

by E. E. Evans-Pritchard

It is well known what confusions and misunderstandings have arisen in the history of Christianity by translations from one language into another. They can be worse when attempts are made to translate religious literature from a European language into languages of peoples with cultures very different from ours, such as the peoples of Africa. I have recently come across an illustration of this in a C.M.S. hymn book in Zande (*Buku Aimina*, The Religious Tract Society, London, n.d.). I shall present a few specimens of translations into this Central African language of familiar verses as examples. Before doing so I should say that Zande is a tonal language and that the translations are made to conform to English metre and to be sung to the English tunes. This in itself is enough to render the hymns more or less meaningless. I am not trying to make fun of the missionaries, for whom I had great respect, but I must say that I am astonished at their attempts not only to translate hymns to be sung to a foreign system of notation but also to translate them, where possible, literally. Thus:

Sun of my soul, thou Saviour dear,
It is not night if thou be near:
O may no earth-born cloud arise
To hide thee from thy servant's eyes.

*Yesu, Uru mbisimore,
Ka Mo du no, yuru o te;
Ka pai ye nga ka oka Ro
Ti bangili vururo ya.*

This would have sounded quite remarkable to an ordinary Zande (one who was not an instructed Christian convert). He could not conceivably have used the sun (*uru*) as a metaphor in this context, and goodness knows what he would have made of *uru mbisimore* (sun of my soul) in his ways of thought! Then *oka* (hide) has the sense in Zande of hiding something or somebody and not at all the sense of concealment which it has in the English hymn. 'Earth-born cloud' has defeated the translator—he makes do with 'may nothing come' (*ka pai ye nga . . . ya*). Then:

There is a green hill far away,
Without a city wall,
Where the dear Lord was crucified
Who died to save us all.

*Gangura du yo tuturu
Pati bakporo yo,
O i a wagi Gbia ni
Na kpi tipa rani.*

I cannot guess what a Zande would make of 'There is a hill far away'—we may be thankful that the translator has not tried to find and put in a word for 'green', for the hill is not green anyway! And what image could a Zande have of *bakporo* (city)?—perhaps a large homesteads of mud and grass huts. The word used for 'crucified' (*wagi*) could not convey to a Zande what it means to us; he has never heard of the practice. Then:

Spirit of purity and grace
Our weakness, pitying, see:
O make our hearts thy dwelling-place,
And worthier thee.

*Ako Ziazia Toro,
Mo ñakasi rani;
Mo sa kptorani yo no
Ni Ga bañe.*

Even if we allow *ziazia* (pure) to be in the sense it has in the hymn (and that is making a very big allowance), and also *bañe* (dwelling-place) to have the required sense, it must be objected that *toro* for the Holy Spirit will just not do. The word *atoro* means ghosts of the dead, a concept in no way corresponding to that of the Holy Spirit; and in any case, though *toro* would be the singular form of the word if it had one, it has, like the Latin *manes*, no singular form. So all in all it could mean to a Zande nothing of what the hymn is intended to mean.

Of course a literal translation is sometimes impossible without making unintelligible gibberish, a difficulty which the missionaries realized they could not overcome; though in that case one wonders why anyone should want to render a hymn into Zande at all. Thus, to give one example:

While shepherds watched their flocks by night,
All seated on the ground,
The angel of the Lord came down,
And glory shone around.

Now, the Azande have no flocks and no shepherds and no words for either; nor have they any word for angel (the missionaries used *malaika*, taken from Arabic) and glory could scarcely shine around. So somebody has written a new hymn to be sung to the same tune, the first verse of which I give with a translation:

*Awili Azande nga ani,
Ani ye awere
Ka tambua Barani, na fu
Wiliko areme.*

We are Azande,
We have come now
To praise our Father, who gave
His son today.

A few examples have been given—many more could be. Is it surprising that an ordinary Zande could not make head or tail of what it was all about? Translating the Bible into an African language is a tough enough task, and one is lost in amazement at the naïvety of people who add to it by trying to translate also the English hymnal with all its cultural idioms, metaphors and nuances into a language which has quite different ones—a language of a people, moreover, of whose ways of thought the missionary may have a very inadequate knowledge.

I suppose that something of this kind has been going on throughout the missionary world and it might well have the attention of the anthropologist where he is qualified to express an opinion on the semantic difficulties involved and the consequences of their not being sufficiently recognized and allowed for. But, so far as I know, no such study, a study in which anthropology, linguistics and missiology would overlap, has ever been made; and, of course, some very broad historical issues would have to be considered, such as what has Europe made of Christian thought and in what politico-cultural complex have her missionaries, not always well educated and sometimes bursting with a feeling of superiority (a sort of colonialist religiosity), tried to impose on those who in one way or another were subjected to their instruction.