

Fang Oral Scripture Adaptation Project Report

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Introduction

The advance of globalization among the minority languages of the world is rapidly changing the landscape of Bible translation. Though a complete written Bible is a worthy goal, in some cases the declining vitality of minority languages and lack of mother-tongue literacy make this approach impractical. By the time the completed Bible is published, there may be few left to read it. Facing this reality among the Fang people of Equatorial Guinea and observing a very low interest in the existing written Fang New Testament (NT), we began an experimental oral adaptation of portions of the Old Testament (OT). Narrative passages of the OT were translated orally from Spanish into Fang by a gifted storyteller, and presented in the traditional Fang troubadour style, called *mvét oyeng*, including traditional music and rhythms. The resulting recordings have been positively received by the community, and we offer this detailed project report as an alternative and innovative model for other language groups who may be facing similar circumstances.

1 Background Circumstances

1.1 The Fang Language

The Fang language (ISO: fan) is a Bantu language with 589,000 native speakers¹ in Central Africa, ranging from Southern Cameroon, throughout Equatorial Guinea (EG), and into Gabon. The Fang are traditionally jungle-dwellers of the interior² and are the most numerous of several people groups in continental EG,³ dominating the coastal minority peoples. There are two main dialects of Fang in EG, *Okak* in the south and *Ntúmu* in the north, which have many phonological and lexical differences but are mostly mutually intelligible.

The official and educational language of the country is Spanish, and all local languages have been prohibited in schools since the period of Spanish colonization. The country gained its independence in 1968 but the Spanish language remains dominant, and there is no mother-tongue education. French is also widely used.

¹ 2013 figure from Ethnologue: Languages of the World, 22nd edition.

² Fang tradition holds that they came from Egypt (Acacio Mba, personal communication). “They come from the north of Sudan, from which they were the protagonists of a large exodus that spanned many generations and frequent struggles with the peoples they encountered. According to legend, they come from Asia, cross the Red Sea and after a time in Egypt they cross the desert and the savannah and arrive to the coasts of Guinea at the end of the 18th century.” See Isabela de Aranzadi, *Instrumentos musicales de las etnias de Guinea Ecuatorial* (Madrid: Apadema Editorial, 2009), 41. Translation mine. Some evidence for this tradition comes from the fact that their oral tradition preserves the memory of desert and savannah animals that they could not have encountered in their current jungle homeland (Ibid., 47).

³ Unless otherwise noted, our discussion will be limited to continental Equatorial Guinea, excluding the island of Bioko where the capital city of Malabo is located, which has its own unique linguistic environment. Bioko is the historical home of the Bubi people, and the Fang have maintained a presence there only in recent history.

There is no tradition of writing Fang; an orthography was developed by expats for the publication of the NT (see section 1.2).⁴ Literacy in Spanish is reportedly high (77%, according to the Ethnologue), especially among the urban population.

There are significant linguistic differences between the coastal city of Bata and the rural interior of the country. Fang use is much more ubiquitous in the interior, where the older generations and many women are still monolingual Fang speakers. However, most of the interior has no schools beyond a middle school level, so all youth desiring higher education must relocate to large cities like Bata or Ebebiyin (or in some cases Malabo) where Spanish is rapidly becoming more dominant.

In Bata, children speak almost exclusively Spanish with each other, and mostly Spanish with their parents. In a small survey done in the city of Bata (2019) 50 adult Fang speakers were asked the following question: “What language do your children usually speak with their friends?” All except one responded with: Spanish. When asked the question, “What language do you usually speak with your children?” 47/50 said, “Spanish.”

A more extensive survey of the language vitality was also performed in 2019 by Susana Castillo Rodríguez, PhD (State University of New York, Geneseo). 1,750 answers were collected all over continental EG, and the results are still pending. In personal communication⁵ with the professor who carried out the survey, she said that her overall impressions were that Spanish was quickly displacing Fang as the first language of most children and youth.

In general, the head leaders of local church denominations and networks live in Bata and preach in Spanish to congregations of mixed ethnicities, whereas the rural pastors they oversee are much more likely to preach in Fang. While most churches still sing some percentage of their worship songs in Fang (especially in the interior), no Evangelical church that we are aware of is using traditional instruments in their worship.⁶ The xylophone and traditional drums began to disappear from Evangelical churches beginning in the 1970s,⁷ replaced by western keyboards, guitars and drum sets.

1.2 History of Bible Translation in Fang

A complete Bible translation in Bulu, a variety of Fang spoken in southern Cameroon, was published in 1940. Many Fang Christians in EG learned to read it, but the dialectal difference made it difficult to understand. It is only used by a few individuals, and its orthography is not used elsewhere in EG.

The NT in Fang of EG was published in 2014 by the national Bible translation organization ACTB.⁸ There was little to no local church involvement in the translation process, and no community celebration of its publication. Some copies were distributed and sold, but since that time it has been used very little in the local churches. These mainly use the Reina-Valera 1960 Spanish version.

⁴ In this paper Fang words are spelled as they appear in Bibang Oyee 2013 if listed there, except that *ŋ* is replaced with *ng*.

⁵ June, 2019.

⁶ Catholic churches continue to use some traditional instruments.

⁷ Acabio Mba, personal communication, June 2019.

⁸ Asociación Cristiana de Traducciones Bíblicas: Christian Association of Bible Translations.

Beginning in 2015, SIL made a Scripture app available, which included a large amount of the audio recording of the NT. Despite promotional work with local churches and some advertising, the app has been received with limited interest. Even though the app has an analytics tracker, it is hard to estimate exactly how many people are actively using the app because of limited internet connectivity. Based on the little data that has been uploaded, there are only 2-3 people who actively use the app.

In the summer of 2018 we designed a new version of the Fang Scripture app, which included the Reina-Valera as an optional parallel/interlinear version, as well as other updated features. We published it on the Google Play Store and launched a targeted online advertising campaign, targeting EG, Cameroon, Spain, and Gabon. Over 1,000 people downloaded the app, but the retention rate was abysmal. That means that most users uninstalled the app soon after downloading it, and the app currently remains installed on only 94 phones. We believe that many people who speak the dialects of Fang from Gabon and Cameroon thought that the app was a version of the NT in their dialect, but were disappointed when they tried to use it. Therefore, after six months of advertising targeting other countries, we changed the target to EG only. The result was that downloads virtually came to a standstill, and remained so until we discontinued the advertising.

When asking Fang speakers why they believe the NT has been so poorly received, many reasons are given, ranging from the translation being unnatural and difficult to understand, to the *Okak* and *Ntumu* dialects being oddly mixed in different features of the orthography, resulting in a Fang that represents no actual speaker. One of the most frequent comments, however, is that learning to read Fang is difficult.⁹

There were some consistent literacy efforts on the part of expats in Bata and Evinayong (a small city in the interior) between roughly 2004-2011. These mainly consisted of the creation of primers and one-time workshops at churches focusing on transferring Spanish literacy skills to Fang.¹⁰ In 2016, SIL created an app to help users learn to read Fang, but again, interest and distribution have been limited. There were also workshops to train the leadership of ACTB to train more literacy teachers, but these classes did not continue after the expats left, and there are no longer any consistent and ongoing Fang literacy efforts in the country.

It appears that, apart from a few individuals, the Fang are not interested in a foreign-motivated “agenda of literacy”¹¹, but are content for Fang to remain oral as always. In the same way, it seems that a Fang Bible was never a significant felt need on the part of the community. It was at best a “generated need”—what Hill defines as “when a community does not feel the need for a translation of the Bible into their language, but the Bible translation representative convinces them of the need. This is the weakest motivation of all, but still can result in a successful program...” as long as those involved invest “much more effort in stimulating and sustaining interest.”¹² Unfortunately, this key condition of sustained

⁹ The language’s tonal system complicates the matter. The orthography of the NT represents high and low tones and rising word-final tone on a nasal, but the Fang dictionary Bibang Oyee 2013 distinguishes high, low, low-high and high-low tones.

¹⁰ Bridget Ulibarri, personal communication, August 2019.

¹¹ James A. Maxey, *From Orality to Orality: A New Paradigm for Contextual Translation of the Bible* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2009), Kindle location 94.

¹² Harriet Hill, *The Bible at Cultural Crossroads* (New York: Routledge, 2006), Kindle location 5163.

community interest and involvement was not met during the translation process, and local opinion leaders were not successfully engaged. Sadly, the result has been a largely unused NT translation.

Young Guineans eagerly pursue a future in which economic and educational opportunities are linked to Spanish, French and English, and seem mostly unconcerned that Fang may gradually fade into the past. We therefore concluded that a written Fang OT was not a strategic goal. By the time it could be published, it would serve only as a cultural “museum piece” for future generations who will speak more Spanish or French than Fang. Even if finished quickly, it is unlikely that it would be widely accepted and used, given the current disuse of the NT and apathy towards Fang literacy.

