

The Merits and the Demerits of Translated Scripture: A Study of Yoruba Translation of the Qur'an

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Introduction

The advent of the translation of the Qur'an into another language is not a new phenomenon, it started right from the time of the Messenger of God, Muhammad himself. The impact of the Qur'an as a pivot of guidance to the Muslims and to those who care to study it cannot be ignored. As a result of this the translation of the Qur'an into another language is a rewarding effort. The translation of the Qur'an is also an undoubted avenue for mutual understanding between the Muslims and the speakers of the target language. The Yoruba Muslim had left no stone unturned to convey the message of the Qur'an to the speakers of the language. Though the motive of the translators of the Qur'an into Yoruba language are uneven and in the process of evolution so, there is room for improvement. As a matter of fact there are some achievement and shortcomings as the translation of the Qur'an into Yoruba language is concern. These are some of the areas of discussion in this paper. Historical and analytical approaches are applied. Information are collected and scrutinized for logical conclusion. At the end, the merit of translation of the Qur'an into other language like Yoruba would have an edge over the demerit of it. The area of discussion entrances the historical background of the translation of the Qur'an, history of translation, Yoruba and their language, the translation of the Qur'an to Yoruba, and the assessment of the translated Qur'an into Yoruba.

Translation

Translation is regarded as the communication of the meaning of a source language text/s by means of equivalent target language texts. Translation is also said to have began historically only after the appearance of written literature.¹

The word translation is derived from the Latin word trans-fero or tratum means: "to carry across or to bring across" which could be carried out through metaphrase literal or word for word translation or through paraphrase or "saying in other words" the former is also referred to as formal equivalence and the latter as dynamic equivalence.² These two methods are indispensable in the art of translation of any work and so translators had to put this in mind in order to make a judicious blending of the two types of translation in both the two languages involved.

According to Roger Bacon, if translation would be a successful one translator must know the source and the target languages as well as the science he intends to translate. This is an unfulfilled condition in which most of the translators found themselves.³

Translation of materials into Arabic is said to have expanded after the creation of Arabic scripts in the 5th century C.E. and became important with the advent of Islam, this include translation of political and diplomatic materials from Persian, Greek, Chinese and Indian languages then followed the translation of classical works. Places such as al-Qairawan, al-Azhar and an- Nizamiyyah served as centers of translation. Then the translation of Arabic works into Latin and other related European languages followed.⁴

Translation also has two distinct attributes of fidelity and transparency, therefore, it is faithful or beautiful, it is faithful if it accurately rendered the meaning of the original text without distortion and transparent if it favours the target language or the audience more than the source language and its subject matters. Eugene Nida stated that functional and formal equivalence that are equal to paraphrasing and metaphrasing respectfully were invented to translate the Bible and that this method could also be adopted for any other translation. The two methods may be combined by a translator as he may also choose any of the two at any time or place in his translation whenever circumstances dictate that, and based on the competence of the translator, but the general error is that an incompetent translator goes for false equivalence.⁵

For the translation of scripture, a competent translator must have fulfilled the following conditions mainly: good command of the source and target languages, being familiar with the subject matter of the source, knowing the relationship and otherwise of the both languages involved, and knowing when to paraphrase or metaphrase.

Translation in Islamic history reached its pinnacle during the Abbasid era due to the love Muslims had for knowledge of other nations most especially the Greek, Roman and Indian philosophies. The role of Abu Jafar al-Masur in this area could not be ignored. Works translated into Arabic language during this time include: Medicine, Philosophy, Mathematics, Astronomy and Chemistry.⁶

According to Abikan M.A.(2011) the translators of the Qur'an were of different motives ranging from distortion and baseless accusation if the translator has no belief in the Qur'an and aims for evangelical purposes

among the Muslim when the translator is among the people of the Book. A Muslim translator also who has what is seemed as a beautiful purpose may fall into fallacy due to mediocrity and incompetency.⁷ Accordingly, the reason why some Muslim scholars disallowed the translation of the Qur'ān into another language is based on their belief that certain words and expressions in the Qur'ān are untranslatable, due to the nature of its language, its method of expression and its approach to issues. For instance, a word may have diverse meanings based on its nature or based on the type of the article attached. Another fear is that the translation of the Qur'ān would deny the speakers of such language the urge for the learning of the common Arabic text of the Qur'an that is essential for his daily supplications.⁸

