s covenant with Noah and the momentousness of the promise given in Genesis 9:9<sup>7</sup> for the Jewish and Christian faith. It takes, therefore, translators who are acutely aware of the constructionist nature and relativity of meanings and sensitive to the multilayered nature of their source text to navigate their metaphorical ship through the rocky cliffs of target language vocabulary, reader response, and socio-historical origin of the source.

Apart from their function to convey the denotational meaning, possible lexemes in the target language—particularly in ideological texts in the broadest sense—have to be considered with regard to aspects of their connotational meaning, like register, etymology, and reception history. In short, the translators position the target text through the choice of lexemes in the target language, thereby at the same time positioning their message and themselves as social actors.

In the following I am going to discuss these two aspects of lexeme translation with regards to the translation of the Scriptures into Yorùbá. The considerations behind this aspect of the translation process were frequently not only of a philological but also theological and political nature. Already existing religious vocabulary from Islam and the native religion in the area presented opportunities for Christians to position themselves in relation to these religions by either accepting or rejecting the words in question as representations of Christian concepts. Where no Yorùbá words were found suitable, the translators resorted to creating new Yorùbá lexemes, or attempted to express unfamiliar concepts through existing, familiar lexemes. Exemplarily, I am going to discuss the translations of ‘prayer’, ‘God’, and ‘Holy Spirit’, retracing the source material from which debates and discourses were relevant for the translation, and the philological, theological, religio-political explanations and justifications the missionaries gave to back their choices.

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<sup>7</sup>“And I will establish my **covenant** with you, neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood; neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth.”

#### 4.1 ‘Prayer’

One issue for the translators was the existence of Muslim religious vocabulary in the area, usually borrowed from Hausa, the language of Muslim troops invading northern Yorùbáland. The existence of a second Abrahamic religion in the region, despite its status as a scriptural monotheism and a shared religio-conceptual history, was not a welcome sight for Christian missionaries; Islam was not perceived as a possible ally against the polytheistic ‘heathenism’ of *òrìṣà* worship.

On the contrary, the missionaries liked to emphasise their moral and intellectual superiority over the Muslims they encountered. In many ways, Islam was more accommodating to traditional religious customs than Christianity, which led the missionaries to feel that “in the common practice of Yorùbá Muslims [Islam] came [too] close to [...] paganism” (Peel 2003: 209). Also, the fact that the Qur’an was only available in Arabic to Yorùbá Muslims meant that the level of literacy and knowledge of the Qur’an was low amongst them, a state of affairs which the Christians used to expose and ridicule Muslims (cf. Peel 2003: 209). John Christian Müller, when a Muslim is pointed out to him, reveals thus not only his personal attitude when he “[tells] the people plainly this Mahommedan is no Messenger of God, neither does he know God himself” (12th April 1848, CA2 O72 6).

While the missionaries might not have approved of Muslims in Yorùbáland, those involved in translation work could not ignore the Muslim cultural and linguistic influence. In his first translation of Luke 1:13, Samuel Crowther translates the angel’s words *διότι εἰσηκοσθη ἡ δεησις σου* “Your **prayer** has been heard”, as “*Ọlọrun bho adua re*” (CA2 O43 94), literally “*Ọlọrun/God hears your prayer*”.<sup>8</sup> Charles Gollmer, when writing his critical commentary on Crowther’s translation, however, remarks “*Adua Prayer Hausa used by the Mohammed[ans] perhaps *ibèbè* a begging here better*” (CA2 O43 94).

Gollmer expresses his dislike of the Hausa word *àdúà* and his preference for the Yorùbá word *ibèbè*, which translates as ‘begging’ or ‘beseeching’. Despite the absence of an explicit causal link between the Hausa origin

<sup>8</sup>The Yorùbá language does not express the passive voice in a verb form. It is possible to express passive-like meaning by using a generic subject like ‘a’ (we) or ‘won’ (they). In the case of Luke 1:13, however, the hearer cannot be expressed through a generic subject because *ọlọrun*/God is the only possible hearer. Therefore, the active voice is the only option to express the intended meaning.



and Muslim use of àdúà, and his suggestion of an alternative translation, it does not take a great leap of the imagination to come to the conclusion that Gollmer preferred *ìbèbè* because he wanted to stay clear of any associations with Islam.

