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Afterword: More on Mother Tongue Theological Education

by Richard J. Gehman

The recent issue of AJET I found fascinating, especially the first two articles by Drs. Harries and Wildsmith. I would like to respond to Dr. Harries' article in particular, *The Prospects for Mother Tongue Theological Education in Western Kenya*.

Harries strenuously pushes for the use of the Mother Tongue (MT) in theological education because of the deep cultural meanings contained in the MT which cannot be translated into another language. Because Bible colleges teach in English or French, students are unable to wrestle with the deeply cultural meanings of traditional African life; hence, the need to use MT in Bible and theological colleges.

This of course is not a newly discovered concept. The reason students of the Bible since the Protestant Reformation are urged to learn Greek and Hebrew is that only through the knowledge of the original languages can the depths of meaning of the original biblical text be understood.

In 1928 the Africa Inland Mission established their first Bible school (Ukamba Bible College) in Kenya in Machakos where Mr. Guiding taught the students in Kikamba until he retired in the 1950s, much of the time being the only teacher. (Think of the incredible legacy he left to the Africa Inland Church in Kenya with hundreds of pastors taught.) The following year in 1929 they established Moffat Bible College (originally the W.Y. Moffat Memorial Bible Training Institute) in Kijabe in order to train pastoral students among the Gikuyu, Masai, Kalenjin and Luo, so Mr. Teasdale taught in Kiswahili, the lingua franca of Kenya. For whatever reason, the A.I.C. in Ukambani grew larger in numbers, stronger in stewardship and evangelization, and deeper in their commitment to biblical truth than other branches of the Africa Inland Church, according to the A.I.M. missionaries in Ukambani. Their explanation was that all the pastors in Ukambani were taught in the MT and the others in the lingua franca. Therefore, Akamba understanding of the truth went deeper.

However, to conclude from this that our theological institutions should change course and begin once again to teach in the MT is a stretch. In America we would say, "You are whistling in the dark;" you are dreaming "pie in the sky." It will never happen, and for good reason.

Of all the injustices and travesty which colonial governments wracked upon the Africans, their greatest contribution was the English or French languages together with classroom education. English and French are

windows to the world. A Kenyan educated in English has access to thousands and tens of thousands of books. How many books are available in the MT? To focus on MT in theological education is to impoverish the minds of the students. Very few books are found even in Kiswahili. Although Kiswahili is a Bantu language, no vernacular language is fully transferrable to any other language. Learning in Kiswahili is no substitute for learning the depths of cultural meaning found in the vernacular language.

English is the official language of Kenya and the medium of instruction in all schools, beginning with Standard IV. It would be an insult to ask theological students to study in their MT while their peers are using English. Who will minister to the educated elite in our urban centers? To pine for a return to MT in theological education is a non-starter.

The students that I have known over the years have succeeded rather well in ministry after four years of theological studies in English (preceded by five to seven years of English in Primary and Secondary).

Yet Jim Harries has a point. Students immersed in their English studies for four years not only fail to wrestle with the deep meanings of their cultural beliefs, and fail to apply biblical teaching to their cultural setting; they begin to forget their Mother Tongue. Before graduation from theological college, students I have known began reading their vernacular Bibles in order to reacquaint themselves with biblical vocabulary in their MT.

What is the solution? Continuing education and refresher courses are desperately needed for pastors. The notion that four years of biblical studies renders the graduate a master of the Bible and theology is ludicrous. They need further training - an on-going refreshing that comes from the study of God's Word together with their peers. Denominations that fail to promote in-service training are failing their own pastors. They need it.

What better way of deepening their understanding of Scriptural truth than to do it in their Mother Tongue? In most Bible schools we find a mixture of communities represented by the students. It would be virtually impossible to teach them in their Mother Tongues. It is unrealistic and impractical. But to gather all the Wakamba pastors together, the Gikuyu, Masai, Luo and Kalenjin in their respective communities, would be a rich opportunity for a knowledgeable teacher to lead them through theological and biblical studies in their MT.

For decades I have advocated and promoted that our churches provide continuing education for their ministers. If they would only catch this vision, and see the value of doing it in their MT, what a great boon that would be!