

## **The Role of Mali Muslims in Team Translation of the Bible**

*Anne Lise Matre*

### **Introduction**

In our translation office in Mali some years ago, my Fulani co-worker and I found ourselves engaged in an important discussion relating to the understanding of the person and role of God. We were translating 1 Thess 3:2 and could not agree on the Fulani expression to be used for translating the expression ‘God’s fellow-worker’. My colleague was of the opinion that it is blasphemy to say that God uses ordinary people as his fellow-workers. He therefore wished to replace the Fulani word for ‘fellow-worker’ (*gollidoowo*) to ‘servant’ (*gollanoowo*). I was of the opinion that ‘fellow worker’ was the only correct translation and that we should use that expression, even if our readers might find it difficult to accept. My reasons for this were: first, that *gollidoowo* was indeed an expression which most closely rendered the original Greek into Fulani, and second, that the choice of this term also expresses a fundamental theological understanding in Paul’s letters – namely that through the new birth the Christian has become a brother or sister of Christ, and as such also God’s co-worker in proclaiming the Gospel and furthering the ministry of reconciliation (1 Cor. 3:5-9; cf. 2 Cor. 5:18-21).

How can an expression like ‘God’s fellow worker’ become so difficult for a translation team? It became difficult for us because my colleague and I belonged to different religions: I am a Christian, he a Muslim. Our understandings of God, our theological presuppositions and loyalties were different. But also on other important subjects, our views often appeared to be far from each other.

In this article I wish to present our experiences and reflect on the nature of our collaboration. First of all, I shall give some background information on Christian mission among the Fulani people in Mali and Bible translation into the Fulani language. Then I shall address the topic of including people without Christian faith as helpers and co-workers in Bible translation before

I treat the main focus in this article, namely the role of Mali Muslims in our Bible translation-team. To put this in perspective, I will also reflect on the role which local Christians had in the Mali Fulani Bible translation team before I draw some conclusions.

## **Christian mission among the Fulani in Mali**

Mali was colonised by France during the second part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>. The colonisation was the starting point for Catholic missions in Mali. In the 1930s, Protestants from America came to Mali to do mission work too. They began evangelizing the Fulani in the north-eastern part of the country. The work, however, was not successful, so the missionaries left the Fulani and founded a church among the Dogons who turned out to be more receptive to the gospel. The Catholics also failed among the Fulani. So when missionaries from the Norwegian Mission Society (NMS) and from the Christian Reformed Church (CRC – based in the USA) came to Mali in the 1980s, there was hardly any Christian Fulani in the country. Even today 99% of the Fulani are assumed to be Muslims. The type of Islam we find in Mali is a folk Islam which includes a lot of animistic elements.

## **Bible translation in the region**

The official language of Mali is French. The educational system is also conducted in French, but, since only 10% of Fulani children attend school, French translations of the Bible do not impact the Fulani. The same is to be said of the Bible in the Bambara language. A Bambara Bible was published in the Ivory Coast in 1981 and is in current use in Bambara speaking churches in Mali, in addition to a New Testament in Bambara published in Mali in 1996. The Fulani, though – even those who know some Bambara – despise this ‘black’ African language and use it only if they have to.

The only translation that has – to a certain extent – impacted the Fulani in Mali is the translation from Cameroon (1983). Linguistically, the Fulani language in Cameroon is fairly different from the Fulani language used in Mali. But male Fulanis in Mali are used to dealing with Fulanis from all over West Africa, so they are able to understand it. Before there was any NT

---

<sup>1</sup> For a general presentation of Mali history, and its colonisation in particular, see: Attilio Gaudio, *Le Mali*, Paris: Editions Karthala, 1988.

translation in Mali Fulani, missionaries would give the Mali Bible translation from Cameroon to new Christians. However, only a very few of them were able to read and understand this Cameroon based Fulani translation.