A second instance also points in this direction of interpretation: in Luke 1:10 Crowther translates “all the assembled worshipers were **praying** outside” as “*bhobho ijjo enia pejo nkiron liakokò*”. Again, Gollmer, after giving an etymological explanation of the contracted form “nkiron [ < ] ni ikiron have a praying—ikiorun—a saluting the sky or heaven” (CA2 O43 94) points out the Muslim use of the word *ikiorun* and subsequently suggests the Yorùbá phrase word “ibaolorunso a talking speaking with God fr[om] i-ba-Olorunso” (CA2 O43 94, highlighting in original).

Despite the anti-Islamic sentiments among the missionaries, however, Gollmer’s suggestions for new linguistic inventions were not particularly successful. Samuel Crowther, in line with his use of *àdúà* in Luke 1:13, in his 1850 translation of ‘The Book of Common Prayer’ “settled on *adura*, which denotes individual petitionary prayer” (Peel 2003: 195, highlighting in original), thus using the term the Yorùbá population must already have been familiar with. Furthermore, the modern Yorùbá Bible<sup>9</sup> also renders the two passages above as

“Gbogbo ijọ awọn eniyan si “nitori ti **adura** rẹ gba”  
ngbadura lode ni akoko.”

Luke 1:10, modern Yorùbá bible

Luke 1:13, modern Yorùbá bible

For Peel, the reason for the fact that the missionaries in their translations still used terms associated with or originating from Islam, was that in doing so the Christians could “take the full advantage of the semantic ground prepared by Islam” (Peel, 2003: 195), even if this meant the tacit admission of certain common elements in both religions, despite the explicit distancing from Islam in the area.

<sup>9</sup>Consulting British and Foreign Bible Society archive material on Yorùbá translations of Christian texts throughout the second half of the 19th century as well as more recent editions will shed additional light on the consistency of the use of *àdúà/àdúrà* compared to other possible terms.

## 4.2 ‘God’

While the missionaries wanted to repudiate any association not only with Islam but also with the ‘heathen’ “foolishness and superstition” (Samuel Crowther, 11th February 1837, CA1 O79 1) of native customs and rituals,<sup>10</sup> certain elements of the Yorùbá lexicon and conceptualisations of the world proved to be useful when developing the Christian vocabulary. Among the most crucial was certainly the choice for the Yorùbá name of the Christian deity. One of the few elements among most regional varieties of Yorùbá beliefs and rituals was the notion of a creator god, a *deus absconditus*, quite apart from and above the *òrìṣà*<sup>11</sup> and who, depending on the region and which aspect of the deity the speaker wanted to emphasise, was called by a different Yorùbá phrase name, describing him as supreme ruler (*Olódùmarè*), lord or master (*Olúwa*) or owner and inhabitant of the sky (*Ọlọrun*) (cf. Idowu 1962: 33–37 *passim*).

For the missionaries the concept of a supreme deity, irrespective of the question if it was introduced by Islam, earlier Christian contact, or had already existed, was a welcome sight. It would not only provide a base for introducing the notion of a monotheistic faith on a conceptual level but also facilitate translation work. The task at hand was to choose a Yorùbá name for the Christian God which would be recognisable and meaningful to the native audience yet would clearly distinguish the Christian God from the *òrìṣà*. In Luke 1:6, Samuel Crowther translates:

And they were both righteous before **God** [Greek: θεος], walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the **Lord** [Greek:

<sup>10</sup>I hesitate to use the term ‘religion’ in this context for two reasons. Firstly, compared to Christianity, which appeared on the scene in the form of Protestant missionaries and for the sake of evangelisation projected a certain image of uniformity and internal cohesion, Yorùbá *òrìṣà* worship and the related rituals displayed considerable regional variation. Therefore, it seems inaccurate to speak of ‘a native religion’ as if the homogeneity indicated by term had indeed existed. Secondly, and partly connected to the previous point, worshipping an *òrìṣà* was not seen as an activity distinct from other activities of daily life. Thus, the term ‘religion’ does not without reservations apply to the relationship between *òrìṣà* and devotee. Even in modern Yorùbá, Peel reminds us, the “word for religion – *ẹsin* from *sin* [to serve] [...] refers primarily to the world religions...” (Peel, 2003: 89).

