

Cultural Identity and Bible Translation in Africa: An Analysis of Indigenous Language Integration

***Rachel Pauline Aikins**

Email: paulineaikins@gmail.com

Ghana Baptist University College

<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-4202-162X>

Abstract

The growth and stability of the Christian faith hinge on the act of translation. John 1:14 “The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.” This foundational belief underscores the confidence in the translatability of the Bible, stemming from the historical act of incarnation. For African communities, engaging their mother-tongues is vital for transformation and sustaining the impact of Christianity. The research explores the significance of the indigenous languages as pivotal to the theological categories among the Mfantse, Akuapem-Twi, and Konkomba people of Ghana in the 19th century. Mother-tongue literacy plays a crucial role in how Scriptures are interpreted and applied in Christian missions within these communities. Consequently, reducing language imperialism will support mother-tongue expression for future generations. The study advocates for academic and theological discourse to support mother-tongue usage in schools, emphasising that language and translation can foster dignity, unity, resilience and a sense of belonging.

Keywords: *Cultures, Identity, Indigenous, Bible Translation, Missionary, Africa/Africans*

Introduction

Cultural identity profoundly shapes the understanding of the Scriptures, providing critical insights that foster effective communication of the Gospel among diverse ethnic groups. Shared values, traditions and languages serve as foundational elements that enhance the interpretation of the Bible within indigenous communities. The history of Bible translation is closely linked to missionary work dating back to the third and fourth centuries. This translation effort not only revealed biblical truths about God but also elevated the Greek language above the Hebrew text, facilitating the spread of Christianity among Hellenistic groups during that era. While the Bible is revered as a sacred text in Israel, its historical presence in Africa resonates deeply with similar significance. African communities have engaged with the Scriptures for centuries, interpreting and contextualising them within their cultural frameworks. This enduring relationship underscores the interconnectedness of religious traditions and illustrates the diverse ways in which the Scriptures resonate with various cultural identities across the continent. Notably, the first significant translation of the Bible occurred in Africa, specifically in Alexandria, Egypt, challenging the notion that the Bible is solely a foreign or Western text. This article offers a scholarly analysis of how indigenous languages are integrated into the context of the Gospel, positing that an African theological perspective enriches this dialogue by incorporating deeply rooted cultural understandings. Such integration is pivotal for comprehending why the Gospel has flourished in various parts of Africa.

The study will focus on three indigenous groups: The Mfantse, Akuapem-Twi, and Konkomba peoples of Ghana. It will examine how their unique linguistic and cultural backgrounds

have influenced their reception and interpretation of the Gospel, highlighting the importance of language in shaping spiritual identity and community life.

Methodology

The article explores “Cultural Identity and Bible Translation in Africa: An Analysis of Indigenous Language Integration.” The methodology considered comprehensive existing research on cultural identity, indigenous languages and Bible translations. This allowed the author to engage research materials and field research through effective interaction with the Bible Society of Ghana (BSG) and the Ghana Institute of Linguistics Literacy and Bible Translation (GILLBT). BSG is only not in the enterprise of translation, it offers emotional, psychological and medical assistance to alleviate people from their dire predicaments. As part of their developmental process and transforming lives, society embarks on projects targeted at the marginalised and the needy. Bibles are given without cost to inmates in the prisons and correctional centres across the nation or whenever needed or during the organisation’s anniversaries. This effort affords the communities to experience the life-transforming power of God through his Word.¹ The researcher’s interaction with GILLBT revealed the practical activities of mother-tongue literacy and education. GILLBT was actively involved in the transformative programme of translation that helped the Konkomba to experience God through Bible translation.

Each year GILLBT enrolls up to 3,000 learners in their literacy programme and about 90 percent of them sail through successfully. Mr. Michael Serchie, a field director for languages at GILLBT indicates that, as part of GILLBT’s contribution towards the government’s efforts to educate Ghanaians on their civic rights and responsibilities, GILLBT often collaborates with the National Commission for Civic Education and communities in parts of the Northern Region for workshops. In 1992, their collaboration led to the translation of the abridged constitution of Ghana into 24 languages and reviewed it in 6 other languages. Further, collaborating with the Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), they translated the “Rights of the Ghanaian Child and Ghanaian Woman” into selected languages. Likewise, GILLBT’s activities have helped with the translation of the New Testament into 34 languages while 14 of those language groups are in Konkomba, Tampulma, Bimoba, Farefare, Chumburung, Sisaali, Lelemi, Deg, Kasem, Kusaal, Nafaanra, Gonja, Buli and Vagla.

Bible Translation

Translation plays a vital role in the interpretation of the Scriptures, signifying that untruthful translation will result in misinterpretation of the Scriptures. In addition, communities and tribes that gained access to the translated Bibles were illuminated, educated, gain self-esteem, identity and freedom from oppression. This study agrees with Mthikazi Roselina Masubelele that Bible translation has unlocked a considerable portion of world literature for African writers, enabling them to share experiences with other nations of the world and also introducing them to almost all contemporary forms of literature.² Since the work concerns the people in the community, a narrative of their orthographies, proverbs, history and culture is significant to the Bible Translation Enterprise. A few literature works on translation reveal the significant integration and connection of cultural identity and the Biblical Text. Bible translation is the process where missionary activity

¹ Bible Society of Ghana, “Official Newsletter,” 20-21.

