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## REVIEW OF:

**Ekem, David** (2011) *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana): The Historical, Linguistic, and Theological Settings of Gã, Twi, Mfantse, and Ewe Bibles*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura and St. Jerome Publishing.

Reviewed by:

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### I) INTRODUCTION

Mr Chairman, Rev Dr Nana Kwakye; our guest speaker, Dr Aloo Mojola; the author, Very Rev Prof Ekem; distinguished ladies and gentlemen; first I want to say thank you, to the Bible Society and its General Secretary Rev Erasmus Odonkor, for inviting me to review this book. It certainly is a pleasure to do this because I had actually borrowed an advanced copy of the book last year from the author. This was because I had been informed about it by Rev Prof Ansre who thought the book would be very useful to me to understand the Bible translation terrain in the country. And I found the book very illuminating, and indeed it became very critical to us in our preparations for GILLBT's fiftieth anniversary conferences last year. So it is certainly a pleasure to have been able to read it again, review it, and to recommend it to you all--and others not in this room.

Mr Chairman, traditionally there are two ways of reviewing a book. The first is a more direct approach where the reviewer simply looks at the contents and assesses their contributions to a given body of knowledge. The second approach is a more extensive one where the reviewer goes beyond the contents to reflect on the broader theme or set of themes within which the book is located. In this case it becomes a review article. I have chosen the latter, review article, approach as the author touches on critical themes with implications for the Mother Tongue Scripture ministry in Ghana, and the African continent.

### II) THE BOOK AND ITS CONTENTS

As the title of the book implies, this is a historical case study of the translation of the Bible into four of the dominant languages of the Gold Coast, now Ghana. Overall this is a fascinating book detailing the history of Gold Coasters (Ghanaians) and European missionaries collaborating on the translation of the scriptures in Ghana and Togo beginning in the 15th century through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with a glimpse into the 21<sup>st</sup> century as well. The author, Rev Prof David Ekem, the Director of the Institute of Mother-tongue Biblical Hermeneutics, and who is also the first occupant of the Kwesi Dickson-Gilbert Ansre Distinguished Professorial Chair both at the Trinity Theological Seminary, takes the reader through an amazing historical

tour of the earliest translations of biblical texts into four of the majority languages of the Gold Coast (now Ghana) and Togo: That is Ga; Twi (Akuapem and Asante); Ewe and Mfantse.

In doing so, the author is able to help his readers relive the lives and challenges of these early translators by providing relevant documentation and examples that illustrate the historical contexts and the many important translation issues, and challenges of these early translators. Finally he moves beyond these early translations to look at the more recent post independence translations by the Bible Society of Ghana, and the Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy and Bible Translation (GILLBT) which I direct.

The book is structured as follows:

**Chapter One**, titled “**Early Phases of Interaction with Custodians of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures on the Gold Coast**” sets the tone and context for the rest of the story. For those not completely familiar with the detailed history of Bible translation, as I was before I read the book, the author begins the book with a pleasant surprise: First, Bible translation actually began in Africa, with Africa referred to as the “cradle of Bible translation”. And before this surprise has really sunk in, the author introduces another surprise. That is, mother translation in Ghana did not begin with missionaries. Specifically Mother Tongue Bible translation and interpretation in Ghana began with a Ghanaian Jacobus Capitein, an ex-slave who after studies at Leiden became the chaplain at the Elmina castle and began translating the scriptures into Mfantse. There are other very interesting stories of pioneers like Anton-Wilhelm Amo, (1703-1756); Christian Potten (1715-1769) which readers are introduced to.

Mr Chairman, by historically integrating the role and agency of Africa, and Africans, in Bible translations, the author addresses what is a paradox of silence in relation to the role of Africa and Africans in missions’ history. And in doing so the author helps to liberate the dominant missionary historiography, in particular that of Bible translation, from the ideological, and sometimes even racist, strictures within which it is often enmeshed. As an example, in relation to silence on the work of a GA Minister Rev A.W. Hanson, the author argues:

***“It is quite amazing, and perhaps disappointing, that the revisions and subsequent translations done after Hanson’s time have failed to capture the innovative but meaningful attempt by an African scholar”*** (p.28).

Mr Chairman, this corrective historical analysis is often seen as revisionist that seeks to downplay the role of missionaries in Africa. I submit that the reverse is actually the case. By documenting the role of Africans which dominant missions historiography has sometimes ignored, such analysis actually becomes redemptive. In other words, by documenting the role of Hanson, Rev Prof Ekem, the author, helps to redeem missionary history and literature from this historical injustice!

Indeed in reviewing the book, it is very tempting indeed to include all the rich and fascinating historical details found in each chapter, and to reflect on them. But I have tried to resist that temptation and rather focus on brief outlines and summaries so we can all read these fascinating stories for ourselves.

So briefly:

**Chapter Two**, titled “The GA Bible” is the story of the making of the GA Bible. It starts with the early and pioneering translations of the Bible into GA, some of whom, like Rev W.A Hanson were unacknowledged. The main focus of the chapter, however, is on the substantive history of Johannes Zimmermann and his team of National Translators who labored together to ensure the translation of the Bible into GA

**Chapter Three**, titled “The Akuapem-Twi and Asante-Twi Bibles” deals with the history of the translation of the Bible into the Akan dialects of Akuapem-Twi and Asante-Twi. The work of the Basel Missionaries, in particular Johann Christaller and indigenes like David Asante, Akrofi, CA Denteh are told in fascinating historical detail. The chapter also details the story of the development of the Akan language, and the politics that went with it. Indeed this chapter demonstrates the contribution of Bible translation to the process of language development in this country.