NMS missionaries started translating portions of the Bible into Mali Fulani in 1986. In 1990, translators from Société Internationale de Linguistique / Wycliffe Bible Translators (SIL/Wycliffe) joined NMS in this work. During the whole process, the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) was involved in the translation too. The New Testament was published in January 2006. The NMS and SIL/Wycliffe, together with the CRC, are now collaborating in the process of translating the Old Testament.

### **The organisation of Bible translation**

In their book *The Theory and Practice of Translation*,<sup>2</sup> Eugene Nida and Charles Taber have made constructive suggestions as to how Bible translation should be organized. When the team members have understood the text by grammatical and semantic analysis, the text is to be transferred to the target language and restructured. Testing the translation is the last step. One single team cannot do this entire work, so normally it is conducted by two (or more) different teams. In our Mali Fulani translation we adopted this working process, organizing the project in two teams:

- The first one was *the transfer-team*, which was a small team sitting together in an office doing the grammatical and semantic analysis, transferring the texts into Fulani and restructuring them until they sounded accurate and correct.
- The second team was *the testing team*. The testing team was much larger than the transfer-team. The work of the testing team was done in the field, where people read – or somebody read to them – the translated texts coming from the transfer-team. Its main focus was to ensure that the translation was clear and smooth.

Consequently, from now on I shall refer to these two as ‘transfer-team’ and ‘testing-team’, respectively, and use ‘Bible translation teams’ to cover both.

---

<sup>2</sup> Nida, Eugene A. & Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Help for Translators, 8), Leiden: United Bible Societies / E. J. Brill, 1974, 174-186.

## **Is Christian faith a condition for being involved in Bible translation?**

Can people without Christian faith contribute constructively in Bible translation? Based on my own experience the answer is yes. In 1986 there were no Christian Fulani in Mali. Hence the question never came up whether Christian faith should be a condition for being involved in translating the Bible. The reality was that, if the mission wanted the Bible to be translated into Mali Fulani, it was necessary for them to ask Muslims for help, since the missionaries could not perform this work alone.

For the Mali Muslims themselves, being involved in translating a holy book belonging to another religion did not seem to be a problem. From their point of view, the gospel is more or less identical with what they call ‘Linjiila’, a holy book associated with the prophet Jesus which is mentioned in the Quran. Muslim leaders in Mali often want more knowledge about this book, so the first Malian Bible-translators – even though they knew that Christianity is a separate religion and not a part of Islam – regarded their work as a way to learn more about Islam.

Are there, then, from a Christian point of view, any objections to having people representing other religious faiths involved in translating the Bible? I have, so far, not found any. The United Bible Societies’ practice seems to be that anyone who is linguistically trained, or has sufficient language qualifications and can contribute to a good translation, is welcome in the team.<sup>3</sup> Together with Eugene Nida, Jan de Waard made a list of fundamental qualifications a Bible-translator should possess.<sup>4</sup> They mention verbal facility, knowledge of the subject matter, ability to work with others, etc. All these are characteristics of persons who may well contribute. The issue of faith or religious affiliation is not identified by de Waard and Nida. In fact, there are numerous cases of Bible translation where persons who do not hold a Christian faith have made good and valid contributions to the

---

<sup>3</sup> I have been informed by Samuel Thomas, UBS Great Britain, that on this matter every country is free to do what they want and that the policy is that the initiators do what is necessary to make a good translation. Christian faith is not a precondition for being involved in translating the Bible.

<sup>4</sup> de Waard, Jan and Eugene A. Nida, *From One Language To Another: Functional Equivalence in Bible Translating*, Nashville/Camden/New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986.

projects.<sup>5</sup> Even so, I suppose that initiators of Bible translations, looking for members for a transfer team, will prefer a Christian to a Muslim if the two persons otherwise possess the same skills. I can see two reasons for preferring Christians. The first is that faith in Jesus Christ gives a very strong motivation for translating the word of God. The second is that Christians have a view of God and a theological understanding of the Bible which are different from that of Muslims. They will, therefore, often understand the texts more congenially with the message of the Bible as a whole, and that of each Bible portion in particular, so as to make use of the intrinsic information in these texts. Also, they are more familiar with the Bible and can more easily make necessary cross-references. On the other hand, when it comes to the testing-team it is very important that representatives from the target group – in our case Muslims – give their opinion on the translation and contribute to its clarity.