² Mthikazi Roselina Masubelele, “The Role of Bible Translation in the Development of Written Zulu: A Corpus-Based Study,” (PhD Thesis, University of South Africa, 2007): 1-264 (1). uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/1149/thesis.pdf?sequence=1.

is focused on translating the Bible or parts of it into the mother-tongue of the people being evangelised to enable them to read it with understanding.³ It primarily engages the interpretation of the Biblical text from the original language into the receptor language. Although it is a gradual process, it embraces the total life of the people, including their cultural, socioeconomic and spiritual lives.⁴ Sanneh sees two ways that mission can proceed: 'mission by diffusion' and 'mission by translation'. The former makes the missionary culture part of the message while the latter accepts the receptor culture. The paradigm of the translatability of Christian mission is the incarnation of Jesus Christ.⁵ When 'God in Christ became a man, divinity was translated into humanity, as though humanity was a receptor language'.⁶ Christ did not come with a 'heavenly' language but spoke Aramaic, his mother-tongue, and took on the Galilean culture. Walls designates that 'the first divine act of translation into humanity thus gives rise to a constant succession of new translations'.⁷

Francis Acquah affirms the views of Atta-Akosah, Sanneh and Walls, expressing that the indigenous language with its symbolic expressions served as a very important medium for the Mfantse to express the religious categories and symbols in Christianity and Islam.⁸ In various cultures and languages, symbolic expressions have been instrumental in the translation and understanding of immigrant religious beliefs and ideas.⁹ Drawing inference from the apostles' efforts in transmitting the Christian message with understanding and meaning to the Greek-speaking Christians, Sanneh writes: "The preponderance of Greek-speaking Christians in the Early Church forced the apostles to embark on translation, interpretation, and exegesis. No tongue was taboo or exclusive, and no one was irredeemable."¹⁰ The cultural medium of the Mfantse language, with its Indigenous symbols and myths, was employed by the early indigenous converts to Christianity and Islam in the evangelisation and spread of the two religions among the Mfantse people.¹¹

The indigenous religious categories and conceptions in which the ideas and beliefs of the immigrant religions were expressed did not only provide access to a better understanding of the new faith traditions, it also afforded the indigenous converts the opportunity to express their faith in their indigenous terms for a better meaning.¹² For example, the usage of *asɔfo*, 'a 'priest', *asɔrdan* 'a meeting place of worship', *nyamesom*, 'the worship of God'; *akɔm*, 'ministering under the power or inspiration of the spirit', among others, were indigenous Mfantse expressions that are conveniently engaged by the immigrant religions, including Christian faith and Islam.¹³ Acquah

³ Thomas Atta-Akosah, 'Bible Translation in Christian Mission: A Case Study of the Spiritual and Socio-Cultural Impact of the Bible Translation Strategy of the Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy and Bible Translation on the Dega People of Ghana' (MTh. Dissertation, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2004): 1-132 (66). researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10413/10413/1/Atta-Akosah_Thomas_2004.pdf

⁴ Atta-Akosah, 'Bible Translation in Christian Mission, 66.

⁵ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2009), 29.

⁶ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 27.

⁷ Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 29.

⁸ Francis Acquah, "The Impact of African Traditional Religious Beliefs and Cultural Values on Christian-Muslim Relations in Ghana from 1920 through the Present: A Case Study of Nkusukum-Ekumfi-Enyan area of the Central Region," PhD Thesis, University of Exeter, 2011, 9-330 (47). <https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/bitstream/handle/10036/3473/AquahF.pdf?...3>

Acquah, "The Impact of African Traditional Religious Beliefs," 256.

⁹ Acquah, "The Impact of African Traditional Religious Beliefs," 256.

¹⁰ Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 36.

¹¹ Acquah, "The Impact of African Traditional Religious Beliefs," 257.

¹² Acquah, "The Impact of African Traditional Religious Beliefs," 257.

¹³ Acquah, "The Impact of African Traditional Religious Beliefs," 257.

was emphatic that Bible translation into indigenous language promoted healthy understanding, recognition, self-identity and reverence for priests, Imams, Christian Churches, and traditional leaders.¹⁴ The process of translation eliminated qualms, disputes and untenable religious differences that had the potential to foster religious exclusivism.¹⁵ Moreover, the interpretative process is a dynamic dialogue between the Scriptures and the individuals who engage with the text, enabling them to interpret the ‘Word of God.’ This process involves not only the authors, audience, and text itself but also the intended purposes behind the message being conveyed. Interpreting the Bible requires careful consideration, as biblical texts often address issues rooted in diverse cultural, economic, and social contexts. Additionally, the sociological, cultural, economic, and personal backgrounds of the reader can significantly influence the interpretation of a given text.¹⁶ One could argue that, just as cultural context shapes an individual’s understanding of Scripture, language plays a crucial role in this process. Through language, one can effectively break down and interpret the Scriptures, ensuring that their meaning is communicated clearly in the reader’s native tongue for more accurate understanding and practical application.

