

A Desire That Would Not Die:

God's Word for a People in Exile

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Melody DuBois has served in communications roles with SIL International since 1994, first in the Philippines and now from the US as global communications coordinator. A wide team of colleagues collaborated with her in telling this story of a people seeking hard after God's Word in the midst of much difficulty.

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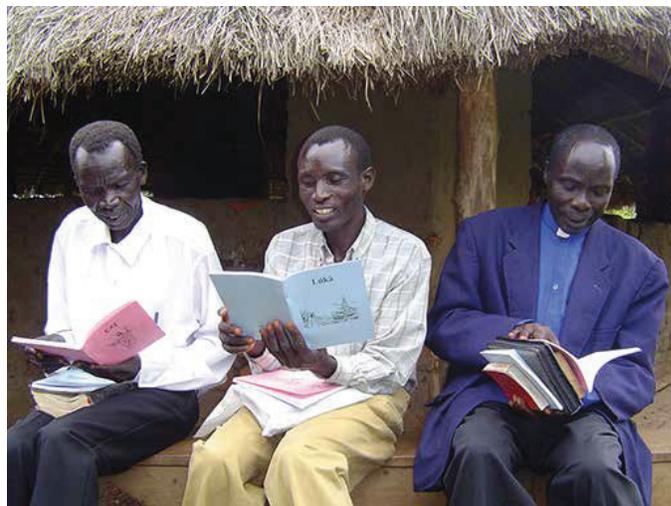
How hard would you work to have the Bible in your own language? Even if you didn't know how to start? Or if, after getting some help, the work ceased for ten years because of war? Or if the community who spoke your language ended up scattered across three different countries, and mixed in with speakers of many other languages?

This has been the experience of the Keliko people of South Sudan. In 1983 Rev. David Gale, a Keliko pastor, gathered with Christians from many language groups at a Christian conference near Juba in South Sudan. Each person was asked to sing a worship song and read the Word of God in their own language. Rev. David was unable to comply with this simple request because he found himself weeping.

At that time, although the gospel had been shared with the Keliko as early as 1915, all their worship and access to God's Word was through neighboring trade languages such as Bangala and Bari. Despite their long history with Christianity, the Keliko people had no Scriptures in their own language. Coming face to face with this reality for his people, Rev. David was overcome with sadness. He asked for prayers from the group gathered at the conference, that the Keliko would be able to translate the Bible, songs and liturgy into their own language. Opening the Bible he was using, he found Matthew 7:7 and read, "Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you." The group prayed for him, and he returned home.

After Rev. David got home, five churches of the Keliko parish met for their annual conference. They had heard that other language groups in the area were receiving translation assistance from SIL International staff located in the area, and they believed they should also have their own Bible. After two years of fundraising, they sought assistance from SIL. In 1986, research began in the language, and within a year a writing system was completed and a story, a song and a few Scripture verses published in pamphlet form. The work had begun!

But then, full-scale war broke out. Most Keliko left their home area and became refugees in Congo and Uganda. SIL staff were evacuated, and the person assigned to assist the Keliko returned to her home country. For the next 10 years, no further progress was made.



Then, in 1998, Rev. David's grandson, Bishop Seme, was studying in northern Uganda. An SIL couple visited his theological college to talk about Bible translation. Rev. Seme told them about the stalled work on the Keliko translation and asked for help. As a result, SIL specialists were assigned to help finalize the writing system and provide training in translation principles. Using the writing system, a number of Keliko learned to read and write their own language. The Keliko Bible translation project finally began making steady progress. Genesis was published in 2004, followed by a series of other Scripture portions.



In November 2016, as the Keliko translation team was involved in the final checking process of their long-awaited New Testament, the Keliko homeland was ravaged by violence. People were killed, women were raped, houses and churches were looted.

At the time of the attacks, the translation team was already working from several locations. Most of the team

members were based in Juba, the capital city of South Sudan. Bishop Seme lived approximately 150 miles away in Panyana, an important church center in the Keliko homeland. He served part-time as a translator and advisor, checking translation work over the phone and making occasional trips to Juba to meet the other translators.

