

## The 'Common Hausa' Bible: Good News For Catholics?

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### **Abstract**

The publication in 2015 of a new translation of the Hausa Bible in simplified Hausa, inspired by the Good News Bible and entitled "Hausa Common Language Bible" is a significant event for Christians in Northern Nigeria. It has prompted this article on the history of Bible translations in Hausa and, in particular their reception by the Catholic Church in Nigeria. The translations of 1932 and 1979 had a positive reception and have been used extensively in the Liturgy and catechesis of that Church. The new 'simplified' translation, however, poses some problems for Catholics, as explained in this article. The author is forced - reluctantly - to counsel against its acceptance by the Catholic Church.

### **1. Introduction**

A new translation of the Holy Bible in any language is a major event for Christians. I well remember the excitement when the Jerusalem Bible was published in 1966, followed by the Catholic edition of the Revised Standard Version (RSV) some months later. Up to then, it had been the King James Bible for Anglicans and the Douay Version for Catholics (both from the seventeenth century) which met our needs. The Second Vatican Council (1962 - 1965), however, had opened the door to a surge of vernacular translations of the Bible, and these accompanied the work for the vernacular Liturgy in the Catholic Church.

These ground-breaking English translations were followed by the New RSV in 1989 (with the Catholic Edition published from 1989 to 1993). Likewise, in the USA there was the New American Bible and the American Standard Version. Much later, here in Africa, the Pauline Sisters in Nairobi sponsored and published the African Bible New Testament (a completely new translation) in 1995 and then, in the year 2000, the complete African Bible.

## 2. The Bible in one's Second Language

It is, however the simplified English version, **Good News for Modern Man**, that is of primary interest in this essay. This translation of the New Testament was commissioned by the American Bible Society for those who do not have English as their mother tongue, and it was published in 1966 – a golden date for the Word of God in English. Over thirty million copies had been sold by 1971. The New Testament was followed by the Good News Bible in 1976 and an edition which included the Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical Books in 1979. The **Good News Bible** provided for the rapidly growing English-language market in the then newly-independent nations in Africa and Asia, and it was soon followed by editions in simplified French (*Bonnes Nouvelles Aujourd'hui, en francais courant*) and in Spanish for Latin America.

This 'simplified English' translation for non-native speakers was the inspiration for the new (2015) Hausa-language *Littafi Mai Tsarki: Juyi Mai Fitar da Ma'ana* (literally 'The Holy Book, a translation which is easily understood'). It is also referred to as the 'HAUSA COMMON LANGUAGE BIBLE BSN' (Bible Society of Nigeria) inside the cover. It follows the publication of the simplified New Testament [*Hausa Mai Saukin Karatu*] in 2000; and it means that there are now three versions [1932, 1979, 2015] of the Holy Bible in Hausa (which is second only to Swahili as the most widely spoken African language). All were published by reputable Bible Societies, and are still in print.

## 3. Littafi Mai Tsarki: 1932 & 1979

The oldest of these, *Littafi Mai Sarki*, published originally by the British & Foreign Bible Society in 1932, is the work of Dr. Walter Miller, an Anglican missionary who spent most of his life in the Old City of Zaria. He was persuaded to move, with many of the Hausa Christians, to the village of Wusasa outside Zaria in 1929, and it was there that the work was completed. Wusasa is well-known as the birthplace of General Yakubu Gowon, the Head of State from 1966 to 1975, and of many other prominent Northern Christians, both before and after the independence of Nigeria in 1960.

Dr. Miller died in Jos in 1952 after a lifetime of service to the Anglican Church in Northern Nigeria. E.P.T. Crampton has described in detail the huge contribution he made in those early days (*Crampton, 1979: especially*

pp 37-40, 59, 129-134). He was in many ways the 'father' of the Hausa-speaking Anglican community and his *Littafi Mai Tsarki* in perhaps his most lasting legacy. However, although loved by generations of both Catholic and Protestant Christians and still in popular demand (the last reprint was in 2007), it did not have the richness of vocabulary that only a native Hausa speaker could assure. And, with increased and improved literacy and the enhanced position of Hausa in the old Northern Region after independence, the need for a new and improved Hausa translation of the Bible was increasingly obvious.