Speaking on the subject of cultural identity and Bible translation, Solomon Sule-Saa admits that the story of the English Bible and its revolution inspired him, indicating that “translating the Bible into the language of the common man can change political systems, free people from oppression and give people a new way of looking at the world.”¹⁷ Bible translation does much more than helping people in their spiritual lives. According to him, the translation of the Bible into the languages of Ghana has stimulated developments, fostering vernacular into political and social empowerment.¹⁸ Mother-tongue Scriptures have brought about a rippling effect in the Dagomba and Konkomba communities, increasing the social significance of the Church, and provision of social services for the betterment of the communities. He further asserts that Bible Translation provided a sense of personhood and empowerment, preserving the Konkomba and Dagomba cultures and leading to the transformation of traditional institutions that inspire peace and appreciation for diversity in Christian-Muslim discourse.¹⁹

In a preliminary finding of her doctoral dissertation, Juliana Senavoe notes that the exclusive use of Twi in the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches in Ghana, particularly among Akuapem-Guan ‘stifled creativity’ in the Guan Churches. She observes that the true incarnation of the Gospel for Akuapem-Guan Christians and the doing of theology in the mother-tongue are yet to take place.²⁰ This view is sustained by Atta-Akosah who posits categorically that Churches without Scriptures in the mother-tongue are not able to sustain spiritual depth into succeeding generations

¹⁴ Acquah, “The Impact of African Traditional Religious Beliefs,” 258.

¹⁵ Acquah, “The Impact of African Traditional Religious Beliefs,” 258.

¹⁶ Peter White and Rachel Pauline Aikins. “Name It, Claim It, Grab It African Neo-Pentecostal Faith and Hope Gospel” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 30 (2021): 263-281.

¹⁷ Solomon S. Sule-Saa, “The Impact of Vernacular Bible Translation on the Dagomba and the Konkomba of Northern Ghana in the light of Lamin Sanneh’s Conception of Mission as Translation,” PhD Thesis, Akrofi-Christaller of Theology, Mission and Culture, 2007, 244-250.

¹⁸ Solomon S. Sule-Saa, “Discussing the Effect and Influence of Bible Translation among the Konkomba People,” 1 August, 2013, Accessed 7 November 2017. <https://heartlanguage.org/tag/gillbt/>

¹⁹ Sule-Saa, Solomon S. “The Impact of Vernacular Bible Translation on the Dagomba and the Konkomba of Northern Ghana in the light of Lamin Sanneh’s Conception of Mission as Translation,” PhD Thesis, Akrofi-Christaller of Theology, Mission and Culture, 2007, 18-29.

²⁰ Juliana Senavoe, “The Effects of Non-Translation of the Scriptures among the Guan of Southern Ghana Some Preliminary Findings.” *Journal of African Christian Thought* 1 (June 2002): 48-60. 58.

because they will have difficulty answering false teachings.²¹ Citing the experiential narrative of Livingstone in 1857, Sanneh states,

In Madagascar a few Christians were left with nothing but the Bible in their hands; and though exposed to persecution, and even death itself, as the penalty of adherence to their profession, they increased tenfold in numbers, and are, if possible, more decided believers now than they were when, by an edict of the queen of that island, missionaries ceased their teaching.²²

As discussed so far by the scholars, it can be inferred that an indigenous Church left without missionary agents but with the Scriptures in their mother-tongue is likely to persevere and develop a relationship with God. This is empirically proven through the work of Johannes Gottlieb Christaller of the Basel Mission who devoted himself to the study of indigenous Twi language six years after he arrived in Akropong-Akuapem, in 1859. Christaller and his indigenous team members like David Asante and Jonathan Bekoe Palmer were able to translate and publish the four Gospels into Akuapem-Twi.²³ Three years later the team sent the manuscript of the translated Bible to Europe for publication in 1871. Christaller followed it with a comprehensive Grammar book in 1875, three thousand six hundred (3,600) Akan Proverbs²⁴ and a monumental Dictionary²⁵ in 1881 which has been described as ‘a veritable encyclopaedia of Akan life’.²⁶

The reading is clear, synthesizing the views of Kuwornu-Adjaottor, Sanneh, Acquah, Senavoe and Atta-Akosah, who agree that Bible translation is a powerful tool for curbing disputes and conflicts, as well as preserving traditional values, cultures and identities. Credit should be extolled on some European Christian missionaries who saw the value in Bible translation and indigenous language in their efforts to transmit the Gospel. Their efforts resulted in the translation of the Bible into many indigenous languages in Ghana which led to self-worth and a better understanding of the Scriptures.

