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Counting on oral Bible translation: Preserving language and culture through numbers

ABSTRACT

Bible translation into indigenous languages has a wider social impact beyond its religious significance for Christian communities. This article discusses how traditional written Bible translation projects can impact the social situation of their contexts in terms of literacy and education and the preservation of cultural identity. In some instances, Bible translation endeavours to even work toward preserving languages themselves. Oral Bible translation will be considered a viable methodology for Bible translation that can have a wide social impact beyond its religious significance. Indeed, in predominantly oral contexts, oral Bible translation can empower communities in ways that traditional written Bible translations cannot. Oral Bible translation will be shown to empower communities, by preserving cultural identity through the presentation of examples from a Mozambican oral Bible translation project that preserves knowledge of the traditional numbering system of the indigenous language in its translation. By demonstrating how oral Bible translation can contribute to language preservation and community empowerment, this article also offers valuable insights for stakeholders engaged in language planning and minority language advocacy.

1. INTRODUCTION

At first glance, "Bible translation" and community empowerment may not seem to be likely partners. Bible translation, for many, is a purely spiritual exercise dealing with issues other than

the material concerns of this world. Community empowerment tends to conjure up ideas of aid and development. Contrary to these assumptions, community empowerment does go hand-in-hand with Bible translation. For years, the Bible has empowered communities, by supporting language development, education, and employment and positively impacting social spheres and societies (sadly, there are also examples of ways in which the Bible has negatively affected social spheres). This article examines some of these areas, by highlighting how Bible translation has impacted these realms beyond its religious significance. In particular, it considers a case from Mozambique that preserves traditional language through an oral Bible translation project's approach to translating numbers. By highlighting the general impact of Bible translation and the particular case in Mozambique, this article demonstrates that oral Bible translation is a viable methodology for Bible translation and one that empowers communities in ways that written translations do not.

2. THE SOCIAL IMPACTS OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

Although the activity of Bible translation interests and motivates Christians, due to the Bible's religious and spiritual significance to them, it is also true that the Bible is significant beyond those spheres. In many of the world's contexts, Bible translation impacts the use of language itself, including in its development, preservation, and even in the revitalisation of nearly extinct languages. By extension to this, Bible translation impacts the communities that use the translations through the revitalisation of cultures themselves and through activities such as literacy and educational development. Bible translation efforts have supported and reinforced minority cultures in the face of profound global change – change that may have otherwise resulted in the extinction of languages and their partnered cultures.

The impact of Bible translation beyond its religious significance is also felt historically in the development of predominant languages of Western Europe such as English and German. The influence that the King James Version (1611) and the *Lutherbibel* (1534) had over England and Germany's religious and cultural trajectories, respectively, cannot be underestimated. The King James Version has enriched the English language in ways which the majority of individuals may no longer recognise but are, nonetheless, profound. Burke (2009:ix) emphatically states that

> [n]o other book published in English has so profoundly shaped and influenced the English language and has had such an enriching effect on the body of English literature (Shakespeare notwithstanding) than the King James Version of the Bible.

Indeed, the King James Version had an "immense impact on the English language, politics and law" (Bobrick 2009:21) whilst also sanctioning "the right and capacity of people to think for themselves" (Bobrick 2009:25). Aside from English and German, another lesser-known example from Europe is how the preservation of Welsh and its development into a literary language can also be ascribed to the impact of the Bible translated into that language (Llewellyn 2018:73).[1]

> The translation of the complete Bible into Welsh in the sixteenth century is generally accepted to have been a pivotal moment, laying the foundation for the modern standard literary language and contributing significantly to the continuing survival of the Welsh language itself (Currie 2016:152).

As a literary product, the Bible is often the only form of literature that exists in some languages. Bible translators have often been the first to develop orthographies, grammars, and dictionaries in previously undocumented languages. The number of times that this is the case in places such as Papua New Guinea, various Pacific islands, South America, and many parts of Africa is simply too high to be able to cite all the pertinent examples. Harrison (2015:vii) tells us that

> Bible translation [is] by far the most ambitious, most multi-lingual translation effort in the history of mankind. It is the largest parallel corpus that has ever existed, and far exceeds in cumulative line count any other work of literature.

