

Impact of Missionary in Tribal Language

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Abstract

The introduction of Christian missionaries to the tribal areas of Asia, Africa, and Latin America had a deep influence on local languages, cultures, and identities. Although the promotion of Christianity is the first thing that comes to the mind when thinking of the work of missionaries, their language engagement has impacted literacy, education, and cultural preservation in many ways and for a long time. This study focuses on the first point, referring to the missionaries as the main supporters of the tribal languages by the language documentation, translation, and education, and on the second point, naming them as a reason for cultural decay because of the introduction of the dominant scripts, the alteration of oral traditions and the isolation of the native practices. The mixed-methods approach was used that combines historical analysis, ethnolinguistic literature, and case studies from India, Africa, and Latin America to trace how the missionary-led activities interfaced with language systems to result in hybrid identities. Information shows that although through Bible translations, grammar compilations as well as literacy programs missionaries brought about many tribal languages' standardization, these processes were mainly linked to religious conversion that caused a break in indigenous cosmologies. This research article reflects on the influence of missionary work in 3 aspects. writing down the oral languages which were not spoken of before; the missionary schools' involvement in the formation of the linguistic hierarchy; the outcomes of the tribal communities' socio-cultural changes resulting from linguistic shifts. In the end, the study presents arguments stating that the effects of the missionaries on tribal languages should not be seen as either preservation or destruction but rather as a complicated interplay of power, culture, and identity. This paper extends an interpretive lens for considering the ways in which the encounter of language affects cultural futures by locating missionary interventions both globally and locally.

Keywords: Christianity, missionaries, oral languages, tribal languages, indigenous cosmologies

INTRODUCTION

Language is a medium that is beyond communication; it is a treasure house of culture, identity, and a different perspective on the world. Oral traditions are universally dominant in most tribal communities, and even when a certain tribe has a well-written script, language is still the most potent unifier and the most reliable character of history, faith, and social order.[1-2] In the times when Christian missionaries ventured into tribal areas during the era of colonization, they found these oral-speaking natives societies which were to be dealt with through literacy, Bible translation, and education. The creation of openings for tribal languages was one of the positives that came alongside

the challenges after the interventions of the missionaries, thereby having both kinds of legacies, which until now, influence linguistic and cultural landscapes [3, 4].

The phenomenon that provoked the encounters between the missionaries and tribal languages stems from the period of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when Jesuit, Protestant, and Catholic mission groups started to penetrate the areas beyond the colonized borders. Missionaries

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were very quick to comprehend that winning over the locals through their propaganda would greatly depend on their command of the opposites' languages. This insight made them commit so much to the study of different languages and thus, they very often became the first to write, set the rules, and codify numerous tribal tongues. In India, for example, Santali was developed into a systematic language for the first time by the missionaries such as Lars Streford and Paul Olaf Bodding, who not only worked out primers but also translated religious texts and published ethnographic works (Kujur 214) [5]. Correspondingly, in Africa, the likes of Johann Ludwig Krapf assisted the documentation of Swahili and similar tongues while in Latin America Spanish missionaries rendered Christian literature into Quechua and Nahuatl.

The outline of these endeavors seems to indicate the unquestionable support given to the local languages by the missionaries. Nevertheless, they were often linked with the larger intent of winning over souls to the mission and of gaining colonial control over the territories. By putting the oral traditions in a written form, religions had already changed the scope of the culture of the tribes, simultaneously adding elements which were alien and unfamiliar to the existing traditions [6]. The now-Christianized versions of myths, songs and rites—those that could be more popularized as the community no longer engage direct interaction—were recast within theological Christian perspectives. Even though literacy opened new channels for communication, it also pushed out those that belonged to the traditional modes of knowledge exchange which made the communities susceptible to cultural standardization [10,11].

The impact of the missionary work on tribes' languages is not plain. Which side did they fall on - that of preservation or that of destruction? The answer is not so easy. Missionary translations and the establishment of schools, for instance, made sure that many of the tribal languages did not die out and got recognition in academia and government offices. The signing of literacy with the teachings of Christianity was the main reason whereby missionaries frequently demoted the indigenous worldviews so far as they were unlikely to co-exist. This problem is what is still guiding the current disputes among linguists, anthropologists, and historians seeking to find out what happened when missions came knocking at the door of indigenous communities.