Though, translation of the Qur'ān is not seemed to be possible according to the majority of Muslim scholars they suggested that the interpretation of its meaning is possible, so that there would not be a claim of bringing the equivalence of the Qur'ān as suggested by Abikan. But one could say that the immutability of the Qur'ān denied by the Qur'ān is not in the area of translation but bringing its equivalence in Arabic language and if that is not possible in Arabic it would be highly impossible through translation.

The Muslims also belief that learning of Arabic language is imperative for the proper comprehending of Islamic literature therefore they prevent the translation of the Qur'ān into other languages.

Other Muslim scholars support the idea of translating of the Qur'ān into other language based on the fact that it is the meaning of it that is translated but not the Qur'ān itself. They also believe in the non-translatability of the Qur'ān like the first group based on the meaning of Q:17:88. It is their belief also that the Qur'ān would not fulfill its universality according to Q: 4:174 and 3: 138 except through the translation of its meaning to other languages. The Prophet Muhammad also was order based on Q:5:67 to convey the Qur'ān to all mankind and this would be impossible without the translation of its meanings. All these proofs are logical and based on that, conditions are laid down for translating of the Qur'ān which includes proper understanding of the Quran, its expressions and methods. Secondly, it has been made as condition that the translator masters the both source and target languages along with their method of expression. The Arabic text must also be attached with the translation of its meaning, while the issue of mastering the both source and target languages includes the ability to paraphrase and metaphraces when necessary.⁹

The Qur'ān and its translation

It was reported that Salman al-Farisi (the Persian) a companion of the prophet Muhammad translated the first chapter of the Qur'ān into the Persian language. ¹ Assuming the information being authentic, he might be the first or the second Muslim/person to have translated the Qur'ān into a foreign language as the verbal translation was done by an unknown translator who translated for an-Najashi (Negus) the king of Abyssinia when he hosted the Muslim emigrants in his palace at the eve of the migration of the Muslim to his kingdom at the beginning Muhammad's mission.

The first complete translation of the Qur'ān into foreign language was executed in Sindhi language in 884 (C. E.) in Alwar Sindhi by the order of Abdullah Ibn Umar Ibn AbdulAzeez on the request of the Hindu Raja Mehruk.¹⁰

The Latin translation of the Qur'ān was executed by a group of the orientalist scholars in the 13th century led by Robert of Ketton(c. 1110-1160) which was titled: "Lex Muhamet pseudoprophete" which means "Law of Muhammad the False Prophet" and in 1142 Peter the venerable persuaded Robert to join a team he formed to translate Arabic works into Latin for evangelical purpose among the Muslims. Thomas E, Burma stated that from 15th century to the present, scholarly opinion has condemned the Quranic translation of Peter and his team as a loose and misleading effort. Juande Segovia said that Robert of Ketton took the work with liberty, as surah 114 was expanded, the explicit from Arabic texts were often left out and implicit items were added apart from numerous other changes. Ludovico Merracci Hadrian Reland and George Sale also criticized the work and said: the translation in question deserves not the name of translation.¹¹

In the 12th century Mark Toledo a Spanish physician 1193-1216 who attended Toledo school of translators also produced one of the earliest translations of the Qur'ān into Latin.¹²

The Yoruba and their Language

The present Yorubaland encompasses the land situated west of the Niger River up to the southwestern part of Nigeria. It is suggested that Yoruba is a corrupted form of the word Ya^crab which is an attribute to Ya^crab Ibn Qahtan the ancestor of the Arab. Based on this the Yoruba believe that they are of an Arab origin, an assumption which some other tribes in Nigeria found difficult to swallow. It is also believed that they have migrated to their present place before some thousands years ago.¹³

The advent of Islam in Yorubaland could not be precisely ascertained though the first mosque at Oyo-Ile or ancient Oyo is believed to have been built around 1550 C.E.¹⁴

Before the advent of Islam the Yoruba people were worshippers of multiple gods using oral religious poetry, myths, and ritual ceremonies.