With this being the case, it should come as no surprise that the Bible is also the first literature translated into these contexts. This is especially true when, as mentioned earlier, Bible translators first reduced these languages to writing and the first published literature in those languages was the Bible. This, of course, means that people need to be literate – a situation often addressed as part of the broader programme in written Bible translation projects in various contexts. Usually, the motivation for joining literacy with Bible translation efforts over the years was pragmatic. Bible translators realised that the audience cannot engage with the translation if they cannot read it. Indeed, this view remains dominant among many missionaries and others nowadays, despite the inroads that oral Bible translation has made in recent years. Dye (2009) indicates that one of the keys to increased

1 It is also worth pointing out, anecdotally, that the Bible was the first book printed on the moveable-type printing press invented by Gutenberg. To say that the printing press heralded a technological revolution in Western society would be an understatement, but the fact that the first book printed was a Bible shows that the impact of the Bible extends beyond not only religious spheres, but also into technology and societal development.

Scripture engagement is that the material exists in an accessible form. The written word is only accessible to those who are literate. But literacy is not simply a means-to-an-end scenario:

> In a holistic sense, literacy plays an important partnership in the Bible translation task… Literacy provides minority languages with value and a greater socio-political status through developing a positive environment where these groups have their rightful place in the larger society. A growing literate society supports various social and economic gains for the community (Franklin 2020:7).

Even if language development was not an explicitly stated goal for many projects, it still is evident as one of the outcomes of the Bible translation movement.

Beyond these concrete language developments, Whiteman (1990) links the spiritual impact that the Bible can have to further social and cultural transformation. In articulating his vision of "integral human development", Whiteman (1990:131) claims that

> one of the most important sources which functions as a catalyst for personal transformation is the Word of God communicated in language that human beings can understand. As individual human beings are transformed we have the basic building blocks for the social and cultural transformation of a community.

The reason that Whiteman (1990:130) gives for such is because he believes that

> the Bible provides us with a blueprint and guidelines for human interaction on each of these levels – the individual, the community and inter-community.

For example, Whiteman shows that the endemic warfare among some peoples of Melanesia had mainly subsided, due to the influence of the Bible and Christianity on the people's world view.

Concerning the issue of language preservation and the reality that many languages do not have literary or written traditions, the Bible is often the only depository of the language's words.

> In the absence of dictionaries (or in addition to them), Bibles continue to be the archives for Africa's languages, a depository of the words of a language. They represent efforts to systematize a language's orthography and act as a rich pool of the expressions and idioms of that language. They operate as strong foundations for

> the development of these languages and their literatures (Muthwii 2011:43).

It is often only thanks to the systematisation by Bible translators or those sympathetic to Bible translation (such as SIL linguists) that other literature can then begin to be written, provided that literacy has also been developed in the language. Often, when Bible translation projects start in such contexts, the first task is to create the orthography used for the translation.

In relation to the Zambian and Malawian contexts, Wendland (2004:89) points out that

> [d]ifferent Bible translations, both olden and modern, served not only directly as a cumulative repository and a thesaurus for the Chinyanja language and literature, but they also functioned to stimulate other projects that performed a similar preservative function. The three vernacular Bibles were preceded and followed by a sizable sequence of grammars, dictionaries, wordbooks, scholarly journal articles, dissertations, and diverse collections of stories, proverbs, riddles, and songs. Often, especially in the early years, these were researched and produced by missionaries who were somehow connected with Scripture translation.
>
> It is important to point out the ongoing contribution that was made in the diverse fields of orthography, lexicography, linguistics, socio-anthropology, literature, historiography, folkloristics, and other culture-engaging endeavors by Malawians and Zambians who were in some way associated with the practice of Bible translation.

The edited volume, entitled *Language vitality through Bible translation* (Beerle-Moor & Voinov 2015), highlights the myriad ways in which Bible translation has social impact beyond its religious significance. For example, the various authors in the book discuss issues of language endangerment and vitality, language development, the promotion of "mother tongues", literacy, language revitalisation, and so on. That book engages with these various themes, by highlighting the significance of Bible translation in various contexts from around the globe, including East Asia, Africa, the Americas, the South Pacific, and North Eurasia (Russia). In the foreword to that book, Harrison (2015:vii) emphatically states that

> Bible translation is transformative for a language, especially during the life of the project itself, when it engages some of the best minds of the community in solving formidably difficult problems in semantic mapping, orthography, metaphor, and language standardization.

