

Khup Za Go

A CRITICAL HISTORICAL STUDY OF
BIBLE TRANSLATIONS AMONG THE ZO PEOPLE
IN NORTH EAST INDIA



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Preface

FREDERICK S. DOWNS

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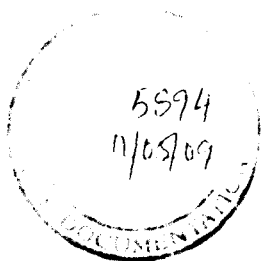
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Statement of the Problem

North East India refers to the area covered by the so-called "Seven Sisters", that is, the states of Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh. The people known as Zos are found in all of these states except Arunachal Pradesh. (See Appendix-A).

Historically, western and Indian anthropologists used to speak of the Zo peoples by composite names such as Kuki-Chin-Lushai. Now their own word "Zo" is used to refer to this widely scattered people who live in Burma, Bangladesh and six states of India. In India the largest number are found in Mizoram, Manipur and Assam. Though a single tribe they have been divided into more than two dozen dialectic groups. We will demonstrate how various factors - migratory habits, distribution over mountainous areas in which communications were difficult, division of the territory inhabited by them into different administrative districts and even countries by the British, and a number of different Christian missions working among them - in their history have created a situation in which the dialectic identity

has become more important than the tribal or Zo identity for the groups concerned. We will then show how Bible translation relates to these developments.

It was in the year 1894 that the first missionaries, J.H.Lorrain and F.W.Savidge, arrived in Aizawl, today the capital of the state of Mizoram. They were the first missionaries to work among the Zo people in the North East. They were also the first to reduce a Zo dialect to written form - the Lusei dialect. In this written form of the Lusei dialect they translated the first portions of the Christian scripture into a Zo dialect - the gospels of Luke and John, and the book of Acts. From that beginning the translation of the Bible into Zo dialects has continued until the present.

Because the Zos did not have a written language, these scriptures were the first literature in any Zo dialect. Thus Bible translation occupies a unique position and to it is attached great importance. It has become a symbol of dialectical identity. Each group, no matter how small, wanted to have the Bible translated in its own dialect. This thesis explores how the Bible which ought to be a symbol of life, love and unity has become an agent of disunity among the Zo people. So far as the writer knows, there has never been a serious study of this problem before. He has taken it up with that hope that it will bring better understanding of the complexities of the situation for the benefit of church and society among the Zo people.

B. Scope

This study covers a period of one hundred years, that is from 1894 till 1994. It begins with the year in which the translation of the Bible into a Zo dialect was first undertaken and ends with the present time when new translations are still being done in Zo dialects. During this period the Zo people have experienced the political division of their habitat into three nations - India, Burma and Bangladesh. This has left even single dialectical groups divided. This study deals only with the Zos living in India - though occasional reference is made to those in neighbouring countries because the closely related dialectic groups cannot always be easily separated by political boundaries not of their making.

C. Sources

Extensive research has been done in the records of the central office of the Bible Society of India in Bangalore, as well as in the Bible Society of India Translation Centre in Shillong. Language files and records of correspondence between representatives of the various dialect groups and the Translations Department of the Bible Society have been carefully analysed. Extracts of the minutes of the Translations Committee of the British and Foreign Bible Society related to the Zo dialects dating from 1902 through 1965 were obtained from London by special arrangement, and these records have contributed valuable information. In addition the writer has interviews with persons currently involved in the translation of the Bible into Zo dialects, as well as with persons previously associated with such translation work.

Other sources include those which deal with the social, political and ecclesiastical history of the Zo people, including the history of various missions and denominations that have worked among the Zos in North East India. Materials like "Baptists in Babel" by George Gillespie of the American Baptist Mission, "A Report on Bible Translation in the North East" by G.E. Marrison of the Bible Society of India and Ceylon, articles related to North East India Bible translations published in *The Bible Translator* and the *World Translations Progress Reports* released by the United Bible Societies have been among the sources that have been particularly useful.

D. Structure

The thesis is divided into five chapters. The introductory chapter deals with the problem, scope and sources of study. The second chapter deals with the pre-modern history of the Zo people prior to their entry into the Chin Hills of Burma. The first section demonstrates that despite their subsequent dispersal and emphasis upon dialectic/clan identity, the Zos constitute a single tribe. The second section traces the waves of migration from China and southeast Asia which resulted in the dispersal of the people and the development of their dialects. Their dispersal from the plains of Burma into the hills also resulted in a deterioration in their level of civilization. This was due to their separation and the extremely rugged terrain in which they now had to live.

The third chapter describes how the different dialect/clan groups were scattered through the hills of areas that were separately administered by the British in both Burma and India (and eventually Bangladesh). Hence mis-

sions that worked in these different administrative territories worked with Zo groups separately. These missions thus also were involved in separate Bible translation projects. This was to create a situation quite different from that in which a single mission worked with all the dialectic groups of a single tribe, e.g., the American Baptists with the Garos or the Welsh Presbyterians with the Khasi-Jaintias.

The fourth chapter surveys the Bible translation work that has been done over the period of study among some twenty different Zo dialectic groups. It shows how not only geographic dispersal but denominational division played an important role. It demonstrates the inter-relationship between dialectic and denominational identities - and conflicts - as these become apparent in Bible translation projects.

The fifth and concluding chapter analyses the correlation between the multiplication of denominations and of dialectical identities expressed through the demand for translations of the Bible into each dialectic group. This is contrasted with developments among other tribes in the North East. Though the Garos living in the hills had numerous dialectical groups, they lived in a compact geographical area and had only one mission working among them with the result that a standard language based on one of the dialects was created which became the language of scripture translation and of the educated members of the entire tribe. Bible translation in that case contributed towards the unification of the different dialectical groups. Initially a similar development had taken place among the Zo peoples living in Mizoram, when a standard written language based

on the Lusei dialect was created by the missionaries. The two missions that worked cooperatively there from the early part of the present century, the Welsh Presbyterian and the British Baptist, perpetuated this common language through scripture translation as well as the production of other literature. This situation was changed with the coming of the independent Lakher Pioneer Mission which created a new written language for the Mara people based on the Tlosai dialect. Hence Bible translation began to be based on dialectic rather than tribal identity. It is shown how this fostered an emphasis on dialectic identity.

There were similar developments in Manipur. The entry of the Indo-Burma Pioneer Mission broke the comity agreements whereby that state was assigned to one mission, the American Baptist. Denominational differences now led to the rejection of the Bible translations in Lusei, Tedim and Thadou that had already been made by the major missions. This chapter shows how the trend towards dialectic divisiveness based on denomination, clan and local issues was evident in a study of Bible translations not only in Mizoram, but in other parts of the North East where Zos live. Questions related to dialectical translations of the Bible became important factors in the disintegration of the Zo people.

While there is a correlation between Bible translation and an increasing emphasis on dialectical rather than tribal (Zo) identity, sometimes it is a symptom and sometimes a cause. Bible translation in itself has not caused the divisions in most cases. It has only been used to reinforce divisions that have taken place for other reason.