<sup>11</sup>The view that “God is not a god” (Peel, 2003: 117) was not widely held in the East of Yorùbáland. Significantly, Muslim influence in the South-East before the arrival of the missionaries had been negligible, which has been believed to suggest a connection between the elevation of a creator over the other *òrìṣà* and the monotheistic influence of Islam (cf. Idowu, 1962: 37).

κύριος] blameless.

as “Awon mejeji si she oloso[?] ni waju *ọlọrun* nwon [?] ni bhobho ofin on ilamma *Oluwa* li aileghan”. Gollmer approves of the name *ọlọrun* for the Christian God because “Ọlọrun he that has the sky or heaven the owner or possessor of heaven is applied to God the Creator of All things only” (CA2 O43 94). He admits that the native population might call “their idol” (CA2 O43 94), their chief deity, by this name but the main argument in favour of the name was that it was solely reserved for one deity and not used for any other members of the ‘heathen’ pantheon.<sup>12</sup> As already indicated above, in many areas in Yorùbáland *ọlọrun* was not necessarily seen as above and apart from the *òrìṣà*. In addition to the Muslim influence which Idowu suggests (cf. Idowu 1962: 33–37 passim), the missionaries thus equated *ọlọrun* with the Christian God, thereby degrading the (other) *òrìṣà* to mere divinities.

Gollmer, accordingly, was less pleased with the term *Oluwa*. Corresponding to the Greek term κύριος and the English term ‘Lord’, *Oluwa* can be used to denote a secular ruler or person of rank. Therefore, when Crowther translates τον ναον του κυριου (Luke 1:9), “the temple of the Lord“, as “*ille ọlọrun*”, “house of *Ọlọrun*/God”, Gollmer indicates that he approves of this change because “ille Olorun is plainly understood ‘House of God’ whilst ille Oluwa might be thought the house of some other master or Lord” (CA2 O43 94).

### 4.3 ‘Holy Spirit’

“There is no word in Yorùbá language to express Holy Ghost” (CA2 O43 94). While this statement by Charles Gollmer can hardly be surprising, it nevertheless presented a challenge for the missionaries involved in translation. Unlike the examples discussed above, in the case of ‘Holy Spirit’ the translators had to find suitable Yorùbá equivalents not for one but for two words which would—used as a unit—have to convey the complex and thoroughly Christian concept of the Holy Trinity and the part in it played by the Holy Spirit.

The less problematic part of the translation was certainly the translation of ‘ghost’ or ‘spirit’. Rather than attempting to find a Yorùbá equiva-

<sup>12</sup>Samuel Crowther, however, uses *ọlọrun* with a lower case *o* as a plural in his 1853 translation of Genesis 3:5, “and ye shall be as gods”: “*enyin osi dabi ọlọrun*” (BSS 467.E57). The use of the divine name with plural meaning resembles the plural in the Hebrew **בְּאֱלֹהִים**.

lent for ‘ghost’ or ‘spirit’, Crowther uses the Yorùbá word *ẹ̀mí*, which translates into English as ‘breath’, ‘breeze’ or ‘life’. *Ẹ̀mí* thus corresponds with the Hebrew רִיחַ and the Greek πνευμα, which are both used in collocation with the Hebrew and Greek word for ‘holy’ קָדוֹשׁ (e.g. Isaiah 63:10: אֲנִי-רִיחַ קָדוֹשׁ) and ἅγιος (e.g. Matthew 29:19: ἁγίου πνεύματος). Moreover, the Yorùbá word *ẹ̀mí* does not only denote breath or a light breeze as physical phenomena. In Yorùbá anthropology, *ẹ̀mí* is the divine breath of *ọ̀lórún* given to a human being before they are born (cf. Abimbola 1971: 78), hence the third meaning, ‘life’. Both aspects, the correspondence with the original languages and the existence of a similar concept in Yorùbá culture, with which Samuel Crowther was almost certainly familiar, must have made *ẹ̀mí* the most straightforward choice.