Urban churches, which are often multi-ethnic, have a strong preference for Spanish Scripture and preaching. Many churches feel that exclusive use of Fang in their services would exclude their minority members, and so although there is often an interpretation into Fang, nearly all urban preachers use Spanish. When the Scriptures are read in Spanish, they are interpreted into Fang on the spot or, as often as not, left untranslated altogether. Years of personally encouraging pastors to use the Fang NT in their services affected little if any change. We concluded that it is not our role to spend decades trying to convince the Fang to use their mother tongue where they clearly do not want to. Hill notes that “diglossic communities may prefer Scripture in the language of wider communication for public ceremonies and the mother tongue for home use. Better to identify a restricted domain in which mother-tongue Scriptures are appropriate and make the most of it than to try to promote mother-tongue Scriptures in larger domains where they aren’t appropriate.”¹³ If Fang Scriptures are not desirable for public services, perhaps they might be accepted in a different domain: traditional entertainment.

We hoped to make Scripture accessible to monolingual Fang speakers, but for this it would need to be: 1) in a culturally relevant format, and 2) ready to share soon before the older generations disappear. If our communication of the Scriptures is to be relevant to the target audience, it must naturally be in a format they consider relevant. As Sundersingh writes, “The incarnational model demands that we be receptor-oriented in our communication. God reached us at our level, and that is the pattern to be employed in all Christian communication.”¹⁴

“Recent concerns focus on the relevance of the translated Scriptures. We cannot afford to ignore this issue; otherwise we end up with unused Bible translation. For translations to be perceived as relevant, they must meet the standards of meaningful communication, centered on the message and focused on the audience.”¹⁵

For a Fang audience, the format they consider most relevant is aural, not textual. As it turned out, the Fang already had a genre of oral performance that is perfectly suited for the long narratives of the OT. This format is called *mvét oyeng*. Surprisingly, no one had ever used the *mvét oyeng* for anything to do with Christianity or the Bible.

¹³ Hill, *The Bible at Cultural Crossroads*, Kindle location 5104.

¹⁴ Sundersingh, *Audio-Based Translation* (Bangalore: SAIACS, 2000), Kindle location 4346.

¹⁵ Fritz Goerling, “Relevance and Transculturation.” *Notes on Translation 10 (3)* (Dallas: SIL, 1996), 50.

1.3 *Mvét oyeng* in Fang tradition

For generations, the Fang have considered the performances of troubadours (*bebom mvét*, lit. *mvét* players) to be sacred and fundamental expressions of their culture.¹⁶ Indeed, as the introduction to a Spanish translation of one of these epics says, “the *mvét* is the deepest expression of the culture of the Fang people.”¹⁷

These narrative epics are called *mvét oyeng*,¹⁸ named for their trademark stringed instrument: *mvét* is the name of the whole instrument, and *oyeng* refers to a bamboo pole, to which are attached three hollow gourds as resonance chambers and between 1-4 strings made of trapping wire. The center gourd is held against the abdomen with the bamboo center at a diagonal angle with the body, while the strings are plucked with the fingertips and thumb, similar to a harp.

In *mvét oyeng*, the storyteller’s narration is accompanied by his own *mvét*, a constant background rhythm made with bamboo sticks (called *bikpara*) hit together by audience members. This resembles a metronome, and is also accompanied by a bell rhythm that plays off of the *bikpara* base. If there is no bell available, an empty liquor bottle usually takes its place. There are intermittent musical choruses, and audience participation with call-and-response phrases to keep their attention.

The performances, which typically last for 2-4 hours, were originally presented at funerals of distinguished men.¹⁹ The troubadour would make veiled references to the life of the dead man in his story, including him as a character under a different name while the audience tried to guess which character represented him.

These stories tell of the exploits of their mythical ancestors, the immortal *Ekan*,²⁰ clan of the mythical world of *Engóng*.²¹ “The *Ekan* are the mythical representation of the Fang, and the stories of *mvét* show us their virtues and defects, their values and their longings, their beliefs and their way of seeing and conceiving of the world.”²² The *Ekan* are a clan of recurring characters, and every lover of *mvét oyeng* is familiar with the inhabitants of *Engóng*, their personalities, and how they are interrelated. The epics are set in present day, with cars, telephones, presidential palaces, military personnel, and especially the ubiquitous military checkpoints providing fodder for humor. The deeds of the *Ekan* are

¹⁶ Isabela de Aranzadi, *Instrumentos musicales de las etnias de Guinea Ecuatorial* (Madrid: Apadana Editorial, 2009), 53.

¹⁷ Eyi Ncogo Moan Ndong, *Muandong el antropofago: epopeya de nvét oyeng* (Libreville: Raponda Walker, 1997), 7. Translation mine.

¹⁸ The instrument and the epics share the same name, but for the sake of clarity I will use the shorter *mvét* to refer to the instrument and the full name *mvét oyeng* to refer to the epics.

¹⁹ Rosendo-Ela Nsue Mibui, *Historia de Guinea Ecuatorial: período pre-colonial* (Gráficas Alegoran, 2005), 128.

²⁰ Some of the varied opinions about the *Ekan* include the following: “The *Ekan* are the first creation of God, the first men. The way he wanted to make us is how they are: they do not die, they never get sick, they are valiant.” (Ndong, *Muandong el antropofago: epopeya de nvét oyeng*, 13. Translation mine.) “...Immortality would be the normal condition of human existence... [because death] ...was introduced among men as a degeneration of the original harmonious order.” “With the introduction of witchcraft in society by woman, there came hate, pride, ignorance and death” (From an unedited text of anthropologist J. Mbana, quoted in Ibid., 14. Translation mine).

²¹ de Aranzadi, *Instrumentos musicales de las etnias de Guinea Ecuatorial*, 35, 53; Mibui, *Historia de Guinea Ecuatorial: período pre-colonial*, 127.

²² Ndong, *Muandong el antropofago: epopeya de nvét oyeng*, 7. Translation mine.

considered not to be the invention of the *bebom mvét* themselves, but rather are told them by their spirits, as stories brought from the land of the dead.²³

The themes of *mvét oyeng* are varied: “lyrical or amorous, epic and sometimes satirical or stories about recent events.”²⁴ They may contain veiled political commentaries (or be interpreted as such even when unintended), which has sometimes made the office of troubadour a perilous vocation. They often include indirect moral or wisdom lessons that teach “the principles and rules that people should follow if they want to live as humans, and the defects that lead to the loss of the human being.”²⁵ The inhabitants of *Engóng*, each with their strengths and weaknesses, serve as memorable examples of how or how not to live. There is a tradition of leaving the story unfinished and always ending with “we will continue tomorrow,” even when that’s not the case.

It is a particularly appropriate genre for interpreting OT passages because, like the Hebrew scriptures, the *mvét oyeng* can include history, epic poetry, songs, and even genealogies. The troubadours sing their genealogies up until their ancestor Àfirì Kárà (supposed to be the source of the name “Africa”) and beyond.²⁶ The translator for this project, Acacio Mba, can recite his own genealogy many generations back, naming God as the last link.²⁷ Since the Fang have a tradition of reciting or singing their direct line of ancestors, including during *mvét oyeng* performances, most of the genealogies in the OT passages that were translated fit perfectly into the adaptations. Even the table of nations in Genesis 10 was put to rhythm and recorded separately like a song.

Traditionally, a *mbom mvét* (troubadour, sg. of *bebom mvét*) must be initiated with special and secret spiritual rites and teachings.²⁸ He is often a descendent of other troubadours and must have a broad memory, be gifted musically and poetically, and be able to improvise. Troubadours are greatly admired and represent “essential character in the Fang oral tradition” (de Aranzadi 54-55).

The most famous *mbom mvét* of recent years is Eyí Moan Ndong (1928-2003). Many of his live performances were recorded and are still played on the radio and distributed today, enjoyed especially by the older generations. *Mvét oyeng* is now a disappearing art form,²⁹ though there are a few storytellers still performing, notably one or more of Eyí Moan Ndong’s sons. Its decline may be due in part to the strong association of the *mvét* instrument with witchcraft and human sacrifice to achieve talent. Tradition says that for the first *bebom mvét*, the condition of receiving their office was the sacrifice of their own mothers (killing them by witchcraft), so that they could bring them stories from the land of the dead.³⁰ Acacio Mba once owned an *mvét*, but it was destroyed by his mother’s sister for fear that he might end up making such a sacrifice. Few today wish to learn it because of the stigma and suspicion that may accompany it. Our hope is that this project can be a step toward redeeming this and other traditional instruments from their associations with witchcraft for a new use in worship of the true

²³ Ibid., 17; de Aranzadi, *Instrumentos musicales de las etnias de Guinea Ecuatorial*, 27.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ de Aranzadi, *Instrumentos musicales de las etnias de Guinea Ecuatorial*, 53. Translation mine.

