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Semiotics of alterity and the cultural dimensions of Bible translation¹

ABSTRACT

Translated sacred writings from various religious traditions often retain a few selected cultural terms borrowed from the incipient sign system, while other cultural dimensions are translated in ways that can broadly be construed as domestication. By contrast, many Bible translation agencies eschew translation strategies in which cultural terms are borrowed, advocating instead for wholesale domestication. In this article, we develop a theoretical framework for representing the alterity, but not the foreignness, of the Bible in translation. Alterity involves the incipient sign system, namely the biblical languages and their cultural contexts ranging from Iron Age Israel within the context of the Ancient Near East for the Old Testament to Roman Palestine in the first century for the New Testament. Examples from African contexts, including Afrikaans (South Africa), Lokaa (Nigeria) and Tira (Sudan), illustrate multiple approaches to representing alterity and provide an important corrective to current practice in many Bible translation projects.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In translating the Bible, a collection of sacred writings originating in the ancient Mediterranean world and spanning more than half a millennium, the cultural dimensions of these texts play a central role. The aspects of culture that must be identified within the incipient sign system (or source text; see Marais 2019:53, 75) are pervasive and include the following cultural categories (Newmark 1988:103): ecology (for example, animals, plants, local winds); material culture (artefacts) (for example, food, clothes, housing, and so on); social culture (for example, work, leisure, names); organisations, customs, ideas (for example, political, social, legal, religious), and gestures and habits. Furthermore, some cultural dimensions within the incipient sign system serve as “rich points of culture”, that is, they are particularly important indicators of culture (Nord 2018:23-24).

In contrast to many modern translations of the Bible, translations of sacred writings from other religious traditions often involve the borrowing of key religious and cultural terms in the translation by a strategy of transliteration. For example, English translations of Hindu religious texts regularly use important Sanskrit religious terms in transliteration rather than offering an English equivalent. To take only one term, the Sanskrit word *dharma* (literally “what is right, a holy duty”) refers, on the one hand, to what is set down in the sacred writings themselves, the laws and religious assumptions on which these laws are based, the form of things as they are, and the power that keeps them as they are. On the other hand, it encompasses aspects of religious and traditional thought and is more readily used for religion (Zaehner 1966:2-5). By retaining the Sanskrit word embedded within the religious text in multiple contexts, the English translation provides a window into the incipient sign system and its cultural and conceptual world. It is important to note, however, that most of the translations of sacred writings retain only a few select key cultural/religious terms from the incipient sign system in the translation; other cultural dimensions are translated in ways that can broadly be construed as domestication (Naudé & Miller-Naudé 2019a). By contrast, many Bible translation agencies eschew translation strategies in which foreign terms are incorporated into the translation, unless the term is indigenised by accompanying it with a descriptive explanatory phrase or including a more general term with the foreign word that explains the semantic field of the foreign term (Barnwell 1986:42-44).

This article is an update of an unpublished article by Naudé *et al.* (2018), which forms part of our research to find ways to represent linguistic, literary, and socio-historical aspects of alterity or “otherness”, but not the foreignness, in an accessible and intelligible way without domesticating the translation and to include the full spectrum of cultural terms and concepts in the biblical

text. Miller-Naudé & Naudé (2019:290) argued for alterity as conceptualised by Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), the French philosopher and Talmudic commentator. Accordingly, alterity lies in the moral transcendence of the other and in taking responsibility for the other, which means that the other must be viewed with respect and that it is of the highest importance to understand one's humanity through the humanity of others. In other words, alterity is based on the irreducibility of the other (Levinas [1995]/1999; [1972]/2006). Makutoane *et al.* (2015) as well as in Naudé and Miller-Naudé (2018) considered the translation of biblical texts with an oral basis and their translation for oral African cultures by recognising aspects of similarity and alterity between the biblical incipient sign system and the subsequent culture. Naudé & Miller-Naudé (2019c) considered how the alterity of the Bible could be presented intelligibly within a Muslim-majority context. Naudé & Miller-Naudé (2019b, 2020), considered the question of the representation of alterity in ancient Bible translations, especially the Septuagint.

