

## TRANSLATING יְהוָה (YHWH) INTO AFRICAN LANGUAGES

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### **Abstract**

*The translation of the OT into African languages is on the increase. OT scholars and translators are discussing the problems of translating names that refer to God and his attributes. In this article I argue that such discussions should be based on a theoretical frame of reference. I also claim that African peoples possess theological tradition that can provide rich sources of illumination in the search for ways of translating divine names or attributes. The paper concludes by demonstrating how this can be achieved by using a case from an African language.*

**Key Concepts:** Bible translations, Name of God, African Theology

### **1. Introduction**

The translation of יְהוָה (YHWH) technically referred to as the “Tetragrammaton” poses difficulties not only for modern translators of the OT into the African languages, but also for the ancient translators. The first translation of the OT into a gentile language is the LXX. In that translation, יְהוָה is rendered as *kurios*, meaning “master” or “lord”. I will demonstrate later that, the term “*kurios*” does not do justice to the notion of יְהוָה. The solution that the LXX proffers, though inaccurate, is carried over into English versions such as the KJV, the RSV, the NIV, and the GNB, to mention only a few. Some early versions of the OT in African languages use one or more of the English versions mentioned above as their source text. Others make use of the LXX in addition to English versions. The common problem in these early African translations is that they follow the error of the LXX and the early English versions on which they base their translations (cf. old Yoruba version and Kiswahili version that use “*oluwa*” and “*bwana*” respectively as the translation of יְהוָה. In each the meaning is “master” or “owner”).

However, from the 1980s through 1990s, OT translators have continued to discuss how the term יְהוָה may be translated. Most of the discussions do not provide a theoretical frame and or any parameters that may guide a translator in his or her search for a more dynamic equivalence of the term in the languages into which they translate. The main contribution of this article to the discussion is intended to be a proposal towards such a theory and parameters.

In this paper, I argue that a study of traditional African theology and the African perception of God and his attributes are necessary and indeed provides rich and valid source of illumination on how the name יְהוָה may be translated. I wish to suggest that such a translation may get closer to the meaning that the Jews of the OT probably understood.

## 2. Theoretical Point of Departure

The basic hypothesis of the paper is the following: The way humans experience God in terms of what they know about him, such as his intrinsic attributes, and the people's historical experience of God in relation to the economic, social, political and material life, shape the names they use to refer to God (cf. Mbiti 1970:26, Cohen 1971:213). In theological terms, this is referred to as "onomasiology". In "onomasiology", the referent is known somehow. The problem is how to refer to him or what to call him (cf. Assmann 1996:25). On the other hand in "semasiology", the word in one language is given, and its equivalent meaning is searched for (Assmann 1996:250).

For instance, the Babylonian god is referred to as "Anum". He is the god of heaven. In Ugarit, "Anum" is referred to as "Shamuna". In Babylonian mythology, Anum's wife is referred to as "Antum". However in Ugarit, there is no idea of a god with a wife. In order to translate Babylonian Anum's wife Antum, Ugarit conceives her as the sea, because the sea is the opposite of heaven for the Ugarit. So the Ugaritic people consider the sea as functioning as a wife to Anum. They therefore refer to Antum as "Tamotum" (cf. Assmann 1996:26).

According to Assmann, one crucial issue in translatability of gods is the issue of identity of one god with another. Where the identity is possible translation can be done. Where such inter-god identity is not possible, Assmann argues that translatability of gods is impossible. The question then is could יהוה be said to be identifiable with the supreme God in African theology? How may such identity be known?

To answer this question, it must be stated that the belief in one god is not a sufficient criterion to equate a god in one culture with יהוה. A people may believe in one god, yet they are not monotheists. Such one god may have a theogonic history. It may also be subjected to the laws of nature. It may have mythological stories of wars and conquest of other gods. Such a system Kaufmann (1960:29) refers to as "monism". In true monotheism, there will be a god that is above nature. He will have supreme will. He will be free from the bounds of myth and magic (cf. Kaufmann 1960:227).

