FRIAR AMARAL BERNARDO AMARAL'S TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE INTO GITONGA (MOZAMBIQUE 1984-2014)

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ABSTRACT

Even if Mozambique has only Portuguese as the official language, there are many languages spoken in the country. That is the case of *Gitonga* spoken in the Inhambane region about 470 km north of Maputo (Briggs 2011: 155). The Bible Society of Mozambique has supported the bible translation to serve the Tonga people in their own language *Gitonga*. This task has been undertaken by Franciscan friar Amaral Bernardo Amaral since 1984 and is still on its course.

This article will address the case of the historical episode by the son of a Methodist pastor, converted to Catholicism who is translating the bible into Gitonga with the support auspices of the Mozambican Bible Society.

As regards the methodology of this article, data was collected from interviews held with Friar Amaral Bernardo Amaral during his work with his team to translate the Bible. Further research was conducted surveying a few online portals. Furthermore some telephonic interviews were conducted to verify some of the facts.

Keywords: Mozambican Colonial War; Christian Council of Mozambique (CCM); Bishop Dinis Sengulane; Mozambican Civil War; Swiss Mission

INTRODUCTION

The historical issue of the bible translation into *Gitonga* has not yet been reported; therefore, it is my duty to provide historical data on it. I met Friar Amaral Bernardo Amaral for the first time on 7 March 2014, while in the ceremonial of my welcoming message to the students in my capacity as the Rector of the Universidade Mussa Bin Bique in Inhambane, Mozambique. Further contacts have been made that led to an interview covering his efforts to translate the bible into *Gitonga*. So, we will address the following topics: Historical reflection on the Tonga people and their language; Friar Amaral Bernardo Amaral, his vision, and the efforts to translate the bible in Gitonga; and the bible translation into Gitonga with the support of the Bible Society.



HISTORICAL REFLECTION ON THE TONGA PEOPLE AND THEIR LANGUAGE

This section highlights the historical framework of the Tonga people and their language. This will provide the grounds to understand the need for the translation of the Bible into *Gitonga*.

Brief historical framework of the Tonga people

Colloquially known as *Bitonga*,³ the people have their origin in the Province of Inhambane in Mozambique; to be more precise from the region of the districts of Inhambane, Maxixe, Morrumbene, and Jangamo. Their estimated number is about 200 000 (Wikipédia [Portuguese], s.v. '*Bitonga*'); or, more precisely, as Orville B. Jenkins has stated in his article entitled *The Tonga people of Mozambique*, their population is 237,780 (Jenkins n.p.) – at least by 2 June 2014. According to a telephonic interview (Amaral Bernardo Amaral, Interview 31 May 2014) conducted to inform this article Friar Amaral Bernardo Amaral has explained the singular to be 'Tonga', referring to the tribe of the 'Tongas' (cf. *Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa*), while the plural is '*VaTonga*' (Amaral Bernardo Amaral 2007). An article published in the *Wikipedia* entitled *BiTonga*, informs the Tonga people speak *GiTonga*, a language from the Bantu family (*Wikipédia*, s.v. 'BiTonga').

Vasco da Gama called it the 'land of the good people'

Vasco da Gama 'anchored his four ships off the Inhambane Bay while on his way to India' for the first time on 10 January 1498; but the first mass held in the lands of Mozambique was only on 11 March of the same year in the Ilha de São Vicente, close to the Ilha de Moçambique (John 2014). Da Gama's crew was sick due to lack of fresh water, vegetables and fruit. Instead of running away, scared, the Tonga populations welcomed the strange white sailers from the massive boats to their huts and cared for them. Vasco da Gama was so impressed that he called the area 'the land of the good people', a label, which is still used today (Adrobat 2011). Corroboratively, an article entitled *Inhambane (cidade) – História*, states:

Established by swahili merchants Inhambane was visited the first time by the Portuguese in January 1498. Landing to refuel Vasco da Gama was welcomed by the population whom he called 'The land of the good people'. The Portuguese built a fortified trading post in 1546, but the region was only definitively occupied by Portugal in 1731. (Wikipédia, 'Inhambane (cidade) – História')

The land is beautiful with its thousands of palm trees and clean, white sandy beaches. Fruit abounds in the region, and the vegetables cultivated without pesticides or fertilizers serve to cook delicious plates of food.