In this article, we explore aspects of alterity and its representation in the biblical text, in order to develop a semiotics for representing the alterity of the Bible in translation (based on Naudé 2010 and Miller-Naudé & Naudé 2019). The analysis involves examples from incipient sign systems of the languages of the biblical text, including the various cultural contexts of the Bible, ranging from Iron Age Israel within the context of the Ancient Near East for the Old Testament to Roman Palestine in the 1st century for the New Testament. The proposed theoretical framework will be illustrated with data from African contexts: Afrikaans (South Africa), Lokaa (Nigeria) (Obono 2016), and Tira (Sudan). The practical implications of the article for the representative of alterity in Bible translation will provide an important counterpart to the current practice of many Bible translation agencies working in Africa.

The article is organised as follows. In section two, a historical overview is provided of the ways in which alterity has been represented in Bible translation. In section three, the focus is on the development of a semiotic model to handle alterity without domesticating the translation. In section four, the theoretical model is illustrated with examples from Lokaa and Tira.

2. ACCOMMODATING ALTERITY IN BIBLE TRANSLATION

Until the 1950s, Bible translations were characterised as formally equivalent (*i.e.* word-for-word or literal). Examples include the English King James Bible (KJV) (1611) and the Dutch Authoritative translation (*Statenvertaling*) (1637), as well as the first Bible translations in many African languages produced mainly by missionary societies, including Sesotho (1909) and Xitsonga

(1929). In these translations, some cultural terms appear as loanwords or transliterations (Naudé 2005e:3), following a foreignisation strategy, with the result that the translations remain inaccessible and unintelligible. For example, the Biblical Hebrew term אֶלְמֻגִים, the name of a tree species occurring three times in 1 Kings 10:11, 12, is translated using transliteration in many languages. The English King James Bible (1611) has *almug trees*; the Dutch Authoritative version (1637) translates *almuggimhout* (“almuggim wood”), and the 1909 Sesotho translation (both Standard and Lesotho orthographies) has *almuge*. Thus, the Hebrew term was transferred into these translations. Similarly, the term אֶלְגוּמִים occurring three times in 2 Chronicles 2:8; 9:10, 11, is translated as *algum trees* in the King James Bible and as *alummimhout* (“alummim wood”) in the Dutch Authoritative translation. However, in the 1909 Sesotho translation (both Standard and Lesotho orthographies), the translation term *almuge*, which is used to translate אֶלְמֻגִים in 1 Kings 10:11-12, is also used for אֶלְגוּמִים in 2 Chronicles 2:8; 9:10, 11. Although the Biblical Hebrew terms אֶלְמֻגִים and אֶלְגוּמִים are both translated with the same term *sandalwood* in the 1929 Xitsonga translation (*sandal*) and the 1933 Afrikaans translation (and its 1953 revision) (*sandelhout*), the translations only reflect the alterity of אֶלְמֻגִים in 1 Kings 10:11-12.

In the second part of the 20th century, a primary concern for meaning and readability resulted in the trend to produce translations that are more reflective of dynamic equivalence than formal equivalence. Examples are the *Today's English Version* (TEV), known as the *Good News Bible* (GNB) (1976), the *Nuwe Afrikaanse Vertaling* (New Afrikaans Version) (1983), and many Bible translations into African languages by various Bible societies, for example the 1989 Xitsonga and the 1989 Sesotho translations (Naudé 2005e:3-4).

In the 1989 Xitsonga translation, the terms אֶלְמֻגִים and אֶלְגוּמִים are both indigenised as *mondzo*, with a footnote at the word *mondzo* to indicate that the incipient language term is *almugu*. *Mondzo* refers to the *Combretum imberbe* (English *lead wood* or Afrikaans *hardekool*), a medium to large, semi-deciduous tree in Southern Africa that grows up to twenty metres in height. Although the wood is very hard and tough and is used for furniture, sculptures, and firewood, it is not as precious as sandalwood or juniper wood and does not meet the description of אֶלְמֻגִים as “the finest ... wood ever imported into Israel” (1 Kings 10:12). In the 1989 Sesotho translation (both Standard and Lesotho orthographies), the terms אֶלְמֻגִים and אֶלְגוּמִים are both translated as *alemaka*, a revision of the loan word *almuge* that was used in the 1909 Sesotho translation to better reflect the phonological structure of Sesotho (Mabile & Dieterlen 1961:6). A foreignisation strategy was followed, with the result that the translations remain inaccessible and unintelligible.