Historical Narrative of Bible Translation

In his work, *On Their Way Rejoicing: The History and Role of the Bible in Africa*, Ype Schaaf, argues that the pursuit of Bible translation can be traced back to 260 BC during the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus II, who ruled in Egypt from 285 to 247 BC. During this period, the Egyptian economy underwent centralisation, and Alexandria emerged as a vibrant cultural hub.²⁷ Ptolemy actively expanded the collections of the Alexandrian library and served as a patron of literature and scholarship. According to tradition, Ptolemy, with the assistance of his counsellor, Demetrius, sought to advance both his scholarly and political objectives by requesting the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek, which functioned as the lingua franca at the time. His ultimate aim then was to include every book in the world in that library. In response, the high priest of Jerusalem dispatched six highly skilled scholars from each of the twelve tribes of Israel to undertake this

²¹ Atta-Akosah, “Bible Translation in Christian Mission,” 49-50.

²² Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 30.

²³ Noel Smith, *The Presbyterian Church of Ghana, 1835-1960: A Younger Church in a Changing Society*, Ghana (Accra: Universities Press, 1966), 55.

²⁴ J. G. Christaller, *Three Thousand Six Hundred Ghanaian Proverbs, From the Asante and Fante Language* (Lewiston, Queenston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1879).

²⁵ J. G. Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language, Called Tshi (Twi)* (Basel Missionary Society, 1933).

²⁶ Smith, *The Presbyterian Church of Ghana, 1835-1960*, 55.

²⁷ Ype Schaaf, *On Their Way Rejoicing: The History and Role of the Bible in Africa* (Akropong: Regnum Africa, 2002), 1.

monumental task.²⁸ Notably, the translation was completed in 72 days, coinciding with the number of scholars involved and came to be known as the Septuagint. Schaaf further details that upon completion, the translation was read aloud to the Jewish community in Alexandria, which expressed astonishment at the fidelity of the text to the original Hebrew Scriptures.²⁹ This accuracy led to its acceptance as a definitive and authoritative translation, which was subsequently presented to Ptolemy II. This historical account underscores the significance of the Septuagint in the context of both Jewish and early Christian traditions. Historical accounts further designate that long before the outpouring of the Holy Spirit baptism in Topeka, Kansas, there were instances of individuals suddenly receiving the ability to preach in foreign languages. For example, in 1881, Miss C.M. Reade, a missionary sent to India, testified that the Holy Spirit granted her the gift of speaking Hindustani, enabling her to preach without the need for a translator. Similar reports emerged from Jonathan Goforth, the renowned Canadian Presbyterian missionary to China, as well as W.P. Buncombe, an Anglican missionary in Japan, who was able to preach to his audience in the Japanese language. These instances highlight the significance of indigenous languages, particularly one's mother-tongue, in communicating the Gospel effectively.³⁰

In a related account, Andrew Finlay Walls, a prominent British historian of missions, in his book, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, observes that “politics is the art of the possibility, while translation is the art of the impossibility.”³¹ He contends that given the inherent frustrations of the translation process, it is remarkable how God chose translation as the means for the salvation of humanity. He was astonished that the Christian faith is fundamentally rooted in a divine act of translation: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14), highlighting that any confidence we have in the translatability of the Bible is grounded in this prior act of translation, as the history of Biblical translation is predicated on the incarnation of the Word.³² His statement reveals that humanity gained a deeper understanding of God through the incarnation of Christ.

In the Gospel of John, ‘No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father has made him known (NIV).’³³ The Greek translation says, *Qeo.n ouvdei.j e`w,raken pw,pote\ monogenh.j qeo.j o` w'n eivj to.n ko,lpon tou/patro.j evkei/noj evxhgh,sato-*. The direct translation from Greek has it that “No one has seen God ever yet, only the begotten of the Father’s bosom ‘exegetes’ God, John 1:18.” Direct translation from the original text shows that no one has ever seen God yet, but the only begotten at the Father’s bosom exegetes: explains, clarifies, and gives detail or meaning about God to humanity. This verse signifies that without the incarnation, it would have been difficult for humanity to either see or comprehend God. As Walls states, although translation is problematic God in his divinity decided to reveal himself through the art of translation. Correspondingly, Lamin Sanneh, the Gambian scholar of Missions, History, and World Christianity at Yale University expresses in his work, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact of Culture*, that missionary translation was instrumental in the emergence of indigenous resistance to colonialism.³⁴ While the colonial system represented a worldwide economic and military order, mission represented vindication for the

²⁸Schaaf, *On Their Way Rejoicing*, 1.

²⁹Schaaf, *On Their Way Rejoicing*, 1.

³⁰ Rachel Pauline Aikins-Mawuko, “Name It, Claim It, Grab It: The Hermeneutical Approach of Lighthouse Chapel International,” unpublished M.Phil. dissertation, University of Ghana (2016), 36.

³¹ Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 26.

³² Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 26.

³³ John 1:18.