> But it also extends in influence far beyond the original project, and shines as an example of best practice in ensuring language survival.

The book shows that Bible translation supports communities, particularly minorities, as they struggle for linguistic and cultural survival in a highly interconnected and changing world. Aside from the hope present in the message of the Bible itself (the "good news"), Bible translation offers hope to these communities that might otherwise face the erosion of their languages and identities, contributing to language preservation and cultural renewal. Others have discussed elsewhere how Bible translation preserved a language, contributed to its development and empowerment, or impacted the social realities of a language community. See, for example, Owens (2006) about the Cherokee nation in North America; Peter (2023) concerning Malayalam, along with Kome (2021), Olalere and Jimoh (2022), as well as Maluleke (2017). For example, Maluleke (2017:95) claims that

> [i]t was through Bible translation that a multi-faceted and diverse ethnic group such as the Vatsonga was able to attain its modern selfhood or identity.

It is clear that there are social impacts beyond the religious significance of the Bible. This was highlighted above in the context of Bible translation, typically as a written product, and its impact on language and the communities that use those languages. The article can now shift to the viability of oral Bible translation and how it might further impact the societies engaged in its production and reception.

3. ORAL BIBLE TRANSLATION AS A VIABLE METHODOLOGY

The spiritual and religious impact of Bible translation is widely acknowledged, and much of that impact can be assumed to apply equally to oral Bible translation. However, one could argue that, for many language situations, the spiritual effect of oral Bible translation will be even greater than in traditional written Bible translation because the audience can engage with it more naturally and immediately. Indeed, for many, it means engaging with the Bible for the first time *ever* because of the previous limitations of written translations for non-literate people. Regardless of the truth of that idea, it can at least be assumed that oral Bible translation has religious significance like its written counterpart. This section of the article explores ways in which oral Bible translation can empower communities, by preserving language in its actual verbal form and empowering those who may typically be marginalised. These individuals

may be those who miss opportunities that would otherwise be afforded to them if they had higher levels of education or literacy. Oral Bible translation meets people where they are, by offering not only access to Scripture, but also dignity, by valuing and validating orally reliant individuals. This approach of empowering marginalised groups extends to the workplace. Oral Bible translation projects can provide training and income for non-literate individuals and for those without formal education in ways that many other jobs cannot. This is not to say that education and literacy are not important, nor that educated individuals should be overlooked for employment instead of a candidate with lower levels of education.

It is important to be clear on what oral Bible translation is and how it is a viable translation methodology. Oral Bible translation can be defined as an approach to Bible translation that, from start to finish, operates within a verbal and oral paradigm. Further clarification is needed. This means that translators are operating orally from the first draft to the various stages of checking, to the final recording that will go out to the community. This means internalising the portion of the Bible being translated so that the translator then has the capacity to speak it out accurately, knowing the story intimately enough to retell it with natural fluency, as they would with any familiar tale.

One of the key benefits of oral Bible translation is how internalisation impacts the process:

> Internalisation is a vital part of oral Bible translation, although it can also be beneficial for written translation, as it allows the material to be experienced in such a way that translators can truly grasp the passage's core concepts and re-express them both accurately and naturally in the new context of their own language and culture (Cleaver 2023:12).

Toler (2020) also insightfully expounded on the critical need for internalisation in oral Bible translation in his thesis on the topic.

Ironically, or rather predictably, if one takes the insights of scholars seriously that the Bible was composed in an oral milieu to begin with (Maxey 2009; 2015; Rhoads 2009; 2013), many written Bible translation projects already rely on oral techniques to assess quality (especially naturalness). Verbal checking, oral retellings, or reading aloud by community checkers are often standard practices. Oral methodologies, far from being peripheral or inferior to written methodologies, are at the heart of what makes Bible translation effective.

In other words, "Orality has always played a part in Bible translation, an oral component in drafting helps achieve a natural translation" (Cleaver 2023:5-6). Dick Kroneman (2017:50) lists some possible techniques to improve naturalness, including: "native readers read the translation aloud in order to improve its naturalness". Kroneman (2017:49) further explains that

> the concept of naturalness clearly implied oral communication, since most of these languages had not yet developed a written style of communication that was clearly distinct from the common oral style of communication.

The importance and centrality of orality to the Bible show us that even written translations benefit from orality.