I wish to argue that since gods do not have physical manifestation, they cannot be compared in terms of physical features. The things that God does and his attributes may be compared across culture (Assmann 1996:32). The god whose attributes match most closely with the biblical יהוה is the one that represents יהוה in the receptor language. Such common attributes can be translated from one culture to another. I propose that the kind of analysis suggested above may be a helpful guide in seeking a translation of יהוה.

Every culture has a partial knowledge of God (cf. Rom. 1:20). The way they know him and the way they describe him, are largely influenced by what is most prominent to the particular culture in terms of their survival and relation to the cosmos. For instance, Mbiti reports that the Zulu are the most warlike nation in southern Africa. So, the people "conceive of God's omnipotence in political terms." They describe him as "the Irresistible" (1970:9). In Zulu this is expressed as "uQugabadele, uGobungqongqo and uMabongakutu-izizwe" (1970:276). Among a people where warfare is the order of the day, power to deliver from an enemy and to give victory is, understandably, what is most prominent to them. A being that can provide such deliverance and victory will be described with expressions that refer to such activities. It is of interest to note that the name used to refer to God by the Jews is "elohim". This translates as "the mighty ones". This meaning is similar to the meaning of the Zulu expression for God. The Jews themselves have a history of a nation born out of war and have continued to fight for existence for centuries. The names

used to refer to God are, therefore, not personal names but descriptions of God's attributes (cf. Cohen 1971:214). Using the notions from African traditional religious worldview and philosophy, Mbiti (1970) provides a detailed account of the names with which African people refer to God. This study benefits much from Mbiti (1970).

### 3. Methodology

This paper is pursued as follows. First, I discuss briefly names and naming in Africa. In doing this, I shall present four parameters that give direction to naming of people and deities in Africa. I will follow this by discussing a theoretical reconstruction of the origin of  $\eta\omega\eta\psi$  as we now have it in the OT. I will argue that the name is a description of an attribute of God as the Jews experience him. Then I shall discuss the problem of "kurios" as used in the LXX to translate יהוה. I shall then demonstrate that in African theological thinking, there are insights that can guide a modern translator of the OT into an African language on how to render יהוה. I shall cite some attempts from a few African languages that are moving in this direction. The paper will conclude by proposing a methodology for engaging in African theological concepts and their utilisations in the translation enterprise.

### 4. Parameters that Guide Naming of Persons and Deities in Africa.

In Africa, name and naming are important aspects of life. Most African names are like a one sentence story. This is similar to their Jewish counterpart. In Africa a name is usually one sentence that summarises the history of the family into which the child is born. It may also express the wishes and prayers of the parents for the new baby. Thus one may hear a name such as "Adaviriku" meaning "father is a forest" among the Epira people. The meaning of this name is that father acts as a protector just as a forest protects everything in it. Among the Yoruba people, one comes across names such as "Iyatunde", meaning "mother has returned". This name is given to a child girl born soon after the death of either the maternal grandmother or paternalgrand mother. An Igbo family who believes that the journey they made to get a wife or that the outcome of a decision to relocate results in a child girl born into the family may name the child girl "Ijeoma", meaning "good journey".

Deities are also referred to according to the particular functions believed that they perform for the community or to the world of the community. I have given an example from Zulu. Since no one knows any pre-God history, the African does not name God like they name their children. The African believes that nothing pre-exists God. He is and always will be (cf. Mbiti 1970). He lives everywhere but nowhere. When they refer to God, they describe him with any of his perceived attributes (cf. Zulu's name for God in section 1 above).

When an African family wishes to name a baby, they consider any or a combination of the following:

- a) The nature of the child. A child may be born with its umbilical chord wound round its neck. If the child is a male, he is referred to as "Ojo" among the Yoruba people. If twins are born, the Yorubas call the first one "Taiye" and the last one "Kehinde". The position of the child at birth is part of its intrinsic attribute. A child may be born with legs first appearing. Some are born with close or open palms. African midwives are trained to observe and take note of these particulars during child delivery. Such information is needed for appropriate naming of the child. The studies of "Guciita Ritwa", naming process among the Meru people is similar to the description above (cf. Gichaara 2001).

