

Why bother with Bible translation?

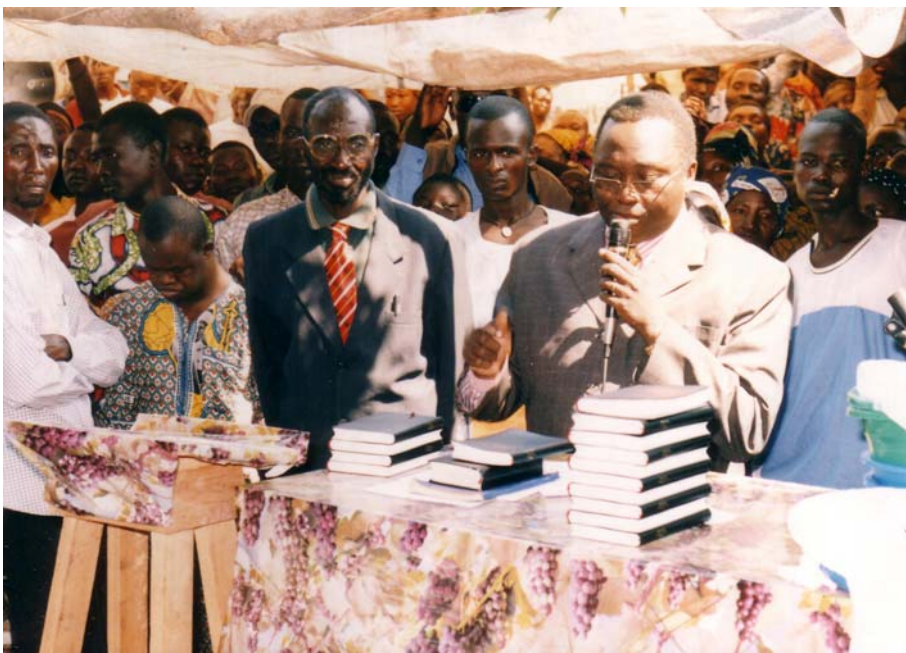
Believers who have never had to read the Bible in anything but their own language find it difficult to experience the feelings of people doing so for the first time: people who, after years of reading Scripture in their second language, with all the doubts, questions and incomplete understanding it brings, now hear God speaking in their own mother tongue.



These people's delight, joy, astonishment and other feelings are rolled up together in the cry, heard so often at the launch of a new translation, "God speaks my language!"

Although such experiences are hardly measured by figures alone, it should be recorded that 13 new Bibles and 17 new New Testaments were registered in the United Bible Societies (UBS) 2008 Scripture Language Report. The Report, updated annually, records new or revised translations of the whole Bible or parts of it which have been received during the year at one of the three Bible deposit libraries.

At least one book of the Bible is now available in 2,479 of the world's languages.



The deeper, closer experience of God engendered simply by having the appropriate translation was well illustrated in November 2008 at the launch of the Sar Bible translation in Southern Chad.

In his address to the hundreds of people present,

the UBS Translation Consultant to the project, Dr Andy Warren-Rothlin, asked why the

UBS bothered to translate the Bible. He answered that rhetorical question with another: “Would a father speak to his children in a foreign language?”

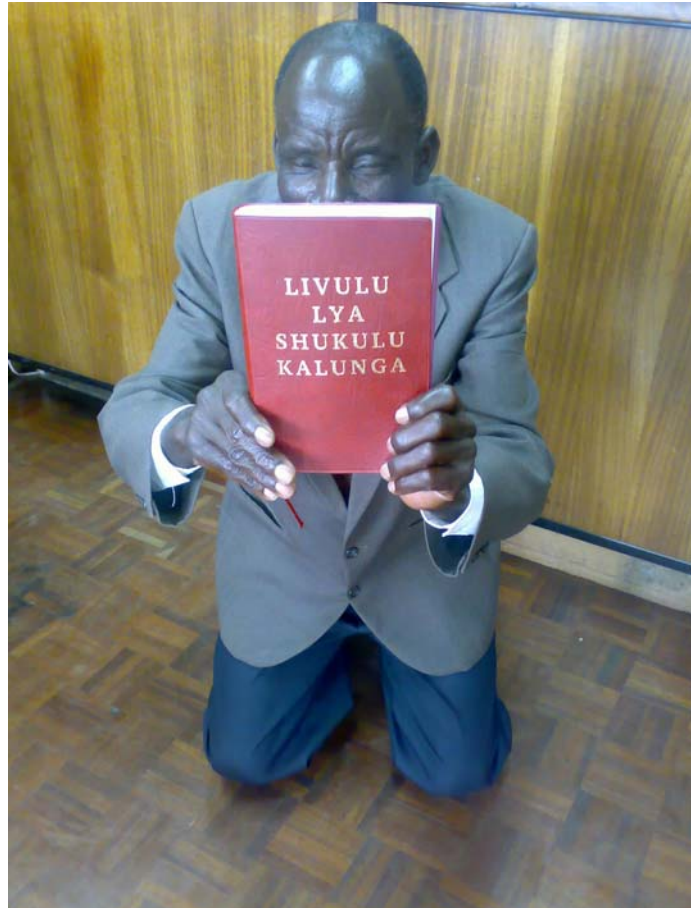
That question speaks volumes about the significance of having the Bible in one’s own first language: more important even than the improved clarity of God’s message is the way it affirms the essential nature of the Christian faith: it is a relationship of children with a Father.

At the launch of the Mbunda Bible in Zambia in August 2008 Peter Kameya Chavaya put it like this.

