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Eugène Casalis and the French Mission to Basutoland (1833-1856)

*A Case Study of Lamin Sanneh's Mission-by-Translation
Paradigm in Nineteenth Century Southern Africa*

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Eugène Casalis and the French Mission to Basutoland (1833-1856)

A Case Study of Lamin Sanneh's Mission- by-Translation Paradigm in Nineteenth Century Southern Africa

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Abstract

In his work, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, Lamin Sanneh claims that, from its beginnings at Pentecost, Christian mission, through its practice of vernacular language transcription and Bible translation, characteristically makes “the recipient culture the true and final locus of the proclamation, so that the religion arrives without the presumption of cultural rejection” (p. 29). In this paper we evaluate the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society’s mission to Basutoland (1833-1856), spearheaded by Eugène Casalis and Thomas Arbousset, in light of Lamin Sanneh’s theses with regard to the Christian gospel and its missionary propagation. We will pay particular attention to the missionaries’ attitudes towards the Basotho people, language and culture; their ambiguous relationship to European colonialism; and their contribution to the founding of modern Lesotho. What were the primary factors of the French mission’s success in establishing an indigenous church, a self-propagating movement, and ultimately in laying the groundwork for a nation?

“The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us” - John 1:14

Introduction

In his groundbreaking monograph, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Sanneh 1989), African scholar Lamin Sanneh,¹ claims that the historical coincidence of European imperialistic colonialism and the heyday of modern missions has oftentimes allowed for fanciful conjectures with regard to the relationship of the two phenomena:

At its most self-conscious stage, mission coincided with Western colonialism, and with that juncture students of the subject have gone on to make all kinds of judgments about the intrinsic bond between the two forces. Historians who are instinctively critical of received tradition in other spheres are more credulous in perpetuating the notion of mission as “imperialism at prayer” . . . Mission came to acquire the unsavory odor of collusion with the colonial powers. . . . The forces pitted against a fair understanding of mission in the late twentieth century are formidable . . . many people are committed to the ideological position that mission is oppressive, and anachronistic to boot (1989: 88).

Sanneh, himself a convert from Islam in his home country of Gambia, takes to task this well-worn caricature of nineteenth century European missions as essentially a tool of Western cultural imperialism. Sanneh asserts: “Modern historiography has established a tradition that mission was the surrogate of Western colonialism, and that . . . together these two movements combined to destroy indigenous cultures. . . . I wish in this book to present another point of view (1989: 4).”

Eugène Casalis and Thomas Arbousset, French Protestant missionaries sent to southern Africa by the newly formed Paris Evangelical Missionary Society (PEMS), arrived in Basutoland (today’s Kingdom of Lesotho) in June of 1833, responding to an invitation from King Moshoeshoe. From their base station in Morija, they would transcribe Sesotho (the language of the Basotho people) and begin the translation and diffusion of the Scriptures; instigate literacy, social and commercial projects; and ultimately contextualize the gospel among the Basotho. Their labors gave birth not only to

the Lesotho Evangelical Church,² but also to the nation of Lesotho.³ Their experience illustrates a mid nineteenth century case study of the impact of Bible translation on both culture and nation in southern Africa.

The French mission to the Basotho is a clear counter-example of the largely imaginary and revisionist caricature of nineteenth century missions as the puppet and pawn of imperialist powers. PEMS pioneer missionaries Casalis and Arbousset, whose work issued in an authentic, autonomous and indigenous African church and, ultimately, in a nation, demonstrated exemplary anthropological methodology, linguistic skill, and cross-cultural aptitude.

Thesis and Argument of This Paper

In this article we will attempt to establish that the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society's adherence to the premises of the mission-by-translation paradigm, as described by Lamin Sanneh, was the primary human factor in the founding of the indigenous Church of Basutoland (which would become the Lesotho Evangelical Church in 1963). After taking a closer look at Sanneh's contradistinctive paradigms of mission-by-translation and we will then examine and evaluate the initial efforts of the PEMS mission among the Basotho, paying particular attention to the missionary intuitions, attitudes and praxis of Eugène Casalis and Thomas Arbousset with regard to the Basotho people, language and culture mission-by-diffusion. Additionally, we will observe how Casalis and Arbousset, through their contextualizing activities, acted as vernacular agents, inspiring indigenous sentiment and thereby laying the groundwork for the founding of a nation.