Scholars believe that the advent of the act of translation in any society is always attributed inevitably with the advent of literacy which is also believed to be generally sprung up from a religious source, so the case is also the same among the Yoruba people where literacy and translation were introduced with the advent of Islam then Christianity. The tradition of oral religious poetry at the beginning of their existence had deep impact on the approach of the Yoruba to learning and knowledge acquisition to the extent that translation of knowledge was done orally. Apart from the Qur'ān there scarcely any tangible translated works into Yoruba by the speakers of this language Christians and Muslims.¹⁵

Besides the Hausa language the closest language to Arabic in Nigeria is Yoruba language, many colloquial words of the Yoruba are traceable to Arabic origin, i.e. Ba'l Arabic, Yoruba= Bale or husband; Sabab Arabic, Yoruba= sababi or reason; arūrah Arabic, Yoruba= laluri or necessity; Sawāw Arabic, Yoruba= sawāwu or equal; al-Ā'fiyah Arabic, Yoruba= alāfia or good condition of health; as-Sirr Arabic, Yoruba= A iri or secrecy; Kashkasha Arabic, Yoruba= ta ka ka a or to go hastily; as-Samā' Arabic, , Yoruba = sanma or sky; an-Nār Arabic, Yoruba = Ina or fire.

Translation of the Qur'ān into Yoruba Language

The translation of the Qur'ān into Yoruba is one of the greatest services of the Yoruba Muslim scholars to the development of the language and to the proper understanding of Islam. The nature of Islam and the Qur'ān which lays emphasis on Arabic language for proper understanding of Islam through the clear comprehending of the Qur'ān had made the translation of the Qur'ān into Yoruba at the early period of Islam in Yorubaland intangible to the early Muslim scholars.

Another possible reason for the delay in the appearance of the Yoruba translation of the Qur'ān is not unattached with the inability of the Yoruba Muslim scholars to develop their own Yoruba alphabets with which they would have executed the work and which the Christian Missionary group headed by Samuel Ajayi Crowder was able to do to translate the Bible into Yoruba.¹⁶

The Yoruba translation of the Qur'ān include the work of Rev. M. S. Cole (1924) which was printed and distributed by the Christian Mission Society of Lagos. This translation was aimed at easing the process of evangelism among the Yoruba Muslims at that time. The merit of this work is the challenge it posed for the Muslims which led to the production of another translation of the Qur'ān.¹⁷

This translation could not survive the test of the time, it only, today exist in the articles of scholars and on the shelves of some scholars and institutions. Though it is not known whether the translation was distributed free of charge, it is certain that it could not achieve its purpose first because the Muslim rejected it and the Muslim Community was discourage from reading it. The demerit of this translation include the fact the translator removed the Arabic text and so it is difficult to know the validity or otherwise of the translation. It also creates misleading and doubt for the innocent and uninformed reader so long as the Arabic text is missing. The Muslim on their own part do not consider it as a correct interpretation or translation of the Qur'ān and this created hatred of the Muslim toward the translator as they thought that he was trying to distort their spiritual document.

It is also clear that the translation was invalid as the translator lack the knowledge of the source language and was not an expert in the target language likewise he was ignorant of the subject matter of the Qur'ān therefore, it lacks fidelity and transparency. This type of translation may create hatred and enmity among the Christians and Muslims.¹⁸

The second attempt was made by A.K. Akinlade who named his translation as: Itumo al-Kuran Li Ede Yoruba means; the meaning of the Qur'ān in Yoruba Language; Printed by Caxton Press West Africa Ltd. Ibadan (1965). According to Abikan (2002) the work has faced a lot of criticism in the legal, language and approach point of view. The merit of this translation is that it is an improvement upon the work of Cole and another attempt to render the Qur'ān into Yoruba, though we do not know the motive of the translator.

The demerit of this translation is like the first one being an individual effort which did not undergo the scrutiny of an external assessor and the Arabic text is not included.