- b) The attributes of the child. The child may be born with certain attributes – physical or non-physical. A child may be born with extraordinary hair. He or she may exhibit some unusual behaviour at birth, e.g. time taken before it sneezes or before it utters the first cry. These may give directions for the search for an appropriate name.
- c) The history of the family. A child may be born during war times. If the child is a male, the Epira people will name him “Ohiyeeku”.
- d) Parental desire/prayer for the child. When a child comes into an African family, it brings great joy and expectations. Parents usually wish that their child would be a very successful and important person in the community. Such prayers and wishes may be expressed in the name given to the child. A Yoruba family may thus name their male child “Oye”, meaning “a king”. An Epira family may call their daughter “Onyinoyi”, meaning “mother of multitude”.

In using names to refer to God, Mbitis’s discussion of the concept of God in Africa (1970) reveals a very fundamental truth. This is that among African peoples, the names used for God that creates the universe, is not used for any other deities. This can be compared with the word “theos” in Greek, which may refer to any kind of deity including God the creator. Also in English, the word “god” could be any deity, although English uses a capital letter as the first letter to distinguish God from god. In sounds; this difference is not heard. The Hebrew word for God is “elohim”. This word is also used for all types of deities. The reader is left to judge who is more monotheistic, the Africans or the Caucasian race or people of the Middle Eastern region.

In choosing concepts that refer to God, the African simply describes him in terms of his perceived attributes or activities. Since no one knows the history of his pre-existence, the ways he is referred to excludes such history. The African believes that God has no beginning and no end. He is (Mbiti 1970). For example, the Epira people refer to God who creates heaven and earth as “Ohomorihi”, meaning “the great one that makes the rain”. The Epira people do not have rainmakers. As farmers, they depend on rain made by God for survival.

In the Epira theology, Ohomorihi is never used to refer to other deities. Indeed all other deities derive their existence and power from Ohomorihi. If a deity is considered wicked and bad, he is usually handed over to Ohomorihi to judge and punish. Ohomorihi can render such a deity powerless. What other deities plan to do, Ohomorihi can overturn. But what Ohomorihi has decided to do, no any deity can question it or overturn it. Ohomorihi is everywhere. He is not localised to a particular place. Other deities have their locations known to man.

From the above, we obtain a little insight into the principles that guide naming among the Africans. We also know that the Africans have ideas about the God who creates the universe. They have ways of referring to him. They have ideas about his eternal attributes and his works. These few examples suffice to illustrate that Africans give names to their children and to deities according to certain parameters. In the next section, I discuss a theoretical reconstruction of יהוה and how the name came to be used by the Jews to describe an attribute of God.

## 5. Theoretical Reconstruction of יהוה

Before one can appreciate the strength and weakness of the present attempts to translate יהוה, it is necessary to have a fair understanding of the probable path that the

Tetragrammaton has travelled before it reached the state that we have it in the OT. The point where the name is met as being revealed to Moses is in Ex. 3:14. There, God tells Moses that he (God) is יהוה אשר אהיה read as “ehye asher ehye”. This is usually translated as “I will be who/that I will be” (Hartom 1992:16).

It should be noted that when God reveals himself to Moses he says that he is “ehye asher ehye”. This is a sentence. It has a verb “ehye” (אהיה). The verb in the sentence is in the form of first person common singular, qal imperfective. It is from the root היה meaning “to be” (Smith 1969:585). The meaning of the imperfective form is “I will be”. When Moses returns to his people and reports the speech of God to the people, he probably uses the verb in its third person masculine singular, a form of indirect reference. So, he might have said that God refers to himself as יהיה אשר יהיה, meaning “he will be who he will be”. On the change of the second “yod” to “vav”, it is usual to find in Hebrew that “yod” and “vav” do interchange without changing the meaning of the word. In other words they are the same phoneme. For instance, ילד may be written as ולד both meaning “to give birth to a child” (cf. Even Shoshan 1981:467). Brown, Driver and Briggs (1906/2000:217) note that הוה “becomes rare synonym for היה”.

For example, in Neh. 6:6 we have

אתה הוה לב למלך

You are (הוה) to them a king.

Ez. 21:15

למען היה לה ברק מטר

In order that you are (היה) to her a lightning of terror.