Lamin Sanneh's Mission-by-Translation Paradigm

Sanneh states his thesis concisely:

Christianity, from its origins, identified itself with the need to translate out of Aramaic and Hebrew, and from that position came to exert a dual force in its historical

development. One was the resolve to relativize its Judaic roots. . . . The other was to destigmatize Gentile culture and adopt that culture as a natural extension of the life of the new religion (1989: 1).

For Sanneh, the gospels are “a translated version of the message of Jesus, and that means that Christianity is a translated religion without a revealed language” (2003: 97). He muses: “Christianity seems unique in being the only world religion that is transmitted without the language or originating culture of its founder” (2003: 98). Consequently,

Christians found themselves propelled toward a popular mode for translation and for communicating the message. . . . Christians became pioneers of linguistic development. . . . The resulting literacy . . . produced social and cultural transformation. A culture that for the first time possessed a dictionary and a grammar was a culture endowed for renewal and empowerment (2003: 98-99).

Vernacular transcription and Bible translation by missionaries “is more than just a tactical concession to win converts. It is, rather, an acknowledgment that languages have intrinsic merit for communicating the divine message. They are worthy of God’s attention” (2003: 100).

Christianity’s cross-cultural expansion in history, beginning with the experiences of the early church recounted in the Acts of the Apostles, was accomplished through the practice of what Sanneh calls “mission by *translation*,” which is ideologically opposed to and ultimately incompatible with what he refers to as “mission by *diffusion*” or “mission as *cultural imperialism*.” To support his case, he alludes to historian Arnold Toynbee, who, in Sanneh’s words, affirmed that, continuing the legacy of the early church, modern missions “. . . followed the logic of the translatability of Christianity and submitted the religion in the most intimate way to the terms of local culture. By so doing, such missionaries had become indigenizers in the best sense of the term, rather than cultural imperialists (1989: 90).”

New Testament Precedents

Sanneh's starting point is the nascent church in the Acts of the Apostles, with the query: "How might the church, Gentile or other, rise to its missionary obligation unless it believed that its experience, which is necessarily culturally defined, was in some fashion normative of the divine truth?" (1989: 28-29). He then outlines two ways to proceed, two paradigms:

One is to make the missionary culture the inseparable carrier of the message. This we might call mission by *diffusion*. By it religion expands from its initial cultural base and is implanted in other societies primarily as a matter of cultural identity. . . . Conversion that takes place in mission by diffusion is not primarily a theological inquiry. It is, rather, assimilation into a predetermined positivist environment. The other way is to make the recipient culture the true and final locus of the proclamation, so that the religion arrives without the presumption of cultural rejection.⁴ This we might call mission by *translation*. It carries with it a deep theological vocation, which arises as an inevitable stage in the process of reception and adaptation. . . . Conversion that takes place in mission as translation rests on the conviction that might be produced in people after conscious critical reflection. What is distinctive about this critical reflection is that it assumes . . . a relativized status for the culture of the message-bearer (1989: 29).

Despite the early attempts on the part of the Jerusalem apostles to assimilate non-Jews through the postexilic practice of cultural proselytization—the predecessor of mission-by-diffusion—the combination of a series of cross-cultural missionizing experiences along with strategic interventions on the part of the Holy Spirit allowed the early church to radically redirect its missional theology and praxis in harmony with the entirely new paradigm of mission-by-translation, which is on the supposition of individual spiritual conversion. This reorientation had several unforeseeable and beneficial consequences with regard to apostolic mission:

In Paul's mind mission was the solvent of cultural xenophobia, essentially his own. . . . No one is the exclusive or normative pattern for anyone else, and no one culture can be God's favorite. . . . The result is pluralism on a radical scale. . . . Mission helps to burst the old wineskins with the pressure of cross-cultural interpretation dissolving the barriers of cultural exclusiveness (1989: 29-30).