Translating the term ‘holy’ proved to be a more challenging endeavour. Chapman (2005: 578) describes ‘holiness’ as a property “associat[ing] an object with what is divine in the sense of giving to it an association with a power that derives from beyond this world”. Moreover, the concept has traditionally been seen to stand in opposition to the profane,<sup>13</sup> the everyday experience (cf. Jödicke 2006: 876).<sup>14</sup> Apparently, the missionaries did not find a satisfactory Yorùbá equivalent for this concept in the linguistic frame of *òrìṣà* worship. It would not do justice to the missionaries’ diligent and zealous work to dismiss this as deliberate ignorance as Idowu (1975: 86) does in claiming that “[t]he missionary had no use for the religion which he had pre-judged, before he left home, to be an expression of benightedness [...]”.

Even Yorùbá native speaker and former *òrìṣà* devotee Samuel Crowther mentions in his translation of the Lord’s Prayer that Yorùbá lacks a direct equivalent of the Greek ἅγιος (cf. Peel 2003: 197). In his first service held in Yorùbá on 9th April 1844 in Freetown, he preaches from Luke 1:35:<sup>15</sup> “*Ohung ohworh ti aobih ni inoh reh li aomakpe li Ommoh Olorung*” (CA1 O79 11a). Here he still uses the word *ohworh*,<sup>16</sup> ‘honour’ or ‘respect’, to translate ἅγιος. Similarly, in his translation of Luke 1:49<sup>17</sup> “...*owo si li oruko re*”,

<sup>13</sup>Prominently discussed by Mircea Eliade in his treatise on “The sacred and the profane”.

<sup>14</sup>Rudolf Otto’s ‘The idea of the Holy’ renders it an altogether irrational experience beyond human understanding. Otto’s approach has been challenged in particular by notable figures of the philosophy of religion like Friedrich Schleiermacher, who sought to emphasise the immanence of the Christian God in the world.

<sup>15</sup>“...therefore also that **holy** thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.”

<sup>16</sup>in modern Yorùbá *òwò*

<sup>17</sup>“...and holy is his name”

Crowther's word of choice is again *òwò*, which Gollmer in his commentary translates into English as 'esteemed' (CA2 O43 94). It appears, however, that for Crowther *òwò* did not convey the full meaning of the original and was thus not one of the Yorùbá words he felt were "very expressive of the Greek" (1843, exact date uncertain, CA1 O79 10). The missing element was the reference to the distinct nature of 'holiness', the opposition to the profane already mentioned above. Similarly as in the case of *Olúwa*, Samuel Crowther felt the word did not set apart mundane honour and esteem from respect owed to God (cf. Crowther 1843, exact date uncertain, CA1 O79 10). Also, the word did not convey the idea of an intrinsic property but rather describes people's conduct towards the object or being referred to as *òwò*.

Samuel Crowther chose to use the word *mímó* instead. Unlike *è mí*, *mímó*, far from being an immediate equivalent of the Hebrew (שׁוֹרֵף) or the Greek (ἅγιος), according to Gollmer translates as "clean, pure, holy, and [is] in this [the latter] sense only applicable to God" (CA2 O43 94). It has a secular meaning and can be used to describe, for example, a clean surface or clean clothes. Beyond this secular use, Charles Gollmer points out, Yorùbá Muslims employ the word in combination with *oba* (king) to describe Allah. Apart from Luke 1:49, in which he decided to keep *òwò*, Crowther uses *mímó* throughout the Gospel of St. Luke. In Luke 1:70, τῶν ἁγίων προφητῶν αὐτοῦ ('of his holy prophets') is rendered "*woli re mimo*". The 'holy covenant' in Luke 1:72 (διατηκῆς ἁγιας αὐτοῦ) Crowther translates as "*majemmu re mimo*".

*Mímó* in Crowther's translation consequently cooccurs with *è mí* to denote the Holy Spirit. *È mí mímó* fills both Elizabeth in Luke 1:41 and her husband Zacharias in Luke 1:67 as annunciated by the angel in Luke 1:35.