Having stated this, I wish to add a note of appreciation for my Muslim co-worker's contribution to our translation project. The target group of our translation was the Muslim community. Having a Muslim scholar in the transfer team was a great benefit. Because of his profound knowledge of Muslim faith, as well as of Mali culture, his contributions to the translation process were of great value. Together we were able to identify and use appropriate religious vocabulary and to be confident that people would understand what we had written. Thus both his religious faith and his varied skills were highly relevant to and useful in the project.

### **The role of Muslims in the Bible translation teams**

As I said above, there were no Christian Fulani when NMS started to translate the Bible in Mali, so Muslims had to be employed. Our most important Fulani co-worker in the transfer team was Bah. Bah was a Muslim leader in his village and a teacher of the Quran to children before he started to translate the Bible. The two main reasons Bah was asked to help were his excellent

---

<sup>5</sup> One example can be found in Chinese Bible translation, where the role of the native literati has often been neglected. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century mission translations they contributed as secretaries, assistants, and linguistic experts - even as translators. See Thor Strandenaes: 'Anonymous Bible Translators: Native Literati and the Translation of the Bible into Chinese, 1807-1907' in *Sowing the Word: The Cultural Impact of the British and Foreign Bible Society 1804-2004*, Stephen Batalden, Kathleen Cann and John Dean (eds.), Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2004, 121-148.

language facilities and his ability to write his language well and accurately. Over the years, we also discovered that he had a great ability to work with others, that he was creative and that he cared for the translation. Most of the time that I worked with him as the transfer team consisted of just the two of us. In our translation work, though, we were linked to other Fulani Bible translation teams in West Africa through the use of CARLA.<sup>6</sup> As a consequence, we were able to use a ‘converted’ Fulani text from another region as a starting point, and – to put it in a simple way – our work often consisted of Bah restructuring the phrases while I verified whether this restructuring corresponded well to the meaning of the source text. Situations, like the one described in my introduction, often occurred during our working sessions. Finding a good solution to these sorts of problems demanded:

- Knowledge of the subject matter; for instance, what the gospel says about God and what is the most accurate translation of a verse; as well as the
- Ability to create an ambiance in the team that assures further good collaboration; the result of this will be that members of the team will still be willing to share their opinion and come up with creative proposals, even when their proposal has to be turned down as in the case with *gollidoowo*.

This ability to work harmoniously with others – as also identified by Nida and de Waard – seems to be especially important in a team consisting of people representing different religious faiths.

How can one deal with the differences of faith and opinions? This question is especially adept and challenging when Christian faith is the basis and the target of the collaboration, as in the case of Bible translation. Another challenging aspect is that Christians usually want Muslims to become Christian and vice versa, since both Islam and Christianity are evangelizing religions. The issue of Muslim/Christian prayer is a third challenging area. I could also have mentioned the problem posed by the poverty of the local people versus the wealth of the missionaries, but this problem goes beyond the focus of this article.

---

<sup>6</sup> Computer Assisted Related Languages Adaptation is software from JAARS (a SIL/Wycliffe technical service) which is able to adapt a text to a related language. The translation is a good help for a translation team, but the result text needs thorough revision.