²⁶ Ibid., 50.

²⁷ Personal communication, June 2019.

²⁸ The translator for this project was never initiated in this way, but rather imitated what he heard in the “countless” *mvét oyeng* performances he saw during his lifetime (personal communication, March 2019).

²⁹ The fact that the Fang still value this art form was shown in that when our musical director traveled carrying the *mvét*, he was approached several times by strangers asking him to come and perform at funerals and events.

³⁰ Ndong, *Muandong el antropofago: epopeya de nvét oyeng*, 23.

God and for communicating his truth. In various interviews on the radio Acacio has said, “The other troubadours get their stories by witchcraft from the land of the dead. But I don’t get my stories that way. I get them from God himself, in his word.”

2 Project Description

2.1 Target audience

Our target audience consisted of the inhabitants of the interior where Fang is still dominant and the older adults of Bata and Malabo who enjoy recordings of *mvét oyeng* and who may or may not read Spanish. We also strongly wanted these recordings to be attractive to any lover of *mvét oyeng*, and not just church members, so our target audience was not limited to Christians. An unanticipated audience included a local institute for the blind, and a few young urban individuals who take a strong interest in Fang language and traditions.

2.2 People involved

The principal artist was Acacio Mba Micha, a skilled storyteller with a vast knowledge of traditional Fang culture. He was the translator and narrator for all the recordings. Because Acacio was raised in the central region of the country, his dialect falls mid-way along the *Okak-Ntúmu* spectrum, making his Fang easy to understand and acceptable to almost all hearers. He is a graduate of the Bible school IBCP³¹ founded by WEC International in Bata.

Acacio’s brother Canuto Ngui, a professional xylophone player, judge, and teacher, was the musical director, composer and performer. Both brothers were raised in a Catholic family but now are Evangelical Christians involved with the Baptist church. Both grew up in their home villages in the interior until young adulthood, and therefore speak a very high native level of Fang and have a deep knowledge and appreciation of their culture.

Andrew Case served as the principal translation consultant, project administrator, producer, sound engineer, graphic designer, and marketer. He holds an MDiv from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (Louisville, KY), is a member of SIL International, and was recognized as a translation consultant by SIL (through the Cameroon branch) in 2018.

Bethany Case was the project’s visual artist, creating the illustrations for the group’s logo, the cover art for each recording, and marketing posters; she also served as supporting translation consultant and linguistic researcher, and worked with Fang speakers on transcriptions and back translations of songs and segments of the oral translations. She holds an MA in linguistics from the University of North Dakota.

Many volunteered their voices for the recording of original songs, including Paulina Nfumu Endong, Luis Lorenzo, Faustino Jeremías, Gregorio Ndong Nchama, and other chorus members. Countless others collaborated in the distribution of the published recordings.

³¹ *Instituto Bíblico Casa de la Palabra*, “House of the Word Bible Institute.”

2.3 Project Introduction

The consultant attended a week-long orality workshop in July 2018 at Dallas International University, and then in September taught an abbreviated orality workshop in EG for the benefit of ACTB. Acacio Mba participated in that workshop, and there had his first introduction to oral translation. He discovered that he was particularly suited to oral translation, and he told us that both he and his brother had shared a long-term desire to preach the Gospel using traditional instruments.

In late 2018 Acacio and Canuto's dream was reawakened when the consultant wrote a fictional first-person testimony of a Fang sorcerer, who, after long resistance to God is rescued from his own witchcraft by Jesus Christ.³² He approached Acacio about translating it orally into Fang. After reading the story in Spanish, Acacio loved it and decided that it was something he would enjoy bringing to life in his own language, so in December, 2018 he translated it orally in the *mvét oyeng* style. The resulting recording, *Mósemólugu Mókomo*, or the "Super Sorcerer of Mokomo," was very enthusiastically received, and it spread virally without much need for promotion. The story was considered a Scripture-use project, because Bible passages are woven throughout, especially at the end. This first Scripture-use project became the bridge to OT recordings.

After the success of *Mósemólugu Mókomo*, Acacio made it clear that he did not want to stop working on more adaptations. He asked about the Bible, and the consultant suggested he work on Exodus 1-15. He agreed enthusiastically. We collaborated as consultants and technicians, but the original vision of biblical *mvét oyeng* belonged to the Fang brothers and they had the final word in all artistic and marketing decisions, and they embraced ownership of the project.

The vision was to make portions of the OT and other Christian materials accessible to a Fang audience in their own storytelling form, and simultaneously to promote and preserve the traditional art forms. Their intended use was as individual or group entertainment rather than for use in church services, although some churches did end up incorporating them into special events and evangelism.

The project was a personal artistic endeavor rather than a community translation project. Because this was not a traditional translation (fully back-translated, word-for-word consultant-checked, and community-checked), and in order to give the storyteller the artistic license to tell the stories in an effective, contextualized way, we chose to call the project a Scripture *adaptation* or *dramatization*. It is Scripture brought to life, rather like a Fang version of "radio theater."

Before the project began, we had already committed to transition to a translation project in a different country. The success of this project made us postpone our departure, but we had a firm deadline of September 2019. The OT adaptations began in January 2019 with Exodus 1-15, and then based on the average rate of 25 verses/hour demonstrated during that recording, we set the team an optimistic goal of adapting most of the narrative passages of the OT between March and September of 2019.³³ More time would of course be needed to add the music and sound effects. The whole project was non-profit, and the resulting recordings were offered free to all who were interested.

³² Inspired by *Spirit of the Rainforest: a Yanomamo Shaman's Story* by Mark Andrew Ritchie.

³³ The plan included Genesis, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel, Esther, Job, Jonah and parts of Daniel, for a total of 6793 verses. At the rate of 25 verses/hour, and assuming a rate of 4 hours/day and 4 days/week, about 4.5 months would be needed to record the voice narration for the above books.

2.4 Detailed Process

Text selection and prep

In considering which texts to translate, we prioritized the narrative portions of the OT because narrative is the easiest to translate, and tends to be the genre that is most effective in audio format.³⁴ The first text selected was Exodus 1-15, followed by Genesis 37-50, Jonah, Ruth, Esther, 1 Samuel, Joshua, Judges, and Genesis 1-35. Since the text would be translated orally from Spanish, we chose a highly natural Spanish version as the base for the front translation. This was *Dios Habla Hoy* (DHH) for most of the texts, and the *Nueva Versión Internacional* (NVI) for Genesis 1-35. The translation consultant then compared this translation with other Spanish translations, including the predominant Spanish translation used in local churches, *Reina-Valera 1960* (RV), and with the Hebrew text. Based on these comparisons, the consultant adjusted the front translation for clarity, for consistency with RV where appropriate, and for textual integrity where necessary. Referring to translators' notes (from SIL and UBS) and commentaries, the consultant also added footnotes to clarify difficult passages, explain the meaning of Hebrew names, provide important cultural context, and answer any question the translator might have regarding the passage. The finished front translation was then transferred to the translator's computer.

Oral translation with HearThis

The project office was air-conditioned, well-lit, and padded with mattresses and pillows for noise and echo reduction. The translator used a Logitech noise-cancelling headset (with an attached microphone), and a budget HP laptop with the program HearThis installed. His screen was divided between the HearThis window, and the front translation window, with the text enlarged for easy viewing: only 4-6 sentences at a time.

For those unfamiliar with HearThis, it is a program designed for oral Scripture translation that allows the translator to record and re-record each verse until satisfied with the result. Recording is done by holding down the space bar and releasing it when finished. A final export stitches all the individual verse recordings together into one complete audio file. In this case, the translator worked with larger sections of text at a time: roughly paragraph by paragraph instead of verse by verse.

The translator always spent time internalizing the text and practicing it out loud before recording. This was done in various ways: by listening, by reading, and by days of reviewing whole stories at a time. At the beginning of the project, the consultant would read a paragraph aloud two or three times, dramatizing it with facial expressions and hand motions. The translator would watch and listen intently, and then look back at the written text on the screen for some time while rehearsing to himself how he wanted to say it in Fang. This often was repeated, and sometimes it might take up to thirty minutes for the internalization of a more complex paragraph. At other times it might take a minute or two.

After recording the segment, they would play it back, and the translator would listen carefully, looking at the front translation to check for errors or any missing content. If an error was found, he would record the segment again. Later, after learning to work alone, the translator preferred to internalize the text by reading it for himself carefully instead of listening to the consultant read it aloud.

³⁴ Sundersingh, *Audio-Based Translation*, 88.

The translator also took home audio bibles in Spanish on his smartphone so that he could spend time internalizing a longer passage. The story of Tamar and Judah in Genesis 38 is an example of a passage that he internalized as a whole at home and recorded rapidly the following day.