In Yorùbá, the Holy Spirit has thus become 'clean, pure breath or life'. This meant a considerable semantic shift towards Muslim thought, incorporating notions of ritual purity and cleansing into the Christian concept of holiness. Similarly, adopting an element of Yorùbá anthropology meant another step unto Sanneh's quicksand of cultural nuances (1990: 5). These concessions to Islam and *òrìṣà* worship aided the appropriation of the Christian faith in Yorùbáland. Nevertheless, as Peel concludes, "[*è*]mi *Mímó* [...] must have seemed a very strange coinage to those Yorùbá who heard it for the first time" (Peel, 2003: 264, highlighting in original).

## 5 Old beliefs in new shape

The final aspect of translation I would like to discuss is the fate of the *òrìṣà* in this process. Perhaps the most telling example is the story of the *òrìṣà Èṣù*. Originally, *Èṣù* was an ambiguous figure in the Yorùbá pantheon. He was seen at the same time as an executor of divine will—hence his epithet *Èlégbá(rá)*, ‘helper’<sup>18</sup>—and a “trickster who might spoil any sacrifice” (Peel 2003: 263). However, in his 1843 “Vocabulary of the Yorùbá language“, Samuel Crowther lists *Èṣù* as “Satan, demon, adversary, fiend” and *Èlégbára* as “God of mischief, Satan”. How did this change come about?

*Èṣù-Èlégbára* was an ambiguous, obscure, and not easily comprehensible *òrìṣà*, for his worshippers perhaps as much as for the missionaries who encountered him in the native population’s everyday lives. He was ascribed apotropaic power (cf. McKenzie 1997: 231) but at the same time enforced punishments for *Òrúnmilà*, deity of the Ifá divination and mediator of *Ọlórún*’s will, for example if sacrifices were not offered as prescribed. *Èṣù-Èlégbára* was therefore dreaded as a force of chaos and the unforeseen (cf. McKenzie 1997: 101). His statues in the *Ègbá* area were often of an ithyphallic nature whereas in other areas they could be aniconic, consisting of a rock or large stone (cf. McKenzie 1997: 60).

It might thus have been the shape of the statue in question which lead the native Yorùbá Thomas King to write in his letter from Abéòkúta on 27th October 1857 about “a muddy demon of the most disgusting shape and form called *Eṣu* [sic] (devil)” (CA2 O61 1). Charles Gollmer refers to the *òrìṣà* in a similar fashion when on 10th October 1858 he tells the story of a Yorùbá man who:

was [sic] decided to leave the service of Satan for the service of Christ and [who] now wishes to give up his Idols and join the people of God. [The man claimed] that the light of the Gospel had prevailed over Heathen darkness and that Faith in Christ had conquered the mighty Bulwork of superstition. Among the Idols delivered [was] *Eṣu* [sic] the Devil...(CA2 O43 129).

*Èṣù* was in the missionaries’ minds and words, reduced to his negative qualities of the trickster and force of chaos.

<sup>18</sup>McKenzie (1997: 44) has the following to say about the *òrìṣà*’s name: “In the coastal area, *Èlégbara* seems to have been often preferred to *Eṣu* as a name for this *òrìṣà*. Another name for *Eṣu-Èlégbara* was *Agba*, The Old One”.

This reinterpretation of Èṣù was not only restricted to how the missionaries referred to the òrìṣà in their English writing. The identification of Èṣù with the Christian devil entered into the active Yorùbá Christian vocabulary.<sup>19</sup> A few examples from the 1857 collection of Yorùbá hymns *Orin, ati iyin, si ọlọrun* ('Songs and praise to God') with English translations (CA2 O87 88 A/B) can illustrate this:

- |                                |  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| “Gbagbara ọwọ Èṣu fu wa e.”    | “Take away strength from the <b>Devil</b> for us.”<br>(from Hymn 2, written by J. Pratt)           |
| “Iwọ Èṣu, a bo ọwọ rẹ o.”      | “Thou <b>Satan!</b> we are delivered from thee.”<br>(from Hymn 14, written by J. Pratt)            |
| “Awa o ti b Èṣu la fọrun e...” | “We would no more with the <b>Devil</b> go to the other world.”<br>(from Hymn 6, written by Ayena) |