Such scholarly work is targeted at aiding in this dispute and is done through examining the missionary influence on tribal languages in the areas of linguistic documentation, educational reform, and cultural transformation. With the help of case studies from India, Africa, and Latin America, this article traces how the interaction between the missionaries and tribal languages led to the movement of the latter in both directions i.e., to preservation and erosion, quite frequently at the same time.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Between 2002 and 2012, *Zwartjes, O. (2012) [12]*, examined the current state of the art in the historiographical discipline known as "Missionary Linguistics." It was an update of Zimmermann (2004) and included distinct sections on previous missionary linguistics research, international conferences, published volumes, journals, primary source reprints and editions, exhibits, and other associated activities. There were two categories in the reference list [1]. original sources, which had around 140 entries, and [2] secondary sources, which included about 300 titles. This report stimulated researchers to make further progress in this exciting area of study and provided a number of new research subjects.

Yanger, A. (2017) [13] focused on the political and social facets of such transformation. The Bible had been translated into regional tongues, and a very effective educational program had been adopted by every mission and denomination from the start, serving as the main impetus. Societies across the Northeast had begun to awaken and rejuvenate as a result. The tribal societies experienced the biggest transformation. It sparked a national identity movement that had remained strong. This had been made possible by a stable British colonial government that served as the foundation for the new tribal political entities that formed decades later. Those developments brought new issues and

difficulties. The issue of political sovereignty had been the most important of them all. At different points in time, certain tribal communities rebelled against India's national government and waged bloody insurgency warfare. While some of the battles ended peacefully, others did not settle. The influence of Hinduism and colonisation in Northeast India, which had taken place long before Christian missions and western colonisation appeared, was another topic included in the paper. Some tribal cultures, particularly those in the Assam plains, had suffered greatly due to this Hindu religious and cultural influence, known as Sanskritization. It hindered their political ambitions, social freedom, education, and economic development. The Christian tribal communities, on the other hand, advanced significantly in each of these domains. In the area, the Sanskritic-Hindu influence was a powerful force. Given India's political situation, it rose. Christians in the Northeast, especially tribal Christians, were aware of the threats they faced and were ready for the new challenge by better comprehending the missionary work that had been done in their country.

Dasgupta, S. (2016) [14] describes how Christian missionaries in Chhotanagpur interacted with the Oraons and shows how they struggled with and reorganised their ideas of the "tribe" and the "Oraon" throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I contend that the Oraon was first identified with his pagan customs, his alleged agreement with the Devil, and his realm of demonology and worship. However, he gradually evolved into an animistic aboriginal tribe by the end of the nineteenth century, or a "primitive" in the context of evolution. A variety of classifications, including "heathen," "savage," "race," "tribe," and "Aboriginal," seemed to compete with one another in the missionaries' tales as they looked for myths, customs, and histories as well as a genuine Oraon language. In fact, colonial ethnographic literature that drew on and ultimately marginalised missionary representations mirrored the inability of missionary narratives to overcome the conflict between religion and race. The topic of whether race or religion influenced tribal identity was brought up in a lawsuit in the 1960s that Kartik Oraon brought before the Election Tribunal at Ranchi against the Protestant convert David Munzni. The matter was eventually decided by the Supreme Court [8].

By analysing the written speech of Australian Methodist missionaries during the early colonial era in New Guinea, *Schram, R. (2016) [15]* examines these understandings and behaviours. The politics of previous interactions between Melanesians and Australians shaped the colonial environment in which these missionaries worked, notwithstanding their desire to interact with heathens in an unevangelized region. The voices of indigenous speakers are mocked by missionary writers, who portray a world where missionaries and natives are unable to reach a common religious understanding. The phrase "taparoro," which is used by the indigenous to refer to the mission and its operations, is often quoted in their parodies. Missionaries use this specific indication of their own otherness as a foundation for a new mission register into which they may convert Christian concepts after presenting a reality characterised by a recurring knowledge gap. By doing this, they create a new discourse from the resources available in the intricate field of interlingualism rather than just imposing one dominating code as a metalinguistic norm.

