



Ahmed's story

Translation in a growing church

"I am so burdened for my people."

These are the words of Ahmed*, a Sudanese man who became a follower of Jesus in 2018.

One of the first known believers from the Mblego* tribe, he confronted the reality that there was no established church among his people, let alone quality discipleship tools or a Bible translation. Faced with this, how could Ahmed reach his family and friends? First, a bit of context. Ahmed had decided to follow



LANGUAGE OVERVIEW

Country:	Sudan
People group:	Mblego*
Language:	Mblego*
Native speakers:	500,000
Status:	Unreached**

*name changed for security

**status from Joshua Project

TRANSLATION OVERVIEW

People involved: **17**
Time active: **Jul 2021 - present**
Current goal: **New Testament**

Christ during his first week at a Ugandan school run by Greater Reach Alliance, a Sudanese church-planting network. Greater Reach Alliance (GRA) has a vision to reach the people groups in Sudan who have never heard the gospel. Shortly after a concentrated prayer effort by the leaders, they met Ahmed. But they didn't want just a small handful of converts: GRA wanted to see the church established in Sudan's unreached people groups. And that required Scripture translation.

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Prayerfully, they began searching for a means to translate Scripture into the local languages.

At a global Bible translation event, GRA leaders met with leaders from unfoldingWord, an American organization that promotes Church-Based Bible Translation. Since both organizations have similar



ministry strategies, a partnership was soon formed. The GRA leaders were interested in finding out if Church-Based Bible Translation could help them reach the unreached people groups in Sudan.

Meanwhile, Ahmed had led several of his friends from Islam to Christ, adding to the number of Mblego believers. The need for biblical resources was acutely felt.

In partnership with unfoldingWord, GRA assembled a translation team of graduates from the ministry school mentioned earlier and five credentialed theologians in



the Sudanese diaspora in Uganda. The team set out to work side-by-side with believers like Ahmed.

Translation begins

The team grappled with a challenge all the way through the process: namely, they had to figure out how to train a group of new believers who were not yet theologically mature to translate Scripture—normally a task reserved for degree-holding experts. How could this be done?

What happened is a great example of CBBT's flexibility. While CBBT is most efficient in locations where the church has been well-established, it can nonetheless be carried out in settings where the church is new.

The solution taken by the Sudanese team was as follows: rather than translating Scripture right away, the team began by translating unfoldingWord® Open Bible Stories (OBS)—a collection of 50 key biblical stories designed for translation training, evangelism, and discipleship. This enabled two things. First, since they were not working directly with the Bible, the translation team didn't face anxiety over mistranslating the word of God. Second, as they worked through the collection of stories, they encountered the biblical story in its entirety while wrestling with its details, strengthening them theologically and paving the way for translation of the whole Bible.



Challenges and solutions

The translation process itself was not without difficulty. Before the Mblego team started translating Open Bible Stories, a separate team had started translating OBS into Sudanese Arabic—the lingua franca of the region, spoken by many of the Mblego. The Mblego team intended to use the Sudanese Arabic translation as the source text for their own translation. But this led to two problems.

First, since the Sudanese Arabic resources were new and the Mblego project was the first time they had been used in translation, they were sometimes found to be incomplete or incorrect. Fortunately, since they were working side by side, the Mblego team was able to deliver feedback to the Sudanese Arabic team, enabling them to revise the translation resources and ensure their efficacy for use in other minority languages in Sudan. As they worked through Open Bible Stories, the Mblego supplemented the Sudanese Arabic resources with the English-language resources.

Second, Sudanese Arabic is different from Mblego in many ways. A particular example is the case of



“connecting words”—words like “for,” “and,” and “but.” Sudanese Arabic has many such words. Mblego has only a few. So when the Mblego team encountered these words in the Sudanese Arabic resources, they were forced to use the same word for what were originally many separate words. Since a good translation must be appealing—and this includes sounding authentic, how a native speaker would talk—this was a problem.

Rather than inventing new words or borrowing terms from another language, the leaders from the church planting network and unfoldingWord encouraged the Mblego team to rephrase the translation as best they could. Shortly afterward, they found a way to rephrase the sentences to reduce the number of connecting words, restoring the naturalness of their translation.

Nine months later, the Mblego team celebrated their finished translation of Open Bible Stories. The tool was designed for evangelism and discipleship, and the Mblego team took this seriously. OBS quickly became a favored resource as they told their friends and family about Jesus.

The Mblego also translated the JESUS film alongside OBS to ensure that the life of Jesus could be communicated to as many Mblego as possible. Soon,

over 150 converts to Christianity came from the Mblego tribe, and there were dozens of Bible studies and house churches. That number is continuing to grow.

Equipped with translation skills and a passion for the gospel, the Mblego team started an ongoing project to translate the Bible—beginning with Job and Genesis—just three months after finishing Open Bible Stories. They are working alongside five other translation teams representing unreached people groups in Sudan.

“ I am walking with other brothers until they see the path of Jesus.

Ahmed

The effectiveness of CBBT in a church as new as the Mblego is a strong testament to its flexibility.