Apart from this identification of the òrìṣà with the Christian devil, the sheer frequency with which Èṣù appears in the collection of Yorùbá hymns is remarkable. He is mentioned eight times in the compilation of 15 hymns of which a third are not longer than four lines. Indeed, the devil became a prominent element in Yorùbá Christianity. The prayer of the former *ba-baḷàwo* Akibode already partly quoted above shows the devil as an external, personal enemy with a strong physical presence and power in the mind of Yorùbá Christians:

It is just that when a strong man comes to another strong man's house, and fight with him so much that the former succeed that of the latter. So that he take him away and tied him well with his chains, dig a pit and throw him in and then take the children and tied them separately but not so much as the father, so the father try chance and loose the children one by one, telling them to run away home till the children all gone, and only the father

<sup>19</sup>It is unfortunate, therefore, that Thomas Wright did not include into his annual letter from Lagos the original Yorùbá version of the convert Akibode's prayer: "I found that thy word is true and send all my children to thee from the devil but I alone remain there" (25th November 1872, CA2 O97 14).

remains in the pit. When the strong man came and have a peep in [peeped into] the pit and found that the children are got out by the father he tied him more and more so that the father couldn't move (Thomas Wright, 25th November 1872, CA2 O97 14).

Akibode here expresses his feeling of having been overwhelmed by an exceptionally strong man and—with his children—bound, carried off from his house and thrown into a pit. Evoking familiar images of displacement and slavery, Akibode in this physical, graphic description clearly refers to the devil spiritually binding him and his children and keeping him away from God. As indicated above, it would be interesting to see the original Yorùbá version of the prayer in order to find out Akibode's exact words. Peel hazards a guess as to the Yorùbá rendering of 'strong man'. He suggests the word *alàgbàrà* (cf. Peel 2003: 258). The word, apart from sounding remarkably like Èṣù's epithet *Elégbàrà*, also contains the word *Agbà*, the name of an *òrìṣà* worshipped near Lagos which Peel identifies with Èṣù (cf. also McKenzie 1997: 44).

Akibode's prayer as well the Yorùbá hymns quoted above thus lead us to two preliminary conclusions on the fate of Èṣù: Firstly, Èṣù as the devil played a prominent role in Yorùbá Christianity. His importance exceeded that of Èṣù in *òrìṣà* worship and that of the devil in the missionaries' post-enlightenment protestant tradition. This can be explained by the reinterpretation of Èṣù not only as the devil but by the extension of the enemy stereotype to the entirety of the *òrìṣà* as the "collective work of Satan" (Peel 2003: 264). Secondly, Yorùbá converts and to a certain extent the Yorùbá missionaries, who were naturally considerably more familiar with *òrìṣà* worship than their European colleagues, perceived the *òrìṣà*, Èṣù in particular, as a real force to reckon with and which was active in the world. This created a tension between "the modern view that *òrìṣà* have no external reality" (Peel 2003: 260), and the perceived continued reality of the world of the *òrìṣà*, kept alive by the linguistic identification of Èṣù as the Christian devil.

It is this tension that I would like to focus on now. Apart from the perceived spiritual benefits for the individual, converting to Christianity in nineteenth-century Yorùbáland could have a number of this-worldly advantages for the convert. Prominent among these were the opportunity to receive a Western education, which became increasingly important with the rise of colonial influence on the area, and a welcome economic relief. Worshipping *òrìṣà* was a costly affair; one had to pay the *babaḷàwo* for their div-



ination, sacrifices often consisted of expensive livestock, and buying statuses could involve investing considerable amounts of cowries. In a time of slave raids, civil wars, and the resulting displacement and loss of property and land, the dire need for guidance was felt as much as the economic plight.

