Translator's Notes

While in the dawn of national and ethical emancipation, it has been recently emphasized that the act of translation demands moral and social responsibility, one aspect is often overlooked in translation theory, i.e., spiritual responsibility. The *Legends of the Atayal People on Formosa* are no ordinary stories. Dr. Otto Scheerer meticulously recorded sacred narratives in the form of legends. Legends, as the *Legends of the Atayal People on Formosa* exemplify, play an irreplaceable role in all religions and cultures, and form the moral, ethical, and spiritual fundament of peoples.

Legends are the primordial genre of reaching into the transcendent, building a bridge from the here and now to the infinite destiny of humankind, a so-called paradise (cf. *The Way of the Deceased Atayal into Paradise*, pp. 26–29).

Legends are origin myths. The perception of transcendence leads to the question of human and physical origin. Bound to the earth, humanity is a lineage of ancestors and descendants (cf. *Origin of the Ancestors of the Atayal*, pp. 72–75).

Legends are the carriers of ethos and morality. Legends intuitively realize that morality has a transcendent origin; what is allowed and what is forbidden, what is moral and what is immoral reflects the identity of a people (cf. *How It Came About That the Bird Silek Makes Decision Among the Atayal*, pp. 80–84).

Legends discern and order the cosmos and its creatures, whereby sun

and moon, land, water, and air are pieces of the observable mosaic of nature (cf. *The Legend of Those Who Went Out in Ancient Times to Separate Sun and Moon*, pp. 96–99).

Legends, nevertheless, have a deep notion of disruption. An original harmony, on account of human action, is disrupted by the power of the elements, only to be restored through sacrifice. The resulting reality accounts for the plight of the endless human struggle for survival (cf. *The Legend of the Flood*, pp. 88–91).

Filipino Christianity will not fail to recognize that the *Legends of the Atayal People on Formosa* feature a great number of similarities with the Judeo-Christian origin myth found in the first book of the Sacred Scriptures of Christians. Jewish reflection fathoms an origin of the world that reaches before any perceivable beginning, that which St. Thomas Aquinas calls God. Humankind springs from the earth. It is humankind that proliferates. Humankind, reflecting the deity, is bound to a moral code. There are taboos—not to eat from, not to appropriate, not to objectify—and yet, humankind fails, stumbles, and falters.

Genesis likewise tells of a flood as result of human trespasses, making reconciliation necessary. The first book of the First Testament narrates that the "earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence" (Gen 6:11). This necessitates purification and renewal. Yet, human life has been irrevocably compromised, Genesis once more surmises: "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life" (Gen 3:17).

Based on a letter from the Dutch missionary Nicolau Adriani in Indonesia to Otto Scheerer in 1925, Richard Scheerer raises the question concerning the possibility of "an indigenous expression of Christianity." While indeed, the similarities between the *Legends of the Atayal People on Formosa* and the Judeo-Christian origin myth are striking, one must remain cautious as not to appropriate an indigenous experience and expression of the transcendent from a Christian purview. Rightly, criticism was voiced against the notion of all indigenous believers as "anonymous Christian" coined by the late German theologian Karl Rahner. Primordial experiences are unique and genuine and thus cannot be subsumed by any culturally defined habit and beliefs. Yet, this correct contention does not satisfactorily address and explain those ostensible similarities.

The romantic philosopher Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788) has the

right intuition: "The world is the language of God. As we think in symbols, God thinks in trees or gorges, in rocks or seas, and foremost in the Hebrew and Greek letters of God's inspired prophets, who do not speak in their own, but in God's name" (Locker 2003: 124). Hamann's statement can be extended to all indigenous sacred narratives, whereby one notion takes center stage. What distinguishes sacred narratives from prophane texts is their classification as "sacred". That means the narrator and translator can and must not dissociate oneself from the mode in which the birth of the narrative is embedded. That does, however, not mean that the translator must share the same set of beliefs the text expresses. He must rather pay genuine respect to the *sui generis* of the original narrative.

The last great council of the Catholic Church, commonly referred to as Vatican II (1962–1965), recognizes in its *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation 'Dei Verbum'* that "… Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the sacred spirit in which it was written" (DV 12) in order to perceive its perceived meaning—a meaning that otherwise would elude a secular and prophane reading.

The same seems to be true for the translation of sacred texts in general. This argument should not be confused with a spiritual reading that is not faithful to the language of the text. The aforementioned council holds that, "To search out the intention of the sacred writers, attention should be given, among other things, to 'literary forms'. … For the correct understanding of what the sacred author wanted to assert, due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of feeling, speaking, and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer, and to the patterns men normally employed at that period in their everyday dealings with one another" (DV 12).

Dei Verbum argues for what is universally recognized in translation studies. S. O. Kolawole (2013: 12) summarizes: "The major purpose of linguistics in translation is to relate general properties of language to those aspects of individual speakers or writers or the language community which may be taken as determining the nature of language whether these are cognitive, perceptive, or social in nature." Adding to Kolawole, one can extend his argument to the spiritual nature of narratives and texts. The spiritual nature of narrative can be addressed in various ways. In reference to Sacred Scripture, I have introduced elsewhere the notion of "inspired imagination". Inspired imagination bridges the gap between the human mind

and the mystery of God opened during the fall of man. As giftedness of the Holy Spirit, this imagination breaks down limiting viewpoints of texts and narratives and elevates the reader onto a platform from where the mystery of God revealed in sacred scripture can be perceived and communicated. In rendering the Word of God, Spiritual Biblical Theology becomes an art of exegesis embedded in the experience of the inspired authors, and the formation of scripture (Locker 2012).

The notion of "inspired imagination", which arguably might not be readily adapted by the scientific community—and this is the main argument of this short essay—should be complemented by the notion of "spiritual responsibility". Spiritual responsibility has two aspects. The first, I have argued in another place, rests in the fact that in the words of Walter Benjamin (1923/2000: 82), "It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work. For the sake of pure language, he breaks through decayed barriers of his own language". In other words, the task of the translator is not only to translate what is said but what remains unsaid, or what Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) would describe as what cannot be spoken of (Locker 2013). This, one can argue, is the spiritual, inexpressible sense of sacred texts as integral dimension of their unique genre.

The second, even more important, aspect is the task of the translator to follow the author to the boundary of the experience of transcendence. There, the translator steps on the sacred ground of language. This ground is not only shared by correlated beliefs but the painstaking linguistic and comparative study of the source language. The resulting text is sharing in what source and receptor language share in. Loosely borrowing from Aristotle, if there is only one truth then the sacred narrative and its translation share in that very same truth—the experience of a divine origin and end. This very truth is indeed expressed in the *Legends of the Atayal People on Formosa* as well as in all creation myths, including the story of Genesis.

Arguably, most of the time translation work is dull and redundant. Moreover, the need for translators has been put into question in the light of emerging AI. Advanced computer software has, by and large, superseded sense-for-sense translation, which suggests the possibility of speaking of creativity.

Creativity, however, belongs to the realm of creation, that in the view of

the author is reserved to the sacred. Thus, the attempt to translate the *Legends of the Atayal People on Formosa* was first and foremost a journey with Otto Scheerer onto sacred ground—a ground that entails spiritual responsibility, which arguably can only be reached by humankind.

For this, I am deeply grateful.

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