

## Words Matter...

I watched as the national bishop of the Lutheran Church in Cameroon, Rev. Dr. Jean Baïguélé, stood to deliver his first speech of the morning as the voices of the choir Femmes Pour Christ (Women for Christ) faded into the cathedral's rafters.

Rev. Baïguélé looked reverent but festive in his bright red cassock and miter. I watched him smile as he looked at the crowd of faces that had gathered to celebrate the dedication of the New Testament into their language—Mbum Pana.



*Bishop Rev. Dr. Jean Baïguélé delivering his opening remarks.*

The bishop's speech began with the customary politesse, a slew of greetings and gratitude extended to the various official dignitaries and honored guests who had made an effort to attend the event. He followed these with a brief exhortation to the attendees, not to be mistaken. Though today was a joyful celebration of people – particularly those who worked on this Bible translation - and culture – particularly the language they shaped their world through - the central purpose of this gathering was something far more significant. This was a day to honor the word of God.

Now, I don't mean to be disrespectful. God's word is important, one of the most beautiful gifts we have of seeing the heart of our Father. But "this is a day to honor the word of God" is a statement that you and I have (hopefully) heard more than half a hundred times. It's easy enough to change a couple of mental channels in our minds when a pastor, even a Bishop, gets going about the Bible. After all, even if I click on the "plans for my Sunday dinner" channel, I've never clicked back and been confused about what the preacher was talking about.

## ...They Hit You Right in the Paying Attention

So, I clicked on one of my favorite church channels - checking out the faces of those around me. I wondered what they were thinking, what their lives were like, and why they didn't seem to be paying close attention to the speaker. But as I looked around me, something started changing in those faces. Suddenly, they were all turning in the same direction, pulling their shoulders and bodies along. Instead of glazed-over thousand-yard stares or whispering glances to the conversation partner beside them, I saw eyes widening and focusing over o-shaped mouths.

Intrigued, I tuned back into whatever these people were hearing. Only this time, when I clicked back, I had no idea what the preacher was talking about. Figuring that my French had deserted me, I leaned over to senior LBT missionary Martin Weber and whispered, "What's the bishop saying?" Martin whispered back, "The bishop is speaking in Mbum."

Now, as an American English speaker enthusiastic about Bible translation, the bishop's language choice activates a significant academic interest in me. It recalled all my conversations in my translation and scripture engagement classes about the difference it makes when people hear their language spoken. I remember thinking it certainly made sense that people would be more engaged if you engaged them in their mother tongue. But for the first time since I accepted the call to serve in Bible translation, I didn't have to admit that this made sense because now I could see the faces.



*Two little girls, like me, not paying close attention.*



*Women standing to hear the speakers better.*

## Good Words Lead to Action

The thing about the bishop's language choice was that it did more than get people to lean forward and start paying attention. It served as the model by which all the rest of the event speakers measured themselves. Missiologists often talk about how African cultures are more communal in their decision-making. If one person of significance adopts a particular practice, it's a good bet that the rest of the community will follow suit. After Baïguélé's frankly unexpected example, almost no one gave a speech not followed by the Mbum version. And those who didn't speak in Mbum made self-deprecating jokes about how they wished they could talk in Mbum—no surprise since the Mbum speakers got all the biggest laughs and most protracted rounds of applause.

Maybe I am reading too much causation into correlation, but I think Bishop Baïguélé (through the power of the Holy Spirit) lit a fire amongst his people that day. As the dedication progressed and more Bibles were gifted to various guests, I watched interested listeners become active readers. Even I, a third-party observer of a language I didn't speak, became increasingly curious about what was inside those blue covers everyone else around me was holding in their hands. Suddenly, this holy book, so sacred it kills many sinners who read it, seemed exciting.



*The presiding pastor receives the Mbum New Testament after it was escorted into the church by a royal entourage.*



*The Mbum New Testament being read by a Mbum pastor during the dedication.*



*The Mbum New Testament in the hands of a new reader.*

## Only God's Word Leads to Change

As a Lutheran, I often walk the tightrope between enthusiasm and empty rites. Thank God, my faith isn't dependent on how enthusiastic I feel about it on any given day. Yet, repetition in worship can quickly become rote, making it easier to change the mental channel in church on Sunday.

I don't believe that a few speeches in Mbum are the silver bullet to getting Cameroonians to read their Bible. I don't think even Mbum speakers need to read the Bible in their language to have saving faith. But brother, what a wild moment when an old language becomes vital in a new and life-changing way. What a gift it is when God's ancient promises hit you fresh in the face and pull your shoulders and body along with it.

As I lay in bed that evening, I found the following thoughts rising like prayers. That the energy I felt that day would not fade but keep burning brightly. That this energy would fuel a desire to open God's word and read it. That reading this word would plant something new or strengthen something old in each reader's heart. And that one day, someone of significance would have the courage of Rev. Baïguélé at the Subula Bible dedication.

## PRAYER REQUESTS

- Pray for all the Mbum Pana speakers of Cameroon. That each would come to own, read, and inwardly digest the New Testament.
- Pray that God's word in this language would strengthen and even revitalize the mission and message of the church here in Cameroon.
- Pray for pastors everywhere to have the courage to preach and teach their people in their language, no matter its esteem or reputation.
- Pray for Erin and me as we work on French. Pray that God will give us supernatural abilities for memory and language and that we will achieve a level of French that surpasses our wildest projections.
- Pray for the Subula as they continue to work on their Bible translation and literacy project. Pray for our upcoming trip to visit the community and begin to lay the groundwork for future collaboration.

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