## **Christian faith as basis and objective of the collaboration**

The reason why the NMS started to translate the gospel to Mali Fulani was faith in Jesus and commitment to his Great Commission, which challenges believers in him to proclaim his word (Matt 18:18-20). The objective of the translation work was therefore to bring the readers of the Fulani Bible to faith in Jesus Christ. Hence confessional Christianity was the frame of the translation-work, so to speak. Since Bah and other Muslims had been willing to enter this frame, we missionaries and employers had to be especially aware of their faith and make them feel free to be Muslims within this framework. We had to respect them and make sure that we did not put them into situations which would make other people regard them as Christians. For instance, I once asked Bah to take one of the gospels out to a village to test it. Bah accepted this and read the whole of the gospel of Mark to two different groups of people in his own village. He told me afterwards that testing a translation was extremely informative in relation to his work, but that he did not want to do it anymore because people now regarded him as a Christian. I think I felt sorrier for this than he did, and I never again asked him to test the translation. When he actually did test portions of the New Testament again, it was of his own free will and by this he showed that he had comfortably found his place as a Muslim in a Christian context.

Even when Muslims are respected and find their place in Bible translation projects, they will always be aliens in the project. They do not belong to the project and the project does not belong to them. Decisions are often taken without them and their role might be described as that of ‘helpers’. The case related in the opening paragraph shows how decisions often have to be made against the will of the Muslim co-worker: The Muslim Fulani wanted I Thess 3:2 to say ‘God’s servant’ because to say ‘God’s fellow-worker’ clashes with everything they have learnt about God as supreme divine being.. The Christian missionary has to be true to the source text and choose ‘God’s fellow-worker’. Bah could give advice, but decisions were taken without him and against his will. He was like the ‘anonymous translators’ described in an article by Thor Strandenæs; they often did not even receive recognition for their work.<sup>7</sup> Because of this, I find it particularly important that Christian employers and fellow-workers do their utmost to give Muslims

---

<sup>7</sup> See Strandenæs, ‘Anonymous Bible Translators...’ 2004. Strandenæs shows how Chinese people involved in translation were not even mentioned in the reports to the home mission boards.

working conditions within which they can live comfortably, and to show them the respect they deserve.

## The aspect of mission in Islam and Christianity

Christians have the desire that everyone should be able to recognise Jesus as Lord and Saviour.<sup>8</sup> In the same way Muslims want the whole world to submit to Allah and his prophet.<sup>9</sup> These are in many regards competing wishes and may be experienced as very intense when Muslims and Christians meet in the same office as co-workers every day. How should we behave towards each other under these circumstances? As evangelists for our respective religions, or as people in dialogue?

In my opinion, the dialogue as described by Tormod Engelsen<sup>10</sup> is a very good guide for translation teams. It is extremely important in a Bible translation situation that members do not behave arrogantly towards their colleagues but that they are honest and treat each other with respect and love. Christian translators should, therefore, not have 'a hidden agenda' with regard to their Muslim co-workers, with a view to recruiting them as Christians through their common work on Bible translation. It should be sufficient for the work that the Muslims are willing to collaborate with Christians in Bible translation.

Bible translation work itself can never be a dialogue as such. Engelsen points out that the goal of dialogue is to arrive at a better understanding of the other's religion and have deeper insight into one's own religion. This is not the goal of a Bible translation team; the goal for Bible translators is the Bible translation itself. But arriving at a better understanding of another's religion and gaining a deeper insight into one's own religion can be important side effects. In our team we experienced those side effects every day.

---

<sup>8</sup> Phil 2:10; Matt 28:18-20

<sup>9</sup> Arild Bakke: Islam – en misjonerende religion? (In English: Is Islam an evangelizing religion?) in: Opsal/Bakke (eds): *Mellom kors og halvmåne*. Oslo, Credo forlag 1994, 79-95

<sup>10</sup> Tormod Engelsen: *Kan kristne og muslimer stå sammen?* Perspektiver på dialog og samarbeid (In English: Can Christians and Muslims stand together? Perspectives on dialogue and collaboration.) in: Opsal/Bakke (eds): *Mellom kors og halvmåne*. Oslo: Credo forlag 1994, 165-185