After some troubleshooting, we learned to unplug the laptop and voltage regulator before recording, since these created a hum in the recording. We used a soft silicone keyboard to minimize the click sound of the space bar. We also had to stop recording if it began to rain, as the metal roof amplified the sound. And we had to stop recording after 6:30 pm because of the loud sounds of crickets and frogs that were impossible to block out of the recording studio.

The translator began the project with very few computer skills, but with careful training from the consultant he learned to record and listen back to his work independently. He successfully translated the whole book of 1 Samuel while we were out of the country. If a problem arose, the consultant would connect to his computer remotely via TeamViewer and resolve the issue. When he encountered exegetical or translation issues, he would speak to the consultant through WhatsApp.

Though Acacio could work on his own when necessary, he preferred to have someone else present to be an audience and hold down the record button, since this freed up both his hands for the gesturing that accents his storytelling. Having someone present tended to encourage him to be more expressive and lively in his dramatization. He typically showed high performance skills. While recording, he would burst into life, calling out and gesturing as if performing before a live audience. Just like a live *mbom mvét*, he punctuated his narrative with call-and-response attention-getting phrases, such as “*kpasá vula vim!*” or “*kpasá vula ye!*” In this case, however, the audience response “*vim!*” or “*ye!*” would be recorded by a group of voices and added in later. These phrases have no literal translation but serve to keep the audience engaged and sometimes mark turning points in the story.

When the translator had a question that wasn’t addressed in the prepared footnotes, the consultant researched the answer or advised him on the best way to understand the text. Occasionally he would consult with his brother about the most appropriate Fang word for the context. When the translator finished an entire book or passage, the consultant exported the audio file from HearThis, and the translator took it home on his smartphone to review and check for problems.

Song Composition and Recording

Each Scripture recording began with an introductory song and included between 1 and 4 songs interspersed with the narrative. Where there was a song in the original text, such as in Exodus 15, Judges 5, and 1 Samuel 2, this was adapted to music.

In the early recordings Canuto and Acacio always wanted to included an introductory song. These introductory songs sometimes had only tangential connections with the biblical text. For example, the introduction song to the Joseph story was sung from the point of view of the xylophone player preparing for his journey to visit his friend Jacob in Canaan. An existing popular melody was given new lyrics for the introduction to Esther, in which the singer, the “woman from afar” praised her mother’s training and her own womanly skills. The introduction to Ruth was a traditional riddle of dualities: two large leaves, heaven and earth, husband and wife, child and mother, daughter-in-law and mother-in-law, life and death, etc.

The other songs were often sung from the perspective of key characters at emotional moments: Joseph's brothers venting their anger before seizing him, Jacob mourning the loss of Joseph, Ruth swearing her loyalty to Naomi, Naomi grieving her bitter lot, Jonah in the belly of the fish, Jonah angry with God, Pharaoh hardening his heart against Yahweh, Esther praying before going before the king, etc. Fang women often used to sing of their lovers while working alone in their gardens, so we included an acapella song of Ruth singing of the husband she lost while she gleans.

Songs provided an opportunity to create unique cultural links and preserve fading cultural elements. For example, in a song about Sarah's laughter at being told she would bear a son in her old age, the composer included the words that the Fang hear in the call of a particular bird: "What?! A house here?!" When this birdcall is heard while constructing a new house, it may be considered a bad omen, but its jeering call parallels Sarah's incredulity perfectly, and the symbolism of an unlikely house being built for Abraham through the birth of the promised son enriches the meaning of the narrative.

The logistics of recording the music were often difficult. Since musical director and composer Canuto Ngui lived in the city of Malabo (on the island of Bioko), he was only able to participate on-site during four separate week-long visits. He brought his xylophone with him and composed and recorded all the songs and background music during these intensive weeks.

The *mendzáng*, or xylophone, was the principal instrument for the background music. Other instruments included two sizes of *nkúú*, (a horizontal hollowed-out log drum), an *mbeñ* (a tall vertical drum with a canvas head), a small gourd maraca called *ñas*, bamboo sticks called *bikpara*, the *mvét* (described earlier), a glass bottle, and a sitatunga antelope horn called *ntófik*.

The *mvét* is now so scarce that several months of asking everyone we knew yielded no instrument. For the first few recordings, the musician approximated the *mvét* melody on the xylophone. A few months later, after commissioning an *mvét* to be made, that sound was added to the instrumentation for the later recordings.

In classic *mvét oyeng*, all narration has a bell rhythm in the background "that is repeated tirelessly for hours, [and] has an almost hypnotic effect on the hearer."³⁵ This was approximated by striking a glass bottle with the hard end of a xylophone mallet, since we were not able to find a traditional iron bell, called *angong*.³⁶ This bell serves as the "simple base, upon which the rest [of the instruments] add more complex rhythms [and] improvisations..." (de Aranzadi 29). The music and rhythms are highly repetitive, but with many layers of complexity from different instruments.

Some compositions, such as the song of Miriam, involved a principal voice and choruses with a call-and-response pattern. Finding skilled singers and chorus members with natural Fang accents who could sing the traditional melodic style in tune turned out to be one of the most difficult tasks of the project. We relied entirely on volunteers from local churches and learned by experience to ask for an audition before inviting someone to record. When we found a skilled volunteer to sing the principal voice on a song, we gave them a draft recording of the composer singing the melody with the background instruments so they could learn and practice before coming to record. All instruments and

³⁵ de Aranzadi, *Instrumentos musicales de las etnias de Guinea Ecuatorial*, 53. Translation mine

³⁶ Ibid.

voices were recorded with an H2 Zoom serving as a mic, connected to a Dell laptop running Windows XP. The digital audio workstation (DAW) used was Acid Pro 4 by Sony.

Final Sermons

Because a brief lesson drawn from the story is common in Fang folktales (though not necessarily in *mvét oyeng*), and because Acacio strongly desired to do so, each recording concluded with a brief sermon. By preference of the translator, these sermons were written by the consultant in Spanish and translated orally into Fang with some contextual adjustment by the translator. They drew out the points from the text that were most relevant to current cultural issues and tied the story into the metanarrative of the OT, Christ and the gospel.

An example of part of a sermon that follows the story of Micah and the Levite is as follows:

Brothers, we have heard the story of our God. Now what can we learn from the third part of this book of Judges? From beginning to end it is about the madness of idolatry. The problem with Micah, his mother, and the others is that they are ignorant. They have no idea that their actions and beliefs are absurd and contradict each other. Micah, whose name means "Who is like Yahweh?" makes an altar for other gods! And then he thinks that Yahweh will bless him for having a Levite as his priest. In other words, this story shows us what serious stupidity can result when a generation does religious things without knowing what will really please God. Are you doing the same?

With Micah and the Levite we see that Israel has combined the religion of Canaan with the true worship of Yahweh. Have we done the same in Equatorial Guinea? Yes! We have treated God as someone to manipulate to get the good life. We have used the name of God for our own gain. We have combined the lies of witchcraft and idolatry with the truths of Yahweh, and that has produced a poison that is killing us. We see that Israel had spiritual HIV, and Guinea has nothing less. Confusion and ignorance amid the churches of the world is growing every day. Why? Because each one seeks his own gain and does not seek to know the word of God or an intimate relationship with God, nor delight in Him.

Mixing and Sound Effects

In the DAW, the narration, background music, songs, sound effects, and final sermon were combined into one audio file. During this process the consultant and the translator worked through the narration together, inserting songs, refrains, background music, and sound effects in the appropriate places. This also served as a final chance to catch and correct mistakes or improve the adaptation.

The addition of sound effects is a modern variation on the traditional *mvét oyeng*, in which storytellers made rich use of ideophones (words that evoke an idea through their sound, similar to onomatopoeia), but naturally did not have a full range of sound effects at their disposal. The sound effects were from two sources: those downloaded for free online, and those recorded with Fang volunteers. Examples of the sound effects range from medieval warfare sound effects to animal noises, baby cries, wind, fire, and water, etc.

For sounds of group voices, we invited about 6-15 people, described each situation to them and recorded them imaginatively performing the scenarios in Fang. In this way we got sound clips of Fang voices as the Israelites suffering under hard labor, the Egyptians bemoaning the plagues, the jealous mutterings of Joseph's brothers, the fear of the sailors on Jonah's ship, the repentance of the Ninevites, and others. This added many extra contextualized elements to the recordings: an old Fang working chant for the enslaved Israelites, women wailing in mourning, the traditional victory chant after Yahweh's

victory over Pharaoh's chariots, and everywhere the common Fang exclamation of surprise and shock: "*Ákié! Ákié!*"

For sounds of a larger crowd, such as the war cries of the Israelites at Jericho, we took advantage of a promotional visit to a large urban church to ask those Fang speakers who were willing to stay afterwards to help us record a few shouts.