It is also certain that the translator was expert neither in the source nor the target languages and also not in Islamic Studies which is the subject matter of the Qur'ān therefore, it lacks fidelity and transparency needed in this type of translation. The validity of the translation by then is doubtful.

The translator has benefitted from the work of Cole and followed his method. The third translation of the Qur'ān was executed by Alhaji Usama Kuta which was printed in Iwo town, but the publisher and the date of publication were omitted and the translation contains 452 pages. It was named: Odidi Kurani ni Ede Yoruba: complete Qur'ān in Yoruba language. The merit of this translation is that it is an improvement upon the first and second translations mentioned earlier. The audiences of this translation were the Muslims unlike the other two. But the validity of this work is doubtful as the translator failed to add the Arabic text which is the original document, likewise the translator though was a Muslim who may have the knowledge about the subject matter of the Qur'ān, but he was an expert neither in Arabic nor Yoruba the target language. It has also been criticized based on inaccuracy of some words and expressions and it also lacks the fidelity and transparency needed for

this type of work.¹⁹

This work like the other two mentioned earlier is no more in circulation therefore it seems that it could not achieve its aims and could not serve the target audience.

The other translation was executed by the Muslim Council of Nigeria, Lagos at the instance of his eminence Sir Ahmadu Bello. The council set up a committee that includes Lawal Augusto, I.S. Akani, and H.Y. Dindiey among others. The committee started the translation in 1962 under the supervision of Sir Ahmadu Bello and Ustadz Kamilu Sharif. When the translation was complete it was handed over to another committee of scholars which include Abdul Lateef Ahmad, Abdul Wahab Sanusi, Khidr Mustapha and Iysa Ade Bello among others. This second committee finished its task in 1972 after which the work was also given to another committee for final scrutiny and general assessment in 1973. The committee includes erudite Yoruba Muslim scholars such as; Kamaludin al-Adabi, Burhanudin Sanusi Alaka, Adam Abdullah al-Ilori, Abdul Rahman Salahudin al-Adabi, Muhammad Rajee Sulaiman and Musa Ali Ajetunmobi al-Adabi.

According to Adam Abdullah al-Ilori the secretary of the third committee, the objective of this translation was to be of help for better understanding of the message of the Qur'ān among the Nigerians, to spread and consolidate Islam and its understanding among the Muslim communities.²⁰

Among the merit of this work is the fact that it was executed by a group of different category of Yoruba Muslim Scholars, also it includes the Arabic texts and its execution took a long period of time, 1962-1973 which means that it underwent a thorough scrutiny and assessment of the Yoruba Muslim scholars of the time. This translation has been printed more than three times. The only demerit of it is that the Yoruba sound signs are not utilized to ease its reading.

Another translation of the Qur'ān that surfaced in 1997 titled; Al-Kurani Alaponle (Itumo si Ede Yoruba) which means The Noble Qur'ān(The Meaning in Yoruba Language) the translator, Yasir Anjola Abdul Qadir is a professor of Islamic studies from the University of Ilorin, Nigeria. The work was published in 1997 by Sebotimo Publications, Ijebu Ode, Nigeria.

According to the translator, the reason behind this work is the request of his readers who have read his translation of chapter one of the Qur'ān earlier in 1985. The merit of this translation includes putting of the Yoruba sound signs on the words. The translator has also gained experience from the translations of others before him.

Other individual efforts to translate the Qur'ān into Yoruba include Al-Qur'ān to tobi- EEsu Meta pelu Itumo: The Great Qur'an- three Portions with its meanings, translated by Abdul Azeez Laola. The work is no more in circulation and according to Abikan 2011, the translation is full of errors due to the incompetency of the translator, the translator also failed to add the Arabic text of the Qur'ān though he added the transliteration. It seems that the translator's objective was to assist those who do not have ability to read the Qur'ān in its Arabic form.

Al-Kuran Alaponle Eesukan ti a tu si Ede Yoruba, means: (the Glorious Qur'ān – A Portion that we translate into Yoruba) by Solih Bamidele published by al-Balagh publication, Lagos, Nigeria. The Arabic text of the Qur'ān is added along with its transliteration.