Although the biblical Hebrew terms אֶלְמוֹגִים and אֶלְגוּמִים are both translated with the same term *juniper* in the *Good News Bible* (1976) and the 1983 Afrikaans translation (*jenewer*), the translations only reflect the alterity of the term אֶלְגוּמִים occurring three times in 2 Chronicles 2:8; 9:10, 11. These practices suppressed the linguistic and cultural differences of the incipient text, by assimilating it to dominant values in the subsequent (or target; see Marais 2019:53, 75) language culture. A domestication strategy is followed, which makes the translations accessible, but the alterity is lost.

At the turn of the millennium, translations with communication as their primary function were created (normally a rewriting of an existing translation in a modern vernacular by a single translator/editor), for example, *The Message* in English (2002) and *Die Boodskap* in Afrikaans (2002) (Naudé 2005e:4-5). The Biblical Hebrew terms אֶלְמוֹגִים and אֶלְגוּמִים are both translated with the same term *juniper* in *Die Boodskap* (*jenewerhout*) but as *sandalwood* in *The Message*. In 2 Chronicles 2:8, *Die Boodskap* and *The Message* translate אֶלְגוּמִים as *ander edelhoutsoorte* (“other types of precious wood”) and *algum logs*, respectively. It is a combination of the strategies of the previous era and the following era described in the next paragraph – alterity is still lost.

A new trend in Bible translation in the first two decades of the 21st century is a shift away from the typical dynamic equivalence approach of Bible translations in the second half of the 20th century by the instilling of a new awareness in the minds of the readers to the sociocultural distance between them and the incipient culture (Naudé 2005e:5-9). This results in translations that facilitate reading, on the one hand, and restore cultural knowledge, on the other. A recent example is the *New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition* (NRSVue 2022) within the Tyndale-King James Version tradition (Miller-Naudé & Naudé 2022:6-9). In 1 Kings 10:11-12, אֶלְמוֹגִים is translated as *almug wood*, whereas אֶלְגוּמִים is translated as *algum timber* in 2 Chronicles 2:8 and as *algum wood* in 2 Chronicles 9:10-11. The updated *New International Version of the Bible* (NIV) of 2011, a translation in global literary English independent from the King James Version tradition, follows a similar strategy with *almug-wood* in 1 Kings 10:11-12; *algum logs* in 2 Chronicles 2:8, and *algum-wood* in 2 Chronicles 9:10-11. However, in each case, a footnote is added that the form used in that case is probably a variant of the other form (Naudé 2021:108-110). A foreignisation strategy is followed, which makes the translations inaccessible and unintelligible.

An important question is whether the biblical Hebrew terms אֶלְמוֹגִים and אֶלְגוּמִים have the same referent. Some scholars opine that the same word is intended – the difference is caused by the inversion of the two consonants *mem* and *gimel* (Noonan 2019:54-55; Greenfield & Mayrhofer 1967:83-89). Some botanical commentators consider the two terms to refer to the same tree and identify them as of unknown origin or as red sandalwood, white

sandalwood, or the Phoenician juniper; for example, according to Zohary (1982), the trees are the same, that is, red sandalwood (also called red saunders) from India (via Ophir). The locality of origin of the two timbers – one from Ophir (1 Kings 10:11) and the other from Lebanon (2 Chronicles 2:8) – presupposes two different trees. Following Moldenke and Moldenke (1952), Hepper (1993) identifies אֶלְמוֹנִים as sandalwood and אֶלְגֹּמִים as the *Juniperus excelsa* of Lebanon. According to 1 Kings 10:11, the origin of the shipment of אֶלְמוֹנִים by Solomon is specified as Ophir (likely a place on the southern coast of the Arabian Peninsula). Candidates for the wood that Solomon imported are *Santalum album* (sandalwood) or *Pterocarpus santalinus* (rosewood, also known as red saunders or red sandalwood), which is native to the Indian subcontinent, and not *juniper*. This costly wood is highly valued for its beautiful colour, grain, and scent as well as its woodworking qualities. It is the source of one of the most valuable oils used in the perfume and incense trade. By contrast, according to 2 Chronicles 2:8, אֶלְגֹּמִים is from Lebanon and the logs must specifically be cut from Mount Lebanon. The tree is best identified as *Juniperus phoenicea excelsa*, which is a timber tree, growing at higher elevation in the Lebanon and Amanus ranges. Juniper should also be associated with the Hebrew term אֶלְגֹּמִים in 2 Chronicles 9:10, 11. King Hiram brought gold from Ophir and *algum* wood (but the locality is not mentioned). In 1 Kings 9:10, however, we find that Hiram sent *almug* wood as well as precious stones from Ophir. To conclude, אֶלְגֹּמִים is used in 2 Chronicles 9:10, 11 to be consistent with 2 Chronicles 2:8 and is understood to be the same species, namely juniper. This wood was a valuable type of timber.