Even if we do not know what the historical relationship with the other Tonga of Zimbabwe and Zambia might be, or even further away the Kingdom of Tonga in Oceania, the Tonga of Inhambane are industrious. According to Jenkins, they are well known by their 'great variety of design in the creative, attractive strip patterns of colours, called *gipatsi* (*sipatsi* plural). So far, artisan scholars have discovered 494 unique *sipatsi* patterns!' (Jenkins 2014). With natural beauty, favourable weather and wonderful, good people, it could only be 'the land of the good people'.

The development of the Tonga and their need for written materials

Inhambane became an important base for the Portuguese and so Christianity was introduced. The preaching of the gospel was done mainly in Portuguese, and the development of the Tonga language was left almost without literary materials. However, the Tonga culture can only be understood within what Amaral Bernardo Amaral labels as 'traditional African culture' (Amaral Bernardo Amaral 2007: 35), according to his article entitled *Matriz Estruturante da Cultura Tradicional Africana*. Amaral has argued that Western Christianity needs to listen to the African heart beat with respect if it wants to truly evangelize Africa. The traditional African culture is open to the penetration of the Gospel, more than any other civilization. Neverthless, as Amaral has pointed out:

The Gospel of Christ and the Christian message have a deep echo and favorable ground in the heart of African Traditional Culture and its core values. But, the evangelization of Africans continue to be cosmetic and superficial, if we do not take seriously the dynamics of enculteration, the incarnation of the Word of God (Gospel) must take place within the existing authentic values in African culture (Amaral Bernardo Amaral 2007: 35).

Amaral has also argued that the Gospel has to penetrate into the depths and roots of the African culture to illuminate it, challenge it, and purify it; '...elevating and dignifying what's positive in religious and cultural traditions of these people. Only as Africans are able to assimilate the essentials of the Christian message and to express it faithfully in their own tongue, their own character, their own way of thinking and living, will they be able to feel Christianity as "their own thing", as part of their own nature' (Amaral Bernardo Amaral 2007: 35).

With Portuguese being the official language of the country the development of the Tonga language has not had the possibility to prosper. Only in recent decades has the language received some development with the publication of a dictionary and a grammar guide. It should not be surprising, then, that only 0.72% of the Tonga in Inhambane are Christian. Acording to Jenkins, in 2006 there were only 1 680 Christian individuals in a country of 235,000 people (Jenkins 2014).

Evangelistic efforts have been taken by some missionaries such as Gustavo and Beatriz Fuentes who left the United States to evangelise this African tribe, the Tonga.

They have worked some years in Inhambane with Young Life Mozambique, but are now stationed in Beira (Fuentes 2014). Jenkins has also informed '*The Jesus Film*' is available in *Gitonga*, the language of the Mozambique Tonga' (Jenkins 2014). Some portions of the *New Testament* were translated in 1890 (Jenkins 2014). But, in recent decades a Catholic priest, native of the Tonga tribe, has decided to translate the whole bible into '*guiTonga*' as the Tonga spell their Tonga language.

FRIAR AMARAL BERNARDO AMARAL, HIS VISION, AND EFFORTS TO TRANSLATE THE BIBLE INTO GITONGA

Historical framework of the ministry of Friar Amaral Bernardo Amaral

Friar Amaral Bernardo Amaral has played an important role in the translation of the *Bible* into his Tonga language. On 4 July 1952 Frei Amaral Bernardo Amaral was born in Nhabanba, nearby the city of Maxixe in the Province of Inhambane. His father was Bernardo Amaral and his mother Josefa António Remane, they were a pious family. His mother had been a Muslim who converted to Christianity to get married to Mr. Bernardo Amaral, a Methodist pastor. As Friar Amaral Bernardo Amaral has stated in a telephonic interview: 'When I was born, my father was already a Methodist minister' (Amaral Bernardo Amaral, Interview 3 June 2014). And, as Amaral has further informed me:

Surely the faith and conduct of my father marked the first years of my life. Up to 10 years of age I attended the Methodist church my father pastored. In my house nobody smoked and drank alcohol. Even today I do not smoke or drink. My father was a singer and I learned many things through his music and his sermons (Amaral Bernardo Amaral, Interview 3 June 2014).