According to Abdul Ganiyi Akorede, there was another translation of the Qur'ān into Yoruba by Abdul Salam Bolaji Akuwukewe, which is no more in circulation.

Al-Qkurani Ologo Julu EEsu Merin: means (The Glorious Qur'ān Four Portions is the title of another translation of the Qur'ān by Ishaq Ahmad published by Abbas Printing Co., Lagos, 2004.

According to the translator, the work is an attempt to produce a translation of the Qur'ān that would give correct Islamic Faith to the Yoruba speakers with the claim that most of the previous translations lack this fact.²¹

The translator has also benefited from the experiences of the previous translators and tried to build upon it. The merits of the translation include making introduction for each chapter and explanation of important words while the demerit is the failure to include the Yoruba reading signs.

Assessment of Translations of the Qur'ān into Yoruba

As we have said earlier in the statement of Christopher Kasparet that the issue of spillover is believed to be one of the benefits of translation, this exactly is the case here as some of Arabic lexical items have gained frequency of occurrence in Yoruba language through the translation of the Qur'ān into Yoruba as a target Language.

The knowledge of Arabic became no more necessary for the understanding of the basic meaning of the Qur'ān while those who care to know its message got that opportunity which led to mutual understanding that lessened tension, religious prejudices and ambiguity among the Yoruba of other faiths and the Muslims.

The little understand of Islam gained from the translation of the Qur'ān into Yoruba encourages some Yoruba Muslims to make effort to learn Arabic Language in order to have first hand information about the message of the Qur'ān.

The interest of searching for the truth was enhanced and the Yoruba translation of the Qur'ān became

tool of dialogue between common Christians and the Muslims in Yorubaland. The translated Qur'ān is used along with the translated Bible by Muslim evangelists in holding faith debate and dialogue with their Christian brothers, neighbours and relatives.

It has been observe that since the emergence of the Yoruba translation of the Qur'ān, religious violence, persecution and discrimination are no more frequent in the Yoruba speaking areas of Nigeria.

It has been made as condition for any translator of important document into another language to have mastered the both languages the source and the target along with the first hand information about the subject matter of such document. It is observed that only two of all the translations of the Qur'ān into Yoruba could fulfill these conditions. Apart from the fact that some of the translators do not understand the source language all of them have taken the Yoruba language for granted as none of them is a specialist in the language, though they are speakers of it. Some of the translators even have no knowledge of Islam which is the subject matter of the Qur'ān. The purpose of translation and objectives are not also clear to some of the translators. For instance, the secretary of the more authentic of those translations Adam Abdullah said that the aim of that translation was to be of help for better understanding of the message of the Qur'ān among the Nigerians as if Yoruba is spoken by all the Nigerians. At the same place he said the aim is to consolidate Islam and its understanding among the Muslim communities.²²

The interest of the target audience was not also properly taken into consideration as it is known that most of the Yoruba people do not like reading important documents in their local language and the sound sign that could be of help and encourage them to read is left out by the majority of the translators. Most of the translations including the recent ones did not enjoy any scrutiny and assessment.

If the target audience for the translation of the Qur'ān into Yoruba is the speakers of the language generally then the non-Muslim speakers have not been taken into consideration by the Muslim translators knowing that the Inclusion of the Arabic text would scare them (the none Muslims) away.

Be that as it may, the Yoruba translation of the Qur'ān has promoted mutual understanding, peace and harmony among the adherents of different religions in Yorubaland.

Conclusion

This article has shed light on the history of translation and its evolution in particular into other languages. While the discussion on the translation of the Qur'ān into Yoruba has showed that various effort were made to standardize the translation of the Qur'ān into Yoruba. The non-Muslims are believed to be the pioneers of this effort. The Muslims were able to face the challenge of this course. Though there is room for improvement, the translation of the Qur'ān into Yoruba has played a vital role to guarantee mutual understanding among the Yoruba people Muslims and the others. The level of peace and harmony enjoy by the people of Yorubaland in the area of religion in recent time could be traced to the effect of this translation, though few people read them.

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