The conversion of Paul the Jew *cum* Apostle to the Gentiles—which debuted with his life-transforming encounter with the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus—was only complete when, through his multiple encounters and sustained collaboration with Gentiles whose lives had been transformed by the same resurrected Jesus, Paul surrendered his cultural imperialism and self-sufficiency, exhorting other believing Jews to do likewise. Sanneh writes:

The emergence of the Gentile church produced profound theological repercussions, which it fell to Paul to try to enunciate and systematize. . . . He came to be in radical tension with his own cultural roots, not because those roots were unsound but because the Gentile breakthrough had cast a shadow over any claims for cultural absolutism, Jewish or other. . . . Paul's ambiguous and often very critical relationship to Judaism cannot be isolated from his participation in the Gentile mission, and with good reason. As missionaries of the modern era were to find, encountering the reality of God beyond the inherited terms of one's culture reduces reliance on that culture as a universal normative pattern. A fresh standard of discernment is introduced by which the essence of the gospel is unscrambled from one cultural yoke in order to take firm hold in a different culture. . . . The center of Christianity, Paul perceived, was in the heart and life of the believer without the presumption of conformity to one cultural ideal⁵ (1989: 24-25).

At the very heart of Sanneh's thesis is the concept of translation, and at the heart of translation, writes Andrew Walls, is the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation:

Christian faith rests on a divine act of translation: “the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). Any confidence that we have in the translatability of the Bible rests on that prior act of translation. There is a history of translation of the Bible because there was a translation of the Word into flesh. . . . In prophetic faiths God speaks to humanity: in Christian faith, God becomes human. . . . Incarnation is translation. When God became man, Divinity was translated into humanity, as though humanity were a receptor language. . . . Bible translation as a process is thus both a reflection of the central act on which the Christian faith depends and a concretization of the commission which Christ gave his disciples. Perhaps no other activity more clearly represents the mission of the Church (Walls 1996: 26-28).

At the dawn of Christianity, then, “the spiritual and theological issues raised by the demands of the cross-cultural translation of the Gospel involved an immense struggle, evidence of which is found throughout the New Testament” (Smith 2003: 69). Only multiple and often spectacular interventions by the Holy Spirit allowed the early church and its apostolic founders to break out of their captivity to Hebrew religion, culture and language, overcoming their ethnic and linguistic chauvinism in order to move forward with their worldwide mission to the nations. Without the momentous decision taken by the Jerusalem Council recorded in Acts chapter 15 to admit cultural pluralism within the church, it is not an exaggeration to affirm that the spread of Christianity beyond the otherwise watertight frontiers of Jewish ethnocentrism would have permanently aborted.

Although there are some notable exceptions,⁶ Christian missionaries throughout the history of the expansion of the church have considered languages in all their diversity as adequate vehicles for communicating the gospel to humanity in all of its linguistic and ethnic varieties. Consequently missionaries have gone to great pains and vast resources have been garnered in order to translate Christianity’s foundational document, the Bible, into the vernaculars.

Historical Evidence of Dual Paradigms

By way of contrast, Sanneh identifies Islam as the major proponent of mission-by-diffusion: “Islam . . . exemplifies this mode of mission. It carries with it certain inalienable cultural assumptions, such as the indispensability of its Arabic heritage in Scripture, law, and religion” (1989: 29). Islam’s theological attachment to Arabic as its sacred language of revelation and consequently to Arab culture as its carrier explains why mission-as-diffusion has prevailed as its preferred paradigm of expansion. In summary:

There are striking differences between Islam and Christianity in spite of their common missionary ambition, yet nothing is more fundamental than their contrasting attitudes to the translatability of their respective Scriptures. Scriptural translation . . . is the vintage mark of Christianity, whereas for Islam universal adherence to a nontranslatable Arabic Qur’an remains its characteristic feature” (1989: 211).