That need was met when, in 1979, the Bible Society of Nigeria published *Littafi Mai Tsarki duk da Afokirifa*, a completely new translation. For the first time Catholic scholars were consulted and invited to participate in the work: the text of the Deutero-canonical/Apocrypha books of the Old Testament was their main contribution. The work was done in the Media Service Centre (MSC) in Kaduna and in the Catechetical Centre in Malumfashi (Katsina State), then run by the American Dominicans -- where the Maguzawa Hausa Christians were all native speakers. Among them was, in particular, a Catholic named Musa Danjuma, who later worked for the BBC Hausa Service, and who contributed to the work of translation for many years.

This is the version that has been used by Catholics in the North over the past 35 years. While some words and phrases were initially thought to be too refined for most of our Catholics -- for whom Hausa is not their mother tongue -- they gained acceptance through repeated usage and the context of their use. Take, for example, the use of *gurasa* for wheaten bread and *ruwan inabi* for wine at the Last Supper. It is true that *burodi* (market bread) is used in the Liturgy and would be preferred by many, but both *gurasa* and *burodi* are now used and are valid and interchangeable. In a recent article on *gurasa* in the *Daily Trust* (1 December 2015), Yusha'u A. Ibrahim writes: "Gurasa is locally made bread in Kano. It is said to have been brought to Kano by migrants hailing from Sudan and Algeria respectively. It is made from flour and baked in earthenware pots known as 'tanderu' in Hausa. In the '70s, Gurasa was known to be a meal for the royals and elites. However, over the years it has become food for all, not only in Kano but in the whole northern region and beyond". There is no ambiguity about its nature and meaning.

The English 'wine' however, should not be used for the Eucharist in Hausa, since in Nigeria it can signify palm wine (*bammi*) and indeed any strong drink – as distinct from beer (*giya*; or *burkutu* and *fito* for the locally brewed drink). And since *inab* is the Arabic word for the vine tree, *ruwan inabi* literally means 'the drink from the vine' – here too there is no ambiguity.

#### 4. Hausa as a means of Evangelisation

That however is a digression from the main purpose of this essay, which is **to discuss the Hausa versions of the Holy Bible and their use by the Catholic Church in Nigeria**. In this regard, I have written elsewhere on the advantage of the Hausa language as an instrument for evangelisation in Northern Nigeria and would like to quote from that work at this point:

“A priest would be aware, from his seminary course in Church history, of the advantage for the spread of the Gospel in the early Church of the popular form of Greek, the *koiné*, the popular market language in the Roman Empire at that time. The books of the New Testament were written in Greek *koiné*, and as it was passed on among followers of 'the Way' in the Roman Empire, local language barriers were dissolved and the spread of the Gospel accelerated.

A somewhat similar situation existed in Northern Nigeria, where Hausa was used as a language of trade and inter-ethnic communication in large areas of the Far North and in parts of the Middle Belt. Its diffusion had been facilitated by the decades of political stability that followed the jihad of Sheikh Othman Dan Fodio and the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate.

Sixty years of *Pax Britannica* followed the century of what I may call *Pax Fulanica*; and the colonial administration, following the system of Indirect Rule, built on the existing civil structure. Thus it was that, apart from Borno (where Kanuri and Shuwa Arabic were accorded preferential status), the use of Hausa was encouraged in commerce and administration in the North. This policy had the backing of the Native Authorities (NA) which were, in effect, the executive arm of the Muslim emirates [Hickey, 2000, p. 281].

The article in question also makes the point that the adoption of the Roman – rather than the Ajami/Arabic – script in the 1930s, and its use in administration and in the NA schools, “helped to give the language a neutral religious image and so make it acceptable to both Christians and Muslims” [p. 282]. At the same time, the impact of Miller's *Littafi Mai Tsarki* (in Roman script, 1932) and the establishment of Catholic Apostolic Prefectures based in Kaduna and Jos (1934) led to a more general and better organised evangelisation in the Hausa-speaking region. The Prefecture of Jos, in particular, championed the use of Hausa rather than the hundreds of small ethnic languages in the region, as a unifying agent. This strategy was also followed by the Augustinian missionaries when they came to Yola (1940) and Maiduguri (1954), and by the Dominicans in Sokoto and Katsina (from 1953).