The discipline of Biblical Plant Hermeneutics puts the taxonomy of flora on a strong ethnological and ethnobotanical basis, by studying each plant *in situ* and by gathering indigenous knowledge about the plant and its uses, as well as its context in the biblical text (see Naudé *et al.* 2015; 2021). This implies that it is possible to determine the metaphorical and symbolic uses of flora contextually, but consonant with the Israelite classification and valorisation of the plants. This knowledge supports the understanding of the alterity of flora. An example of a Bible translation that reflects the alterity of flora is the 2020 Afrikaans Bible translation. In 1 Kings 9:11-12, the term אֶלְמוֹנִים is translated as *sandelhout* (“sandalwood”), whereas in 2 Chronicles 2:8 and 9:10-11, the term אֶלְגֹּמִים is translated as *jenewerhout* (“juniper wood”). The alterity is retained and creates an accessible and intelligible reading.

In the next section, we argue that both strategies – domestication and foreignisation – must be accommodated simultaneously. In light of our concept of alterity, ways must be found to make the translation accessible and intelligible for the reader without domesticating the translation to read like an original text. We will demonstrate that an integrated solution can be found in the semiotics of alterity.

3. EMERGENCE OF THE SEMIOTICS OF ALTERTY

In examining how alterity of the biblical incipient text can be represented in translation, we are working towards a theoretical model that is based on complexity thinking, as expounded principally by Marais (2014:15-45). This model has implications for the reductionist, linear paradigm that is prevalent in religious translation, in general, and Bible translation, in particular.

The reductionist strategies of indigenisation and foreignisation, as well as the matter of hegemony in translation relate to Schleiermacher's important publication *Über die verschiedenen Methoden des Übersetzens* (1813), in which he describes two kinds of translation – that in which a text is brought to a reader (indigenisation) or the reader is taken to a text (foreignisation).

The first way in which the translator as an agent of cultural mediation can avoid the reductionist strategies of either indigenisation or foreignisation is by accommodating both strategies (domestication and foreignisation) simultaneously (Miller-Naudé & Naudé 2010). The active hand of the translator in intercultural communication is evident in situations involving asymmetrical power relationships (Naudé 2005a, 2005b, 2005c). In translating from a hegemonic incipient culture such as English into a dominated subsequent culture such as Sesotho, a translator from the dominated subsequent culture must apply strategies to overcome cultural exclusion. With respect to the hegemonic culture, these strategies may include subversion, adaptation, or localisation of the hegemonic incipient culture; with respect to the dominated subsequent culture, these strategies might include rehabilitation or enrichment (Mlonyeni & Naudé 2004; Naudé 2005d; 2007).

HEGEMONIC incipient culture → DOMINATED subsequent culture

subverted

rehabilitated

adapted

enriched

localised

Conversely, to translate from a dominated incipient culture (for example, Sesotho) into a hegemonic subsequent culture (English), the dominated incipient culture must be maintained or globalised and the hegemonic subsequent culture must be resisted (Naudé 2005d; 2007).

DOMINATED incipient culture → HEGEMONIC subsequent culture

maintained

resisted

globalised

By maintaining a paradoxical, complex relationship between incipient texts and subsequent texts, the translation is, therefore, neither foreignising nor domesticating, but rather opening up the cultural world of meaning found in both incipient and subsequent texts to the reader.