Anecdotally, I have had numerous individuals (missionaries, pastors, and others connected to Bible translation work) at various times ask the same question: "But isn't oral Bible translation less accurate than 'normal' translation?". These people showed genuine and valid concern for the translation of the Bible, and indeed, such concerns often arise from a well-meaning desire to protect the integrity of Scripture. But they also sometimes betray a particular ignorance of just how good oral Bible translation can be. Indeed, when done well, it is no less accurate than other written approaches (which have to be done well, too, for that matter). Rather than viewing oral Bible translation as a compromise or second-best alternative, one should recognise it as a legitimate, methodologically sound approach that aligns with the lived experience of most of the world's cultures (who just so happen to rely on orality).

Oral Bible translation is indeed a viable methodology for Bible translation endeavours because it is highly relevant for many (most?) of the world's contexts, providing unique benefits to societies that utilise the approach, including employment for otherwise unemployed people, preservation of language forms as they are actually spoken, giving access to the translation to a majority who would otherwise be unable to engage with it, and so on. Furthermore, a transcribed version of the oral Bible translation can play a key part in literacy outcomes by giving people something to listen to and read simultaneously, thereby working far more effectively than static literary approaches. People can learn to read by matching what they see with what they hear. This is notwithstanding the need to work hard at learning to read and write, as there is no silver bullet when it comes to gaining literacy. Rather than wasting time and energy to defend oral Bible translation's viability and legitimacy, one should focus on refining its methodologies and establishing best practices. The

reality is that oral Bible translation simply *has to be* viable because myriad people cannot engage with the written word. That being the case, let us make oral Bible translation as good as it possibly can be. One lives in an era when technological advancements make oral Bible translation possible in previously unavailable ways. One should make the most of this advantageous epoch to accelerate the provision of the Bible to communities that still do not have it.

In summary, oral Bible translation is especially relevant in contexts where oral communication is the primary mode of learning and cultural transmission. It provides a pathway to Scripture for communities otherwise excluded due to low literacy levels or limited access to formal education. This inclusiveness empowers marginalised individuals, affirming their role as active participants in the translation process. Moreover, oral Bible translation supports literacy goals. Transcribed versions of oral translations can be paired with audio recordings, allowing learners to read and listen simultaneously. This dual exposure can potentially enhance literacy outcomes more powerfully than traditional written approaches alone.

Socially and economically, oral Bible translation creates opportunities for local employment and capacity building. Individuals lacking the qualifications for formal translation roles in written projects can contribute meaningfully through roles in translating, recording, testing, and community engagement.

Crucially, though, these benefits of oral Bible translation do not merely change the format of the translated product for easy access or simply provide employment opportunities to otherwise marginalised people. The whole process reshapes who is authorised to participate in the translation process itself in ways that written translations do not. That is, even when community oriented, written translation inevitably privilege those with formal education and literacy skills. In orally dominant communities, this means that the decision-making power is in the hands of a small, socially elite group. Oral Bible translation transforms this dynamic by enabling those normally excluded from written translation work to function as the primary stakeholders and custodians. In this sense, oral Bible translation empowers communities because they are not only the recipients of a translated text but are the agents and recognised owners.

Beyond improved accessibility to the Bible and increased local agency within communities, oral Bible translation also contributes significantly to preserving language itself – not just in terms of vocabulary but in the authentic forms of speech and storytelling that reflect real usage. By translating Scripture into the actual spoken language of a community,

oral Bible translation protects linguistic forms that might otherwise be lost through formalisation into written standards. This might include specifically oral features such as ideophones or even just the natural turns of phrases that could be ironed out of a written translation.

The following section shall focus on the preservation of language element, specifically by showing how a Mozambican oral Bible translation and transcription project engages with and preserves an indigenous counting system.

4. CASE STUDY FROM MOZAMBIQUE: TRANSLATING NUMBERS AS LANGUAGE PRESERVATION

When it comes to translating large figures in the Bible, an obvious place to go to is Genesis 5, where one reads about the years lived by various individuals. For example, Genesis 5:21-27 gives us a good sample of numbers to highlight and compare just how numbers are presented in the Mozambican Ciyawo Bible translation project known as "PROMOTYPAD" ("Projecto Moçambicano de Tradução Yaawo da Palavra de Deus"—the Mozambican Yawo Translation Project of the Word of God). In English Bible translations, these numbers are given as either numerals or in words. Most translations favour numerals. The NIV, for example, states:

> When Enoch had lived 65 years, he became the father of Methuselah. After he became the father of Methuselah, Enoch walked faithfully with God 300 years and had other sons and daughters. Altogether, Enoch lived a total of 365 years. Enoch walked faithfully with God; then he was no more, because God took him away. When Methuselah had lived 187 years, he became the father of Lamech. After he became the father of Lamech, Methuselah lived 782 years and had other sons and daughters. Altogether, Methuselah lived a total of 969 years, and then he died.

