

## TRANSLATIONS OF ברית AND διαθήκη 'COVENANT' INTO AFRICAN LANGUAGES: A SURVEY

Stuart J Foster  
Ancient Studies  
Stellenbosch University

---

### Abstract

*Twentieth century translations of the biblical Hebrew term ברית, 'covenant', (and its New Testament Greek equivalent, διαθήκη) into thirty-five African languages with about 68 million speakers tend to be quite weak, relying heavily on neologisms and neglecting the relationships and oath commitment implied in the term's ancient Near Eastern context. Translators and theologians in Africa should take corrective measures, such as linking oaths with kinship-type obligations.*

**Keywords:** Covenant, Bible Translation, African Languages, Oaths

### Introduction

This article surveys translations of the biblical Hebrew term ברית, 'covenant' (and its New Testament Greek equivalent διαθήκη) into thirty-five African languages with about 68 million speakers and finds a fairly consistent pattern of weakness. Key aspects of the term in its ancient Near Eastern context are neglected. Given the foundational role of Bible translations for theology in any language and the structuring role of covenantal concepts in the biblical text, translators and theologians in Africa should take corrective measures, perhaps using phrases linking oaths with kinship-type obligations.

A Bible translation is the foundational work of theology in any language. The words chosen for key biblical concepts align, albeit imperfectly,<sup>1</sup> the worldviews of biblical authors and of the people who speak that language. For most African Christians, a Bible translation is the only work of theology they ever read or hear read. The Bible as translated is, at least in principle, the core of preaching and teaching in most denominations and sects, the source from which oral theology flows. As Lamin Sanneh has argued (1989:3, 174-190; 2002:85; cf. also Parratt 1995:55; Mbiti 1994:27), Bible translation is a great Christian distinctive, an affirmation that God's truth can be communicated to people of every language and culture. Despite this, Bible translations are inevitably full of compromises. Highlighting these and the ensuing weaknesses pinpoints where corrective action is needed.

### Definition used

This article assumes a prototypical definition of the biblical Hebrew term ברית, 'covenant' in its ancient Near Eastern context as: 1) a chosen 2) relationship of 3) mutual obligation 4) guaranteed by oath sanctions. This definition is elaborated and defended elsewhere (Foster

---

<sup>1</sup> Examples of the match and mismatch of Biblical terms for God, spirit, Holy Spirit, etc. with key terms in four distinct African languages can be found in Stine and Wendland (1990:131-222). For a discussion that takes seriously both cultural difference and the possibility of real communication in an African context, see Wendland (1987, esp. 1-58).

2005:16-23; cf. Hugener 1998:167-215). The basic concept is what Cross calls 'kinship-in-law' (1998:6-7). Despite the prominence of treaty forms, both in the Old Testament and in scholarship, they are a subset of this larger concept. Covenant was a means of making people who were unrelated, effectively family. This is the background within which attempts to translate ברית, 'covenant' in specific texts from biblical Hebrew into contemporary African languages must move and by which they may be evaluated. This article does not defend *covenant* as the best translation of ברית into English, but uses it as an established technical term.

### Survey Approach and Limitations

To gather data, questions were distributed by e-mail to contacts of the author's involved in translation work in Africa, primarily associated with the United Bible Societies and/or the evangelical mission SIM.

A survey sacrifices depth for breadth by its very nature. This survey suffers from several other limitations as well. No attempt was made to achieve a truly representative sample, with translations from the language groups that make up the majority of African Christians. Most of those reporting are involved or have been involved in Bible translation projects. While this gives the credibility of insider knowledge to their comments, it also skews the results to give more prominence to recent translations, which are often for smaller language groups. Thus translations with wider influence on African Christians are possibly under-represented. Linguistically, focus on the translation of a single word or pair of words can also obscure the fact that a concept can be present and powerful even when the specific word is not used. This is particularly problematic with a term like *covenant*, with its structuring role in biblical theology. (Several survey respondents note the need to use phrases according to context, not just fixed terms.) The curtness of the survey format may also obscure the full semantic ranges of the terms used in translation. Survey results are, therefore, suggestive only.

It should be noted that many languages do not have complete Bible translations. Where only New Testament translations were available, translations of the Greek term  $\delta\iota\alpha\theta\eta\kappa\eta$  were used. This is the term consistently used by the first Bible translators, those of the Septuagint, as the Greek equivalent of Hebrew term ברית, 'covenant'.