## **Prayer**

I know that many Bible-translators want to start work in the office every day by prayer. However, in my view, Christian prayer has very little in common with Muslim prayer so I cannot see how a translation-team can organize a prayer which includes Christians as well as Muslims. Either the Muslims or the Christians – or possibly both – will feel that they participate in something that is very unfamiliar to their faith and religious practice. On the other hand, it is evident that prayer must be given a place during the day. This is particularly important in a predominantly Muslim culture, where the hours of prayer are kept and influence the daily rhythm in society. Hence the need to set aside time for prayer must be taken seriously. Likewise, missionaries engaged in Bible translation regard their work as an aspect of the church's mission, and as such to be guided by prayer (cf. Eph 6:18-20; Phil 4:6f; James 1:5f). The solution adopted in our transfer team was for Bah to observe the Muslim prayers while I left the office once a day in order to pray with Christian women with whom I had the habit of praying daily. This custom did not force either of us to do something we would not normally do, and it gave us both the freedom we needed to pray.

If it had been possible, the mission would most probably have chosen a Christian with a Muslim background instead of the Muslim believer to function in Bah's role in the transfer team. In that case we could have prayed together and we would not have had a sense of strangeness with each other regarding faith commitments. But when human beings cannot have what they wish, they are often able to be satisfied with what they get instead. Also, they might even end up realising that what they did obtain in the end was better than what they had wanted in the first place. This is exactly how I feel about having worked closely together with a Muslim on Bible translation. For me and the project itself, it was rewarding to have a Mali Muslim as a close co-worker in the translation team. We realised that we were able to overcome the cultural and religious differences between us and make a translation that was understood and appreciated by Muslims as well as Christians.

## **The role of Christians in the Bible translation teams**

As stated above, it is desirable that at least the decision making members of the transfer-team in a church Bible translation are Christians. More important it is desirable – even indispensable – that native or local Christians are involved in a Bible translation project which is underway. These are to be considered the future primary users of the emerging translation and also have relevant knowledge of the local culture.

When a new translation project starts, there may be no Christians who have this language as their mother tongue, as was the case in our project. This situation can change over time, and this happened in Mali. New Christians were eventually included in the testing team, often as part of the catechetical teaching they were receiving from missionaries. Eventually, we also wanted Christians to become part of the transfer team, which for them would mean coming to the office and working closely with a missionary and a Muslim Fulani.

We found this not to be easy! The problems we faced could be listed as the following:

- First, new Christian team members had difficulty in finding how to contribute to the work in an effective way. The transfer team existed before the Christians entered the team, and it had already found its own way of working. Bah had a strong verbal facility, he had acquired a lot of theological knowledge and he worked well with the missionaries. We could perhaps say that at this stage the team was functioning too well to easily allow for a change in composition.
- Second, the new Christian team members did not possess to a sufficient degree the characteristics needed to do a good job in Bible translation. As mentioned earlier, the characteristics set out by Nida and de Waard (verbal facility, knowledge of the subject matter, ability to work with others, etc.) seem to be more important in the translation process than Christian faith itself. Christians who possess such skills as mentioned by Nida and de Waard will make an important contribution to a translation team. But Christians who do not possess these skills will not be able to contribute very much. Thus, in the case of the Mali Fulani translation the native Christians ought to have undergone extensive training in such skills if their contribution to the project were to have been significant.

- Third, the opinions of Christian team members were often ignored or disregarded during the working sessions. Lacking the necessary skills, these team members would make inferior suggestions which could not be used. Emotionally it was not easy for a new Christian convert to see the missionary and leader of the team agree more with a Muslim than with a Christian brother or sister on matters which they would regard as specifically Christian.
- Fourth, when new Mali Christian converts became involved in the transfer team, a whole new set of problems emerged. These new Christians had been exposed to the Fulani Bible translation from Cameroon and were emotionally and spiritually attached to it. It was their ‘first love’, it had changed their lives and made them who they were. Consequently, they wanted every other translation to be like the Bible from Cameroon. Bible translators usually meet this set of problems when they revise a translation. People are often so attached to the wording itself that they want to keep it even when they can see clearly that this language is outdated.<sup>11</sup> In a revision situation these problems have to be considered seriously. In our situation, however, which was a new project, the needs of the Muslim audience had to be taken more seriously than the ‘revision problems’ which our translation represented for these few existing Christians.