Three interconnected language ideologies—purism, prescriptivism, and the value of literacy—have an impact on the Choctaw language teaching and learning community, according to *Kickham (2015) [16]*. Although rooted and fixed in an immediately post-contact era, essentialist/purist linguistic and ethnic ideologies that are common among members of the Choctaw Language Community Class frame modern linguistic performance, linguistic meta-discourse, and language revitalisation efforts in a way that alienates some Choctaws while also inspiring language learners. Members of the Choctaw community class strategically use two opposing discourses—prescriptivism and pluralism—to validate their position as speakers and to oppose discourses and hidden practices that favour one dialect over another. Community classes are further impacted by ideologies of purism, correctness, and the value of literacy as well as expert linguistic knowledge. These ideologies a) diminish class effectiveness by emphasising literacy and grammatical analysis, and b) foster an environment of

ethno-linguistic risk that hinders speaker performance. The potential harmful consequences of purist and prescriptivist ideologies may be lessened by teachers' ideological understanding, which may also allow for their strategic use in inspiring students.

Choksi, N. (2017) [17] examines how the Santals, an Austro-Asiatic speaking Adivasi (Scheduled Tribe) community dispersed throughout eastern India, have made language and script a site for an ongoing politics of authority due to assemblages of technologies, political institutions, and exchange practices. It focusses especially on the creation of print objects in the Santali language, which, like its equivalents in the main languages like Bengali, has its origins in Christian missions during the colonial period. The usage of many graphic registers, such as a Roman alphabet developed from missionaries, Indic scripts like Devanagari and Eastern Brahmi, and an independently formed script called Ol-Chiki, has distinguished Santali-language media from hegemonic languages. The paper connects claims of autonomy in colonial and early post-colonial India with the history of Santali print and graphic activity. In the eastern Indian state of West Bengal, it then ethnographically documents how print technologies and graphic practices—specifically, the use of multiple scripts—mediate a modern politics of authority along vectors like class and generation within communities that read and speak Santali.

The ways the Bible translation has improved Xitsonga cultural identity are examined by *Maluleke, M. J. (2017) [18]*. The Xitsonga Bible's 1929 and 1989 versions are the main subjects of discussion. What aspect of Vatsonga cultural identity was recreated, rearranged, and reshaped by the Xitsonga Bible translations? That is the study issue. Baker's Narrative Frame Theory, Descriptive Translation Studies, and Nord's functionalist approach to translation studies serve as the research's theoretical and methodological foundations. A thorough analysis of the sociocultural context of the Xitsonga Bible translations will follow from the theoretical underpinnings of the idea of identity and the connection between language and translation and identity. The social, cultural, and linguistic aspects of Vatsonga identity are discussed, with a focus on their identity before the missionaries arrived. From the first interactions with the Portuguese to the crucial entrance of the Swiss missionaries in the late 19th century and their first attempts to translate the Bible into Xitsonga, the historical background of the Xitsonga Bible translations is explained. The insights that extensive archive resources may provide about the ideological, theological, and historical context of the Xitsonga Bible translations are also investigated. Using the analytical techniques of Descriptive Translation Studies and Frame Theory, the 1929 and 1989 Xitsonga Bible translations are both thoroughly examined and analysed. The organisational frame, which comprises the translation process, the translation teams, the translation's status, and the social pressures that go along with it, are among the frames that have been studied. We'll also look at the linguistic and translation frameworks, which include explicitation, loan word use, translation tactics, and the creation of new terms. The main conclusions clarify how the two translations of the Bible into Xitsonga improved cultural identity. In addition to laying the groundwork for servile colonial religion inside Vatsonga culture, the first Xitsonga Bible translation (1929) contributed to the legitimisation and empowerment of colonialism. Although French, the language of the Swiss missionaries, was not used in the translation, it did make significant use of borrowing terms from adjacent African languages, particularly Sesotho, as well as from the colonial languages spoken in South Africa (English and Afrikaans). By increasing the variety of objects that might be described in the language, the translation improved Xitsonga's vocabulary inventory. The missionaries' colonial Christianity was promoted by avoiding certain indigenous terms that alluded to customary religious rituals and practitioners. Most significantly, the 1929 edition brought the many Vatsonga subgroups together behind a unified Bible translation. As a result, by uniting its readers behind a single translation, the 1929 translation helped to create identity. The 1989 translation of the Xitsonga Bible, in contrast to the 1929 translation, used not only native Xitsonga cultural terms but also natural Xitsonga equivalents and Xitsonga first-language speakers as translators, strengthening the Xitsonga people's cultural identity. Because of Eugene Nida's direct influence, the 1989 edition also deviates from the 1929 version in its use of the Dynamic Equivalence method. By harmonising dialectal variations and standardising and streamlining the orthographic method for writing Xitsonga,