The contribution made by the Catechetical Centre in Malumfashi and the Media Service Centre in Kaduna, noted above, was of crucial importance during the late 1960s and early 1970s when the **Hausa Translation Commission**, of which I was a member, prepared the liturgical texts needed for a faithful rendering of the new Roman Missal issued by Blessed Pope Paul VI in 1969. Appointed by the bishops of the then Kaduna Ecclesiastical Province, the Commission used the terminology in vogue at the time (*Kristo rather than Almasihu, Mariya rather than Maryamu, Yohanna rather than Yahaya, Ekklesiya rather than Ikilisiya, Pope rather than Papa Roma*) but that would gradually change after the 'new' Hausa Bible was published in 1979. In addition to some expatriate missionaries, the late Bishop Christopher Abba (of Minna and Yola), who had the GCE A-level diploma in Hausa, and the above-named *Ba-maguje* lay Catholic, Musa Danjuma, were valued members of the Commission.

## 5. The Hausa Sunday Lectionary

That, however, is jumping too far ahead, for the immediate challenge was the translation of the *Ordo Missae* (1970) and the 3-year cycle of scriptural readings in the new Lectionary. In this regard let me quote from another article I had published in *Shalom* (a quarterly pastoral review intended mainly for priests, published by the Vincentian Fathers from 1983 to c. 2003) in 1987:

“It was not until 1972 that the first Hausa Sunday Lectionary, *Littafin Karatu*, edited by Fr. Bede Jagoe O.P. of Sokoto Diocese, was published by the Hausa Translation Commission. It was a cheap paperback production which followed the 1932 translation of the Bible made by the above-

mentioned Anglican missionary, Dr. Walter Miller. It came at a time when the Catholic Church in the North was engaged in a remarkable surge of primary evangelisation, in which the generally poorly-educated village catechist was the primary agent. The 1972 Sunday Lectionary gave him the indispensable tool he needed for leading a worthy Sunday Service, thereby forging a sense of community and Catholic identity. Five years later, in 1977, it was necessary to reprint the lectionary and this time a durable cloth-bound edition was published by the Media Service Centre in Kaduna" (*Hickey, 1987, pp.242-43*).

## 6. A Vernacular Liturgy

Established by the Kaduna Episcopal Province in 1968, the aim of the Media Service Centre was to combine the mass and group media activities of the Church in harmonious operation, and so proclaim Christ and his Gospel effectively in the Province. "The function of the Centre is threefold", I wrote, "and it covers: a) the training of sufficient personnel in the skills of social communication: b) the production of radio and television programmes, visual aids, and Christian literature: c) research on media problems through an appropriate advisory service". (*Hickey, 1987, p. 243*). It is with the area of publishing (No. 2 above) that this essay is concerned, but its achievements in all three fields have been considerable. In particular, it may be noted that the MSC prepared the short-lived weekly Hausa programme for Vatican Radio in 2002-2003.

The first Director of the MSC was Fr John O'Mahony SMA, and over the next twenty years (he left Nigeria in 1987) he nursed it to maturity and then handed over to Fr. Martin Dama of the Diocese of Jos. Among the Centre's many important Hausa publications are *Yabo da Murna* (hymn book), *Ku zo Gareni* (prayer book). And especially *Littafin Karatu* (Sunday Lectionary), followed some years later by the Daily Mass Lectionary. Other important Hausa publications have come from Augustinian Publications (Jos), the Institute of Pastoral Affairs (Gyel, near Jos), and the Diocese of Maiduguri, where Fr Malachy Cullen was based from 1967 to 1995.

The last-named made what many would consider the greatest of all contributions to liturgical and devotional works in Hausa. The revision of the first Hausa Missal, *Littafin Godiya* (c. 1975), was his work, as was the Hausa Ritual (*Littafin su Sakaramen da Albarkatai*), *Ku Zo Gareni*, and many of the hymns in *Yabo da Murna*. He also prepared the Adult

Catechumenate in Hausa (1973) and later the catechetical work to accompany it, *Yesu Mai Cetona*. After he retired from Nigeria and returned to Ireland, he published the complete set of Sunday Homilies, entitled *Mu Fassara Bishara*.