It is not impossible, therefore, that יהוה can, in course of time, become יהוה.

One may raise an objection to this reconstruction by arguing that יהוה had been met earlier in OT before Moses’ encounter with God in the vicinity of Mount Sinai. In Genesis, יהוה has been used in several places such as Gen. 1:9, 18, 22; 3:8, 13, and 14, to mention only a few. In response to this, I argue that the Pentateuch, as a document, has been edited and re-edited by its authors or redactors. The narrators tell their story long after the events they report had taken place. The stories are backward reflections on past events in terms of a religious perspective. The authors already have a whole picture of the religious life of their people. The key concepts that they use are already developed and fixed. From these, they choose their terms in telling their stories (cf. Van der Merwe 1999:92). It could also be the case that Exodus was actually written before Genesis. These seem to explain the use of יהוה in Genesis before we are told its origin in Ex. 3:14.

Following from the above, we can now discuss the meaning of יהוה. In section 2 of this paper, I claimed that יהוה is not a personal name as many have supposed, e.g. Loewen (1984), Hope and Chidavaenzi (1984), Freedman (1986). In contrast to these, Durham (1987) convincingly argues that the answer Moses receives in response to his question, which is יהוה אשר אהיה that becomes יהוה “is not, by any stretch of the imagination, a name” (1987:38). In Durham’s view, the name “is an assertion of authority, a confession of an essential reality, and thus an entirely appropriate response to the question Moses poses” (1987:38). The name describes one of God’s attributes. It is of interest to note that personal names are usually not referred to by translation. For instance, the name “Joshua” is not translated in different language. What usually happens is that the pronunciation is adapted

to the phonological norms of the language in question. This is not the case with the term “theos”, “elohim”, and also “YHWH”. These are expressions that describe a particular attribute of the Supreme Being as perceived by the culture in question. That is why they are translated and not phonologically adapted in any language.

Most scholars of OT agree that the name יהוה comes from the verb היה “to be” (cf. Sarna 1991:17). היה is a qal perfective, third masculine singular. Its corresponding imperfective form is יהיה “he will be”. Some have argued that the verb is a hiphil, yielding the meaning “he will cause to be”. This interpretation has some problems. First Freedman (1986: 513) states that “the causative of hwy is otherwise unknown in Northwest Semitic”. Also, Smith (1969:585) states that “no hiphil forms of hayah are known to exist.” As one checks through the BDB, there is not the hiphil form of the verb היה. Secondly, the pointing of יהוה does not seem to suggest that it could be a hiphil. Hiphil imperfective is usually pointed with the first vowel as an “a” or “e”. In qal, the pointing of the imperfective usually has “i” as the first vowel.

These arguments lead me to suggest that the verb comes from a qal root. It is a description of an attribute of God. The name describes an essential intrinsic attribute of God. He is the one that will always be. It suggests authority and credibility for Moses, as he will face the challenge of leading the people of Israel from the bondage of the Egyptians and the plethora of their gods (Smith 1969:585). I argue that it is this future dependability that God wants to communicate to Moses with that name (cf. Wenham 1994:277). This is similar to parameter “b” discussed in section 4 above. As an attribute of God, יהוה suggests to Moses that God will be there – without any change – to help him. He can be depended upon as the unchanging one, the one that will always be (cf. Num. 23:19). He is the one that can be trusted to keep his promise and to deliver his people.

The LXX translates יהוה as kurios, meaning “master” or “lord” or “owner”. This translation, which many English versions adopt with some typographical modifications, has been a source of continued misleading of some older translations of the OT into African languages. I have cited the examples of Yoruba and Kiswahili above. It is a happy development; however, that the new translators of the OT into African languages are taking up the challenge again to find a more dynamic equivalent. Some of these new attempts are not based on any theoretical frame or argument. The cosmogony of the African people and the nature of the Hebrew verb forms are not thoroughly exploited in the search for the way יהוה may be translated into African languages. I argue that there is the need to move from the level of intuition to decisions based on analysis of African theology and the grammar of Hebrew. The advantage here is that translators will be able, with some level of confidence, to inform the community they are translating – and for why they do what they do.