Xitsonga as a language was strengthened and brought together, further solidifying cultural identity.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- Examine how missionaries contributed to the documentation and standardization of tribal languages through translations, grammars, and literacy materials.
- Investigate the extent to which missionary education altered linguistic hierarchies and influenced tribal worldviews.
- Assess the socio-economic and cultural consequences of language shifts resulting from missionary interventions.
- Compare case studies from India, Africa, and Latin America to identify both commonalities and region-specific impacts.
- Analyze whether missionary influence can be understood as a binary of preservation versus assimilation or as a complex process involving both.

Research Questions

- In what ways did missionaries contribute to the preservation of tribal languages through documentation and translation?
- How did missionary-run educational institutions shape the linguistic practices of tribal communities?
- To what extent did missionary linguistic activities displace indigenous oral traditions and cultural identities?
- What were the socio-economic implications of missionary language policies for tribal livelihoods and social organization?
- How do the experiences of tribal groups in India, Africa, and Latin America compare in terms of missionary impact on their languages?
- Can missionary influence be classified as primarily preservative or assimilative, or does it represent a continuum of complex interactions?

METHODOLOGY

This study applies a qualitative, mixed-methods research design, which involves the integration of historical analysis, ethnolinguistic study, and case-based comparison. The explanation of this design lies in the investigation of the maintenance and decline of languages, which are challenging to capture solely by numbers. To do this, the work uses a combination of direct and indirect sources to piece together an intricate portrayal of missionary impact.

Research Philosophy

This study utilizes a constructivist model that highlights the idea of knowledge being re-examined and confirmed through interaction between individuals and different societies and cultures. As tribal languages cover different ways of thinking about the world, the influence of missionaries on these languages is to be figured out by acquainting how the change in language is combined with the change of culture and society. To delve deeper into the relationships between mission agents, colonizers, and indigenous communities, we are also applying the postcolonial approach to examine the authority factors.

Research Design

The study is majorly comparative and is about the cultures of three different regions—India, Africa, and Latin America. To explain the differences and similarities of the three regions lifestyle, the paper uses the Santals of India, the Kikuyu and Swahili-speaking peoples of East Africa, and the Quechua and Nahuatl-speaking groups in Latin America as separate cases. These examples were selected because of their well-documented histories and the abundance of linguistic records made by missionaries.

Data Collection

Primary data comes from missionary publications which entail Bible translations, grammars,

dictionaries, and ethnographic notes. A good example is the research work of Paul Olaf Bodding on Santali, Johann Ludwig Krapf on Swahili and Spanish missionaries on Quechua which have opened a window for us to know more. Besides, letters, mission reports, and educational resources are all there as archives to make the study more diverse. The secondary sources comprise peer-reviewed articles, books, and modern studies of the ethnolinguistic community.

Analytical Framework

The analysis conducted in this study relied on a thematic analysis based on three parameters; linguistic documentation, educational influence, and cultural impacts. The linguistic documentation section analysed and assessed missionaries' contributions to preserving and standardising the tribal language in their documentation and translation of the language and development of dictionaries, grammars, written documentation. In the education influence section, the researchers examined how mission schools disrupted previous linguistic hierarchies by directly shifting to colonial or dominant language to educate missionaries, separating colonial or dominant language from the indigenous tongues, often making linkages with literacy and Christian teaching. The cultural impacts, part three of the analysis, were examined as the linguistic and educational structures affected tribes' identities, redefined oral knowledge traditions, and resulted in changes to economic and social structures within the communities. The comparative analysis would assist in developing a full understanding of the data, explaining similarities across regions, such as, strategies related to translation and schooling methods, as well as those elements which reflected the specific historical and cultural context of the distinct geographic regions of India, Africa, and Latin America.

