

## Lamin Sanneh

During the 80's I attended a missionary conference held in Nairobi, Kenya, and among the speakers was Dr. Lamin Sanneh. I was particularly impressed with his concept of translating Scripture as involving a deep penetration into the culture of the target language and the influence of the process on the language community receiving the translation.

To introduce Lamin Sanneh I am quoting from an article in *Christianity Today*, October, 2003, The Defender of the Good News: Questioning Lamin Sanneh:

*“Lamin Sanneh is the D. Willis James Professor of Missions and World Christianity and professor of history at Yale Divinity School. his earliest education, in the Gambia, was with fellow chiefs' sons. Following graduation from the University of London with a Ph.D. in Islamic History ...*

*“Among his many books, the one that has perhaps made the deepest impact is *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Orbis 1989), in which he argues that— contrary to the folklore that passes for social science, and in sharp contrast to Islam— Christianity preserves indigenous life and culture, thanks to its emphasis on mother-tongue translation. Where indigenous culture has been strong, it has absorbed Christian life and worship, thereby sustaining and even increasing its vitality. Where conversion has been to Islam, on the other hand, indigenous cultures have tended to be weak, and soon lose entirely the capacity to think religiously in their mother tongue. The difference lies in the Christian missionary insistence upon translation, on the one hand, and diffusion as the Muslim missionary *modus operandi*. The converse, he argues, is also true. ...*

**“What made you interested in Christianity?** Reading about Jesus in the Qur'an piqued my curiosity. I had no access to the Bible or to a church at the time, and so the Qur'an remained the authoritative and only source of Jesus, son of Mary (the respectful form the Qur'an uses).

**Following your conversion, what did you most miss about Islam? ...** I acquired a deep appreciation for Islam, for its sense of divine transcendence, for my own formation in its moral milieu, for the habits of obedience and faithfulness it transcribed in me, and for the idea it inculcated of the truth and reality God in human affairs.

**How did you end up choosing an academic career in which you have spent most of your time on the faculty of several of the most prestigious universities in the world?** I come from a Muslim scholarly family. My paternal grandfather and my father's brother were both professional religious scholars, and so it felt natural from childhood for me to aspire to be a scholar, and so it felt natural from childhood for me to aspire to be a scholar. ...”

The following are quotations from the revised edition of the work on “translating the message” referred to above:

*Lamin Sanneh, TRANSLATING THE MESSAGE *The Missionary Impact on Culture, Second Edition Revised and Expanded* 2009, pp.199-201*

The process of acquiring expertise in the indigenous languages brought missionaries up against religious customs. One representative Christian figure who reflected in a self-conscious way on this process was Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther (ca. 1807-91), the foremost African churchman of the nineteenth century. A native of the Yoruba town of Oshogun, Crowther was taken captive at age thirteen by Fulani and Oyo Muslim forces and sold as a slave to a Portuguese slave ship in Lagos. He was eventually rescued, in April 1822, by the British Naval Squadron and taken to the West African city of Freetown, Sierra Leone, where he came under missionary instruction. He was ordained in England in 1843 before being subsequently consecrated bishop at Canterbury

Cathedral in June 1864. He played a formative role in developing the missionary outreach to Nigeria, where he used his considerable linguistic gifts.

Crowther recognized that translation was more than a mechanical drill because something of the genius of the people was involved. Language is not merely a tool fashioned to achieve limited and temporary goals. It is also a dynamic cultural resource, reflecting the spirit of the people and illuminating their sense of values. As such it demands to be imaginatively approached, with the investigator skillful enough in the sort of cultural archeology by which one may discover the stored paradigms whereby society represents and promotes itself. The translator should be prepared to dig underneath the layers of half-conscious notions and dim memories to reclaim the accumulated treasure. Consequently, with the sound instincts of a field anthropologist, Crowther made a point of befriending ordinary people without regard to their religious affiliation, going on to pay close attention to the speech of the elders in order to get behind new inventions of the language and the colloquialisms that break the line of continuity with the original. He followed the ripple effects of the initial missionary contact, finding his way to the core of the vital material, which he reclaimed in order to surrender it to the double claim of Christian anticipation and as a trophy of the collective cultural memory,

For this reason he befriended pagans and Muslims alike, "watched the mouth" of the elders and, while discussing theology and other serious matters with them, noted down "suitable and significant words." When he tried such words in common speech, he found that, like "thrown away words," they sounded stale, but "to the rising generation, they will sound sweet and agreeable." He went everywhere with pencil and paper (Ajayi 1969, 128). Crowther's superb field skills allowed him to direct his inquiries toward a deeper appreciation of custom and context, tracking incidents of use and practice against the rules and conventions of society. Precisely because Crowther envisaged long-term Christian engagement with these materials, he felt it imperative to strive for accuracy, naturalness, and dynamism at the same time. Cultural and linguistic facts, he said, must be located in the values and ideals they embody. He wrote in 1844 that his linguistic investigation encouraged him to dig deeper into other aspects of traditional African life, suggesting how the coming of Christianity could be a second wind for threatened cultures.

Crowther was an infinitely patient man, with a natural flair for languages and for field inquiry. He found the missionary enterprise ideally suited to his gifts and temperament, and in that fact we find a clue to the inner nature of Christian mission—in spite of the irony that Crowther was eventually crushed by the machinery of missionary hegemony. In response to the reverberations of scriptural translation, Crowther was inspired to follow through to other aspects of the culture, suggesting that literal translation was inadequate to take the full measure of the enterprise. "In tracing out words and their various uses," he admits, "I am now and then led to search at length into some traditions and customs of the Yorubas" (Ajayi 1969, 128n). Crowther began a systematic inquiry into the Egungun secret society and the cult of Ifa divination, and contributed in other ways to the strengthening of a sense of Yoruba national identity.

In the example of Crowther we see how the translation work of mission came into natural alignment with dormant or dimly apprehended symbols of the culture and reclaiming these as a bridge with the message of Christianity. Crowther was eager to allow what Livingstone called "the eloquence of the native assembly" to give force and shape to the Christian discourse. The sense of responsibility this created toward preserving the authentic forms of indigenous life and custom constitutes a real achievement of mission, while it challenges missionary attitudes.