BIBLE TRANSLATION: NOT ALWAYS POSITIVE?

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Category: Observations

I was challenged by this quote from Emma Wild-Wood in her chapter in Advancing Models of Mission (a book that you should consider reading):

> *The evangelical insistence on translation into the â€œheart languages,â€ or vernacular tongues, of people encouraged literacy and access to a wider cosmopolitan community with brothers and sisters across the world. Evangelicalism in East Africa was no longer majority English-speaking. This meant that Bible translation also became a vehicle for identity-formation into nations and ethnicities, an approach which often dimmed the transnational vision. Christian rulers of different ethnic groups insisted on the Bible in their own language as they jostled for equal recognition in the colonial sphere. Translation was as likely to inculcate pride in a particular language and ethnic group as it was to create transnational sensibilities. For many readers of the Bible in their own language, ethnic pride and transnationalism were intermingledâ€"something evangelicals would later criticize.*

That having a Bible in your own language could become a source of ethnic pride and could serve as a basis for division rather than unity should not surprise anyone who has studied human societies (or who has an evangelical understanding of human nature). This does not invalidate the case for Bible translation, but it does imply that we need to think about it in a much more nuanced way than we sometimes do. Those who have a responsibility to promote, raise funds and advocate for Bible translation need to consider the complexities of the issue and not imply that translation is always good and only has positive impacts. Like any missionary (or indeed, human) activity, Bible translation is complex and can have unintended consequences. We must always present a rounded picture.

For more on this theme, I'd point you to my comments inspired by reading God in the Rainforest.