TRANSLATION WORKSHOP WEEK 3

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Category: Madagascar

Well, the weather seems to be warming up somewhat - we are no longer huddled in jumpers and jackets in the mornings. On Saturday we had the opportunity to enjoy the sunshine and go walking in the hills about 20 miles south of Antsirabe. It was really good to get out of town and to get some exercise after spending so much time in the classroom. We walked up a hillside to see some huge rocks, the biggest of which is known as the 'red-headed rock', from where we had great views of the hills around. We stopped for a picnic before scrambling back down, crossing over the road and walking up the other side of the valley to visit a spectacular waterfall. This involved crossing over a river on a rather shaky 'bridge' of two thin tree trunks. It was about 7 feet above the water and I was the only one who didn't have the courage to edge my way across! The guide took pity on me and gave me a piggy-back through the water - we didn't realise it was only knee-deep! We walked up through terraces of rice fields, interspersed with fields of beans, potatoes and manioc, seeing ducks and cows along the way.

Meanwhile the workshop is going well, and we've been looking at issues like how to translate figures of speech and have discovered some interesting expressions in the different Malagasy languages. An amusing one is: Olombelona tsy akoho! (literally: Human beings are not chickens!) I wonder if anyone can guess what that means?! We have spent a lot of time teaching the meaning of key terms in the Bible like 'priest', 'prophet' etc and discussing how to translate them. All of the languages represented do have a term for a priest who makes sacrifices, but usually this is to God AND invoking the ancestors, so we have to decide if we can use the same term and maybe add a qualification like 'of the Jews', or whether it's not wise to use it because of the connotations. We have a similar problem with the various terms for spirits too - which term to use for 'evil spirit' for example when a culture's view of the spirit world does not totally overlap with the biblical view? Each culture has its own way of describing spiritual reality, yet our standard is the biblical view, but there is much the Bible doesn't tell us about the spirit world. To use a foreign word would not be ideal, and could communicate that the Bible has nothing to say about the spirits that trouble people here. Challenging decisions, but fascinating work!!

Many of the language groups here have animals which are taboo for them.

For example, I worked with translators from the Bara language group and for them goats are taboo, so they do not eat goat, and they have negative connotations. This was actually quite convenient for Bible translation, in passages like Jesus talking about separating sheep from goats! However there is a group here for whom sheep are taboo and this is a big problem. We are not working on this language yet, but we will need to think hard about how we deal with this problem. When translating the parable of the lost sheep we could possibly substitute a different animal here - such as an ox, which is seen as precious here. But it is historical fact that the Israelites sacrificed a lamb at Passover, therefore in translating 'Lamb of God' - Jesus, the supreme sacrifice - this connection cannot be ignored. Here it wouldn't be possible to substitute a different animal, even though in the culture sheep have negative connotations. I'm not sure what the solution could be.....

Today I was helping one of the teams with an orthography problem - looking at how to write sounds in their language which the official Malagasy language does not have and therefore there is no agreed standard for writing them. We have made suggestions about how certain words can be written, so when the team goes back home they can see how people get on reading and writing that way.

Well, it's probably time to stop writing and see if I can connect to the Internet to send this. I'm really enjoying the work here, but I'm now counting the days until I go back home!

Sue