Ethical Considerations

Historically, the ethical issues for the study would be those that are related to representation. The communities of tribes are taken with utmost care not to be represented as agents without a voice but rather as those who have dealt with, opposed, or adapted the influence of the missionaries. The research, by prominently featuring the native views found in the oral histories and the scholarly accounts, manages to sidestep the bias of the colonizers.

Limitations

The dependence on historical records is such that the viewpoints of the missionaries are at times given too much weight. The study has balanced this by incorporating the views of the present-day anthropologists and linguists who re-examine the missionary documents with their critical perspectives. Another limitation is about how far the findings can be applied: the sample chosen from the case studies could be only representative of the tribal communities they have been, in fact, are diverse.

DISCUSSION

Christian missionaries have been a major force in the transformation of tribal language and culture and their influence in this domain is still a topic of debate. Their impact is not purely one of preservation or of assimilation, but rather it demonstrates a coexistence and interaction between the foreign religious representatives and local communities. Based on the literature and historical instances from India, Africa, and Latin America, this paper identifies three main aspects of the missionary work: linguistic documentation, educational restructuring, and socio-cultural transformation. Moreover, it points out the ways in which missionaries' power led to the development of tribal languages and cultures as well as to their change.

One of the major missionary achievements was the formulation of the written idioms of tribal dialects that were previously purely oral. Their activities in extracting grammar rules, composing dictionaries, and rendering the Holy Scriptures into local dialects allowed native communities to gain access to literacy and have a tool for the conservation of their linguistic heritage. For example, in India, missionaries such as Paul Olaf Bodding and Lars Skrefsrud made the Santali language widespread and textual resources that are still used today were created by them. In East Africa, what

Johann Ludwig Krapf did for Swahili was the cornerstone for all the ensuing language developments in the area. So, these situations illustrate the extent to which the involvement of missionaries was pivotal to the survival of certain tribal languages and the restructuring of them into the written form and the transmission of these through the medium of print.

On the other side of the coin, the safeguarding of native languages via missionaries' affiliation with them was almost always carried out from a cultural standpoint. Bible translation was exalted among the tribal languages whilst simultaneously fusing the latter with Christianity and its respective dogmas. According to Lamin Sanneh [9], Bible translation was a glamorization of indigenous languages but their conversion to Christianity, nevertheless. It paved the way for incorporating Christianity's cosmogony into the already multifaceted world of the local idioms. Hence, oral traditions, which had been the historical bearers of religion, cultural ideals, and social customs, were being altered gradually, being replaced by the ones derived from the Bible. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o [7] together with other postcolonial scholars have stated that the appropriation of oral traditions was a form of subtle, yet greatly effective, cultural domination whereby indigenous epistemologies were barely able to continue coexisting because of their forced status as inferior knowledge systems.

Missionary-led educational institutions were also significant actors in this transition. These schools brought the practice of reading and writing to the forefront and did it within a certain context that mainly represented Western knowledge and ways of understanding things. In many cases, indigenous languages were taught at the elementary stage to make religious lessons easier, but gradually colonial languages like English, Spanish, or Portuguese would replace or complement them. In India, one could witness the gradual transition of English from the medium of instruction of higher education in the country and thus a language hierarchy was created where tribal languages were regarded as small and limited to local use. This model of bilingualism, which is present in both the African and Latin American situations, was a precondition for the existence of different knowledge systems and a factor that normalized the idea that mastering the colonial languages was the key to social mobility.

The modification of linguistic hierarchies implied a major change in the relationships that tribal communities had with their languages. Literacy and formal education, on the one hand, made new economic and administrative participation possibilities available, on the other hand, they also abolished the cultural authority of oral traditions. Walter Ong's thesis that literacy doesn't merely change communication, but also the very way of thinking is very much applicable here. The advent of written texts coincided with a waning of traditional storytelling, ritual speech, and communal memory practices. This was a change not only in language but also in the ways in which knowledge was preserved, shared, and authorised.