My survey of the literature on attempts being made to translate יהוה into African languages shows four possibilities. These are

- a) to translate the term as “master” (cf. Wendland 1992, Barnwell 1997);
- b) to translate the term as “one who exists” (cf. Yakabuul 1984, Wendland 1992; Barnwell 1997);
- c) to translate the term as “God” (cf. Hope and Chidavaenzi 1984,<sup>1</sup> Wendland 1992;

<sup>1</sup> Hope and Chidavaenzi state that the term they use is ‘mwari’. This term probably means ‘the one who spreads the universe’. They say that very few people recognise this meaning. Chimera, a Shona from Zimbabwe who is doing a doctoral study in theology at Stellenbosch, confirms that he himself and an overwhelming majority of Shona people do not know the meaning of ‘mwari’.

Barnwell 1997);

d) to translate the term as “I AM THAT I AM” (cf. Loewen 1984, Wendland 1992).

While these suggestions reflect honest attempts and hard thinking, they do not provide the translator any theoretical bases for the suggestions. This lack of theoretical bases weakens the translator’s ability to explain to the community where they work and the reasons for their choices. This is especially needed where people already had some versions that used either “lord” or “master” or even “jehova” in order to enable such a community to have second thoughts on the possible need for a change.

Such an education of the community is made more relevant if the translator is himself able to appreciate that the name is a description of certain attributes of God. He will be able to root his argument in what the community already knows and does (cf. Gichaara 2001: 119). Gichaara describes in that study the Guciita Ritwa (name giving among the Meru people). Gichaara’s study corroborates Mbiti (1970), who argues that Africans refer to God the creator in terms of what the Africans perceive as the attributes of God.

Another problem reflected in the attempts to translate יהוה into African languages relates to the age long problem of the semantics of the Hebrew verb forms. Some hold that the verb forms can have any meaning. This is to say that perfective forms can have imperfective meanings while imperfective forms can also have perfective meanings (cf. Hope and Chidavaenzi 1984). Contrary to this position, I wish to suggest that in Hebrew, each verb form maintains its aspectual distinction. Perfective form usually has perfective meaning while the imperfective form usually has imperfective meaning. Form-meaning neutralisation is not normally tolerated in Hebrew (cf. Moomo, forth coming). If the case with verb forms in Hebrew may be so, I argue that יהוה which comes from יהיה is indeed an imperfective in meaning, suggesting “he will be” (cf. Cassuto 1967, Durham 1987:38, Propp 1999:204). It cannot, therefore be interpreted as “I AM” (cf. Cohen 1969:6). In fact, Aquila and Theodotion translate יהוה into Greek as esomai (hos) esomai, meaning “I will be who I will be” (cf. Propp 1999). This may be given a theological interpretation as “the one that exists for ever”, “the one that never changes”, “the eternal one” (cf. Mbiti 1970:2, 19).

It is of interest to note that the ways God is referred to that are quoted from Mbiti (1970), are grounded in African theology. By African theology one does not mean Africans doing the theology of Bonhoeffer, Calvin or Wesley. African theology is the way Africans have always reflected about God in relation to their own experience. This was long before colonialism and missionaries made their inroads into Africa. This position is in contrast to Swartz (1985). Swartz argues that “it is improper to speak of indigenous ... theology” on grounds that such theology is not codified. I wish to propose that if theology may be understood as man’s reflection about the divine being and the created world, then Africans have that reflection. The African poets, singers, the priests of the cultus are the custodians and the libraries of such theology. The translator, who neglects such sources when seeking to express any of the concepts of God in an African language, does so at his or her own peril. This corroborates De Blois (1992) who argues, “The translator obviously has to start with a thorough analysis of the religion of the people and more particularly terminology referring to deities and the spirit world”. It may only need to be added that such analysis should be done after good listening to the people and not pejoratively describing them in our own imposed categories.