### Survey Results

Survey results for thirty-five languages are summarized on the following pages (in alphabetical order by language name). The languages are broadly distributed, from western, eastern and southern Africa, and represent about 68 million speakers (almost 100 million if second language speakers are included). The language names are those supplied by the survey respondents. Grimes (1992) lists alternatives. The data for numbers of speakers are taken from Grimes, and refer only to mother tongue speakers. Also from Grimes in most cases is the date of publication of the Scripture translation (=date). In many cases the date cited is not that of a full Bible. It has not been possible to indicate this consistently. The abbreviation 'wip' in the date column stands for 'work in progress.' These are current translation projects. In some cases portions will have already been published, in others not. Under 'Translation(s),' the major term used to translate ברית/ $\delta\iota\alpha\theta\eta\kappa\eta$  is in capital letters. Under 'English' is a relatively literal back translation of these terms. 'Common language?' summarizes answers to the survey question: "Is it used in common speech or is it a specialized word (reserved for church or 'Bible language')?"

Translations of בְּרִית and δ ι αθήνη into languages of sub-Saharan Africa (1)							
Language	Area spoken	Number	Translation(s)	English	Date	Common language?	Comments
Aari	Ethiopia	42,000	CAAQA	oath, covenant involving an oath	1997 (NT)	yes, used for oaths in court, property agreements, etc.	
Bemba	Zambia	1,700,000	CIPINGO; fyabo fya cilapo			making a treaty involving two parties; way of oath	
Boko	Benin Nigeria	100,000	LUA BAA KUA NNO	God + concern; commitment; participation + being + with them	1992	yes, "ma baa kuo"="I don't care"	The phrase has a strong sense of participation; as a phrase it is a little clumsy.
Chagga	Tanzania	1,000,000	MUMA (MMA)	relations involving an oath	1999	yes	A rite (and resulting status) establishing a very strong relation between two peoples who are not relatives. Almost as good as blood relation.
Chewa	Malawi Zambia Mozambique	4,000,000	PANGANO; CHIPANGANO; cipope	agreement involving two parties, compact; what binds us together	1922; 1998	not really, except due to Bible influence	It is a nominalized form when verbs would be more idiomatic. A sense of covenant is introduced by using a phrase drawing attention to the specialized meaning.
Ekegusii	Kenya	1,386,000	OKUBUATANA	agreement	1988	yes, can mean joining together	
Fulfulde -Jelgoore	Burkina Faso	600,000	AMAANA; ko Alla fodaninoo	covenant/ promise; what God had promised	1995	yes, strong intent to do something	The word is derived from Arabic under Islamic influence.

Gikuyu	Kenya	4,300,000	<b>KIRIKANIRO;</b> Muma	agreement; oath	1965	yes, meeting of viewpoints	A bit weak, no stronger term available
Gitonga	Mozambique	224,000	<b>GIDZUMELE-DZWANO</b>	promising one another	wip		
Gulmantohema	Burkina Faso; Niger; Benin; Togo; Ghana	571,000	<b>NANTAADO</b>	news, specific business item with someone	1951 (NT)	yes	The initial 'n' is hooked.
Kaonde	Zambia; D.R. Congo	217,000	<b>LULAYANANO</b>	a promising one another	1975	not as noun	The related verbal form is common.
Kikamba	Kenya	2,464,000	<b>UTIANO</b>	promising one another/ agreement	1974		Older term but still valid in today's Kikamba
Lomwe	Mozambique Malawi	2,000,000	<b>NLAKANO; waataana</b>	promising one another; fellowship, agreement	1931; wip	former term, no (only in church); recent term, yes	The earlier translation uses a nominalized form of the verb to promise, plus reciprocal.
Luchazi	Zambia Angola	125,000	<b>LITAVASIANO</b>	an agreeing together	1963	not as noun	Formed from the root verb to agree to which a reflexive prefix and a nominalizing suffix have been added.
Luhya	Kenya	3,000,000	<b>INDAGANO</b>	promising one another	1075 (NT)		
Ndau	Zimbabwe; Mozambique	500,000	<b>CHITENDERAN O</b>	an agreeing together	1957	yes, an agreement	
Luchazi	Zambia Angola	125,000	<b>LITAVASIANO</b>	an agreeing together	1963	not as noun	Formed from the root verb to agree to which a reflexive prefix and a nominalizing suffix have been added.
Luhya	Kenya	3,000,000	<b>INDAGANO</b>	promising one another	1075 (NT)		
Ndau	Zimbabwe; Mozambique	500,000	<b>CHITENDERAN O</b>	an agreeing together	1957	yes, an agreement	
Ngambai	Chad	600,000	<b>MANNRO</b>	swear an oath	1992	yes, for specific occasions such as issue solemn warning, seal a contract, place a curse on someone	