At the age of 10 Amaral Bernardo Amaral made an important decision, which guided his entire life, to study in the Catholic Seminary, the Seminário Franciscano de Amatongas in Chimoio (Amaral Bernardo Amaral, Interview 3 June 2014). His mother opposed his desire to study there, but as he has put it, 'When I asked him, my father did not oppose me' (Amaral Bernardo Amaral, Interview 3 June 2014). The local Catholic mission was São José de Mongué the first Catholic mission in the region where he was born (Amaral Bernardo Amaral, Interview 3 June 2014). The Franciscan friars showed pictures of students at the Seminary in Chimoio and he was 'fascinated' (Amaral Bernardo Amaral, Interview 3 June 2014). Although Chimoio was far away, Amaral Bernardo Amaral ended up studying in the Catholic Seminary.

In 1977 Amaral Bernardo Amaral headed to Brazil having decided he wanted to be a Catholic priest. His father warned him of the fact that he could not be married, but he replied that he was ready to serve God as a Catholic priest. In 1982 Amaral Bernardo Amaral achieved a Bachelor of Theology at the Universidade Católica de São Salvador (UCSAL). He then went to further his theological studies at the Pontificia

Universitas Anthonianum in Rome from which he got his Honors Degree in Philosophy and Theology (1982–1984).

Returning to his country in 1984 he was ordained priest and served in the Xai-Xai Cathedral where he remained until 1987. From 1987 until 1992 Amaral Bernardo Amaral served ministering in the Cathedral of Inhambane. He then moved to Jangamo to be involved with Christian education until 2002. Between 2002 and 2003 he served as an educator in Lusaka, Zambia, and then became the Councilor of the General Minister of the Franciscan Order in Rome from 2003 until 2009. He was responsible for Africa and the Middle East. He returned to Mozambique to serve as a priest in the Parish of Polana in Maputo (2009–2013). From September 2013, until now he has served in support of the Priest of Jangamo.

The inspiration to become a bible translator into the Gitonga language

When Amaral Bernardo Amaral initiated his ministry by being ordained as priest in Xai-Xai, back in 1984, he served under another Franciscan Priest Frederico Samuel Hnanala. Hnanala was also native to the same region as Amaral – Maxixe – and so he became interested in producing literary works in his mother tongue, *Gitonga*. In 1974 Hnanala initiated the translation of the *New Testament*, allied with a Presbyterian minister by the name of Geremias Cossa. These Christian ministers worked together on the project from 1975 until 1983, using pen and paper. They translated some books of the *New Testament*, however, as Amaral has informed, 'At that time there were some areas in which they did not agree' (Amaral Bernardo Amaral, Interview 9 April 2014).

Just some months after Amaral Bernardo Amaral arrived in Xai-Xai on 26 November, 1984, Priest Frederico Samuel Nhanala was travelling to Maputo and was ambushed in Maluane (Manhiça), and mortally wounded. As Amaral Bernardo Amaral says, 'I eventually replaced him as pastor within one month of being ordained' (Amaral Bernardo Amaral, Interview 9 April 2014). It was at the burial of Priest Frederico Samuel Nhanala that Friar Amaral Bernardo Amaral again made a very important decision; as he has stated, 'At the time of his burial I recalled that he began this work of translating the bible into *Gitonga* and publicly promised that I would continue his work, leading the project' (Amaral Bernardo Amaral, Interview 9 April 2014).

THE BIBLE TRANSLATION INTO GITONGA WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE BIBLE SOCIETY

The process of translating the Bible is tedious. It requires much patience and perseverance. But, Friar Amaral Bernardo Amaral demonstrated he was determined to serve the Tonga people with the Word of God in their language. However, there was a need for help. So, some important aspects are to be discussed in this section of the article: The Mozambican

Bible Society and the Sociedades Bíblicas Lusófonas; the process of Bible translation into *Gitonga*; and the support of the Mozambican Bible Society.

The Mozambican Bible Society and the Sociedades Bíblicas Lusófonas

The Bible Society has been operating in Mozambique since 1976, according to Lázaro Eusébio Chivite (Lázaro Eusébio Chivite, Interview 3 June 2014). On the other hand, the online portal of the Portuguese Sociedade Bíblica also informs that the Grupo Lusófono das Sociedades Bíblicas Unidas was constituted in 1998 (Estêvão 2014). This organisation has the goal to internationally cooperate with Portuguese speaking countries and regions. The Mozambican Bible Society is a member of this organisation. The online portal of the Portuguese Bible Society further informs that the world fraternity of the Bible Societies⁶

...has a fully interfaith nature cooperating globally with churches and church organizations and para-churches of various Christian denominations (Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox) (Estêvão 2014).