All these elements the sound engineer/consultant blended together to create vivid soundscapes accompanying key scenes. For example, in the Exodus story, a soundscape included the roar of the sea crashing back onto the Egyptian chariots, their drivers crying out in fear and then becoming gradually muffled under the deluge. After a sobering watery lull, the narration picked back up and continued. These elements added more interest for a modern listener, making it more like "listening to a movie" as some commented.

Cover art

Each recording had its own cover art illustration with the main character(s) of the narrative rendered in color on a white background – this gave a bold iconic image, while keeping color printing cost-effective. Most of the characters were drawn with mid-toned skin and dark hair, approximating a Middle-Eastern look: neither Caucasian nor African. These illustrations were drawn digitally with the Procreate app on an iPad Pro, using the Apple Pencil. The title was added in Photoshop in large bold letters, with the Hebrew title of the book displayed a little less prominently. The Hebrew reminded the audience of the original source of the material and took advantage of the high interest Guinean churches have in the Hebrew language. The final artwork was then embedded in the audio file as the cover art. The discs we burned for distribution each included a color insert in its sleeve or a color print directly on the disc that showed the artwork for the many different books arranged around the group logo.

Marketing and Distribution

About halfway through the project, the Fang members of the team selected a name for their ministry, *Nkuwalong*, which means "the *nkiúú* calls/sounds." The *nkiúú* log drum was traditionally used for announcements between villages: births, deaths, war, church starting, etc. We created a group logo that consisted of the silhouette of a man in a traditional feather headdress (such as that worn by Eyí Moan Ndong) playing the *nkiúú* with the name *Nkuwalong* and the flag of EG emblazoned across the side of the drum. We also recorded a brief *Nkuwalong* theme song which was included at the beginning of every radio broadcast and the later scripture recordings.

Although access to social media is restricted in the country, many urban Guineans have Facebook accounts. We created a Facebook page for the group where we posted links to the finished recordings and occasional photos and news, but this attracted very few followers. The finished recordings were also uploaded to YouTube, but limited or nonexistent internet access for most of our target audience was a barrier to spreading the finished products that way. Distribution, therefore, was mainly through audio files passed directly to smartphones or USB drives and through DVDs.

Advertising strategies included hosting an opening celebration of the first Scripture recording *Mibwére* (Exodus 1-15) for urban pastors and their families; placing Lightstream Pocket Wi-Fi download devices in strategic urban locations and in a public transport van with large colorful banners advertising free resources in Fang and download instructions; sending trusted young Fang men on

promotional trips to interior cities and villages, equipped with letters of introduction for pastors, Lightstream Pocket devices and DVDs to give away; free bumper stickers with the *Nkuwalong* logo and Facebook page; playing the recordings on regular radio slots; radio and TV interviews about the project; a TV commercial inviting the viewer to our office property for free downloads; promotional church visits; circulating the commercial and short “teasers” on Whatsapp; asking Christian taxi and long-distance van drivers to play our recordings continually in exchange for free USB drives; giving away free SD cards and USB drives loaded with our recordings, and others. We also gave free copies of these new *mvét oyeng* recordings to local pirated music stands so that they could distribute them, and we provided promotional posters for their business walls. On the radio program, we occasionally announced giveaways of free micro SD cards loaded with our recordings for callers, and this was sometimes successful at attracting callers.

Team building

We ordered some business cards with the *Nkuwalong* logo on it for the translator, which served to enhance his local identity as a storyteller and artist and maintain him as the face of the ministry. We also gave the Fang members of our team some gifts to celebrate the group identity of the *Nkuwalong* ministry. These included custom neckties with the flag of EG and the *Nkuwalong* logo, which they proudly wore to their radio and TV interviews, and a custom *nkuú* log drum with the group name carved across one side.

Finances

Some of the project was financed with money from a Member Raised Funds (MRF) budget. No participant was paid for his or her time, but their transportation was covered, as well as many meals. The Fang brothers received offerings at the end of the project to thank them for their dedicated work. The project funds also paid for Lightstream Pocket devices, advertising stickers and posters, radio slots, TV slots, a color printer, blank DVDs and sleeves, and blank SD cards. The total amount spent from the MRF came to about \$3,000.

Videos

After releasing Exodus 1-15 and Genesis 37-50, we made a 20-minute montage of clips of the recording process and the sound effects sessions and shared it via Facebook and YouTube. Participants enjoyed seeing themselves in the video and partners could enjoy a window into some of what was involved in the project.

The consultant created a Jonah movie in Fang using clips from a film on YouTube edited together to correspond to the Jonah *mvét oyeng* audio. We included this on the DVDs we gave away, copied it to many phones and showed it at two churches, one in Bata and one in the interior city of Evinayong. It also continues to be shown on local TV. This garnered attention for the project, and brought requests for more movie versions, which we were unable to fulfill.

A music video for the Exodus 15 song was filmed along the ocean in Bata using a Sony DSLR and a Pixel phone (for the slow motion segments). It was later edited with Cyberlink PowerDirector, and subtitles were added in English, Spanish and French. We shared it on YouTube and Facebook and sent a short teaser clip to people on WhatsApp. It continues to be aired weekly on local TV. This video was received with much excitement. Many expressed amazement that something so professional had been

done in EG, and that it brought much glory to God. People we screened it for usually watched it several times in a row and wanted a copy on their phones.

We filmed a video of the Fang brothers expressing their thanks to external donors supporting the project, and a video of Canuto explaining (in Spanish) how to make and play the *mvét*, and encouraging young people to learn it so the traditions do not disappear. The videos are available to the public on YouTube.

2.5 Summary – timeline and number of recordings produced

In the 9 months between January and September of 2019, we recorded and released 15 Scripture-based recordings: Exodus 1-15, Genesis 37-50, Jonah, Ruth, Esther, Joshua, Judges in three parts, 1 Samuel in two parts, and Genesis 1-35 in four parts.³⁷ These ranged in length from 30 minutes to 4 hours, for a total of over 20 hours of Scripture audio. The recordings were released successively as each one was finished. Of the 6,793 verses planned, we recorded 3,840, along with 34 original songs.

Three additional recordings included a translation of a teaching on the Holy Spirit, *Mósemólugu Mókomo* and its sequel *Miká Nkat Fwéñ*, all written by the consultant and adapted to Fang by the translator. The latter also includes lengthy passages adapted from Ezekiel and Matthew. Approximately 1,500 discs were distributed, and we have confirmed transfer to over 500 smartphones.

In order to view more information and examples of final products in video form, please perform the following searches on YouTube: “Andrew Case Éxodo 15,” “Andrew Case Experiment in Oral Scripture.”

3 Status of Local Partnerships

SIL International’s ideal is to partner with national Bible translation organizations whenever possible. In this case, unfortunately, such a partnership was not possible. Some have looked to the Guinean organization ACTB (Christian Association of Bible Translations) as the possible future of Bible translation in the country. Over the last six years, I (Andrew Case) have worked with ACTB intimately and observed much to make me question its health and sustainability.

Around 2015 ACTB was turned over entirely to national leadership by its American founder, Allen Pierce. Shortly after that happened, the executive committee shrank from four people to two people: director Samuel Ndong and one other pastor.³⁸ Although this number makes it impossible to vote on decisions, to this date it has not been increased. During the time that this deficit has existed, there have been two respected pastors and translators “on trial” as part of the executive committee for nearly three years. They are invited to attend meetings, but they have no voice or vote. They are of

³⁷ Judges 1 and Genesis 36 were omitted from the recordings, being mainly war records and non-essential genealogies, respectively.

³⁸ The second member of the executive committee is a pastor who has not studied Bible translation, has never participated in any of the workshops, and does not demonstrate interest in ACTB’s work. During the two meetings of the executive committee which I attended, he offered no opinions or comments, and let the director do all the talking for two hours.

different minority ethnicities than the two current Fang committee members. ACTB claims to be a multiethnic association that desires to see the Bible available for all the people groups of Equatorial Guinea. However, when the subject of racial discrimination was broached with the director, he responded in anger and did not provide an explanation for keeping them indefinitely “on trial” without any say in the decisions or direction of the organization.

Not only are no more executive committee members permitted, but as of October 5, 2019, no members of any kind have been recognized. Over the last three years, I volunteered to train two Fang translators, Luis and Jerónimo. These young men worked on the translation of Genesis for two years and completed or participated in numerous courses and workshops.³⁹ They have maintained a good testimony and standing in their local churches, yet ACTB still has not recognized them as official members of the organization. They continue working for ACTB, but the director has made it clear that they are not recognized in any official partnership with ACTB, nor are they invited to participate in leadership decisions. Despite their fulfillment of all the membership requirements listed in ACTB’s founding statutes,⁴⁰ the issue has never been brought to a vote. Luis and Jerónimo are still unable to understand why, and they have expressed deep hurt and disappointment both to me and to the director.