But when the fighting intensified in the homeland, Bishop Seme had to flee, along with many Keliko people. Weeks later, the violence spread to Juba. The rest of the translation team fled to northern Uganda. Again, work on the Keliko New Testament translation was interrupted. But it did not stop. Despite being displaced, the team continued to work on the Keliko Scriptures.

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“Most of our life is just in war,” explained Bishop Seme. “Though the war has disturbed us and traumatized most people, we still work with them and continue to encourage them because there is no other way. We continue to promote the mother tongue though we are not in our own land.”

Throughout the life of the Keliko translation project, and despite the challenges brought by war and migration, the translation team remained motivated to see God’s message of hope available in the Keliko language. And that persistence is bearing fruit. In August 2018, the Keliko New Testament was welcomed with great joy at a celebration in northern Uganda.



This great milestone for the Keliko people also happens to be a significant milestone for SIL International, Wycliffe USA and other key partners. The Keliko New Testament marks 1,000 New Testament translations completed with involvement from these organizations. It also represents the growing number of translation programs in environments characterized by migration and multilingualism.

Migration and Multilingualism

In response to this trend, a special task force of SIL scholars, translators and language program managers are studying how migration and multilingualism, along with urbanization trends, impact communities of non-dominant language speakers. One of the key findings of the research is that language situations vary. In order to understand and more effectively address that variety, the study group has identified two questions every translation team should ask:

1. What are all the languages this community uses?
2. Where are all of the communities that use this language?

Answering these two questions has become more complicated—and more important—in recent years, as minority language communities increasingly migrate into urban centers across the globe, and as those staying in the homeland also become increasingly multilingual. The situation can vary even within a given language community; not everyone who speaks the same set of languages uses each one of them equally well or in the same ways.

The language needs and preferences of all sectors of a community must be considered to successfully communicate a crucial message. “We want to see the Scriptures available for all people in languages and media that are accessible to them,” explained Dr. Steve Quakenbush, leader of SIL’s Multilingualism, Urbanisation, and Scripture Engagement (MUSE) task force.

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The Keliko are quite familiar with the issues and challenges of a multilingual environment. They first accessed Scriptures in neighboring trade languages, Bangala and Bari. Many Keliko even consider Bangala to be a “holy language”, perhaps because the gospel first came to them in Bangala. Some Keliko churches use the Bari language for the liturgy in their services, as well as using available Keliko Scripture portions. Other Keliko people living outside their traditional homeland also speak Lugbara, Swahili or Juba Arabic. Bishop Seme himself speaks five languages, choosing which one to use depending on the particular context in which he finds himself. However, this multilingual fluency is not universal among Keliko speakers. Many whose formal education years have been disrupted by war have not had the same opportunities to learn other languages. The desire to have the Scriptures in their own language is strong.



In the recent years of forced migration, the question of where all the communities are that speak Keliko has become especially critical for the Keliko translation team.

Keliko communities are now scattered into three main areas: the bush or mountains of South Sudan, Uganda or the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). But most Keliko speakers are now in refugee camps, either in Uganda or the DRC. How are these Keliko to benefit from the Scriptures in their own language?

In the refugee camps, Keliko people often live together but they mingle with people from other language communities. Children speak Keliko with their families, but might switch to a different language when playing with children from other communities.

Wide representation from as many Keliko communities as possible is key to increasing awareness and engagement with the Keliko Scriptures. When translating and recording the JESUS film (a video dramatization depicting the life of Jesus with voice overs in minority languages) in Uganda last year, the Keliko team recruited Keliko speakers living in South Sudan, DRC and Uganda, including some living in refugee camps, as voice actors for the film.



As a result of connections with far flung communities such as those in DRC, many Keliko made plans to travel to the celebration in northern Uganda and even pledged to help with the costs. This was no small offer, especially since they no longer have access to their lands and thus their traditional agricultural livelihood.

The Keliko people were not completely without access to God’s Word before. Many of them also use other languages, and had come to faith through hearing the Good News in those other languages. There will be occasions when they still want to worship and study the Bible with others who use other languages. Yet their desire for the Bible in their own language would not die. As Bishop Seme explained, “It is only the Lord helping us. Many people died in the war, but still we are alive. It is very important to have the Scriptures.” MF