The United Bible Societies are the global entity covering all 145 national Bible Societies, including Mozambique. The common budget of the United Bible Societies is used to finance the translation of the bible into new language groups including Gitonga. As the online portal of the Portuguese Bible Society informs:

Their common budget (which does not include own funds of each of the national Bible Societies) is around EUR 35 million, and is used for the development of new Bible translations and outreach initiatives throughout the world. There are currently about 700 Bible translation projects around the world in which the Bible Societies are involved (Estêvão 2014).

The process of Bible translation into Gitonga

The workload as the Priest of Xai-Xai was heavy. Notwithstanding, Friar Amaral Bernardo Amaral served his flock during the day and worked as a bible translator until late every night. As he says, 'I organized a working group and they helped with the text' (Amaral Bernardo Amaral, Interview 9 April 2014). Meanwhile, in 1987 he was transferred to the Cathedral of Inhambane, close to the Tonga people.

On arriving, he found almost no literature published in Gitonga out there. So, Friar Amaral Bernardo Amaral started translating and printing all biblical texts to be read in *Gitonga* each Sunday in Church. For instance, he translated the *Lexionário Dominical*, which uses one passage of the Old Testament, one of the New Testament, and one of the Gospels. As Friar Amaral has stated, 'I used a duplicator to copy; began on Monday and

on Thursday had everything translated, printed and distributed by all parishes' (Amaral Bernardo Amaral, Interview 9 April 2014). The *Lexionário Dominical* is a Catholic book planned for the reading of the entire Bible in three years (Amaral Bernardo Amaral, Interview 9 April 2014). Then, as Friar Amaral has explained, 'The major holidays such as Christmas, Easter and Pentecost are used to explain the Gospel of St. John' (Amaral Bernardo Amaral, Interview 9 April 2014).

As Friar Amaral Bernando Amaral has further stated, 'I made the *Lexionário [Dominical]* to be used on Sunday from 1987 to 1992. It was complete to be used every Sunday for an entire three year period. And, this was work contributing to Bible translation' (Amaral Bernardo Amaral, Interview 9 April 2014).

The first Bible book to be published was the Gospel of Matthew in 1993. Peter Renju – a Tanzanian – worked in the United Bible Societies in Nairobi. As Friar Amaral has explained, 'When the Biblical text was translated I would send it to Nairobi to be digitalized, and, then, it would be sent back to me already in this format' (Amaral Bernardo Amaral, Interview 9 April 2014).

In 1996 the entire *New Testament* was published in Gitonga; and in the same year also the *Missal Popular Dominical*. As a result, Friar Amaral has stated:

The ecclesiastical communities matured tremendously from the biblical texts in their mother tongue. Church attendees fared spiritual dualism for greater vividness and Christian moral maturity. Here, we emphasize that faith must be rooted in the Word of God (Amaral Bernardo Amaral, Interview 9 April 2014).

In 1992 Friar Amaral Bernardo Amaral began the translation of *Psalms*, and, in 1998 he began to translate the Pentateuch, which was published in 2008 (Amaral Bernardo Amaral, Interview 9 April 2014). Then, as Friar Amaral has mentioned, 'From here I started to think more about the publication of the entire bible. In 2010 I had all the books of the bible translated. The computer greatly facilitated the work' (Amaral Bernardo Amaral, Interview 9 April 2014).

The support of the Mozambican Bible Society

The ministerial duties of Friar Amaral Bernardo Amaral required him to be transferred to Zambia and then to Europe. Therefore, he feared the project would unexpectedly come to an end without being completed. Therefore, as Friar Amaral has stated:

In 2003 I was transferred to Zambia and then to Europe. And, as I feared that the project could be terminated, I presented two colleagues – José Joaquim (coordinator) and Amilcar João – to the Mozambican Bible Society, which financed them; this was because they worked full-time. Some books of the Old Testament were translated by them with my supervision (Amaral Bernardo Amaral, Interview 9 April 2014).