The largest number here, 969, when put in words ("nine hundred sixty-nine" as per the NRSV), uses four words (if one counts sixty-nine as two words irrespective of hyphenation). By comparison, the Mozambican Ciyawo translation requires ten words. The base-5, or quinary, counting system that Ciyawo uses is less efficient when dealing with such numbers, given that such numbers are not really part of traditional Yawo culture. Let us take the numbers in Genesis 5:21-27 as a whole. The numerals 65, 300, 365, 187, 782, and 969 fit together neatly onto less than a complete line

of text in this article when they are given as numerals. The NRSV requires twenty words for these figures (again, by counting hyphenated words as two words). By comparison, the Mozambican Ciyawo Bible translation requires forty-two words to express the:

- *Makumi n'sana-dimo kwisa n'sano (65)* ("tens five-one plus five")
- *Macila gatatu (300)* ("hundreds three")
- *Macila gatatu kwisa makumi n'sana-dimo kwisa n'sano (365)* ("hundreds three plus tens five-one plus five")
- *Dicila kwisa makumi n'sana-gatatu kwisa n'sana-yiwidi (187)* ("hundred plus tens five-three plus five-two")
- *Macila n'sana-gawidi kwisa makumi n'sana-gatatu kwisa yiwidi (782)* ("hundreds five-two plus tens five-three plus two")
- *Macila n'sana-n'cece kwisa makumi n'sana-dimo kwisa n'sana-n'cece (969)* ("hundreds five-four plus tens five-one plus five-four").

In Ciyawo Bible translation, a written translation could use numerals like many English translations do. However, coupled with this is the reality that the numbers will be verbalised, most probably by using English or Portuguese terminology with *Yawo*-ified pronunciation, because the traditional counting system, especially for large numbers, is a diminishing field of knowledge. Indeed, the most recent Ciyawo-English dictionary (Dicks 2022) lists *handeledi* (a transliteration of the English "hundred") and *sawusande* (a transliteration of the English "thousand") as legitimate Ciyawo words, even though they are obviously borrowed from English. Borrowing words is not necessarily a problem *per se*, in that languages borrow words all the time. However, although these borrowed words from English may work alright for Malawi when it comes to comprehension, they do not work so well across the border in Mozambique, where Portuguese impacts this issue (especially the further one gets away from Malawi).

The simplest of the above numbers to form is 300, which, as in English, only requires two words to say in Ciyawo. However, as soon as tens and ones are introduced to the equation, the situation turns into a more complex activity of mental arithmetic. This makes understanding the Bible cumbersome for the vast majority of individuals.

The PROMOTYPAD strategy for saying the numbers, as tricky as it is to calculate them on the spot, is still to say them but then immediately combine them with verbalising the Portuguese equivalent, which is then transcribed as numerals in the written transcription rather than writing out

the Portuguese words. This solution works positively toward preserving the Yawo language and its counting system. By providing the Portuguese equivalent in the oral version, the audience can relearn numbers in Ciyawo. For many people in rural areas, counting large numbers in Portuguese is also impossible (aside from perhaps typical values of the currency used in Mozambique). Stating numbers in Ciyawo gives the audience the knowledge they need to understand the numbers in the original biblical text (which itself uses words rather than numerals). This approach is an act of cultural and linguistic preservation. Although the written version also includes the Ciyawo numbers in words, the oral rendition is more appealing because it means that those who are non-literate can learn and appreciate large numbers in ways not previously possible for them.

This translation could just as easily say the numbers only in Portuguese, but this also results in problems. According to the "translation covenant"[2] (Houston 2025:156), the project intentionally seeks to use Ciyawo terminology, where possible. Of course, that is the whole point of translation (to use the language of the receptors), but I am referring to those times when concepts or terms are not necessarily widely known. Ciyawo terms and Portuguese clarification are used because an aim of the translation is for it to be both meaningful and clear. By using only Portuguese numbers, for example, the translation would isolate the vast majority of people. By using Ciyawo only, many people would be unsure of the preciseness of the numbers and spend a long time trying to figure them out.