The full list of Fr. Cullen's works was published in *Jos Studies: St Augustine's Major Seminary, Jos* (Hickey, 2007). A graduate of English literature in University College Cork, he found an outlet for his great talents and missionary zeal in this apostolate and he tackled it with an impatient zest and zeal. He was not, however, a man to sit on a committee or commission but, rather, working alone, he was able to accomplish as much (or even more?) than a commission could do (Hickey, 2007).

These, then were the five great agents which combined over a forty year period (1965 – 2005) to provide the necessary tools for the evangelisation and pastoral-liturgical needs of the Hausa cultural area in northern Nigeria: namely, the Catechetical Centre in Malumfashi, the Media Service Centre in Kaduna, Augustinian Publications in Jos, the Institute of Pastoral Affairs outside Jos, and the pen of Fr Malachy Cullen OSA in Maiduguri.

## **7. The Common Hausa Bible: 2015**

This is the context for this essay, which is focused on the three translations of the Holy Bible into Hausa (1932, 1979 and 2015) and the reception they received in the Catholic Church. It is the last of these, as noted above, that is the primary subject of this study; since it has not yet been diffused among Catholics and is largely unknown to them. It was an article in *The Guardian* newspaper that drew my attention to the new translation. A few days before its launching in Lagos, the General Secretary of the Bible Society of Nigeria, Dare Ajiboye, described the project as follows:

“Despite the huge cost of translation, put as well over N30 million, it has become necessary to come up with the Hausa Common Language version, which is the third Hausa Bible translation . . . It was undertaken to make the Bible understandable to everyone who speaks that language regardless of the geographical area, or whether or not the person is a mother-tongue speaker of the language”. He then commented on the 1979 translation as follows: “While Hausa speakers found the 1979 version a joy to read, many second

speakers of the language, especially from the Middle Belt and other places, found it difficult to understand.”

“Hence this translation, which started in 1991, using the kind of Hausa that the non-native speakers could understand. However, to ensure that it was grammatically acceptable to the first language speakers, every book was carefully vetted by those who have Hausa as their first language . . . The New Testament of this version was completed in 2000 and was highly appreciated, while the Old Testament was ready in 2012. The Complete Bible is what we are going to dedicate on March 19, 2015, he added.” (*Guardian*, 13 March 2015).

It was not until August 2015 that this new Hausa Bible was on sale in the Anglican bookshop in Abuja (at N850 per copy). It is a hard-cover and well-bound production with good quality paper and some graphics. A two-page introduction (*Gabatarwa*) explains the purpose of this new translation and lists many of the simplifications (of vocabulary and expression) adopted. Each book of the Bible has a short Introduction and an outline of the themes treated. The Apochrypha or Deutero-Canonical works of the Old Testament (included in the 1979 translation) have, however, been omitted. The Bible has also a Glossary of the more abstruse terms used, followed by three maps of the Biblical lands.

## 8. A Catholic Review

Given the success of The Good News Bible in Africa, it is not surprising that Catholic as well as Protestant Church leaders and missionaries would speculate on the potential for evangelisation offered by the new Hausa Common Bible. I had hoped that it would be as powerful a tool for further evangelisation as the English simplified version has been but, as the following review shows, I was to be disappointed. That is not to decry the need for such a work, especially given the lesser level of literacy in Hausa today -- since it was virtually eliminated as a subject in the Primary Schools in the North. Hausa today **is much stronger as a spoken than as a written language**: as a result fewer books and articles are being published.

From a Catholic point of view, I was disappointed that the Deutero-Canonical works of the Old Testament (Apocrypha) are not included. That may please many Protestants but it scarcely encourages ecumenism. I had thought that the 1979 Hausa Bible, which included them as a separate

section (as Martin Luther did in his German language Bible), was an acceptable arrangement.

In addition, the refined terminology used in the 1979 translation has now been accepted through usage; and unless there are in some cases very strong reasons for change, I would prefer to leave the work as it stands. Take the case of *Tsohon Alkawari* and *Sabon Alkawari* for Old and New Testament. The Common Hausa Bible has *Tsohon Yarjejeniya* and *Sabon Yarjejeniya* – the new word meaning a treaty or covenant, which is indeed truer to the reality. However, the same would be true for English where Old and New Testament would not seem to indicate a covenant between God and Man. Is that sufficient reason to change the accepted English terminology to Old and New Covenant? I doubt it, and apply the same logic to *Alkawari* in Hausa.

