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# BOOK REVIEW

## *Bibles in Africa through European eyes*

Nyirenda, M. (Bukuru, Hippo Books, 2023) pp. 176,  
ISBN: 978 1839732522

As per its title, the book focuses on vernacular Bibles in Africa through European eyes, and explores case studies in 19<sup>th</sup>-century translation. The book is well-placed and contributes significantly to the history of Bible translation, with a specific focus on the historical background of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

As alluded to, the book focuses on Biblical translation, with a central point being Africa. With this book, the author delves deeper into the historical background and explores the influences of missionaries who started Bible translation in Africa. The book has four sections. First, it examines translations from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The book starts by focusing on the theories used by Bible translators from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present. The book first focuses on the history of Bible translation. The author explores some of the early challenges in Bible translation:

The dominance of European thought and practices in the Modern Missionary Movement thrived because of the imperial expansionism of European nations of which it eventually became an integral part (Nyirenda 2023:8).

The missionaries perceived that the indigenous people of the southern hemisphere do not have a culture, which meant that the missionaries saw their roles as bringing not only the gospel, but also



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culture and civilisation in sub-Saharan Africa. Bible translation has always been at the core of mission because it encompasses civilisation. However, the author raises some problems of Bible translation:

The dominance of European thought and practices in the Modern Missionary Movement thrived because of the imperial expansionism of European nations of which it eventually became an integral part (Nyirenda 2023:8).

For the missionaries it was so critical that the indigenous people read the Bible because they believed that it led to securing salvation and civilisation. Civilisation, in this instance, meant Western civilisation because, as far as the missionaries were concerned, the natives were not civilised. Therefore, Part I of the book gives an overview of what informed the minds of the missionaries as they worked among the natives, observing some of their cultural practices that were considered uncivilised. This emphasises how the missionaries viewed themselves and their culture as superior to that of the indigenous communities. This first part of the book speaks to the fact that at the core of Bible translations are people who felt compelled not only to evangelise but also to educate and civilise the natives. Nyirenda (2023:46-47) elucidates

... the Modern Missionary Movement was intent on using cultural, economic and military superiority to implement its agenda for Africa. This agenda was generally aimed at no less than a complete overhaul of African societies.

Part II of this book focuses on the Efik New Testament Bible translation. It explores the historical forces behind the Old Calabar Mission. This section of the book highlights the complexities missionaries went through as they worked among the indigenous communities, especially how they comprehended their culture, which they felt needed some reform. The slave trade at the time was a lucrative business, due to the trans-Atlantic traffic in slavery. This led to Africans themselves being involved in slavery where weaker families sold themselves to stronger families for protection. During this period, there was also an interest in English and mathematics as symbols of civilisation because civilisation was equal to Western civilisation. With the developments in the slave trade, an establishment in Sierra Leone became a type of freed African slaves. Despite the positives that the missionaries contributed to the indigenous people, they viewed themselves as superior:

Consequently, they looked down on Africans with contempt, and when they had Africans in their power, denied them the equal rights of humanity (Nyirenda 2023:39).

In Part II of this book, the author gives practical examples of how Bible translation evolved, by focusing on this period, especially the missionaries' superiority complex:

Given the superior status of the missionaries enjoyed among Africans, it was not long before they began to assume the role of master and judge (Nyirenda, 2023:52).

According to the author, it appears that socio-political circumstances at the time influenced the translation process.

Part III of the book focuses on the Chichewa Bible translation project, which started nearly at the same time as the Efik New Testament project, focusing on the Livingstone and Blantyre missions. The author does not go straight to the process of these translation projects; instead, he gives a detailed history of what informed and led to these projects. This part of the book focuses on the Livingstone and Blantyre missions and the intricacies of missionaries living side by side with the natives. This section further explores language and translation and notes that, among other issues with earlier Bible translation, "[m]issionaries were the sole architects of the education that took place in Central Africa" (Nyirenda 2023:111). Nyirenda (2023:57) rightfully mentions that

[t]he consent of the Africans who were supposed to be undergoing this transformation was largely irrelevant and not sought for.

As much as the missionaries had the best interest of producing the Bible in the language the indigenous communities would be able to understand, their world views and culture were not considered. Instead, the European culture reigned supreme.

Part IV of the book explores how far Bible translation has gone and the challenges it still faces in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The book offers suggestions or contributions advocating for the "epistemological tools found in each society and culture, for harvesting what resonates with source language realities and cultures" (Nyirenda 2023:158).

Of interest about this book is that it is not necessarily written with a particular audience in mind. Instead, it is a book for all. The author explores the intricacies of Bible translation and gently takes his readers behind the scenes of the world of Bible translation and how the discipline emerged. The book contributes immensely to the field and in-depth study of how the indigenous Bibles were translated and highlights the European biases experienced by those translations. The author does not shy away from highlighting the weaknesses of Bible translators and identifies the gaps in their translation process.