

Lost and Found in Translation – Two Case Studies at the Interface of Inter-Cultural Communication in the Christian Mission

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ABSTRACT

As one of the most translatable religions on the planet, Christianity is also one of the most vulnerable in terms of diversity of meaning. Such vulnerability is no better demonstrated than at the interface of cultures. Two case studies in Ghana involving the Ewe and the Kasena, both of which have been intensely investigated with respect to the influence of the Christian mission, demonstrate the extent to which receptor communities take control of the Christian message once it has been delivered and appropriate it in a multiplicity of ways into their lives. The unintended consequences of this process are numerous, profound, and sometimes devastating for the communities concerned. The theologies that emerge within such communities frequently have little resemblance to those that were brought, even though the trajectories upon which they are placed have their origins at the sending end of the transaction. The two particular case studies in question also raise questions about how research, both in process and outcome, is influenced by the ideological location of the researchers.

Introduction

Christianity is meant to be one of the most translatable of religions. The multiplicity of its forms in terms of belief, practice and language around the world, bears testimony to this. But the translatability of its message, especially at a cultural interface, makes it profoundly vulnerable. It means lack of control, change, uncertainty, creativity, misunderstanding, perplexity, disappointment, surprise, astonishment and, sometimes, tragedy.¹ Its multiplicity of interpretations

1 Jeff Peires argues, for example, that the great Xhosa cattle killing of 1856-57 was caused by a misinterpretation of the notion of the resurrection of the dead preached by the missionaries to the Xhosa. See Jeffrey B. Peires, *The Dead Will Arise – the Great Xhosa Cattle-killing Movement of 1856-57* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1989).