Omho	Sudan	185,000	<b>ECORIT</b>	promising one another	1969 (NT)	yes, used for engagement to be married	
Ronga	Mozambique	500,000	<b>ZIPFUMELWAN A</b>	promising one another	1923		
Ruhaya	Tanzania	1,200,000	<b>ENDAGAANO</b>	promising one another	1968 (NT)		
Sena	Malawi Mozambique	1,200,000	<b>CHIVERANO</b>	an agreeing together	wip	yes, means agreement	
Shona	Zimbabwe	7,000,000	<b>CIRAUGANA</b>	promising one another	1980		
Sotho	Lesotho	4,000,000	<b>SELEKANE</b>	promising one another	1989		
Swahili	Tanzania; Kenya; Congo	5,000,000	<b>AGANO, Mkataba (1952); MAPATANO (1998)</b>	Covenant, testament, Agreement	1952; 1998	no, mostly used in church contexts	The number of speakers reaches 30 million if second language speakers are included.
Taita/Sagana	Kenya	153,000	<b>ILAGHANO; Mutero</b>	promising one another; oath	1990 (NT)	technical term in local courts; other term specific to blood covenants	
Tonga	Zambia	880,000	<b>CIZUMINANO</b>	agreement involving two parties	1963	yes, means agreement	
Tswa	Mozambique; South Africa	695,000	<b>MAKANGWA</b>	promising one another	1955		
Tswana	Botswana	3,300,000	<b>BOPELOTSETLHA</b>	promising one another	1991; 1857		
Venda	South Africa	597,000	<b>NYEMULO</b>	promising one another	1936		
Wodaabe Fulfulde (Sokoto)	Niger; Nigeria	700,000	<b>ALKAWAL</b>	promise, covenant	wip	yes, used for example for pre-birth engagement agreed between families	

### General Survey Trends

The data suggest several conclusions. For most languages there does not seem to have been a well-established vocabulary to use from local covenantal, kinship-making, customs. Many of the terms are neologisms, coined by translators to extend traditional vocabulary. If traditional terms did exist, translators have tended to avoid them (perhaps due to unwanted associations).<sup>2</sup> The single exception is that of Chagga, where an apparently precise analog of ancient Near Eastern customs was available to translators. An implication is that good analogs to biblical covenant customs are not widespread in much of Africa.<sup>3</sup>

One common pattern is to create a noun from a verb, such as *to promise*, and add a reflexive suffix. (The Bantu language reflexive morpheme – *an* – appears 25 times in the list.) The resulting words, while understandable, are inherently weak. Nouns tend to have less impact than verbs and artificial ones are weaker still. One result is a tendency, mentioned in several instances, for these terms to become church-only language, unrelated to daily life. On the positive side, the consistent inclusion of the reflexive is an attempt to communicate the relational nature of covenants. Though faint, there is a definite echo of kinship language.

The terms used tend to fall into three semantic fields, that of promises (most frequent), that of agreements (almost as frequent) and that of oaths (least frequent). The stress is on the element of mutual obligation in the definition adopted above, to the neglect of the other three elements: that there is an ongoing relationship, that it is chosen and not natural, and that it is guaranteed by oath sanctions. Promises are only one aspect of covenant making; they lack the threat of severe consequences for failure implicit in oaths and do not make it clear that an ongoing relationship results. As noted, this is partially compensated for by reflexive forms which speak of promising one another and are, in effect hard to distinguish from agreements. In many cases where the semantic field of agreements is used, the solemn, binding nature of the biblical commitments is easy to miss, as is the point that in Scripture two equal parties are frequently not involved. An agreement tends to focus narrowly on a course of action more than a relationship.