## 6. Methodology of Analysing African Theological Concepts and the Translation of יהוה

This section is discussed in the context of a practical situation. The situation is the translation of יהוה into Ebira language. When the translation of the OT began in Ebira, the problem of translation was a difficult one. The difficulty is compounded because many Christians in the area are already used to the KJV that renders יהוה as “Lord”. Another influential version, especially among the Anglican community and the Aladura churches, is the old Yoruba version. The Yoruba version translates יהוה as “Oluwa”, meaning our “owner” or “master”. These meanings suggest a master and slave or servant relationship. Schneider (2000:6) mentions a pertinent problem namely that those who advocate lord/master for יהוה should reconsider. Schneider argues that Baal also means lord/master. How then will the lord/master of Baal be different from that of יהוה if both are rendered by the same term? Besides, there is nothing in master to suggest commitment to help that the slave or the servant can rely upon. The Christian community wanted the translators to use “Ananyi-yi” a literal translation of “oluwa”, meaning our “owner”. The problem here is that the notion “our owner” does not come in any way near the description of the attribute of God that יהוה suggests to the Jew. The second problem is that it does not distinguish between אדוני, “my lord”.

The translators began to study the theology of God in Ebira worldview. They collected and studied the praise phrases that Ebira people, especially their singers and the priests of local cultus use in praising deities during festivals such as “ekweechi”, “echanee” “echori” and others. In Ebira theology there are broadly four deities. These are Ohomorihi. He is the God that creates the entire universe. He is also regarded to have created all other deities. He has and exercises power over them all. There is also the “Ete”, the earth. Ete is the deity that swallows everything created. He gives food by producing good crops. He also eats the human to whom he gives food. But Ohomorihi can deliver a person from him, or prolong the life of a person so that Ete will not eat him early. Ori are the deities found in various forms and places. They can exist in springs that never dry, or rocks that have special formations and can echo, or some trees, or some streams. They can bring good and bad fortunes. But Ohomorihi can deal with them. In fact Ohomorihi can cause them to relocate. There is also the “Anyenee”. Anyenee simply means “women”. Anyenee is in charge of witchcraft cult. Every masquerade has to have the backing of Anyenee, if they wish to succeed. Men are believed not to be able to do anything without the backing of Anyenee.

In studying the praise phrases used to describe the attributes of these deities, the translators found that each deity has and maintains a specific register of praise phrases that are not shared with any other deity. The name “Ohomorihi” and all his praise phrases and all the expressions that are used to describe his attributes, are never used to praise or to describe the attributes of the other three. Among the praise names for Ohomorihi is “Ohomorihi ehe eni ehe ve, ene e yi ma vara”. This translates as “God who is eternal, the one that never changes”. The translators come to the agreement that this praise name that describes the unchangeableness of God is very close in meaning to the probable meaning of יהוה. So, they decide that they will use the expression to translate יהוה. It is closer in meaning to the idea that יהוה suggests than “our owner”. This choice is similar to the sentence names that Ebira people use in naming people. Comparatively, it is also like the way that the Jews name their children and also the way they refer to God by sentence names that describe certain aspects of his attributes, or tell some history or express wishes



for the child that has just come into the world. So, the translators compress the sentenced into one word as “Eneyimavara”.

When this name was tested out, the community responded differently. Some like the name; others are indifferent, while others were violent in rejecting it. Those who reject it violently do so because of their attachment to the KJV and the Yoruba translation they are used to. But everyone could tell the meaning of the expression. As the translators take time to explain the probable meaning of יהוה in Hebrew, not many question the use of Eneyimavara any more. New readers of the translated portion, who had never had other contacts with any other version before, are usually extremely delighted. They understand the meaning of the translation.

## 7. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to suggest a theoretical way of understanding the development of יהוה, and how that understanding may help in finding ways of translating the name into African languages. I have argued that there is a rich resource in African theology that a bible translator can exploit in translating the attributes of God, including יהוה. I demonstrate this by illustrating it with an example from the way יהוה is translated into Epira. As the discussion and the search for more dynamic equivalent ways of translating the name into African languages continue, I wish to propose that such a search should take seriously the study of African theology, and African naming systems. Any effort in the direction of the semantics of the Hebrew verb forms will be added advantage. With such equipment, a more satisfactory expression may be found and the translator will also be able to explain with some confidence the reason why s/he chooses the expression s/he chooses.

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