One might safely assume from current appearances that ACTB is an association of one: the director. ACTB has a large base—a complex of buildings that were built up by American funding.⁴¹ People may rent the guest house and other houses and apartments, and income is generated in this way.⁴² The director does not pay rent.

The American founder asked me to help the director and his wife with the finances, and for a year I did so. Every month there were discrepancies in the books that they could not add up without my help. After that year their involvement of me dwindled until I was no longer part of the process. No one replaced me, and now only the director and his wife are permitted to see the financial information and manage the income.

During the time that I helped with the finances, I observed that there were funds available that could have helped to pay translators and purchase other necessary items like fans, water filters, and more computers. However, each time Luis and Jerónimo asked for these items that they needed to do their translation work better, they were told that ACTB did not have any money and they never received an explanation as to where all the generated income went.

In October of 2018, I brought a handful of recommendations to the two executive committee members, encouraging them to make changes for the sake of a sustainable and better future for ACTB.

³⁹ Translation Principles, Advanced Translation Principles, Intro to Biblical Hebrew, Intermediate Biblical Hebrew, Introduction to Biblical Greek, Textual Criticism, Discourse Analysis, Oral Drafting and Fang Literacy.

⁴⁰ The founding statutes of ACTB list four requirements for becoming a member of the organization in article 10: 1) To have accepted Jesus Christ as personal lord and savior, 2) Maintain church attendance and doctrinal truths, as well as gospel discipline, 3) Maintain good Christian behavior in public and private, 4) Be voted by a majority of the executive committee. The director does not allow anyone to see these statutes, so a copy was obtained from the founder.

⁴¹ It consists of a library, a classroom, a large meeting room with a kitchen, three offices, two storage rooms, two dorm rooms, two small apartments with bathrooms and kitchens, a medium size two-bedroom house, a large two-bedroom house, a two-bedroom guest house, and small three-bedroom wooden house, and a house for the director’s family. ACTB sits on property about the size of two soccer fields, with extra space for more buildings.

⁴² For about a year, ACTB was generating about \$1,600 in rent, not counting the guest house, which is often occupied for about \$20/night. The cost of maintaining the property is about \$100/month.

The director became angry and to date has not sought to continue the discussion or made any of the recommended changes. Because of this ongoing situation, along with the director's disinterest in oral translation and his unwillingness to work with translator Acacio Mba, we found it impossible to partner with ACTB on this project.

However, the government ministry that participates in the promotion of local languages (CICTE) expressed interest in our project and encouraged us to continue. They wanted to collaborate, but in the end there was little they could do for us.

4 Orality Issues

While textuality invites a linear view of the Biblical text, oral cultures benefit from a more episodic or "hypertextual" approach to the Bible.⁴³ Our presentation of the OT is divided into episodes the size of whole books or portions of books, such as the Joseph story. We love the fact that the Scriptures are presented in the local group storytelling format, given that "...stories are the mode in which worldviews are best transmitted from generation to generation and from one person to another."⁴⁴ In fact, this medium is probably far closer to the original intended medium of the Hebrew scriptures than the silent personal reading common in Western textual culture.⁴⁵

Sundersingh's observations from his book *Audio-Based Translation* help orient the majority of us who come from text-driven cultures. He writes, "Christianity began as an oral phenomenon in the context of a predominantly oral culture. Only a few, elite, were literate... Christianity came to depend on the written word only gradually."⁴⁶

Written language shows a number of linguistic differences from spoken language, including more systematic ordering, more difficult words, abstract thought and less repetition. It is also denser than spoken language, with a higher ratio of content words to grammar words. In contrast, speech, by its very nature "lacks lexical density because of its tendency to use simpler words, more grammatical units and also because of its tendency to repeat lexical items. Also speech has the capacity to employ pause and slower pace in order to achieve greater comprehension."⁴⁷ Thus, even when a written work is recorded by a reader, it does not contain the same compelling dynamics of natural speech. We observed evidence of this issue in EG, since many people were not impressed by the recording of the written Fang NT. It was not received with anything like the enthusiasm that greeted the *Nkuwalong* recordings. Part of this is surely due to the linguistic differences between written language and spoken language, and the challenge of rendering a written text as natural speech.

In oral performance adaptation or translation, it is crucial to understand that written language read aloud is *not* the same as natural speech, and requires more mental processing of the listener. Sundersingh again observes that, "A spontaneous spoken language has a natural rhythm and tone which

⁴³ Sundersingh, *Audio-Based Translation*, 88.

⁴⁴ David J. Hesselgrave, *Scripture and strategy: the use of the Bible in postmodern church and mission* (Littleton: William Carey Library, 1994), 51.

⁴⁵ Thomas Boomershine, "Biblical Megatrends: Towards a Paradigm for the Interpretation of the Bible in Electronic Media." In *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers 26*, edited by K. Richards (Atlanta: Scholars, 1987), 63.

⁴⁶ Sundersingh, *Audio-based Translation*, Kindle location 2471.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 2831.

tend to become artificial when someone tries to read a prepared text. This is true even if the text is supposed to be a written representation of spoken language.”⁴⁸

Therefore, an audio Scripture translation should be more than just a written text read aloud, but should deliberately incorporate more of the linguistic and paralinguistic characteristics of natural speech. Oral performers “should also employ a deliberate dilution of density by way of repetition, colloquialism as appropriate, and an increase of function words.”⁴⁹ We found that Acacio naturally, instinctually, and intuitively incorporated all these principles into his adaptation of the OT.

The Fang, having no tradition of writing, are accustomed only to natural speech patterns. Sundersingh points out that “Audio communications, meant especially for the non-literate audiences, need to be formulated in a spoken realm rather than written.”⁵⁰ An oral translation process is an excellent strategy for making the end product as much like natural speech as possible. We found that Acacio’s translation involved more repetition and colloquialisms than the Spanish source text. He added these elements intuitively during the process before we were even aware that they should be included.⁵¹

Sundersingh rightly notes that “the receptors of a particular audio translation may be closer to the people of the Old Testament than the translation consultant who supervises that translation project.”⁵² We absolutely found this to be true for the Fang when time after time the actions of OT characters that were most baffling to us as Westerners turned out to be perfectly intelligible—indeed, almost expected—to the translator.

To give one example, many aspects of marriage and family life in Fang culture line up with OT patterns far more closely than Western culture does. For the Fang, a concubine is a normal social category, being a woman living with a man who has not paid the bride price. A man pays a bride price (Jacob), gives the family of the bride gifts and takes her to his own village (Abraham’s servant to Rebecca’s family). He must go to retrieve his wife if she runs away (the Levite of Judges 19). He may take additional wives if he can afford them (Jacob, David). A barren woman may give another woman (usually a young relative) to her husband to bear children in her place (Sarah, Rachel). It is also not uncommon for a man to ask his wife to say she is his sister when traveling (Abraham, Isaac).

Because of these and many other parallels between traditional Fang culture and ancient Israelite society, we hope the common ground that the Fang have with the ancient biblical cultures will be maximized without a European language as an intermediate filter.

5 Translation Quality, Style, and Contextualization

Through personal interaction and frequent discussion of translation issues, the translation consultant was confident that the translator was making good translation decisions for maximum

⁴⁸ Ibid., 2671.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 2903.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 3112.

⁵¹ Comparing a transcription of Acacio’s translation of Ruth 1 with the NT text of Luke 15, we found that Ruth 1 had only slightly lower (and probably negligible) ratio of content words to function words than the written Fang. The oral translation of Ruth 1 had 342 content words out of 951 total words for a ratio of 35.96% content words. The written translation of Luke 15 had 330 content words out of 905 total words for a ratio of 36.46% content words. However, we are confident that further study will yield a much greater difference in other sections of the OT adaptation.

⁵² Sundersingh, *Audio-based Translation*, Kindle location 3952.

naturalness while maintaining a high level of accuracy and attention to detail. The translator frequently corrected himself while recording individual segments and insisted on recording again if any detail was lacking, or if it didn't sound like completely natural Fang. For example, the translator recorded the segment of Genesis 3:18-22 six times over until finally satisfied. Reasons for recording again included clarifying what kind of "skins" God used to dress Adam and Eve, changing too-specific "skins of sheep" to "skins of animals," changing "in order to dress them" to "and he dressed them," and adding in an accidentally dropped "the man and his wife." He also re-recorded (on this and many other occasions) because "it sounds like a translation." Then he would often record again if his voice came out too "weak" and quiet. Care was taken to use the name *Yavé* 'Yahweh' everywhere יהוה appears in the Hebrew text, even where this is obscured by the Spanish translation *Señor*.