To find a solution to these problems, we had to re-organise the work again. Due to the limited contribution which they were able to make in the transfer team, the Mali Christians were taken out of this team and instead made consultants in the testing team. Together with a missionary, they would read through the texts prepared by the transfer team and their feedback could be very important. The positive consequence of this method of working was that these new Christians could contribute to the translation without creating or being involved in tensions in the transfer team. The negative consequence was that they felt that they had too little influence, authority and, consequently, responsibility for the work. The Mali Fulani New Testament published in 2006 had difficulties in becoming their own. They tended to cling to the Bible from Cameroon. This might not have happened

---

<sup>11</sup> This set of problems occurred in abundance when the Norwegian Bible Society published a revision of the Bible in Norwegian in 1978 and is described by Finn-Erik Vinje in his article ‘Skal Gud tale dagens eller gårsdagens språk?’ (In English: ‘Is God speaking today’s or yesterday’s language?’) in: Ole Chr. Kvarme (red.): *Norsk bibelspråk*, Oslo: Bibelselskapet 1992, 10-21.

if they had been able to be better included in the translation process from the very beginning.

## Conclusion

Based on general guidelines for Bible translation and my own specific experience in the Mali Fulani NT translation work I wish to draw the following conclusions:

*Firstly*, the members of translation teams should ideally have certain fundamental skills, such as linguistic training and verbal facility, cultural insight, knowledge of the subject matter, and ability to work with others. Additionally, in the case of a church Bible translation it is desirable that the decision making members of the teams are Christians, but Christian faith alone is not a sufficient condition for being a co-worker. Also members with another faith affiliation, who are loyal to the objectives of the translation, may be engaged.

*Secondly*, in the case of translation for a predominantly Muslim audience it is important that team members have insight both into Christian and Muslim theology. An informed Muslim member of the translation team will be able to raise some of the questions or objections which are likely to be raised also by members of the target group. This makes it possible to engage in the Christian-Muslim encounter already in the translation process itself, not waiting for the completion of the translation to start this dialogue. In the case of the church Bible translation into Mali Fulani – to be used in a society which is 99% Muslim – it was therefore desirable to include Mali Muslims in the translation teams. Because of their religious knowledge and affiliation, and their cultural insights, they helped the teams to find relevant vocabulary and expressions. Thereby the translation team were made aware of possible limitations or problems in translation in the very act of choosing the best way possible of rendering especially the theologically relevant terms and expressions. On the other hand the Mali Muslim contribution enabled the target group better to read intelligibly and understand the translation. In this regard Bah made a significant contribution in our project.

*Thirdly*, if there are Muslim members in the translation teams it is very important to treat them with respect and to give them freedom to maintain

their Muslim faith and to practise their spirituality within the translation framework. The process of translating the Bible may facilitate interreligious dialogue and should not take advantage of the loyalty of members of other faiths and make the process itself an act of propagating Christian faith. Christian influence should therefore not go beyond the witness which the Bible itself and the lived life of Christian translators represent.

*Fourthly*, the involvement of both native Muslims and of native Christians who have converted from Muslim faith is desirable in church Bible translation projects which are aimed at predominantly former or present Muslim believers. An early involvement of native Christians is desirable if one is to safeguard a favourable reception among the Christian readership. Involvement of native Muslims in the testing teams is desirable in order to secure a text which can be read intelligibly and understood well by the potential Muslim readers of the finalised version.