One can only imagine, therefore, how welcome the sight of the missionaries preaching the “freeness of the gospel” (George Meakin, 11th April 1857, CA2 O69) must have been in the eyes of many of the poor Yorùbá. However, converting to Christianity clearly also had disadvantages for the convert. The community elders and *babaláwo* in the hierarchical gerontocratic societies of Yorùbáland were less than happy when people broke rank. Conversion upset existing power structures and withdrew valuable income from the diviners. For many converts it also meant severing family bonds and exposing themselves to persecution through their own families. CMS correspondence abounds with cases like that of a young convert who was repeatedly poisoned by his own family before finding shelter in the mission station (cf. Thomas King, 24th November 1850, CA2 O61 38) or the case of a woman who “for refusing to associate with her husband in his idolatrous worship, was severely beaten by him [after he cut] her primer to pieces” (Thomas King, 27th October 1857, CA2 O61 1). For those in power, conversion could mean losing the benevolence and support of other chiefs and elders and divine legitimacy for their power, as the example of Oṣiṣẹ, chief of Akāṣi, shows:

With deep feelings of regret he spoke of the hindrances in his way, how that as a chief, he must come into contact with the request of the elders and *babalawo*. ‘My office and situation,’ he said, ‘is a great hindrance to me [...]’ (Thomas King, 1st October 1850, CA2 O61 38).

Moreover, *òrìṣà* worship in the eyes of many could not easily be abandoned. Upon asking members of the public why they were unwilling to convert to Christianity, Henry Townsend had to acknowledge that “[they] have but one reason to offer, ‘it is their custom, their fathers did so and so must they’ ” (25th July 1845, CA2 O85 229). The customs and traditions of their forefathers offered people a cosmological and anthropological framework which could explain the world, account for contingencies and give those referring to it a narrative of origin and purpose.

With the spiritual and this-worldly benefits presenting an incentive for prospective converts on the one hand and the fact of how deeply *òrìṣà* worship was woven into the fabric of community and family structure and traditional patterns of explaining the world on the other, it is hardly surprising to find a man in conversation with James White suggesting “he would worship God in conjunction with his other [sic] idols” (9th June 1852, CA2 O87 34). While White of course replies that “[no] man can serve two masters” (9th June 1852, CA2 O87 34), the reinterpretation of *Èṣù* meant that the *òrìṣà* could still play a meaningful role in converts’ lives. Demonising the *òrìṣà*, linguistically identifying specifically *Èṣù* with the Christian devil, made it possible for them to still be relevant albeit in a new guise, now as bogeymen instead of objects of devotion. In fact, as Walls (2007: 125) puts it, the “native significance of the divinity component [i.e. *oriṣa*] is reflected in the very rigour of the rejection that demonizes it”. In focusing their conversion experience on turning their backs at their gods as the ultimate enemy, Yorùbá Christians still interacted with the *òrìṣà* as points of reference. Meyer describes a similiar situation for the Ewe in Ghana. The wish to turn away from the devil and ‘darkness’ became central to converts’ statements (cf. Meyer 1999: 99).

Meyer goes on to point out that the Pietist missionaries in Ghana were thoroughly displeased by this focus on the devil and demons in their converts. The same was true for the Yorùbá mission. As mentioned above, the heritage of the enlightenment in—particularly the European—missionaries’ Christian tradition welcomed a more ethical, more abstract and internal approach to evil rather than the personalised, external figure of the devil. However, as Meyer (1999: 110) remarks, “...conversion did not bring about what professional theologians and social scientists tend to expect, namely rationalisation and disenchantment”. Rather, Yorùbá Christians integrated traditional aspects of belief into their new faith and the devil became a distinguishing element in Yorùbá Christianity. Possibly underestimating the continuing significance of the *òrìṣà* in the life of Yorùbá Christians, the missionaries, through the linguistic mapping of the devil onto *Èṣù*, rendered possible a link between the old and the new faith.

## 6 Concluding remarks

This paper started by pointing out the differences between Islamic and Christian traditions of translating religious texts. The exceptional nature of religious texts as far as translation theory is concerned does not only lie in the notion of the texts as divine revelation or divinely inspired. As Long (2005: 7) indicates, it is also:

their function as behaviour models for individuals, communities or whole cultures [which results in] the most compelling reasons for the translation process to be a serious and well-thought out undertaking.