Sanneh bolsters his case from Christian history with references to the missionizing works of Cyril and Methodius among the Slavs; Roman Catholic missions in America, Japan, and India; and, later, Protestant missions in India and Africa, concluding with David Livingstone, for whom the vernacular Bible had become the “real engine of mission” (1989: 114). If Roman Catholic missions in the early modern era recognized and accommodated the vernacular in the liturgy and the discipline of the church, Protestant missions “in their translation work made mother tongues the centerpiece of mission. . . . Thus were sown the seeds of vernacular renewal . . . encouraging popular movements in areas of missionary outreach” (1989: 124).

Sanneh goes further in his analysis: “Missionary adoption of the vernacular . . . was tantamount to adopting indigenous cultural criteria for the message, a piece of radical indigenization” (1989: 3). Meticulous, dynamic, and culturally-sensitive translation of the Scriptures into the vernaculars, followed by the forming and nurturing of indigenous churches to which it invariably gives rise, has probably been the single most strategic missionary activity in the history of the Church. Kwame Bediako corroborates this analysis:

It is to the undying credit of the modern missionary enterprise from the West, and to the lasting benefit of the newer churches which have resulted, that the value of the vernacular Bible for converts was generally recognized quite early. There is probably no more important single explanation for the massive presence of Christianity on the African continent than the availability of the Scriptures in many African languages (Bediako 1997: 62).

Sanneh does not gloss over the obvious humanity, neither of the first century apostles nor of Western missionaries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: all were subject to some degree of cognitive dissonance, of incoherence and inconsistencies, and of errors committed against the recipients of mission. Sanneh does not claim that Christian mission has never employed the methods of mission-by-diffusion. In this regard, he cites the Jerusalem apostles who at first attempted to fulfill their universal mission according to the Jewish paradigm of cultural inclusion and diffusion, but which they quickly abandoned in favor of the new paradigm, which Jesus had exemplified in his own teaching and practice of mission. Neither does Sanneh contend that mission-by-diffusion, as historically practiced by Islam, for example, has never or could never employ practices normally associated with mission-by-translation. He concludes, however, that mission-by-diffusion is “unquestionably the stronger strand in Islam whereas mission as translation is the vintage mark of Christianity” (1989: 29).

Although on occasion Sanneh may get close to eulogizing certain missionaries for their perspicacity and competence, he generally describes them as deeply sincere servants who—largely in spite of themselves, their mission agencies, priorities and strategies—managed to accomplish at the very least the one right thing, that is, translating the Bible into vernacular languages and then contextualizing the gospel into local cultures.

For Sanneh, the act of transcription and translation functions as a catalyst that may very likely bear unexpected fruit:

When one translates, it is like pulling the trigger of a loaded gun: the translator cannot recall the hurtling bullet. Translation thus activates a process that might supersede the original intention of the translator. Mainly for this reason we distinguish between the motive of mission and the consequences, between the “trigger,” so to speak, and the “bullet” (1989: 53).

Sanneh continues: “Missionary translation was instrumental in the emergence of indigenous resistance to colonialism” (1989: 123). In the case of the emerging African church, “vernacular translation often converged with steps to encourage indigenous ascendancy. . . . In their vernacular work, Christian missions helped nurse the sentiments for the national cause, which mother tongues crystallized and incited (1989: 125).”

The practice of mission by translation tends then to issue not only in the founding of indigenous churches, but may also, through its affirmation of local language and culture, lead to different forms of indigenous and even nationalist sentiments and causes. Sanneh goes as far as to claim that the “seeds of the divergence between mission and colonialism were sown with the translation enterprise” (1989: 112-113).

For Sanneh, the contention by critics that Christian mission necessarily interferes with indigenous cultures—a sensitive charge and deserving of careful consideration—is probably overdrawn, simplistic, and in most instances, unwarranted. Such criticism

. . . denies the possibility of genuine cultural exchange and, beyond that, it seals culture from the possibility of change. . . . Enough has been said to suggest that even when it was blatant cultural interference, mission excited sufficient vernacular initiative to commence a critical appropriation process. . . . It is one of the interesting ironies of the Western missionary enterprise that the evangelical motive actually helped to shield indigenous populations from the unmitigated assault of the West and that, through the elevation of

the vernacular in translation, missions furnished the critical language for evaluating the West in its secular and religious impact (1989: 202-203).

