THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE OROMO LANGUAGE IN ETHIOPIA

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Abstract - This study investigates the role of Evangelical missionaries and churches in the development of the Oromo languagein Ethiopia. The study draws on theoretical and methodological frameworks from the field of language planning and development. The main source of data was interviews and focus group discussions conducted with church leaders at different organisational levels and other members of the church community. In addition, documents found in the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) archives were analysed. The findings indicate that a number of church activities have contributed to the maintenance and development of the language. These activities include translation and transliteration work of the Bible and other religious literature, literacy and educational programmes and the media.

Keywords - Dominant Language, Ethiopian Orthodox Church,Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, Evangelical Christianity, Language Development, Language Maintenance, Language Policy, Language Rights,, Minority Language, Oromo, Vernacular.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia has a unique history among African countries. Unlike many other African countries which had been colonized by Europeans, Ethiopia has been free from such colonization. Van Aswegen (2008:9) notes that Ethiopia is one of the two countries which have never been under foreign rule (see also Appleyard and Orwin 2008:268). Eide (2000:15) reports that in Ethiopia the rulers belonged to an indigenous group, the Amharas. A feudal monarchy ruled the country until it was overthrown by the mass revolution of 1974, when the communist military junta took over the power of the government. This military government was replaced in turnby a government led by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front in 1991 who changed the language policy of Ethiopia, according language rights to all ethnolinguistic groups.

The earlier regimes favoured a policy of a unitary state with one language (Amharic) and one religion, Orthodox Christianity. When the Evangelical missionaries arrived in the country, this situation started to change. In their effort to evangelize the Oromo and other people groups, the Evangelical missionaries made use of the vernacular languages of the country. The development of Oromo is largely the work of the Evangelical missionaries and the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY). The aim of this paper is to examine the role of the EECMY in the development of the Oromo language and to evaluate the contributionof this church to the development of this particular language. The instruments used in the collection of data for this study included interviews, focus group discussion, participatory observation and document analysis.

II. LANGUAGES OF ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia has a population of nearly 80 million and with a multitude of ethnic groups and languages(Cooper 1976:292; Van Aswegen 2008:29; Woldemariam 2007:212). The two biggest ethnolinguistic groups are the Amharas and the Oromos (see Table 1 below).

No.	Ethnic group	Number	Per cent
1	Oromo	25,488,344	34.5
2	Amhara	19,867,817	30.1
3	Somali	4,581,793	6.2
4	Tigre	4,483,776	6.1
5	Sidama	2,966,377	4.0

Table1.: Distribution of major ethnic groups of Ethiopia (adapted from Central Statistics Agency 2007 Population and Housing Census).

III. EARLIER ATTEMPTS TO DEVELOP OROMO

From the very beginning, the policy of the Evangelical missionaries was quite opposite to that of the EthiopianOrthodoxChurch in that it started using the vernaculars of the country. Before the introduction of Evangelical Christianity to the Oromo area the Oromo language was limited to informal home use. However, the translation of the religious material and the use of this material publically awakened the speech community to see that its language has a value like any other language.

The first well recognized attempt to translate the Bible into Oromo was by Johann Ludwig Krapf, a missionary who came to Ethiopia in the 1840s (Hirpo 1999:4). Diga (1999:30) reports this translation did not reach the community, however, and remained unused.

The first successful translation of the Bible in Oromo was published in 1899 (Diga 1999:31). It was the work of Onesimos, an Oromo who was enslaved in childhood, and later liberated by Swedish missionaries. He was educated at Massawa, the Ethiopian port, as well as in Sweden(Aren 1978;

Hirpo 1999). Hetranslated the Bible and other religious materials into Oromo in collaboration with Aster Ganno (an Oromo girl freed from slavery) andother liberated Oromo slaves.Much of the earlier work was done outside of the country in Emkullu, Eritrea (Bulcha 1995:41 Aren 1978: 385; Hirpo 1999:46). Besides translating the Bible and other religious material, such as liturgy books and Catechism into Oromo, these pioneer ministers collected other oral literature of the Oromo community. For instance, Aster Ganno collected various songs, riddles, fables, proverbs, and parables.

The missionaries and the church also played a vital role in developing the Oromo language by conducting different literacy campaigns and educational programmes in the vernacular languages. The pioneer missionaries opened schools as part of their evangelization activities. It was thanks to the Swedish missionaries who could not enter into the country that such schools for boys and girls were opened at the Port of Massawa in Eritrea (Hirpo 2011:1).Later, when he first went to Najjo, Wellega, Onesimos began his work by opening a school.