³⁴ Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 29.123.

vernacular language. This according to Sanneh, provided indigenous Christians the tools to comprehend the significance of world events, and as such the purposes of God through the familiar medium of the mother-tongue and people were able to respond to colonial events in the light of vernacular self-understanding.³⁵

For Schaaf, before Christianity came, Africa knew the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The Septuagint, the Ten Commandments in Ethiopia, the sacrificial practices of the Massana, and the stories of the Matakam, are all examples of Jewish influences on Africa. This is so, because people of the book (Jews), settled in Africa before the birth of Christ.³⁶ The translation did not only excite the recipients, but it also provided them with creative and new pathways to understanding the God of Israel. It enabled Ptolemy II to better understand the Hebrew Scriptures, and it became the Bible of the Jews in the diaspora and the Bible of the early Christians.³⁷ The discourse by these scholars repudiates the popular presupposition that the Bible is a colonial device to oppress or enslave Africans. In fact, before the colonisation of Africa, the Bible was, and it is still the Bible that has always been and remains a universal book for all generations and all people.

This underpins the discussions on “Cultural Identity and Bible Translation in Africa: A Scholarly Analysis of Indigenous Language Integration within Gospel Contexts” among the Mfantse, Akuapem-Twi in Southern on one hand and the Konkomba in Northern Ghana on the other. Given the narrative above, Bible translation is important, it helped the Grecians to comprehend Jewish worship of YHWH, and projected a better image of YHWH because they could hear him in their mother-tongue. The translation further demystified negative preconceptions of non-Jews about God, it lifted God from a confined Jewish religion into cultures of the world.³⁸ Bible translation effectively transformed communities, influenced indigenous leadership and modified practices that dehumanized and created social division, including self-worth and values that were previously undervalued.

To affirm the significance of the translations among the Mfantse, Akuapem-Twi, and Konkomba, the author consulted staff from the Bible Society of Ghana (BSG), which has translated the Bible into major ethnic groups since its inception in 1966, and the Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy and Bible Translation (GILLBT), which has equipped and empowered communities since its establishment in 1962. Both organisations have made translations inroads into the Mfantse, Akuapem-Twi, and Konkomba people of Ghana since their establishment. On pages 88 to 90 of his work, Schaaf presents a graphical display of the first Bible translations in Africa. It spans from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries when the earliest Bible translation into some indigenous dialects of African languages began.³⁹ In Ghana, translation of the full Bible emerged in the mid-eighteenth century, with Ga - 1843; Akuapem-Twi - 1859; Mfantse - 1896 and Ewe - 1858. The translations of the New Testament were published in 1859, 1863, 1896 and 1877.⁴⁰ Complete translations of the whole Bible into Ga, Akuapem-Twi, Mfantse and Ewe were accomplished in 1866, 1871, 1948 and 1913 respectively.⁴¹ In 1964, the Akuapem-Twi version of

³⁵ Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 123.

³⁶ Schaaf, *On Their Way Rejoicing*, 1.

³⁷ Schaaf, *On Their Way Rejoicing*, 5-6.

³⁸ Schaaf, *On Their Way Rejoicing*, 5-6.

³⁹ Schaaf, *On Their Way Rejoicing*, 88-90.

⁴⁰ Schaaf, *On Their Way Rejoicing*, 89.

⁴¹ Schaaf, *On Their Way Rejoicing*, 89.

the Bible which was used by all Akan-speaking people was revised into the Asante-Twi and Akuapem-Twi, with slightly different orthographies.⁴²

Bible Society of Ghana (BSG)

Officially, BSG was established on September 18, 1965, with the mission of encouraging the use of the Word of God to transform lives and a vision of making 'The Bible' available and affordable for everyone. It has since been translating Scriptures into Ghanaian languages, and distributing them at affordable prices to Ghanaians.⁴³ BSG has translated and published the Bible in eight major Ghanaian languages namely: Ga, Akuapem-Twi, Ewe, Mfantse, Asante-Twi, Dangme, Nzema and Dagbani, including the New Testament in Eshahie, and has new translations of the New Testament in Ewe and Mfantse.⁴⁴

The organisation also worked on the Scriptures for the Dagaaba of Northern Ghana, who were previously unable to read their Bible translation because it had been done in neighbouring Burkina Faso. BSG produced the Scriptures in the Dagaare language to support the Church and



Figure 1: Bible Society of Ghana into Ghanaian Languages (September 2023).

help Christians become firmly grounded in the Scriptures. The translation project began in 2009, following a sociolinguistic survey in 2008, and was completed in 2021.⁴⁵ In 2011, the "Gospel of Mark" was completed and published as *Maako Gane*, which was enthusiastically launched for the Churches of God in Dagaare-speaking communities across Ghana. The New Testament was completed in 2012 and published in 2014. The projected cost for 2016 is approximately \$63,530.⁴⁶ Additionally, the organisation is pursuing an empowerment project for the Dagaare people, aimed at helping non-literate speakers read, write, and express themselves in their mother-tongue. A total

⁴² John D. K. Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana): The Historical, Linguistic and Theological Settings of the Ga, Twi, Mfantse and Ewe Bibles* (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 2011), 75-76.