Having returned to the country, but now to the Polana Parish in Maputo, the Bible Society put pressure on him for the publication of the work done. Friar Amaral was too

busy to be able to finnish the work. He had to apply for another position to enable him to complete his beloved Bible translation into *Gitonga*. As he has put it,

I was the priest of the parish of Polana, so, I could do nothing. I had to ask my superiors that released me from the parish to be able to deliver the texts on the deadline of May 2014. It is important that the biblical text is as accurate as possible. Eighty percent will be delivered and the remaining twenty percent will be delivered afterwards (Amaral Bernardo Amaral, Interview 9 April 2014).

The process of Bible translation into *Gitonga* will require some more months to be finished. It entails three levels of work, as Friar Amaral has explained:

Revising [Biblical] translation requires working at three levels: Firstly each translator has a particular job; secondly a special computer program provided by the Bible Society called *Paratext* 7 is used to process the translation work done by each member and that text is shared with each other for review; and, thirdly the three translators held a meeting for final verification of the biblical text (Amaral Bernardo Amaral, Interview 9 April 2014).

The final revision procedures require a very ecumenical effort. As Friar Amaral has added, 'Regarding reviewers we involve all in an ecumenical way as comprehensive as possible on Mondays and Wednesdays' (Amaral Bernardo Amaral, Interview 9 April 2014) Then, after the revisions have been done, the translating group organizes workshops '...involving those who want to participate ecumenically. This is the work that has been done' (Amaral Bernardo Amaral, Interview 9 April 2014).

Finally, according to Lázaro Eusébio Chivite, 'The Bible Society of Mozambique supports any Christian confession. Therefore Bible translation will be published as follows: One version to the Catholic Church including the Deuterocanon; and another for the Evangelicals' (Lázaro Eusébio Chivite, Interview 3 June 2014).

CONCLUSION

A few thoughts may be mentioned in conclusion. Firstly, the process of conversion of Friar Amaral Bernardo Amaral to Catholicism from his prior Methodist upbringing, and the fact that his father accepted it, is notable. As notable is the fact that he went on to educate himself overseas, cutting his ties with the common habits of the young people of his age, to stay around their families. He prepared himself very well in Philosophy, Theology, and Ministry, having acquired the taste for producing literature as demonstrated by the various books and articles published.

Secondly, as any other people the Tonga wanted the bible in their own Tonga language. But, to translate the entire Bible is a tedious and monotonous task that has taken more than thirty years of Friar Amaral Bernardo Amaral's life to be accomplished. This demonstrates the tenacity of Friar Amaral Bernardo Amaral in fulfilling the promise made at the funeral of his predecessor, Franciscan Priest Frederico Samuel Hnanala, concerning the work of translating the bible into *Gitonga*. Moreover, one of

the most striking things I found in Friar Amaral Bernardo Amarals' determination to translate the Bible into *Gitonga* is the fact that it was not due to economic ambition or possible gain. Most of his labour was done at his own expense and, he did not receive any compensation. Further, those who will read the Bible in this language are relatively few, compared to many other languages of the world. Most of the Tonga people do not know how to read or write. He has given away the copyright process of this translation to the Bible Society.

Thirdly, I was impressed by the leadership that Friar Amaral Bernardo Amaral has demonstrated, especially having chosen teams to work with him, a practice he has been following for decades. The teams kept on translating the Bible even when he was absent for several years. This was accomplished when computers were not yet available and phone calls were very expensive. In any case, the bible is in the final stages of being translated and many biblical texts are already being used in the Tonga language. Patient labour through the years pursuing this translation effort, is now bearing fruit.

ENDNOTES

- The author of this article is a D.Th. student working on a thesis entitled: 'The impact of the 1974 revolution on religious freedom in Portugal (1974–2006)' to be submitted at the Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History, and Missiology, Faculty of Theology, College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa in 2014 under the supervision of Prof M. H. Mogashoa. This article is further research, as a contribution in the field of Church History.
- 2 fcdasilva@gmail.com
- 3 As centuries ago the Portuguese interacted with the Tonga people and heard them say they spoke *GiTonga*, they understood it as *BiTonga*, concluding the people should be called *BiTonga*. Therefore, this is the name by which the Tonga are colloquially known by the Portuguese speaking people in Mozambique.
- 4 Original text in Portuguese: 'Cultura Tradicional Africana'.
- 5 Note: "See information online at http://media.inspirationalfilms.com/?id=toh00".
- 6 Author's own translation from Portuguese.

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