This meticulous attention to detail was reflected in the select back translations we did. With the help of Luis Lorenzo and Antonia Eyone Ngoma Angue we transcribed and back-translated one poetic passage, Exodus 15, and two narrative passages: Genesis 38:1-25, which was recorded as a whole, and Ruth 1, which was orally translated in smaller segments. As expected, the Ruth 1 back translation was more closely aligned with the front translation in form and order than Genesis 38:1-25.

The motivation for calling the project an "adaptation" does not stem mainly from changes or omissions to the text, but rather from the many elements that were added. These include the songs, call-and-response phrases, storytelling introductions and formulas, and occasional Fang proverbs or sayings that enrich the story.

An example of call-and-response phrases and a storytelling introduction occurs after the first chapter of the Joseph story at the beginning of the story of Judah and Tamar. Although Genesis 38 often feels to a Western reader like an odd intrusion on the chronology of Joseph, for the Fang storyteller it is completely natural to take such a detour from the mainline story. Below is Acacio Mba's introduction to this episode.

	<u>Fang transcription</u>	<u>Free translation</u>
Narrator:	<i>Kpasa vula vim!</i>	[Untranslatable]
Audience:	<i>Vim!</i>	[Untranslatable]
Narrator:	<i>Eeee! ananiiin ngwaa milán</i> <i>Milán mi ne metárega ané alá, Ndong</i> <i>Nkum màá yem,</i> <i>É muán wua a ne angée ñi ná: ma ke yaŋ a</i> <i>dzaá mèè tá dzam nde milán misum meyaŋ.</i> <i>Afe ede bimbere vadi.</i> <i>Ná Judá aa dzó ná aa búéle é dzaá babe</i> <i>bobáñaŋ, Judá aa ke.</i>	Eeee! Oh, the stories! Stories are beginnings like fish traps, Ndong Nkum [the narrator's stage name], I don't know. The little chimpanzee who is distracted says, "I'm going to the village now, I don't see anything, and the stories have already started." We have something strange right here! [common expression of surprise] ...that Judah says that he is leaving the village of him and his brothers, Judah is going.

The aside about the fish traps and the distracted chimpanzee remind his audience to be patient as the story unfolds. Like the river fish traps, which are very complex to make and set and do not yield instant results, so his stories require time and attention to impart their benefits to the hearer. He

encourages his audience not to be distracted like the chimpanzee, and then introduces a surprising change in scene before beginning the story of Judah and Tamar.

Two examples of Fang sayings or proverbs inserted in the story also occur in Genesis 38. After Yahweh puts Onan to death in verse 10, the narrator inserted a proverb and a comment:

Fang

É mot aa bɔ abé, aa bɔ abé déñ.

É mot aa bɔ mbeɲ, aa bɔ mbeɲ ywéñ.

“Mbot ane abé” éñe adzó ne ya dɔ, adzó te éde bitaa ná éloraa ná Onan ba mwán ñaɲ.

Amu ná é dzam sege mot aa bɔ dzam te éde fe ñaa aa búran ádo.

English

The person who does evil does his own evil.

The person who does good does his own good.

"The person who is bad," is the one that said it, and it's the reason that we've seen what happened to Onan and his brother.

Because everything that one does, that thing too someone will die because of it.

Later when Tamar covers her face with her veil in order to seduce Judah, the narrator described her covering by saying that only her eyes were showing, and then inserts a refrain from a well-known Fang story in which an animal was buried until only his eyes showed and asked whoever came along if they had seen an antelope. The refrain is often used to signify two staring eyes.

Mis mebomo á mis mebomo, ye oyen me okpom aa lot ova?

Staring eyes, staring eyes, have you seen for me an antelope pass by here?

In this experiment of oral adaptation, opening the doors to creativity allowed for contextualization and preservation of linguistic richness and nuance that would not have been possible in other traditional translation contexts. Shaw writes, “Languages around the world abound in paralinguistic forms. For example, onomatopoeia and ideophones provide, in oral communication, a way to vocalize sound appropriate to the context. These sounds convey emotion and add color.”⁵³

As mentioned before, Acacio made use of the rich range of Fang ideophones in his storytelling, such as *biɲa biɲa biɲa* for the movement of a snake, *kpewewewewe* for a rumor spreading, *átup tup tup* for thrusting something into fire, *á chen chen chen* for changing clothes.

The flexibility of the oral adaptation model allowed for many fascinating contextualizations of OT concepts. The following are just a few:

1. In Fang culture, as a sign of good hospitality, a host would bring guests warm water to bathe with. Therefore, in Genesis 19:2 the translator specified that Lot offered the two messengers *warm* water for bathing.
2. Much like the number 7 in Israelite culture, the number 9 signifies completion and perfection to the Fang. For example, in 1 Samuel 2:5 Hannah says: “The barren has borne seven.” Acacio, understanding the poetic, symbolic context, said, “The barren woman has become the mother of nine.”

⁵³ Daniel R. Shaw, *Transculturation: The Cultural Factor in Translation and Other Communication Tasks* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1988), 154.

3. In 1 Samuel 24:4 we read, “Then David arose and stealthily cut off a corner of Saul’s robe.” In order to communicate the stealth of David’s actions, Acacio added a colorful image of the sneakiest animal of the jungle doing the sneakiest of actions: David snuck up behind Saul “like a chameleon drawing a hunting bow to shoot an arrow.”
4. The gate of a walled town in OT times functioned as the place for business transactions (e.g. Ruth), where the town’s leaders presided, and where visitors might find a host (e.g. Gen 19:1). The Fang traditionally have a similar gathering place at the entrance to each village: a simple roofed enclosure called an *abáá*. Here the men eat, talk, and make decisions, and here visitors wait for a welcome upon entering the village. Thus, in texts where the town gate functions in a similar way, the translator rendered this as the *abáá*, conjuring similar associations in the minds of Fang listeners as the town gate would have done for original listeners. Thus, Boaz discussed Ruth’s fate with the unnamed kinsman at the *abáá* of Bethlehem.

6 Community Reception

The *Nkuwalong* recordings were widely received with enthusiasm. Some expressed surprise that a project of this quality was being done in the country, and many people voluntarily spread the recordings to their neighbors in the city and family in the interior, excited to share something new and quality in Fang. We heard many reports of people’s friends asking them for copies or borrowing their discs to copy. We also heard of people playing them at church retreats, funerals, or village visits. Many requested more discs to share with others who were asking for copies, and some said they never again saw the disc or USB drive we had given them because some family member or friend kept borrowing it to listen. A friend said that when he traveled to the interior, people who had heard part of a recording on the radio asked for copies.

When we began the project, we were not aware that the *mvét oyeng* is traditionally a form of entertainment during all-night wakes at funerals. We only discovered this when other Guineans began taking the initiative to play our recordings at funerals. This put a powerful gospel-witness tool into the hands of believers who long to see their unbelieving family members listen to the truth of God’s word. For the first time in history there is a bridge between this tradition and God’s truth, which fit seamlessly into the cultural expectations. When a pastor’s brother died suddenly, they played the *Mósemólugu Mókomo* recording twice in a row during the wake (nearly two hours of audio each time), and then discussed what parts each had most appreciated, contrasting life with Christ and without Christ. This same church in the interior also used *Mósemólugu Mókomo* to do evangelistic campaigns in surrounding villages.

Some of the local pirated music stands mentioned earlier recognized the demand for our recordings, and consequently began to charge double the usual price per track. The success of the brand was also evidenced in that one of the project’s volunteer singers who has a regular radio show, decided to adopt the name *Nkuwalong* for his own show, use one of the Genesis songs as his theme song, and play *Nkuwalong* recordings on his airtime.

We heard our radio broadcasts being played in offices and bars. One of our distributors said that soldiers on a military base in the interior had asked him to bring them more *Nkuwalong* recordings.

Many non-Evangelicals were also highly interested, including Acacio and Canuto's Catholic⁵⁴ brothers who voluntarily helped to spread the recordings to the interior. Those who showed little to no interest included some city dwellers and city pastors. ACTB remained silent and demonstrated no interest in the project.

Some feedback we received indicated that some church members would have preferred more spiritualized versions of traditional elements (e.g. adding the name of Jesus to a traditional victory chant) and less additional material around the text. However, the translator valued these elements precisely because of their traditional value and likely appeal to non-church-members, and did not wish to sacrifice *mvét oyeng* norms to please one segment of the audience. As Harriet Hill notes, "Trying to target all groups and uses simultaneously often results in a product that doesn't reach any of the groups well."⁵⁵

Acacio and Canuto themselves expressed that this project represented for them a dream long ago given up for lost now made reality.

In many ways this project parallels the innovation and motivation of Eugene Peterson, who sought ways to make the lessons of the Bible come alive for the parishioners of his church. He said "I had a congregation of people who didn't read books. And so I started translating the Bible in their language, not knowing what I was doing. And suddenly, they started paying attention to me in a way they never did before." Over the past 25 years, the various 'Message' translations have sold more than 20 million copies. His books have been popular with Christians of different traditions, from Catholics to Southern Baptists to members of Evangelical churches and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.⁵⁶ At the same time, Peterson's adaptation of the Bible has *not* appealed to millions of others who strongly prefer traditional styles and language.