Rather than being the puppets of Western colonialism and the rapists and destroyers of cultures, missionaries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were, more often than not, the bane of colonial powers and the defenders, preservers and revitalizers of ancient cultures. Sanneh wrote:

Men and women who were never distinguished as explicit champions of their own culture found the attractions of another irresistible, and as a consequence became promoters of the lore and wisdom of other people. Whatever their motive, such missionaries were laying the foundations of indigenous revitalization to which the Christian cause would be tied (1989: 25).

Bediako generalizes: "The phenomenon of African Christianity in the twentieth century, therefore, far from signifying an acute Westernisation of African life, may rather be the evidence of how much African peoples feel at home in the Gospel of Jesus Christ" (2003: 62). Sanneh concludes:

Thoughtful missionaries understood that God had preceded them in Africa, ... that translation involved esteem for the vernacular culture, . . . and that, finally, linguistic investigations and the systematic inventory of indigenous resources were likely to touch off wider and longer-lasting repercussions in the culture (1989: 166-167).

Mission-by-Translation In the Work of Eugène Casalis and Thomas Arbousset

It has been well documented that Casalis and Arbousset rejected key ideological, attitudinal and behavioral tendencies often associated with mission-by-diffusion, namely: racial supremacism, European ethnocentrism, and the cultural imperialism characteristic of the European colonization of Africa.

But did Casalis and Arbousset, and the PEMS after them, in fact wholly embrace the premises of mission-by-translation? Did PEMS missionaries consider Sesotho language and Basotho culture as adequate mediums for the translation of the Scriptures and as adequate carriers of the Christian gospel?

As we have seen, at the heart of the mission-by-translation paradigm is ... *translation*, the act of transmitting meaning from one linguistic medium to another, with all the inherent structural and cultural challenges and risks. With their acquisition of Sesotho, Casalis and Arbousset would begin their own process of missionary translation and incarnation of the gospel into Basotho culture, which would not only alter the course of Basotho history, but also set the direction and the standard for future PEMS work.⁷

After their arrival in Basutoland, Casalis and Arbousset learned Sesotho in an amazingly short time, a feat that, according to biographer Marie-Claude Mosimann-Barbier, may be explained in part by the prior linguistic work in Bechuana (a language closely related to Sesotho) completed by Scotsman Robert Moffat, aided by Casalis' fellow PEMS missionaries Samuel Rolland and Prosper Lemue.⁸ Casalis' natural flair for language and his interest and training in linguistics would aid not only in capitalizing on Moffat's work but also in simultaneously unlocking the secrets of the Sesotho language and Basotho culture.

In order to discover or construct dynamic equivalents for translation purposes, and following the example of Moffat, Casalis and Arbousset actively engaged native elders in the work. South African anthropologist David B. Coplan comments: "If anthropology is most fundamentally an exercise in translation, then the recruitment of elders as collective, dialogic critics of the missionaries' efforts to translate the gospels into Sesotho stands out as exemplary ethnographic method (2003: 4)."

Mosimann-Barbier brings to light a significant contrast between the work of Casalis and Arbousset and that of the future colonizers:

The French missionaries never at any moment attempted to impose their language on the Basotho, contrary to the later practice of the colonizers who considered the indigenous languages to be inferior. Casalis justifies this choice and, ahead of his time,

emphasizes the importance of preserving the mother tongue: “As concerning awakening the conscience, touching the heart, producing life-transforming convictions, the instrument *par excellence* is the mother tongue. As poor and ill-conceived as it may be, it possesses accents whose significance cannot be measured by philosophers” (Mosimann-Barbier 2012: 260-261).⁹

Casalis’ study of Sesotho led him to the conclusion that « the Basotho idiom has furnished all that is necessary for reproducing divine thought with clarity and without abusive long-windedness” (Mosimann-Barbier 2012: 251). In another place he summarizes: “The language which the Basotho speak, and which is understood by thousands of other natives, has been mastered, rendered more supple and even enriched, to the point of being sufficient for all religious and social purposes” (Casalis 2011: 338).¹⁰ Casalis and Arbousset discovered in Sesotho what they had to some degree expected: vocabulary and concepts sufficient to translate and contextualize the gospel and with which to communicate the whole counsel of God contained in the Scriptures.