The second way to make the alterity of an incipient text accessible and intelligible in the translation is through the use of explanatory annotations in the form of metatexts (or paratexts), that is, supplementary material accompanying the translation such as footnotes, introductions, illustrations, and glossaries (for example, Naudé & Miller-Naudé 2019c). As an example of this approach, we consider Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, where the Greek word ζιζάνιον is used to refer to the weed that the enemy has sowing with the wheat seed. There is no general word for weed in Greek, so the term ζιζάνιον must refer to a specific weed. According to Musselman (2012:133-134), this plant has all the characteristics of a segetal weed, that is, a weed that is adapted to grain crops, and has a life cycle consonant with that of the crop – they germinate at the same time, mature at the same time, and have nutritional requirements in common. The weed that best fits these requirements is the very common *Lolium temulentum*, which has numerous common names, namely darnel, bearded darnel, or darnel ryegrass. It is an annual grass native to western Asia, reaches 30-60 centimeters (1-2 feet) in height, and has spread throughout the world. Koops (2012) agrees with this identification and adds that darnel looks so much like emmer wheat that it is very difficult to distinguish the two. In addition, evidence from Egyptian tombs and from excavations at Lachish tell us that darnel grass has been a pest for at least three millennia. By translating ζιζάνιον with the generic term “weed” (as in most of the Bible translations such as the *New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition* [NRSVue 2022]) makes the translations accessible, but the alterity is lost. The English Standard Version (ESV 2016) translates “weeds” in Matthew 13:25, but adds a footnote: Probably darnel, a wheat-like weed. The 2020 Afrikaans Bible translates ζιζάνιον as *drabok* (“darnel”) and adds a footnote *’n Eenjarige onkruidgras, Lolium temelentum, wat soos koring lyk* (“An annual weed grass *Lolium temelentum*, which looks like wheat”). Although *drabok* appears in Afrikaans dictionaries and is referred to in literary works, it is not widely known and a footnote is necessary to explain the term for the reader. To assist the reader in understanding that *drabok* must be understood as a type of *onkruid* (“weed”), the general term *onkruid* is used in the heading of the pericope instead of *drabok*.

A third way to handle the alterity is by utilising the nature of signs. In light of Naudé (2010), we expand the work of Marais (2014:46-73), which explores primarily the indexical nature of signs, to include all three of Peirce's seminal notions of signs as icon, index, or symbol (see Naudé 2010). We preliminarily identify tokens of alterity as having aspects of an *iconic translation*, in which one or more aspects of the alterity of the incipient text are mimetically represented. An *indexical translation* is one in which the translation points to some aspect of the alterity of the incipient text without representing it directly. A *symbolic translation* is one in which the alterity of the incipient text is represented with a conventional or arbitrary pairing of form and meaning. We also draw upon some of the notions of translation within the field of cultural semiotics and especially the work of Sonessen on the semiotics of translation. Sonessen (2014) argues that translation must be viewed as a double act of communication. The translator "is a doubly active agent", an interpreter of the incipient text, and the creator of a new text; "he or she is the receiver of one act of communication and the sender of another one" (Sonessen 2014:264). There is both a hermeneutic dimension and a rhetorical dimension involved in both acts of communication.

Our approach to the semiotics of alterity aims to include the full spectrum of foreign cultural terms and concepts in the biblical text. We, therefore, expand the cultural dimensions of Newmark (1988:103) mentioned earlier as follows, in order to categorise all of the cultural terms in the incipient text languages of the Old and New Testaments:

- a. Ecology – flora, fauna, landforms (e.g. mountain, river);
- b. Material culture – artefacts (personal); food and drink; clothing; architecture of houses and temples (buildings and structures) and their furnishings; musical instruments; offerings (e.g. sacrifices); weapons; transport; money, currency; measurements (distance and length, volume, weights);
- c. Social culture – forms of address (e.g. greetings); names; festivals; occupations;
- d. Organisations and office holders – political; military; social; judicial; religious;
- e. Gestures, habits, customs, and expressions;
- f. Ideas – world view; values; ideals; designations of time (e.g. minutes, hour, days, months).

With this background, we are ready to describe our current research on alterity in Bible translation, drawing upon the data collected by our former postgraduate student and co-author, John Ofem Obono, from the New Testament translation

in his language, Lokaa in Southern Nigeria,² as well as some data from the translation of Genesis into Tira, a Nuba Mountain language of Sudan.³ One important fact to note about both translations is that they were produced using translations as the incipient text – the English translation of the NIV (New International Version) in the case of Lokaa and a selection of both Arabic and English literal and dynamic equivalence translations in the case of Tira. This results in an additional layer of complexity in the representation of alterity that must be examined.

4. ILLUSTRATION OF THE SEMIOTICS OF ALTERITY

We begin with a selection of cultural items in the New Testament as translated into Lokaa.

The plant term “hyssop” is an iconic translation into English of the Greek ὕσσωπος, which is itself a translation of the Hebrew חַיִּסּוֹף in the Septuagint.⁴ In Lokaa, the translators used the word *yisoki*, which is the name of a local bitter herb that is used for ritual cleansing in the traditional religion. It was, therefore, perceived by the translators as functionally adequate for “hyssop”. The translation is thus symbolic in that it uses an indigenous Lokaa botanical term and simultaneously indexical in that the translators believed that the translation points to the functional significance of the incipient term.