What happens when the numbers get even bigger? For Genesis, the largest explicitly stated number is 969. This is already accounted for in this article. However, in Exodus 12:37, the project encountered 600,000 – the number given for how many fighting men left Egypt (not counting dependents). When it comes to other large figures such as those in the census lists in the Book of Numbers or cases such as the 144,000 in Revelation, these will need to be dealt with appropriately. What happens to the translation approach when the numbers are in the thousands? Sometimes, in Ciyawo, the word *sawusande* is used, but it is often interpreted to mean "hundred" rather than "thousand". Even the adopted word is not as precise in Ciyawo as it is in its original English. An approach that continues to use Ciyawo arithmetic and Portuguese clarification is likely, with numerals in place of Portuguese words for the transcription.

Returning to the issue of the 600,000 in Exodus 12:37, this verse reads that "The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred

2 Otherwise known as a "translation brief", but in the context of this project, the idea of a covenant is used to better reflect the idea of a relationship between the audience of the translation and the original text.

thousand men on foot, besides children" (NRSV). To say such a number in Ciyawo, it would be: *macila makumi n'sana-dimo kwa dicila* ("hundreds ten five-one times a hundred") or *macila n'sana-dimo kwa macila dikumi* ("hundreds five-one by hundreds ten"). Mathematically, this is ten lots of six-hundreds times one hundred or six-hundreds times ten hundreds. There is no single recognised way that does not use mental arithmetic to arrive at the intended figure. Those who hear this number spoken would need to pause (or stop entirely for a while), in order to work it out.

In this particular instance, instead of expressing such an awkwardly large number, this number is expressed as "six hundred groups of people, not including women and children". Six hundred is relatively more straightforward, because it is only a few words in Ciyawo (*macila n'sana-dimo* / "hundreds five-one") compared to the half a dozen above. This was not done simply to make the translators' lives easier at the expense of exegetical accuracy or disloyalty to God as the original author. This is not merely messing with the original text for the sake of convenience. On the contrary, "six hundred groups" is arguably a more accurate translation of the Hebrew homonym[3] אֶלֶף (herein transliterated as *'elef*) – a word often translated as "thousand" but with obvious potential to be translated differently, given that it is in other texts such as Joshua 22:21, where it appears as "families" (NRSV) or "clans" (NIV). The principal Hebrew lexicons give a range of glosses for *'elef*, including "thousand" (Clines 1996a:297; Köhler & Baumgartner 2000a:59), but also "clan" (Clines 1996b:299; Köhler & Baumgartner 2000b:60), "cattle (collective), head of cattle" (Clines 1996c:299; Köhler & Baumgartner 2000c:59), "unit of a thousand men" (Clines 1996a:299), or "group of a thousand" (Köhler & Baumgartner 2000b:59). Even if the translation choice of "groups" is proven to be wrong and *'elef* is always meant to be translated as "thousand", it is not that the translation means that there were not 600,000 individuals. It simply does not specify the size of the groups.

To put this discussion in context, various explanations have been given over the years to deal with the improbability of the large number seemingly present in the text of Exodus 12:37. These range from dubious appeals to gematria (Goldstein 2012:102), to the idea that the census lists in the Book of Numbers are garbled (Albright 1925:21; Goldstein 2012:101), that the figures are hyperbolic or representative of some astrological scheme (Davies 1995:457), or are entirely fictitious or exaggerated for theological reasons (Humphreys 1998:199). None of those explanations seems convincing. They require slightly too much creativity when the

3 It is arguable whether the term is a true homonym (derived from different origins) or simply a case of polysemy (in other words, the meaning of the word developed diachronically from a common origin).

likely reality seems far simpler. The most compelling theory is a version of that initially advanced in modern times by Petrie (1906:211), who proposed that the word *'elef* is, in fact, a mistranslation when translated uncritically as "thousand" when it could also mean "a group" or "family". This idea has been further explored to the point that it seems the most logical explanation of the data. The New American Commentary sums up the argument, stating that "translators have paid insufficient attention to" the translation of the Hebrew term in Exodus 12:37 (Stuart 2006:301). That commentary also offers an explanation as to how the term came to mean "thousand":

> By simple economy of speech, 'ox herd' or the like came to mean 'herd ['eleph].' From there, because 'herd' connotes a large group, variable in number, various definitions derived, ranging from 'cattle' in general to 'family' to 'tribe' to 'division.' Then, for purposes of precise numerical counting (but not military unit description), the already widely used word was borrowed to indicate the quantity 'thousand' in the decimal system. This modern reading back into the text of the mentality of the decimal system in all passages that contain descriptions of numbers of people is the reason that 'thousand' is the word many translators have accordingly assumed must be the meaning in places like Exod 12:37 (Stuart 2006:301).