In short, Casalis unambiguously espoused the central premise of Sanneh’s mission-by-translation paradigm, namely, the prioritizing of the transcription of the language and translation of the gospel, which, far from being bound to a divinely appointed language and culture of revelation, is destined for vernacular transmission and eventual inculturation. The analysis of Sesotho and the translation of the Bible into this previously unwritten language would open windows of insight into the culture of the Basotho—its belief system and values, history, hopes, and fears—which Casalis and Arbousset believed would then provide keys for the missionizing of the Basotho people.

Casalis and his missionary colleagues held in high regard the Basotho people, their language and culture, which, to the degree that it was possible for Europeans, they adopted as their own. George McCall Theale, in his Basutoland Records, concluded:

The French missionaries sent to our country for life pondered problems from the vantage point of the natives They did not seek to turn the Basotho into simple reproductions of the white man but rather

encouraged them to progress in the furrow of their own conduct, adopting their way of thinking. This is the secret of their success as civilizers and of the great influence to which they attained in Lesotho (Mosimann-Barbier 2012: 226).¹¹

Coplan suspects that Casalis' interest in Basotho culture went beyond the mere search for keys to aid in communicating the gospel message: "One cannot avoid the impression that Casalis found the study of the 'natural history' of Basotho culture and the practice of comparative ethnology...rewarding for their own sake: evangelization as a pretext for ethnology" (2003: 4). French africanist Alain Ricard concurs with this analysis: "I believe Moshoeshoe . . . had sensed in Arbousset this curious and fertile respect which gives birth to great works and nourishes great friendships" (2012: 17).

Both Coplan and Mosimann-Barbier identify several apparent inconsistencies and paradoxes in the attitudes and behavior of PEMS missionaries. For example, Coplan evokes Casalis' aversion to some Basotho customs, such as:

. . . bridewealth, polygyny, rites of initiation, and magical procedures in healing (which) blinded him to the integral value of these practices in the overall moral economy and social system that he so brilliantly documented, analyzed, and otherwise respected and admired. The Calvinism of the PEMS was unfortunately not only in prejudice but also in substance directly opposed to core elements of Sesotho, including those that underpinned the existing political and social order. (2003: 6).

Mosimann-Barbier elicits the lack of tolerance on the part of Casalis vis-à-vis certain Basotho superstitions, witchcraft, water witching, ancestor veneration, circumcision and initiation rites, and especially polygamy.¹²

Coplan admits, however that "despite his disapproval of Basotho custom as obstacle to Christianity, Casalis could not 'help feeling a certain respect for these traditions'" (2003: 6). Mosimann-Barbier underscores the role of missionary negotiation with Moshoeshoe in the disappearance of several of the above practices: « Depending on the

moment, the king opted either for tradition or for the new religion. . . . The king thus was able to obtain, most often by persuasion and example, that his people gradually renounce a certain number of Basotho customs" (2012: 220, 222).

We may conclude that PEMS missionaries did not impose their cultural views on Basotho society, but attempted to use persuasion and negotiation, allowing Moshoeshe and his elders, through their system of *pitso* (national assembly), to propose and initiate change and promote gradual transformation.

For Casalis and Arbousset, Basotho language and culture became, in Sanneh's words, the "true and final locus of the proclamation" and "a piece of radical indigenization." Coplan summarizes the indigenizing posture and nature of PEMS work in respect to Basotho culture in general:

The PEMS became the commoners' church, transforming itself into the Lesotho Evangelical Church, the champion of independence and indigenism, making Sesotho tradition and history respectable and maintaining its reputation for intellectualism, local literature, and pride in Basotho heritage (2003: 10).