⁴³ Ghana Bible Society (BSG) Website: www.biblesociety-ghana.org/, Accessed

⁴⁴ Jonathan E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor, "Patronage and Usage of the Mother-Tongue Bibles in Kumasi, Ghana." *Prime Journal of Social Science* 2 (2012): 121-129. ir.knust.edu.gh/.../patronage%20and%20usage%20of%20the%20mothe. 121-122.

⁴⁵ Bible Society of Ghana Website: <http://www.biblesociety-ghana.org/about-us/>, Accessed 9 November 2017.

⁴⁶ Bible Society of Ghana Website: <http://www.biblesociety-ghana.org/our-work/dagaare-first-bible-project/>

of 3,000 copies of Dagaare Primers and 5,000 copies of Dagaare New Reader Portions (1-5) will be provided to 1,500 new learners across 20 communities to enhance their reading and writing skills within the project's first year.⁴⁷

Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy and Bible Translation (GILLBT)

GILLBT is a Ghanaian Christian non-governmental and mission organisation that contributes to the Great Commission through language development, literacy, and Bible translation. It believes that mother-tongue literacy and access to the Word of God in native languages bring freedom and life to Ghanaians and their communities.⁴⁸ Established in 1962, GILLBT has focused on providing alphabets, grammar, and reading materials in Ghanaian languages while promoting mother-tongue literacy.⁴⁹ Through its skilled workforce, the organisation has built local partnerships to make the Scriptures accessible to various language groups in Ghana.⁵⁰ GILLBT collaborates with communities to develop and monitor projects that include (a) translating the Bible into different Ghanaian languages, (b) distributing translated Scriptures through multiple mediums and (c) promoting literacy education. Its ultimate vision is to transform lives for God's glory through the effective use of the Word of God in mother-tongues.⁵¹ Possible observations from the organisations' histories depict translation as being a rigorous activity and part of global and national development initiatives that are specifically tailored for Indigenous communities, emphasising culturally appropriate practices and the involvement of local people in shaping their own development goals in the centuries past.



Figure 1: Dedication of the Deg Bible (News from GILLBT, July 2016)

⁴⁷ Bible Society of Ghana Website: <http://www.biblesociety-ghana.org/our-work/gurune-literacy-project/>

⁴⁸ GILLBT Website: <http://www.gillbt.org/who-we-are/>

⁴⁹ Kuwornu-Adjaottor, "Patronage and Usage of the Mother-Tongue," 122.

⁵⁰ GILLBT Website: <http://www.gillbt.org/who-we-are/>

⁵¹ GILLBT Website: <http://www.gillbt.org/who-we-are/>

Cultural Identity and Bible Translation in Africa

Contributing to the discourse on cultural identity and Bible translation in Africa, Sule-Saa recounts that before the translation of the Bible, the Konkomba and Dagomba people largely rejected Christianity, viewing it as a faith of outsiders. Numerous attempts to evangelise them failed, but following the translation of the Bible into their languages, many in these communities began to put their trust in Christ. Sule-Saa discusses that the translation broke down relationships of servitude, fostered peace in tribal disputes communities, provided a renewed sense of identity, halted betrothal marriages, and addressed local issues within the cultural context.⁵²

Kirby echoes Sule-Saa's insights, noting that the emergence of Christianity has significantly altered the Konkomba worldview. Their previously low self-esteem has been uplifted, allowing them to embrace their ethnic identity. No longer see themselves as nameless groups at the lower echelons of Dagomba society, the Konkomba now take pride in their language and identity.⁵³ Kirby highlights that soon after the translation in their mother-tongue, many remarked, "Even God speaks our language in the Bible." Through the translation, the Konkomba have embraced what it means to be "God-people,"⁵⁴ enjoying freedoms of movement, choice, expression and agency to shape their futures.⁵⁵ They do not need to assimilate into Dagomba culture to attain these freedoms; instead, they can cultivate their forms of leadership and choose to live in a "peace culture" rather than a "war culture."⁵⁶ From the perspectives of Kirby and Sule-Saa, it is clear that Bible translation into indigenous languages has liberated cultures, fostered a sense of nationalism, encouraged education, and facilitated social transformation.

The study established that Bible translation is intricately connected to indigenous languages. The historical context underscores the long-standing relationship between the Scriptures and cultural identity. Each of these languages of the Mfantse, Akuapem-Twi and Konkomba have rich cultural nuances that have greatly influenced the interpretation of biblical texts. Translation offers a profound sense of belonging, identity, freedom, and confidence to the receptor community. Many scholars, including Walls, Sanneh, Schaaf, Sule-Saa, Kirby, Acquah, and Atta-Akosah, contend that Bible translation is significant because it was initiated by God through Christ. Their work highlights that the process of translation empowers individuals to read and comprehend God's message in their language, fostering a deeper spiritual connection.