The Greek plant term *κριθίνους* is translated “barley” in English and occurs in John 6:9 in the phrase “barley loaves”. Barley is not known in the Lokaa area, so the translators used a phrase meaning “rice of barley” (*elesi ya abali*). In substituting rice – a known plant – as the type of grain, the translators used a symbolic translation, which obscured the alterity of the incipient term. But, by modifying the expression as “rice of barley”, the translators used an iconic translation with respect to the representation of the English incipient term *barley* (contrast the Greek *κριθίνους*). The rendering expresses something of the alterity of the incipient text, while retaining intelligibility.

Grain presents another problem for the translators because the Lokaa do not have a general name for grains. The translators adapted the term “seeds

2 The *Ethnologue* (Eberhard *et al.* 2023) identifies the linguistic affiliation of Lokaa as: Niger-Congo, Atlantic-Congo, Volta-Congo, Benue-Congo, Cross River, Delta Cross, Upper Cross, Central, East-West, Loko.

3 The *Ethnologue* (Eberhard *et al.* 2023) identifies Tira as a Niger-Congo, Kordofanian language of Janub Kurdufan state in Sudan.

4 For the philological history and botanical identification of the term, see Naudé *et al.* (2021).

for food” (*ntimumma lujia*) since Lokaa does have specific terms for maize and rice that can be described as grains. The translators thus employed symbolic translation by using “seeds” for “grain”. But the expression can also be described as indexical in that it re-contextualises the term “seeds” as being “for food” rather its implicit use “for planting”.

In translating the botanical term for fig tree, the Lokaa translators noted that they could not use the name of their local fig *kəkamati*, which is very close to the fig family but only a shrub. This is because of the appearance of the Greek term for fig tree, *συκῆ*, in verses such as John 1:48, where the fig tree is an enjoyable place for sitting in the shade. The Lokaa translators decided to use an iconic translation of the English “fig”, which they indigenised as *figi* in Lokaa. Since the term *figi* could not easily be connected to the indigenous term *kəkamati*, readers would not have difficulty with passages such as John 1:48, in which people sit under the fig tree.

A number of plant products in the New Testament were also culturally unknown to the Lokaa. The term “myrrh” is an unknown plant product. Because a distinctive feature of myrrh is its aroma, the translators used the phrase *yamle bə maar* “oil of myrrh” in Revelation 18:13 to imply a sweet-smelling ointment. This is an iconic translation with respect to the retention of phonological aspects of the incipient language term “myrrh” (Greek *μύρον*), but indexical in the addition of “oil”, which implies an aromatic oil relating to the culturally unknown term myrrh.

Frankincense is also a plant product that was used for a highly prized type of incense in the ancient Near East. The Lokaa translators rendered this term with the phrase “sap of incense” (*ebəəm ya insensii*). In this case, the phrase that they chose to use focuses on the origin of incense as a plant product derived from the sap of a tree. This is a symbolic translation. However, they modified the indigenous term “sap” with “of incense”, using a transliteration of the English word “incense” in Lokaa, an iconic translation.

Some cultural terms in the New Testament function in multiple semiotic ways in the incipient text. One such term is the Greek *φυλακτήρια*, which is rendered in the English NIV incipient text as “phylacteries”, an iconic translation of the Greek. The Lokaa translators, however, used an indexical translation “boxes where words are written” (*yakubeen bə yafongi kaa likaa*), describing the appearance of the item rather than its function; contrast the New Living Translation (2004) “prayer boxes”, that is, boxes used while praying, a translation that describes another aspect of the item. The phylactery contained portions of scripture and was bound with a leather strap to the head or arm of the Jewish man during prayer as ritualist expression of Deuteronomy 6:8, in which Moses commands the people of Israel that God’s words should

be “bound as a sign on your hand and as frontlets between your eyes”. By employing an indexical translation of the alterity of the Greek term, the Lokaa translators were able to convey only one aspect of its alterity and arguably not the most important aspect of its alterity. An iconic translation, such as was mentioned in the introduction for the Buddhist term *dharma*, allows multiple aspects of the alterity of a term to be conveyed in the translation.