Likewise, the word *Bishara* for Gospel is substituted by *Labari Mai Dadi* in the Hausa Common Bible. This, to me, changes the meaning from 'good news' (as in *Albishirinku!*) to a bland and generic 'nice news'. This is at least an impoverishment of what the Gospel, the Good News, is for us Christians.

Even more disturbing for a Catholic is the total elimination of the Hausa word for Church, *Ikilisiya* (adapted from the Greek original *ekklésia*). It is substituted by the phrase *Jama'a masu bi* – meaning 'community of followers'. The Church of Christ is indeed a community of followers -- believers and followers of 'the Way', but it is much more than that – as is clear from the ancient Professions of Faith (I believe in the catholic Church; and more explicitly in the Nicene Creed – I believe in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church). One can rightly ask, and many Catholics will do so -- **What was the motive for removing the word 'Ikilisiya' (ekklésia' in Greek, ecclesia in Latin, église in French; i.e. Church) in the Hausa Common Bible?** It would seem to deny or at least obscure the reality of the Church as an institution founded by Christ.

### **The Last Supper**

A further difficulty for Catholics is the term used for what took place during the Last Supper (*Jibin Ubangiji*). One can accept the change made from 'gurasa' to 'burodi' for bread – for both terms are equally valid – and from *koko* (a small earthenware bowl) to *kwaf* (from the English 'cup'), and applaud the use of *ruwan inabi* for wine (as explained above). However,

the definition of 'ruwan inabi' given in the Glossary is dangerously misleading: we read – [*ruwan inabi*] *ya kunshi kowane irin giya, mai zake da mai tsami, wanda ya tashi da wanda bai tashi ba* [Wine includes all kinds of alcohol, whether sweet or sour, whether fermented or not]. That is not true. As explained above, the words *giya*, *fito* and *burkutu* all denote brewed beer, although *giya* is sometimes wrongly used in a wider sense. The **English word 'wine' must be studiously avoided** in the Hausa Catholic liturgy – since its primary meaning in Nigeria is palm wine: *bammi* in Hausa: (although, sadly, we do find it in the current *Hadayar Godiya* (Missal) and the hymn *Burodi duk da wine, a mai da su* etc. in *Yabo da Murna*).

The Hausa word for alcoholic spirits (strong drink) is *barasa*, not *giya* or *ruwan inabi*. The latter, literally 'drink from the vine' (from the Arabic *Inab* – the vine plant) can indeed be *mai zaki* (non alcoholic grape juice) or *mai tsami* (alcoholic wine); but **in the context of the Jewish Passover Supper it was definitely the latter**. In view of the Eucharist we celebrate – the Mass -- this point is of the greatest importance for Catholics and no ambiguity of terminology can be tolerated.

The replacement of *lamiri* (conscience) -- as used especially by St. Paul but also found in Acts, Hebrews and 1 Peter -- with *tunani* (thought, thinking) or *tunanin zuciyar* is also an impoverishment of the concept of conscience, handed down to us in the New Testament. *Lamiri*, as used in the 1979 Hausa Bible for conscience, has now been accepted by the Faithful and it is fully understood from the context of its use. There is no need for such a change.

Finally, it may be noted that the important proper names *Yesu*, *Almasihu*, and *Maryamu* are unchanged; while the reversion from *Yusufu* to *Yusuf* and *Yahaya* to *Yohanna* will hardly be an issue. These versions have always been interchangeable.

## 9. Conclusion

I had eagerly awaited the arrival of the new Hausa Common Bible in Abuja. Aware of how the Good News Bible had helped so many Christians in Nigeria, many with limited English, I dearly hoped that its Hausa counterpart would have the same effect in the North and Middle Belt of Nigeria. Readers of this review will have realised by now that I am deeply disappointed. What could have been a unique opportunity for both

Catholics and Protestants to combine in the diffusion of the Good News to the many people of good will who await it, has been lost. The new Hausa Common Language Bible will be widely used by Protestant Christians but, **sadly, I cannot recommend it to Catholics.** They will, I am sure, continue to use happily and with great spiritual profit the 1979 translation, but we can continue to reflect on what might have been: *da na sani . . .*

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