Another aspect of language development was the use of the media. In 1959 an ecumenical radio project was launched called Radio Voice of the Gospel (RVOG) (Wolde-Semaiat 2008:9; Launhardt 2004:132) in which the vernaculars such as Oromo were used: 70% of the airtime was devoted to social programmes such as education, health care, development, music and daily news while religious programmes were given only 30% of the time. During the communist era in Ethiopia (1975-1991), this radio programme was nationalized by the government. Later on, after so many negotiations, RVOG could resume its service in 1978 from the Seychelles over the Far East Broadcasting Association's station.

IV. CURRENT CONTRIBUTION OF THE CHURCH TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF OROMO

Since 1991 government language policy has changed from a unitary to a pluralistic system, allowingall languages the freedom to be developed.As the time is now more favourable to the development of minority languages than any other time in the history of the country, the EECMY is promoting and extending its use of Oromo and other vernaculars. Most of these activities are continuations of those previously begun, but there are also new initiatives.

The EECMY collaborates with the Bible Society of Ethiopia (BSE) which is currently responsible for the translation of the Bible into the different vernaculars of the country. Currently the BSE is engaged in the translation work of 30 languages of the country. The EECMY also has offices specifically dedicated to the work of translation of religious material. The EECMY opened a special office in 2008, working particularly on translation and literacy, under the name 'Translation and Language Development Ministry'. Translations have been and are still being made into the different dialects of Oromo. A transliteration of the original Oromo Bible into the Roman script was published recently.

The church is still working on literacy and formal education. A special office for developing literacy programmesand conducting community based literacy programmeswas opened in 2008.There is a literacy project specifically designed within the church structure for Oromo. The pilot phase of this project began in 1997 under the name Joint Functional Literacy Project (JFLP). The contents of the programme include: reading and writing, awareness building, Christian literature, health education, natural resources conservation, agricultural production and other small scale income generating activities.

The report on the pilot project claimed that more than 90,000 individuals became literate through this programme and that a total of 112,000 copies were published under different titles. Many Oromo writers were encouraged to produce written literature.The report on the main phase listed many achievements for the main phase, amongst others, that many communities had built teaching centres or organized their own home and village prayer centres for literacy work; the training (orientation) and incentive payment to literacy teachers (facilitators) had produced much fruit; and the demand for more teaching centres was increasing.

Seeing its advantages to the communities, the leaders of the communities at different levels started supporting the project. For example, the congregation buildings were used as literacy centres and the government education offices took part professionally in the campaign. The literacy campaigns the church conducted have motivated many people to continue with their formal education. It was reported, for example, that some of the literacy centres were transformed into formal schools. This literacy work of the church has had an impact on the government, which is also educating Oromo children in their mother tongue. The church still has excellent schools at different levels which are serving the community. This endeavour to enable the community to read and write has without doubt played a significant role in the development of Oromo.

As we saw in the previous section, the broadcasting media of the church had been operating in the different languages, coming from different centres under different names. The radio programme which broadcast from the Seychelles during the communist era in Ethiopia was later taken to Kenya from where it also started to broadcast in Oromo under the name Gospel Broadcasting Service (Wolde-Semaiat2008:44). From this time on, the EECMY became part of the radio ministry programme and the transfer of the programmes from Nairobi to Addis

Ababa took place in 1998. There were thirty programmes in Amharic and Oromo, focusing on social issues in which the EECMY was actively involved (Wolde-Semaiat 2008:29). Later on, they started producing an additional four half-hour programmes per week with equal shares of time between Amharic and Oromo through funding from the Norwegian Church Aid.

Currently, since 1995, this radio programme is being transmitted from the Trans World Radio (TWR) stations under the administration of the TWR office in the Republic of South Africa. According to the statistics of the Audience Relations Office, Oromo is the second most listened to language programme next to Amharic. In addition to the radio programme of the EECMY-YDCS, a television programme known as El Shaddai Television Network has also been established, in which religious programmes are being transmitted in different Ethiopian languages, especially Amharic, Oromo and Tigrinya. Programmes on this TV network are transmitted from the USA, UK, Ethiopia and the Republic of South Africa

V. CONCLUSION

Throughout the history of Africa, missionaries and churches have played a significant role in the development of indigenous languages. Although different, in certain ways, Ethiopia is no exception to this trend. The languages of Ethiopia were ignored until the Evangelical missionaries arrived in the country. They played a significant role in translating the Bible into various vernaculars, in particular, Oromo. The EECMY, which grew out of the Evangelical mission, played the most significant role in codifying and developing the language, even though it was proscribed by the government and opposed by the Orthodox Church. Since the acceptance of the equality of all indigenous languages in Ethiopia, the EECMY has continued to play a significant role in the current development and maintenance of Oromo.

The current improved contribution of the church towards the maintenance and development of the language is largely due to the greater tolerance to vernacular languages by the government of the country at present. Unlike the past regimes of Ethiopia (the feudal and the communist), where vernacular languages had been proscribed, the present government has proclaimed the equality of all languages and cultures under the Constitution.

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