We turn now to two terms involving material culture. In Acts 27, the Apostle Paul is a passenger on a ship. In Lokaa, the term used for a ship literally means “English boat” (*ukalangwaa*). It is a morphologically compound word comprised of the words for “English person” (*Okalang*) and “canoe” (*ukwaa*). The term was not coined for the Bible translation, but rather originated in colonial times when the English arrived in Nigeria on ships. The indigenous term for a canoe was modified to represent the large, ocean-going ship of the English. The use of the term in the New Testament is a symbolic translation, in which there are overtones of its alterity.

The term for canoe is also used in a new compound in the New Testament in Acts 8:28, where the Greek term *ἄρμα* (“chariot”) is found. The Lokaa represents this culturally unknown item with the phrase “canoe that is driven by horses” or “horse-driven canoe” (*ukwaa wā nyanyang ntuuli*). In this case, the translators decided that the canoe was the most common indigenous item for transport, thus employing a symbolic translation. By specifying that it is “horse-driven”, the translators re-contextualise the item as moving not on water but being pulled by horses on a road.

A final Lokaa example involves the common expression that Jesus used to describe himself, namely *ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου* “son of man” (e.g. Matthew 8:20). In Lokaa, this epithet was translated with the phrase “son of a person” (*wēen wā ɔnɛn*). This translation is symbolic in that it uses indigenous Lokaa words. However, since the publication of the New Testament in 2006, this phrase has gained popularity within contemporary Lokaa society as an expression to describe an important person whose career is going well. In the New Testament, the phrase “son of man” is used to describe Jesus as prototypically human, but the Lokaa phrase is now being used to describe an exceptional person in Lokaa society.

We close with a phenomenon relating to alterity that is often overlooked in translation, namely what we will provisionally call the “alterisation” of the subsequent translation. By this we mean that the choice of the translators to translate in such a way that their translation highlights or expands the distance of the subsequent text from the incipient text. We encountered this in the translation of Genesis in Tira, a language of the Nuba Mountains in Sudan. The Tira are about evenly divided as Muslims and Christians. The Christian

community is under extraordinary pressure from the Sudanese government, which has pursued a policy of one nation, one language (Arabic), and one religion (Islam). As a result, it was the decision of the Tira language committee that the orthography for writing their previously un-written language would use the Roman alphabet rather than the Arabic alphabet. They also decided that the Bible translation should not use any words that had their basis in Arabic. For example, in translating the term מִצְרַיִם (“Egypt”), the Tira translation does not use the indigenous Tira term, which is derived from the Arabic, but rather the term *ljip* (e.g. Genesis 12:10), which is derived from the English. However, when Hebrew מִצְרַיִם is used to refer to the eponymous ancestor of Egypt (Genesis 10:11, 13) or as part of the geographical name אֶבְל מִצְרַיִם (Genesis 50:11), the term is translated with *Mizrayim*, a transliteration of the Hebrew. Similarly, in translating the name of the Israelite patriarch, the Tira name *Ibrahim* was not used, because it has its origins in Arabic, but rather *Abram* for Hebrew אַבְרָם and *Abaram* for Hebrew אַבְרָהָם (e.g. Genesis 17:5). This decision concerning translation strategy has the advantage of producing a translation with maximal distance from Arabic, with the simultaneous disadvantage that it does not directly connect places and names in the Bible with their indigenous Tira equivalent. This results in making opaque the fact that the location of *ljip*, a land mentioned in the Bible, is identical to the country north of Sudan, which many Tira people have visited. The Tira strategy of alterisation thus involves an iconic translation of an English incipient text for ideological reasons, at the expense of a symbolic translation that would allow for the proximity of their geography and culture to the world of the Bible.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The representation of alterity in Bible translation is a complex phenomenon, in which one or more of the aspects of signs as icon, index, and symbol may play a role. The use of translations as incipient texts for translations in Africa may further provide opportunities for iconic translations which link the translations and the communities who read them to languages of broader communication. However, the alterity of the translation with respect to the culture within which it is produced may also be highlighted, as in the case of the Tira, where indigenous terms with Arabic etymologies are avoided at the expense of the intelligibility of the biblical text within its cultural context. The representation of alterity is not neutral with respect to either the agency of the translator or the ideology of the translation. By employing Peirce’s seminal concepts of the sign as icon, index, and symbol within complexity thinking, it is possible to shed additional light on the multifaceted nature of alterity in Bible translation.

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Keywords

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