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Language Between the Fault Lines

Most of my readings are originally in Tigrigna, English and Amharic. I read translated works of English and translations of translations. I feel some cultural spirits and values are lost in translation.

I write primarily in Tigrigna. Tigrigna is spoken in my country Eritrea and the neighboring Ethiopia. As language is integrated with culture, some words become the extraction of cultural experiences. Knowing different languages can help to create new expressions and ideas in your language of mastery. In some cases, the grammar of one language can change the idea in the writer's mind and can give new perspective. When we are thinking, we are influenced by the cultural context of the language that we are using to imagine.

In this process, there are some words that cannot be translated completely or partially into other languages. To have full understanding of a word, we need to know the culture and its values. Every language causes us to think differently. For example, if I said "mewets" in Tigrigna, the closest translation to English is "toothbrush." In this case, *toothbrush* can only express the purpose; it cannot evoke the image of the object which is also part of the culture. We say "qalOalem" in Tigrigna, but it is too far from its English translation, "nibble." There is no "ghost" in Tigrigna culture, but sometimes we talk as if we have seen a dream about someone dead. Imagine the difference between the words *dream* and *ghost*. This difference shows that sometimes we need to use the exact word as it is.

Switching from one language to another can give a writer a new approach to a complete spirit of reflection. In Tigrigna "thank you" can be said in different ways, but in English, the expression of thanks is generally limited to "thank you" or "I appreciate..." In Tigrigna, if someone lent me a toolbox, I have to say "yeQenyeley," if someone gives me priority, "kbret yhabeley." If someone gives me water to drink, I have to say "xeba ste," which can be translated as "drink milk from the hands of God." If I got help from people much younger than me, I have to say "Hasab lbKa yesmrelka" or "merOaKa yerAyena," etc. In English the subject is "I," but in Tigrigna the subject is "God."

The main writing language of the writer and culture are two interrelated elements which come into play with idiomatic expressions, quotations, setting, and character. I consider a direct translation of the expression "remets wedi guahri, quTuO wedi nebri"—the possible translation can be, "Ember is the son of coal glow, furious is the son of a leopard." But "remets" is a very hot ash and the last remains of fire that cannot be easily distinguished from its heat. Hot ash does not equal *ember* or *smolder*.

I want to demonstrate that translation is beyond conversion of ideas like a unit. It comes out of transforming concepts to get the acceptance of another reader. It is a means of reflecting the philosophy of a society. If an Eritrean says, "Let's go home and drink coffee," the invitation is not just for a private,

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casual sit-down. If you don't have more than 2 hours you don't have to accept the invitation, because it means: *visit, chat, and have fun with the family*. Sometimes you go for a coffee, but you find yourself eating dinner and laughing for hours before the coffee ceremony starts.

I believe a translation has to show cultural differences to the reader. Imagine when you are translating an idiom or word that it demands another wider translation. Sometimes one word can be translated through an entire chapter. Instead of translating one idiom with another comparable idiom, it is clearer if the idiom is translated as it is used in the culture of the character. Switching from language to language helps a writer to create the exact expression and virtue of a character to seal a culturally-based image in the mind of the reader.

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