More recently, Imes (2019:92) discussed the arguments and agrees that the Hebrew term *'elef* in Exodus 12:37 is best understood as "military units", bringing down the total number of men leaving Egypt to approximately 22,000 – a more likely figure.

Aside from intentional conservatism and a commitment to tradition, there is no need to adhere to the idea that 600,000 men left Egypt, not including women and children. Interpreting *'elef* as a military group in no way diminishes the miraculous exodus from Egypt brought to reality by God. Choosing such an interpretation is not to harmonise the Bible with other sources at the expense of the biblical message. It all seems to make the most sense this way alongside the archaeological and historical evidence, whilst still maintaining loyalty to both the source text and target audience. Historically, if there really were 600,000 men, then one might argue that there was no need for the exodus from Egypt at all, because Israel would have been strong enough as a force to overthrow the Egyptians themselves. That is,

> for the battle of Qadesh (thirteenth century) the Hittites amassed an army of thirty-seven thousand (thought to be exaggerated) that was believed to be one of the largest fighting forces ever assembled. Shamshi-Adad (1800 b.c. Assyria) claimed to have amassed an army

> of sixty thousand for the siege of Nurrugum. If Israel had a fighting force of six hundred thousand, what would they have to fear? (Walton *et al.* 2000:88).

In fact, the translation as "six hundred groups" seems to give God more glory than the alternative, given that Israel's army of 600,000 fighting men would have been unprecedented in ancient warfare.

Considering the exegetical investigation performed on Exodus 12:37 at the PROMOTYPAD project and the explanation concerning the Hebrew term's meaning and translation, the decision was taken to translate the "six hundred *'elef*" as "six hundred groups", as mentioned earlier. Again, whether or not the translation is exegetically certain does not matter so much in this Exodus 12:37 passage, because "six hundred thousand" or "six hundred groups" could still amount to the same thing regarding the actual number of individuals involved. There is no specification as to the size of the groups. The decision to translate this way results in a clearer and far more natural translation than one would otherwise have if one tried to verbalise "six hundred thousand" in Ciyawo.

Intentionally preserving the Yawo way of saying numbers is an act of linguistic and cultural preservation as well as revitalisation. The way to say big numbers is out there in Yawo society (it was not made up); it is simply forgotten by many. Recording an oral Bible translation that uses the traditional Ciyawo terms alongside the Portuguese means that people grow in knowledge and play a part in preserving Ciyawo as a language in a changing world. Keeping minority languages alive is in the best interests of the world as a whole, and it is such a privilege when Bible translation performs a pivotal role in language preservation in this way.

Orality validates people of all classes and educational levels. What the PROMOTYPAD project in Mozambique has done with numbers is meaningful to all. In that sense, this Bible translation is didactic in its religious and spiritual message and in dealing with mathematics. This in itself can lead to future educational opportunities because the mother tongue of Ciyawo is validated as an appropriate vehicle for learning.

5. CONCLUSION

Translating the Bible into indigenous languages empowers those communities. Oral Bible translation reaches even further by empowering communities in ways that traditional, written projects cannot. Oral Bible translation offers more meaningful engagement for many people, while delivering social benefits such as supporting employment for marginalised

community members, developing and preserving language, and affirming communities that use indigenous languages. This article showed that oral Bible translation, especially when attentive to cultural details such as counting systems, offers unique contributions to the practice of translation itself and the flourishing of the communities involved. Bible translation is not simply about its spiritual significance, but also about voice, agency, and community empowerment.

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Traditional counting systems	Tradisionele telwoorde	Mekgwa ya setso ya ho bala
Ciyawo language (Mozambique)	Yawo-taal (Mosambiek)	Puo ya Seciyawo