Oath-related terms are more prominent in more recent translations (one from the 60's, one from the 80's, four from the 90's). The semantic field of oaths, with its implications of divine sanctions for disobedience, has the strength of being a well-attested part of ancient covenant ritual as well as being an integral part of African religious and cultural traditions. Its weakness is that, alone, it is too narrow. It gives no indication what the commitment being made is. Phrases linking oaths with kinship-type obligations could perhaps compensate.

### Conclusions and Implications

The broad pattern that emerges from the survey is that for many African languages key biblical covenant vocabulary has lost much of its meaning and impact in translation.<sup>4</sup> At

<sup>2</sup> Note also Wendland's comment about key terms in general (1987:73): "The more frequently a concept appears in the Scriptures and the more culturally relevant it was in biblical (Jewish) culture, the less satisfactory a specific local equivalent will be."

<sup>3</sup> This contradicts assertions made by Nigerians Adamo (1997:107) and Oduyoye (1997:112). Conceivably such customs are better established in Nigeria than elsewhere. The survey did not include any major Nigerian languages.

<sup>4</sup> It is beyond the scope of this article to analyze the causes of this state of affairs. However, one factor may be the traditional translation pattern of starting with the New Testament. Covenant language in the NT very much assumes the OT, where many more details are developed. It is easier to get away with terminology that is broader and more vague when the focus is on translating the NT. Then, when attention turns to OT translation, the key word has already been chosen and tradition and inertia militate against a change.

best, these translations depend on the broader sweep of Scripture to fill out their meaning (as does all biblical vocabulary, of course, to some extent). A secondary pattern is that more recent translations (often for smaller language groups) have done a better job of connecting the complexities of ancient Near Eastern covenant customs with African languages and cultures, finding local equivalents or using terms related to oaths. This encouraging trend is outweighed, however, by longstanding patterns. The onus is on those who teach to supplement the translations for fuller impact. Yet weak translations handicap the preachers and teachers. New translations and revisions should not perpetuate traditional weaknesses. At the very least, footnotes and glossary entries must take note of the complexity and richness of ancient covenantal concepts.

Ancient covenants not only committed the parties to mutual obligations, they did so on the analogy of ongoing kinship relations and called on God or the gods to enforce the commitments made by life and death. African Bible translations should stop obscuring these realities.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adamo, DT 1997. "Peace in the Old Testament and in the African Heritage." Pp. 99-111 in HW Kinoti and JM Waliggo, eds. *The Bible in African Christianity: Essays in Biblical Theology*. Nairobi: Acton.
- Cross, FM 1998. "Kinship and Covenant in Ancient Israel." Pp. 3-21 in *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins.
- Foster, SJ 2005. "An Experiment in Bible Translation as Transcultural Communication: The translation of ברית 'covenant' into Lomwe, with a focus on Leviticus 26." DTh dissertation. University of Stellenbosch.
- Grimes, BF (ed.) 1992. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*. 12<sup>th</sup> edition. Dallas: SIL
- Hugenberger, G 1998. *Marriage as a Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics as Developed from Malachi*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.
- Mbiti, JS 1994. "The Bible in African Culture." Pp. 27-39 in R Gibillini, (ed.) *Paths of African Theology*. Maryknoll: Orbis.
- Oduyoye, MA 1979. "The Value of African Religious Beliefs and Practices for Christian Theology." Pp. 109-116 in K Appiah-Kubi and S Torres, (eds.) *African Theology En Route*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Parratt, John 1995. *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Sanneh, L 1989. *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*. American Society of Missiology Series, 13. Maryknoll: Orbis.
- Sanneh, L 2002. "Domesticating the Transcendent. The African Transformation of Christianity: Comparative Reflections on Ethnicity and Religious Mobilization in Africa." Pp. 70-85 in A Brenner and JW van Henten, (eds.) *Bible Translation on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century: Authority, Reception, Culture and Religion*. Sheffield: Academic Press. JSOTSS 353.
- Stine, PC and ER Wendland (eds.) 1990. *Bridging the Gap: African Traditional Religion and Bible Translation*. UBS Monograph Series, 4. Reading, UK: United Bible Societies.
- Wendland, ER 1987. *The Cultural Factor in Bible Translation: A Study of Communicating the Word of God in a Central African Cultural Context*. UBS Monograph Series, 2. New York: United Bible Societies.