Despite weaknesses and flaws in missionary transmission, the fruit of the PEMS mission in Lesotho was indeed an indigenous church. Possessing the Scriptures in the vernacular, the Basotho church theoretically and potentially possessed the instrument by which she might measure not only her own work and culture, but also that of her founding missionaries.

Awakening Indigenous Sentiment Among the Basotho

Did gospel translation into the vernacular by PEMS missionaries in Lesotho, like the "trigger of a loaded gun," activate a process whose consequences might "supersede the original intention of the translators?" (Sanneh 1989: 53).

With all the imperfections of its human agents, the practice of mission-by-translation should naturally give birth to indigenous sentiment, which may then express itself in the form of local and, in

certain contexts, even national causes. As we have seen, Sanneh claims that, in the case of the emerging African church, “Christian missions helped nurse the sentiments for the national cause, which mother tongues crystallized and incited” (1989: 125). This was certainly the case in Lesotho, where admittedly, even before the arrival of missionaries, the dream of a Basotho nation had already been born in Moshoeshoe. PEMS missionaries arrived on the field with their own dreams of Christian nationhood, as exemplified by Samuel Rolland who had “dreamed for them (these nations) nationhood, their own language, a firmly established political independence” (Mosimann-Barbier 2012: 2).¹³

The economic contribution missionaries made to the growth of the national cause is well documented. However, without the transcription of Sesotho—a supra-tribal *lingua franca*—it is difficult to imagine that Basotho efforts alone would have culminated in nationhood. The transcription of Sesotho is probably the single most important factor in unifying the Basotho in their march to nationhood. Claude-Hélène Perrot affirms; “By reducing Sesotho to a written language, the missionaries contribute to national unification” (1963: 105).

Other crucial factors for the growth of the national cause were the diplomatic, logistical and moral support of the missionaries, the introduction of Christianity and the establishment of a national church under indigenous leadership. Coplan remarks that the description and analysis of Basotho political and legal systems not only “reflected French missionary interest in the development of the Basotho towards nationhood,” but also “served the strategy of converting the Basotho aristocracy ‘from the top down’ in the building of a ‘national church’” (2003: 5). Perrot concurs with this connection between organized religion and national sentiment:

The imported religion may consolidate national unity as it does not recognize traditional tribal and clannish distinctions. . . . The major Christian holidays to which a station invites its neighboring stations and which assemble thousands of participants coming often from distant places reinforces this nationalizing tendency (1963: 105).

Despite the imperfections of its human agents, the practice of mission-by-translation among the Basotho by Casalis and Arbousset gave birth to an indigenous church, to indigenous sentiment, and finally to nationhood.

Conclusions

Eugène Casalis and Thomas Arbousset, from the beginning and throughout their mission to the Basotho, practiced mission-by-translation as evidenced by their commitment to mother tongue translation as the centerpiece and the motor of their work. Their attitudes and approach to the Basotho people and their culture were consistent with the esteem in which they held their language. Having provided the Basotho with their vernacular Scriptures, errors committed in the process of missionizing could conceivably be corrected with time by the indigenous and indigenizing Church of Basutoland in its outworking and incarnating of the gospel in its own context and in neighboring lands.

The vernacular renewal of Basotho culture was the fruit of the combined actions of the transcription of Sesotho, the translation and diffusion of the Bible in Sesotho, and the introduction of Christianity into Basotho society. Given their considerable investment in Bible translation, literacy and the founding of schools and churches, it is abundantly clear that PEMS missionaries possessed a full sense of their theological vocation vis-à-vis the Basotho, a hallmark of mission-by-translation.

It is difficult to assess to what degree conversions were the result of “conscious critical reflection” and “theological inquiry,” the hallmark of mission-by-translation, rather than the mere “adoption of a new cultural identity and assimilation into a predetermined positivist environment” (Sanneh 1989: 29), the hallmark of mission-by-diffusion. However, the PEMS missionaries’ insistence on personal conversion, along with the practice of public baptism of new converts, was a safeguard that, at the very least, ensured a minimum of individual theological understanding and engagement on the part of many, if not most converts.