Thus, the missionaries in Yorùbáland embarked on an ambitious journey when they set out to spread the word in Yorùbá. As illustrated above, the CMS correspondence bears witness to the various considerations and debates and the diligent and zealous work behind this undertaking.

By way of conclusion, I would like to reiterate certain observations made during my research. The first observation is that the group of people involved in the actual translation work was relatively small. Most prominently among them were certainly Samuel Crowther and Charles Gollmer. Beside them, Henry Townsend was concerned with the process to a certain extent and the African missionary Thomas King contributed to the Bible translation in the 1850s. If we include the philological committee who reviewed translations before they were printed, the number of people is still negligible compared to a native population of roughly two million (cf. Peel 2003: 242).<sup>20</sup> This small number of people, many of them non-native speakers of any Yorùbá dialect, nevertheless played a crucial role in committing a hitherto oral language to writing and in choosing and developing the standard for the written language, with the political consequences outlined above. They also introduced a substantial part of the Yorùbá Christian vocabulary; even if one accepts a merely mildly relativistic position and admits that the words we use and the context in which we use them, shape our conceptualisation of the world, it becomes clear that this small group of people had a tool of considerable religious and political power at their hands.

<sup>20</sup>Peel refers here to the population in the 1890s. However, the number can still be used as a point of reference in the present context.

A second observation at this point can be made when looking at the examples of *àdùrà* and *òlórùn*. In these cases the missionaries' interpretational authority was curbed by the need to make concessions to the existing cultural and religious context. Instead of clearly distancing their faith and their teachings from Islam and *òrìṣà* worship, Crowther, Gollmer, and their colleagues were forced to make use of the semantic ground already prepared in order to make themselves understood and give the Christian message a tangible and meaningful place in Yorùbáland.

The third observation which can be made regards the linguistic reinterpretation of *Èṣù* as the devil. Here, we could see plainly that the results of their translation work could backfire on the missionaries, or rather their original teachings, in unexpected ways. As indicated above, the fact that the devil became a significant element of Yorùbá Christianity was a thorn in many a missionary's side. The missionaries, with their highly efficacious arsenal of moral authority and political influence which resulted in the capability to reshape the conceptualisation of the world, nevertheless surrendered part of this authority and influence through the translation process. Translation inevitably entails the transfer of the message into the target language's cultural sphere. Concessions and adaptations to bridge the gap between the source language and the target language are necessary, as the example of the 'Holy Spirit', which became 'pure breath', demonstrated. The translation process involves partly relinquishing control over the message to the speakers of the target language. Furthermore, the debate and the final decision on the form of Scriptural proper names in Yorùbá to a certain extent allowed for the target language in the translation process to determine the terms of how the Christian message would be conveyed. Without wanting to overemphasise this example, it seems valid to call it at least an illustrative example of how translation can allow speakers of the target language a more immediate access to the message. This access is empowering and can lead, as the example of *Èṣù* showed, to an emancipation process, which while not necessarily conscious, nevertheless means reclaiming a certain amount of control over how the message of the translated text is incorporated into the target language and culture.

Thus, Walls (2007: 91) is correct in saying that "Christianity in Africa cannot be treated as a colonial [or missionary] leftover". While not denying the tremendous influence the Christian mission in Yorùbáland had, not only the religious and political but also on the linguistic landscape, it seems nev-

ertheless appropriate to view the native population as target audience of the translation not only as recipients but also as creators of the message. Therefore, Charles Gollmer, in a letter from Abẹ̀òkúta, provides the appropriate closing words:

I am thankful to say there are many Yorùbá-reading Christians here, our converts, who as much appreciate and love their Yorùbá Scriptures (as far as they are translated), as a true English Christian can appreciate and love his English Bible. [...] I may say the Bible, the word of God, as everywhere so here, is the safe and sure foundation of our Missionary superstructure; and therefore the work stood firm whilst floods and winds of persecution vainly sought to overthrow it; and so it will endure beyond the decay of the builders, for it is eternity born and destined (1st December 1858, BSA/GI/3/8/1857–1863).

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