Regardless of these structural modifications, tribal communities were not merely passive recipients of missionary influence. In most cases, they contextualized the Christian teachings in local settings, picking out the items that match the existing belief systems. The people of Mizo in India, for instance, utilized both the Roman script and the doctrine of Christianity, still, they retained their own cultural expressions which were an amalgamation of Christian and tribal symbols. On the other hand, in Latin America, Quechua and Nahuatl speakers were often able to maintain both belief systems, that is, they not only embraced Christianity but also did not entirely let go of indigenous spirituality. The studies of Jean and John Comaroff [2] in Africa reveal that the local communities were not only altering missionary influence in a clever way but also hybridizing language and religion so that they are not easily categorizable.

The instances given above disclose the insufficiency of understanding missionary impact only in terms of binary oppositions, preservation and erosion. Rather, the facts from history suggest that the continuum is complex and a tribal agency is of crucial importance. It is true that, in some places, the work done by missionaries in linguistics turned out to be the means by which a cultural revival came about later on. However, in other areas, this led to very significant changes in language use and social

organization. The example of the Santali community highly demonstrates this double-sidedness: on the one hand, the translations of missionaries played a vital role in the language's preservation, on the other hand, they simultaneously injected it with new religious theological frameworks. Nevertheless, the written materials are currently being used by Santali authors to create secular literature, to raise language rights, and also to establish the cultural identity.

A comparative analysis of the three regions discloses commonalities as well as differences in their development. Missionary linguistics in India had immense contributions to the characteristics of scripts such as Ol Chiki, and the promotion of the study of tribal languages. While in East Africa the promotion of the Swahili language by the mission established an easy understanding among the local people, on the other hand, the smaller un-supported languages were left in the dark unnoticed and unheard. In Latin America, the religious integration of indigenous languages helped secure them from dying out, but at the same time, the cultural reinterpretation that came with it often lowered the prominence of native cosmologies.

In all three areas, the involvement of missionaries has had a profound impact, both positive and negative on the linguistic and educational systems. Still, depending on how the local populations reacted, what policies the colonial powers implemented, and the degree of missionary engagement, the kinds and magnitudes of effects varied. Such a difference points to the great significance of not viewing missionary impact as a single, absolute force but as a fluid and context-dependent phenomenon that is determined by historical, political, and cultural factors.

Hence it is more reflective of the reality to talk about the missionary impact as a discussion rather than an imposition. No two communities behaved similarly when it came to tribal resistance and adaptation and consequently, their acceptance would differ in the case of missionaries' scripts. Even though the missionaries came up with new scripts and educational structures and also brought through religious texts, local people would always put their own spin or completely reinterpret them. The combined characters that surfaced due to these interactions are indicative of the complex relations of the preservation, change, and agency.

To sum up, the influence of the church on tribal languages is an uncertain one. Documentation of languages was just one of the many things mission works was simultaneously causing alongside disruption, empowerment, and control. Its impact can be seen in both the cultural changes that phenomenally affected and redefined how tribal peoples understood themselves and their world, and the written records still used to facilitate linguistic research. Present-day endeavours towards endangered languages' conservation have as much to learn from the history of missionary contacts as this very history is a source of insight. The latter is a reminder that efforts for the survival of language should be mindful of the cultural milieu and community agency, be non-imposition and instead be supportive of indigenous peoples' struggle for their own linguistic heritage on their own terms.

CONCLUSION

The narrative around missionaries and tribal languages is full of contradictions. They documented languages in written form, thereby preserving a language, but changing its functionality and context in tribal societies. They created literacy and education but invariably tied it all to Christianization and Western epistemologies. They disrupted oral traditions, but also unintentionally legitimized local languages in colonial and post-colonial means and enabled tribal people to act. This study highlights that missionary influences cannot easily be captured through binary notions of preservation/destroy. Instead, it can be viewed as a spectrum based on negotiation, adaptation, and contestation. There are similarities in missionary approaches across case studies in India, Africa, and Latin America, but their local contexts shaped the impacts of missions on indigenous communities and tribal languages, in distinct ways. Future researchers need to unpack indigenous voices and experiences around colonies based on missions as passive but also recognize that tribal communities are one of the active participants in these encounters. The implications for understanding missionary impacts on language

also matter today as many tribal languages around the world remain endangered. The past teaches us that language preservation must be community-embedded, culturally appropriate and free from hegemonic agendas.

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