Furthermore, this act of translation not only enriches the understanding of Scripture but also catalyses cultural affirmation and revitalisation. As communities engage with the Bible in their indigenous languages, they often find renewed pride in their heritage and identity, leading to social change. The biblical narrative illustrates the work of the Holy Spirit in facilitating the proclamation of the Gospel across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. It is essential to recognise that each language embodies unique cultural perspectives, highlighting the importance of appreciating the value and significance of all languages. While the Gospel is presented in a unified form, acknowledging linguistic diversity can deepen our understanding of Scripture and foster ecumenism. This ecumenism is rooted in our shared identity as individuals transformed by the Holy Spirit. Bible translation serves as a vital mechanism for empowerment, self-sufficiency,

⁵² Sule-Saa, "Discussing the Effect and Influence of Bible Translation among the Konkomba People," 1 August, 2013. <https://heartlanguage.org/tag/gillbt/>

⁵³ Jon P. Kirby, "Peacebuilding in Northern Ghana: Cultural Themes and Ethnic Conflict," in *Ghana's North: Research on Culture, Religion, and Politics of Societies in Transition*, eds. Franz Kroger and Barbara Meier. (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2003)30.

⁵⁴ Kirby, "Peacebuilding in Northern Ghana," 30.

⁵⁵ Kirby, "Peacebuilding in Northern Ghana," 30.

⁵⁶ Kirby, "Peacebuilding in Northern Ghana," 30.

and liberation, promoting interreligious dialogue and enabling structural reforms, including the preservation of receptor languages and cultures.

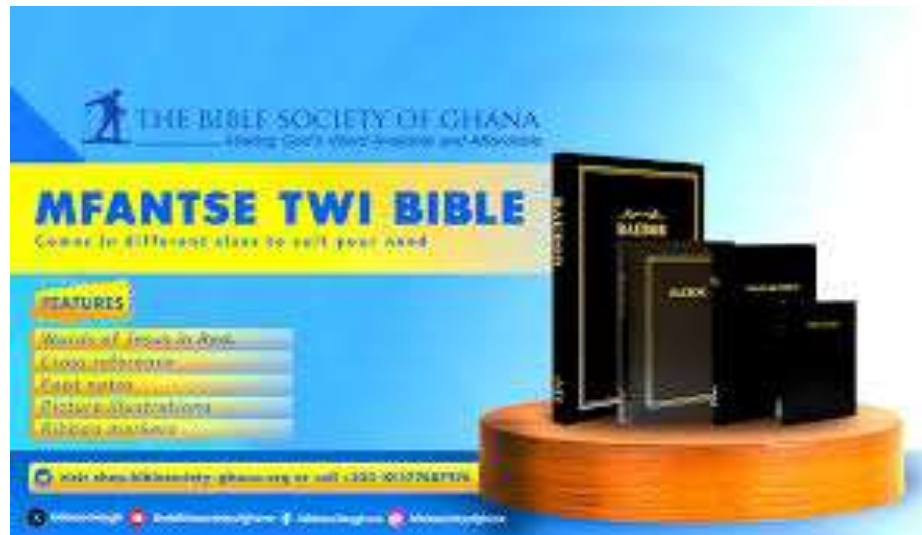


Figure 3: Mfantse/Twi Bible (September 2024)

Justification of the Study

The rationale for this study is rooted in the acknowledgment of the significant influence that cultural identity and language exert on how the Scriptures are interpreted and received in African communities. As highlighted early on, cultural identity is not merely a backdrop but a critical lens through which individuals understand and engage with the Bible. By focusing on the Mfantse, Akuapem-Twi, and Konkomba peoples of Ghana, this research illuminates how indigenous languages serve as vehicles for conveying spiritual truths, thereby enhancing the accessibility and relevance of the Gospel. The historical context of Bible translation in Africa reveals that the earliest significant translations occurred on the continent itself, challenging prevailing perceptions that view the Bible as a foreign entity. This study, therefore, reclaims that Bible translations have empowered local communities, encouraged a sense of ownership and dignity in their spiritual lives and enabled communities to assert their identities and engage with God on a personal level.

Recommendations

To strengthen cultural identity and enhance academic achievement, universities in Africa should integrate mother-tongue instruction into their curricula. This can be achieved by allowing students to engage with course materials and complete assessments in their native languages, thereby improving comprehension and academic performance. Academic programmes should incorporate courses that emphasise the use of indigenous languages, fostering intellectual engagement in mother-tongues. Additionally, institutions could introduce awards for indigenous language speakers to recognise them for excellence in their proficiency, incentivizing participation and reinforcing cultural pride. Universities should establish sponsorship programmes for students pursuing their mother-tongue just as they do for engineering, science, and mathematics, with a focus on supporting the use of indigenous languages in these fields. Such initiatives would promote

both academic excellence and the preservation of linguistic heritage, contributing to the development of a more inclusive and culturally grounded academic environment.