Casalis and his colleagues approached the Basotho culture, in Sanneh's words as, the "true and final locus of the proclamation," demonstrating their commitment to Basotho language and culture as a new home, a new heartland for the gospel. Their close association and at times complicated collaboration with Moshoeshoe throughout the Basotho mission as it unfolded are evidences of their long-term commitment to an indigenous church firmly anchored in Basotho soil. In order to achieve this, they made serious efforts to relativize their own European and French culture of origin.

Lamin Sanneh has perhaps written prophetically with regard to Christianity's pluralist heritage and its ongoing practice of mission-by-translation in our day:

We stand today at the threshold of a new phenomenon in the history of the church when peoples and cultures are flocking to the cause, conscious as never before of the particular, unique contribution they can make. Christianity has become a pluralist dispensation of enormous complexity, and religious statesmanship requires the flexible approach of translatability to foster this pluralism rather than opposing it as a threat. How well Christians manage their great pluralist heritage in these twilight years of the twentieth century will have enormous implications for the kind of society people live in (Sanneh 1989:6).

Notes

- 1 Professor of history and of Missions and World Christianity at Yale Divinity School.
- 2 Formerly, the Church of Basutoland. Today, 180 years after the arrival of Casalis and Arbousset in Basutoland, 90% of the population of the Kingdom of Lesotho considers itself Christian, of which 48% is Roman Catholic and the rest Protestant or Independent of one sort or another. The Lesotho Evangelical Church, the direct descendant of PEMS work which numbers over 270,000 adherents, represents the largest non-Catholic group in Lesotho at 15.3% of the Christian population, or 13% of the total population. (See Jason Mandryk, *Operation World*, Seventh edition, Biblica Publishing, Colorado Springs, 2010, p. 531.)
- 3 Basutoland became a protectorate of the United Kingdom in 1868, gaining its independence as the Kingdom of Lesotho in 1966.
- 4 That is, rejection by the agents of mission of the host culture as an adequate medium for communicating the gospel message.
- 5 That is, the cultural ideal of the missionary.
- 6 During numerous periods of Christian history the progress of mission slowed or came to a grinding halt due in large part to reversion to the attitudes and practices of mission-by-diffusion and its imposition of a Christianized sacramental language (such as Latin and Old Church Slavonic) and culture on unevangelized peoples.
- 7 Anthropologist David B. Coplan writes: "The Lesotho mission was the main spiritual colony of French Protestantism, indeed the model for all the others, and it fathered the development of the modern French Calvinist Church and its humanistic orientation in both France and Switzerland." David B. Coplan, "Imperial Culture in Countries Without Colonies: Africa and Switzerland," paper presented to the Conference, Nineteenth Century PEMS Missionaries and the Foundations of Anthropology in Southern Africa, University of the Witwatersrand, October 25-28, 2003, p. 10. Internet (accessed 17 October 2012): <http://pages.unibas.ch/afrika/nocolonies/coplan.paper.rtf>
- 8 See Marie-Claude Mosimann-Barbier, *Un Béarnais en Afrique australe ou L'extraordinaire destin d'Eugène Casalis*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2012, p. 246.

- 9 Original quote from Eugène Casalis, *Les missions et les langues nationales*, Amsterdam, 1867, p. 11.
- 10 Originally published by Librairie Fischbacher, Paris, 1886.
- 11 Original quotation, George McCall Theal, *Basutoland Records: Copies of Official Documents of Various Kinds, from 1833 to 1868*, Capetown, 1883, *Basutoland Records*, vol 11, p. XXIV.
- 12 See Mosimann-Barbier, *op. cit*, p. 103.
- 13 Original quote: Timothy Holmes, in Daniel C. Bach, *La France et l'Afrique du Sud: histoire, myths et enjeux contemporains*, Khartala/CREDU, Paris/Nairobi, 1990, p. 87.

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