“Having a Bible in my own language is like being assured that...my tribespeople have the same God as the God of the Bible,” he said.

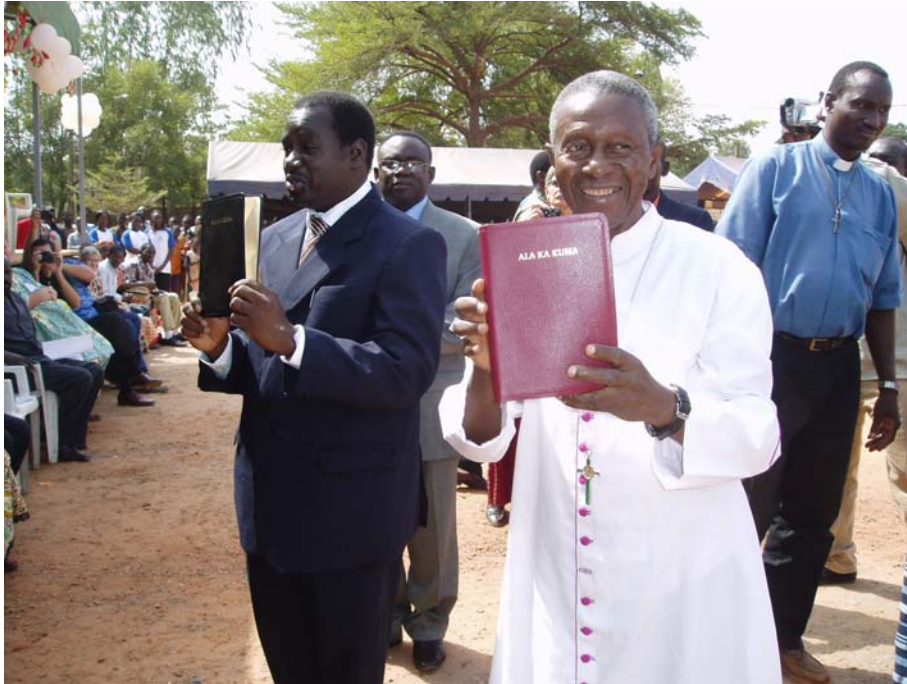
“Like many people who do not have a Bible in their own language,” commented Perdita Chenjela, the Media Officer of the Bible Society of Zambia, “Mr Chavaya had believed that he could never really understand or be understood by God.”

As Mr Chavaya himself put it, “The Word of God was not fully directed at us because we were reading it and relating to its messages in other languages.”



Although a deepened, enhanced relationship with God the Father is the main blessing of a new Bible translation, there are also other – more earthly – benefits.

One is the standard that a Scripture translation plants for a language. A language shown to be capable of conveying the deepest spiritual truths – and deemed worthy to do so – is a language whose speakers, who may for years have been shamed into speaking the majority language in public, only daring to use their own – minority – language at home in private, may at last feel proud.



November 2008 saw the launch of Ala Ka Kuma, the Jula Bible in Burkina Faso. “Ala Ka Kuma is going to strengthen our language!” declared Mgr Anselme Titiamo Sanou, Bobo Dioulasso’s Catholic Archbishop. “This Bible will also enable non-religious Jula-speakers to find the right words and

express themselves better. This is the beginning of Jula literature!”

A bold claim, perhaps but when we consider the influence that a translation such as the King James Bible, now approaching its quatercentenary, had on English language and literature, the idea that a new translation in an African language might have a comparable impact on the culture may not seem so outlandish.

Thus a new Bible translation can strengthen or even pioneer all kinds of counter-cultural initiatives. One is the boost to literacy teaching. Levels of literacy among the potential audiences for a new translation are a key factor in its long-term success, so a Bible Society obviously has an interest in literacy promotion. But it should be said also that the arrival of the first translation of Scripture in a language is a significant spur to people to want to learn to read for first time. Such was the case with the Lari New Testament, launched in the Republic of Congo in October 2008.

With only weeks to go before the launch of the Lari New Testament in Brazzaville, the Bible Society of Congo was greatly encouraged by the enthusiastic response to its Lari literacy training programme.

“I am convinced that the Lari New Testament, combined with literacy training, will bring spiritual revival,” said Abbott Isidore Malonga.

The need to encourage literacy was also a key theme at the launch of the Kono New Testament in Freetown, Sierra Leone. At a launch held in Koidu, eastern Sierra Leone, the Bible was carried along in a hammock, according to the kind of respect given to the Kono chief.



Preaching is another beneficiary. In the case of Yiesu Labarmann Mual Ni, the New Testament in Mual, launched in October 2008 in Togo, the original translator had observed how, during church

services at which Mual-speakers had to listen to the Scriptures of another language interpreted for them, interpreters had trouble putting passages into context. As the pastors become familiar with the new resource, they will find that such problems diminish.

Worship is another aspect of church life where the effects of a new translation are felt. It is not unusual, a little time after the launch of a new translation, to find new worship songs – based on the new text – reinvigorating church worship. In January 2008, the



New Testament in Khassonké was launched in Oussoubidiagna, in a remote part of south west Mali. At the launch service itself the choir sang new songs in Khassonké written by Jean-Marie Kanouté, the principal translator, reflecting the new translation.

So the experiences behind the new Scripture Language Report statistics have already been the cause of rejoicing around the world. But the number of languages in which the complete Bible is available is just 451 – of an estimated 6,900 languages worldwide!

So the translation work, the beating heart of the UBS mission, continues.