Conclusion

Bible translation into mother-tongues is a powerful form of empowerment. For the Konkomba people, gaining access to the Bible affirmed their dignity and helped them reject feelings of inferiority, allowing them to assert their rights with confidence. Similarly, when the Mfantse and Akuapem-Twi communities received the Scriptures in their languages, they truly owned the message. They could understand God in their native tongue and communicate with him directly, without the need for intermediaries. After the translation, the Konkomba expressed their pride by stating, “God speaks our language in the Bible.” This reflects the beauty of translation, which facilitates a direct and unmediated relationship with God. It empowers individuals to resist external pressures, embrace their identities, and fully accept who they are. Through Bible translation, researchers can engage in a vital theological endeavour known as mother-tongue hermeneutics to encourage the development of indigenous theology and inspire cross-cultural communication. This will create an enabling atmosphere for the spread of the Great Commission across different cultures, prevent languages from extinction and inspire national pride.

Bibliography

- Acquah, Francis. “The Impact of African Traditional Religious Beliefs and Cultural Values on Christian-Muslim Relations in Ghana from 1920 through the Present: A Case Study of Nkusukum-Ekumfi Enyan area of the Central Region.” PhD Thesis, University of Exeter, 2011. <https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/bitstream/handle/10036/3473/AquahF.pdf?...3>
- Aikins-Mawuko, Rachel Pauline. “Name It, Claim It, Grab It: The Hermeneutical Approach of Lighthouse Chapel International,” MPhil. Thesis, University of Ghana (July 2016): 1-141.
- Atta-Akosah, Thomas. “Bible Translation in Christian Mission: A Case Study of the Spiritual and Socio-Cultural Impact of the Bible Translation Strategy of the Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy and Bible Translation on the Dega People of Ghana.” MTh. Dissertation, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2004. researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10413/..../Atta-Akosah_Thomas_2004.pdf?
- Bible Society of Ghana Home Page. <http://www.biblesociety-ghana.org>
- Bible Society of Ghana. Official Newsletter – May 2016. www.biblesociety-ghana.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Link-May-2016.pdf
- Bible Society of Ghana. Website: <http://www.biblesociety-ghana.org/about-us/>
- Bible Society of Ghana. Website: <http://www.biblesociety-ghana.org/our-work/dagaare-first-bible-project/>
- Bible Society of Ghana. Website: <http://www.biblesociety-ghana.org/our-work/gurune-literacy-project/>
- Christaller, Johannes G. *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language, Called Tshi (Twi)*. Basel: Missionary Society, 1933.
- Christaller, Johannes G. *Three Thousand Six Hundred Ghanaian Proverbs, From the Asante and Fante Language*. Lewiston, Queenston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1879.
- Ekem, John D. K. *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana): The Historical, Linguistic and Theological Settings of the Ga, Twi, Mfantse and Ewe Bibles*. Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 2011.
- GILLBT Website: <http://www.gillbt.org/2017/10/mother-tongue-october-2017-released/>

- GILLBT Website: <http://www.gillbt.org/who-we-are/>
- Kirby, Jon P. "Peacebuilding in Northern Ghana: Cultural Themes and Ethnic Conflict," in *Ghana's North: Research on Culture, Religion, and Politics of Societies in Transition*, eds. Franz Kroger and Barbara Meier. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2003.
- Kuwornu-Adjaottor, Jonathan E. T. "Patronage and Usage of the Mother-Tongue Bibles in Kumasi, Ghana." *Prime Journal of Social Science* 2 (2012): 121-129. ir.knust.edu.gh/.../patronage%20and%20usage%20of%20the%20mothe.
- Masubelele, Mthikazi Roselina. "The Role of Bible Translation in the Development of Written Zulu: A Corpus-Based Study." PhD Thesis, University of South Africa (2007): 1-264. uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/1149/thesis.pdf?sequence=1.
- Sanneh, Lamin. *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll: New York, 1989.
- Schaaf, Ype. *On Their Way Rejoicing: The History and Role of the Bible in Africa*. Akropong: Regnum Africa, 2002.
- Senavoe, Juliana. "The Effects of Non-Translation of the Scriptures among the Guan of Southern Ghana Some Preliminary Findings." *Journal of African Christian Thought* 1 (June 2002): 48-60.
- Smith, Noel. *The Presbyterian Church of Ghana, 1835-1960: A Younger Church in a Changing Society, Ghana*. Accra: Universities Press, 1966.
- Sule-Saa, Solomon S. "Discussing the Effect and Influence of Bible Translation among the Konkomba People." (August 2013). <https://heartlanguage.org/tag/gillbt/>
- Sule-Saa, Solomon S. "Owning the Christian Faith through Mother-Tongue Scriptures: A Case Study of the Dagomba and Konkomba of Northern Ghana." *Journal of African Christian Thought* 2 (December 2010): 47-53.
- Sule-Saa, Solomon S. "The Impact of Vernacular Bible Translation on the Dagomba and the Konkomba of Northern Ghana in the light of Lamin Sanneh's Conception of Mission as Translation." Unpublished PhD Thesis, Akrofi-Christaller of Theology, Mission and Culture, 2007.
- Walls, Andrew F. *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996.
- White, Peter and Rachel Pauline Aikins. "Name It, Claim It, Grab It *African Neo-Pentecostal Faith and Hope Gospel*" *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 30 (2021): 263-281.