**Chapter Four:** “The Mfantse (Fante) Bible” examines the translation of the Bible into the Mfantse (Fante) language. According to the author, the uniqueness of the Mfantse Bible lies in the fact that in this translation, indigenous translators initiated the work. The roles of Revs Andrew Parker; J.O. Hammond and Gaddiel Acquah are detailed. The quest for a unified Akan orthography---once again highlighting the link between Bible translation and language development---is also explored in this chapter.

**Chapter Five**, “The Ewe Bible” is an exploration of the Bible into the Ewe language of Ghana and Togo. The critical collaboration between translators from the North German Missionary Society (popularly referred to as Bremen mission) and their indigenous counterparts is detailed in rich biographical and historical detail.

**Chapter Six**, titled “Summary of Issues Emerging from the Study and the Way Forward” is an appropriate conclusion to the study. It pulls the threads together by providing a summary of the main findings, addresses their implications, and outlines an agenda for future work and research. In addition the chapter links the translations of the past to the present work. In so doing the author provides a critical and necessary link between the work in the majority languages and the unfinished translation needs of the minority languages of the country. The need for Biblical scholars to build upon the solid and pioneering foundations of this study is also advocated.

An **Epilogue** written by the General Editor of the History of Bible Translation Project of the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship formally concludes the book.

### III. CONCLUSION AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE BOOK

Overall this is a fascinating book that details not only the history of these four Bible translations. To the contrary this is also a book that details the history of the Church in Ghana. It is also a book on language development in the country and the politics that often surround it. It is also a history of the development of literature etc. To provide a concluding summary of the relevance of the book, I give the final word to the doyen of Mother tongue ministry in Ghana, Rev Prof Gilbert Ansre, who in the Foreword to the Book writes:

*“Prof Ekem seeks to give us the translation history of four of our Ghanaian Bibles. To do this, he has undertaken very careful and exhaustive research in Ghana, Switzerland, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America and has obtained overwhelming data and insights. He has presented this complex information in very clear and orderly manner. Being at home in English, German, and some of the Ghanaian languages, he has enabled us to access details of records and views hitherto unavailable to us. The book, while very scholarly, yet makes very easy reading. Moreover, it enables us to appreciate the convictions, abilities, devotion, and tenacity of the many European and African translators...Prof Ekem has challenged us to see the historical translation work as only the beginning of the work that we are obliged to continue. He has succeeded in his objective and the reader is much the better for it” (page xix).*

Mr Chairman, any study that can improve our historical understanding in this way is bound to be instructive in regard to practical tasks and perhaps, even, to moral and ethical reflection. Incidentally the book does exactly that as it provides a number of entry points for such reflection. And so to conclude my review, I want to reflect on one such implication related to the future of Mother tongue ministry in Ghana. The author concludes his work by stressing that the work of Mother Tongue in Ghana and Africa is an unfinished business. This raises an immediate question:

Given that the work has been wholly funded by external funders, with funding from these sources dwindling, **Who will be the patrons of this unfinished task? Specifically who will fund these translations, translators, researchers and theologians who will do this work?**

This issue of patrons of bible translation was brought to me clearly exactly a week ago. Specifically last Thursday May 2 afternoon, I visited the Wartburg Castle in Germany where Martin Luther translated the New Testament into German, his mother tongue. As I stood in the room where he did the actual translation, what occupied me was not the room per se. Rather my reflection went to the Castle itself and the protection it gave him to do the work—at a time when the Catholic church wanted him dead. It took a German patron to protect him, and give him the space to do his work.

**Who are the Ghanaian and African Patrons who will protect our translators and theologians, and create the conditions for them to work effectively?** As I reflected on this, the answer became obvious: The patrons for the ministry of Mother Tongue Scriptures should be Ghanaian/African Christians and the African church. The role of the African church is particularly important, as is captured by one of the earlier Ghanaian Christian nationalists, Dr Ephraim Amu. Remembered mostly as a musicologist for his prolific contributions to our patriotic songs, including our unofficial national anthem “*Yen ara asase ni* (this is our land), he was a firm supporter of Mother Tongue scriptures and theologizing. And in a sermon he preached at Achimota College on November 22, 1942 titled “*The Bible in the Homely Language*”, (or *The Bible in the Mother tongue*) he argues:

*“The foreign mission,’ says Edwin Smith, ‘is not a permanent institution; it will pass away, but the Church remains.’ So some time sooner or later, there will come into existence the Church of Africa, or perhaps Church of West Africa, a church growing in the knowledge of the Bible, a church producing African Wyclifs, Tyndales and Luthers to make perfect versions of the Bible...”* (Ephraim Amu cited in Laryea, 2012: 355).

In this sermon Amu makes demands on the Ghanaian/African church in relation to Mother tongue Scriptures. As a church established on the foundations of Scriptures mostly produced, at least funded, by foreign missions, Amu’s vision is for the African church that emerges from this foundation to take ownership of Mother Tongue Bible translation. Indeed his conceptualization analytically integrates, and ascribes primacy, to the role of the Ghanaian/African church in Mother Tongue ministry. Seventy years after he made this call, a church **has** emerged as a powerful, well-resourced actor on Ghana and Africa’s institutional landscape. Yet, its support for Bible translation remains very minimal. But, as the author demonstrates, the work of Mother tongue ministry is incomplete! The challenge inherent in this is for all of us to be advocates to ensure that the African church, and African Christians, supports this unfinished task, to ensure that Ghana, and the African continent in general, can produce more of the Ekems whose contribution we celebrate this evening.

On this note I want to thank the Bible Society, once again, for organizing this book launch; congratulate Rev Prof Ekem for this fascinating study; and to recommend this book to you all!