7 Impediments and Ways to Improve

The song composition and recording were often rushed by time constraints and the inability of the musical director to compose songs in advance. In addition, a lack of skilled female singers delayed the release of Ruth for several months, since we had three failed recording attempts with three different singers before finally recording an acceptable voice track.

The translator became embroiled in legal battles to retain the rights to his land several months into and until the end of the project, and this delayed the team significantly. If not for this setback, which cost us weeks of work, we may have been able to complete more books from our project plan.

While we were confident in the translator's skills and meticulousness, a few errors that we caught made us reflect that a more robust checking system would have been preferable. Given that the consultants did not understand Fang well enough to notice all errors, and that the project was not back-translated and checked in its entirety, no doubt some mistakes slipped through. Some minor ones we found in time to correct before release, others were corrected only after the release and distribution of

⁵⁴ Since all Guineans were forcibly catholicized under Spanish colonization, the label of "Catholic" says very little about their actual beliefs and practices. Many who call themselves Catholics continue practicing African traditional religions.

⁵⁵ Hill 2006: Kindle location 5095

⁵⁶ https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/eugene-peterson-whose-bible-translations-sold-millions-of-copies-dies-at-85/2018/10/23/1f520742-d6d4-11e8-aeb7-ddcad4a0a54e_story.html. Accessed October 7, 2019.

some copies. However, we are confident that any errors that did survive will be minor issues, not affecting major doctrines or the overall message and impact of the narratives.

The following are a couple examples of errors that surfaced in our checks and back-translation. The omission of the name of Dagon from Judges 6:23 was caught and corrected. The foreign concept of “sheep shearing” in Genesis 38 was initially rendered as “removing the skins” of the sheep before being corrected for the final release.

Since the songs interspersed throughout the recordings are not considered to be translation or direct Scripture, they were sometimes not scrutinized as closely as the actual narration. For instance, in the Exodus 15-based song, Canuto used the phrase “God is my father” instead of “my father’s God.”⁵⁷ Also, the song lyrics that the composer wrote were occasionally not theologically sound. The theological implications of including Jesus and God in the song of dualities in the introduction of Ruth caused some Trinitarian concern, but in the end we let it go, since by the time we noticed it the recording had already been distributed, it was only a brief, passing comment in the song, and the song lyrics would not be considered Scripture in the minds of the listeners. However, other issues that surfaced in the song lyrics were corrected before the final recording. These issues surfaced primarily because Canuto had never had any theological education. However, he was humble and willing to learn and make corrections.

Some community comprehension checks would have been useful to gauge how well the emotion of certain scenes was coming through and how foreign concepts were understood. One of those helping with the transcription/back translation of Ruth felt that the tone that Ruth uses with Naomi in Ruth 1:16 was bordering on disrespectful, rather like an elder rebuking a child saying, “Don’t you ask me to separate from you!”

8 Key Factors and Conclusion

We recognize four key factors to the success of this project: the right people involved, the existence of an appropriate cultural art form, technical skills, and marketing.

The first and most important key to this project was the participation of uniquely gifted people. We know of no other Equatorial Guinean who is linguistically skilled enough to translate, contextualize and dramatize Scripture in Fang like Acacio, nor do we know of any other musician who could have composed and performed traditional music like Canuto. The skills these two brought to the project were essential. Any similar Scripture as contextualized art project (and any quality Scripture translation) must have key people who are both highly skilled and share the vision. Acacio, who had never taken a full translation principles course, demonstrated more innate awareness of translation issues than others who had already completed many translation courses and workshops, demonstrating that training is only one part of the equation. People may be willing to participate, but those who are not linguistically and poetically gifted may never produce excellent literature, no matter how much training they receive.

⁵⁷ At first I wondered if this may have been intentional, given that Yahweh has not historically been the God worshipped by the Fang’s ancestors. However, when I questioned the composer of the song, it appeared to have simply been an oversight.

The second key was the existence of a beloved art form, tied to the heart and identity of the people, which was easily adapted to biblical narrative and sections of poetry. Not all cultures already have such an art form, but a local artist with vision and creativity may be able to adapt or create an appropriate cultural medium. If Jesus were to have come as a Fang incarnate, he would almost certainly been a troubadour.

The third key was the technical skills on the part of consultant Andrew Case, whose years of experience composing, recording and mixing his own music prepared him to make quality recordings, troubleshoot audio issues, mix complex soundscapes with dozens of tracks, and produce and distribute files in various formats. An audio or video project will require at least one skilled technician to make an attractive and accessible final product.

The fourth key was marketing. Making people aware of the existence of our product and getting it in front of people through various mediums greatly contributed to its success and spread. We suspect that the disuse of the written Fang NT is due at least in part to a lack of promotion and awareness that it exists: five years after its publication, we still encounter people who have never heard of it. We believe that in today's world, whether it's in the United States or EG, smart marketing can make the difference between a successful and failed Scripture product. This is especially true where local church involvement in (and thus awareness of) the translation process is low, as has always been the case in EG.⁵⁸

Conclusion

A story that parallels this Fang OT adaptation project is that of *The Heliand*. In his helpful book *From Orality to Orality*, Maxey tells about this remarkable medieval innovation:

One of the truly remarkable pieces of medieval Christian literature is the *Heliand* (Savior), a tale of the Gospel written by a poetic monk who attempted to let the Gospel 'sing' in the culture of the Saxons." "He rewrote and reimagined the events and words of the Gospel as if they had taken place and been spoken in his own country and time, in the chieftain society of a defeated people, forcibly Christianized by Charlemagne: the Saxons." The *Heliand* offers several insights not only into the inculturation of the biblical narratives, but also into a promising reconstitution of medium. This work was heard rather than read in a contextually appropriate location. "The audience of the *Heliand* was probably to be found in mead hall and monastery. The epic poem seems not to have been designed for use in the church as a part of official worship, but is intended to bring the Gospel home to the Saxons in a poetic environment in order to help the Saxons cease their vacillation between their warrior-loyalty to the old gods and to the 'mighty Christ.'⁵⁹

In the same way, the innovation of *Nkuwalong* has produced a genre at once familiar and novel that reaches beyond the church walls to people who could never otherwise be persuaded to encounter God's Word. As Sundersingh observes, "The church has been preserving the written text of the Bible for many centuries. However, the time has come for the text to be liberated from the printed pages and made available to various audience groups in media that they use. Our challenge now is to find means

⁵⁸ This is largely true of the U.S. Bible market as well, where highly successful translations such as the NIV and ESV have been aggressively marketed. (For an example see: <https://vervemarketinggroup.com/portfolio/niv-bible/>.)

⁵⁹ Maxey, *From Orality to Orality*, Kindle locations 862-872.

by which the message of Scriptures may be liberated from the written mode so that it may encompass various opportunities presented by modern communication technologies.”⁶⁰

We fully realize that not all of what this experiment has incorporated is replicable. Yet our hope is that it serves to inspire further innovation within the field of oral adaptation and translation. The experiment was far from perfect, but God has used it significantly in Equatorial Guinea, and we are thankful to have been part of the discovery and excitement of the process. What we have learned is that the hybrid method of oral drafting involving written texts (which is different than the Render method) and recording shorter chunks has merit, and may be more efficient and effective. Obviously, not every translator will be as gifted as Acacio while also being highly literate, but it would be a worthy search and goal.

We agree with Scherer and Bevans when they write, “Too many churches are still imprisoned by forms and structures inherited from other countries and are thus not free to establish such signs of the kingdom of God as to make use of their own cultural context.”⁶¹ And we hope to inspire more people groups to break free from that imprisonment. At the same time, “the gospel must be neither captive to local culture nor alienated from it. This implies a tension between gospel and culture and calls for a self-critical and prophetic stance on the part of the local Christian community.”⁶²

This project has served to reinforce the fact that the significant myopia of ignoring the riches of African oral communities has led to a sad loss of opportunities for Equatorial Guinea until the advent of *Nkuwalong*. As Maxey writes, Bible translation has “historically set its goal as a literary conversion of the population. Whereas literacy offers significant benefits, it should not be at the expense of oral denigration.”⁶³ The alternative that we have employed strives to move beyond a direct transfer of information to a poetic use of language that taps into the community’s culture and its identity. We hope this experiment will encourage others to pursue similar goals.

⁶⁰ Sundersingh, *Audio-based Translation*, Kindle location 3209.

⁶¹ James Scherer and Stephen Bevans, *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization*, vol. 3 (New York: Orbis, 1999), 8–9.

⁶² Maxey, *From Orality to Orality*, Kindle locations 529-531.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, Kindle Locations 1655-1656).

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