

A Cultural Dictionary for Translation and Exegesis

G. N. Appell and L. W. R. Appell

1.0 Introduction

The recording of texts and their transcriptions is only half the story. Certainly it preserves this important literature. But unless it is translated, commented upon, interpreted, and explained, the work is only half done.

Without an exegesis, the simple translations of these texts lose much of their beauty and power. For example, among the Rungus of northern Borneo certain plants are found in the sacred texts. Without further inquiry there would be little understanding of these. But they are indicators of fertile land. When a woman is described as her intestines being visible, this is to indicate her particularly translucent beauty.

Thus, we need the exegesis of figurative language items by the sources of texts in order to unravel them, explain them, and make the translations truthful to the cultural meanings. A cultural dictionary enlarges on a standard dictionary and includes important cultural data and explanation of figurative language items. It is important to note that this effort is not just for those strangers to the society. The middle generation members in most of the societies we have been working with do not understand many of the figurative language items in their own language. In the future, unless we create a cultural dictionary for the languages of the texts collected to serve as a base for translations and understanding, many in these societies will find their texts opaque and inexplicable, resulting in a loss of beauty and power.

For example, we have been working with a 55 year old man who had experienced traditional Rungus culture. Yet with certain texts he does not understand the metaphors, he does not understand what is going on or being said, and even some of the words are unknown to him.

Let me give you another example. A young, Rungus warrior on his way going out to meet the champion of another village dashes down the longhouse ladder, and knocks a young maiden head over heels. She is at first angry with him but then praises him for his bravery and offers to marry him. But there is a critical aspect of this text beyond the understanding of our Rungus sources. When she is knocked head over heels the text states that you can see her ceramic bowl, her pininggan. A *pinggan* is glossed as a plate used for eating. *Pininggan* is a past tense that could be roughly translated as “to have been a plate.” What does this mean? No one knows what this is a metaphor for. One can only imagine, and that would probably be wrong. *

The Cultural Dictionary we have been developing for Rungus society is to provide a full

understanding of the figurative language which then enables us to do a proper translation of texts. This Cultural Dictionary evolved from our original standard dictionary form. It now includes explanations for words to put them in their cultural context. It explains briefly beliefs, the uses of tools, the rituals that are required for ceremonies, and so forth. The Cultural Dictionary also lists in what ritual texts the gods and spirits appear, their characteristics, and where they live. This enables the translator to be able to enlarge on the translation.

This Cultural Dictionary serves a number of functions. The Rungus ritual texts are in couplets, with the first line in the standard lexicon while the second line is in a ritual register or lexicon. These items from the ritual lexicon are socially important as they also appear occasionally in the standard lexicon as substitute words for the names of individuals. When a speaker cannot say a word because the standard word sounds like the name of his/her parent-in-law, the ritual word from the couplet is used. When recording historical texts and other forms of narratives, this can present a problem if there is no list of these ritual terms.

For example, there is the example of a woman whose in-law was named Mabuk. It was close in sound to the word /mavuk/- “getting drunk”. Therefore she could not use the term /mavuk/ in ordinary discourse because it created a ritual violation that would result in harm to her body on death. She used the word /ipa/ from the ritual register in referring to that in-law.

The Cultural Dictionary is arranged on the basis of word roots, with the various forms appearing both in the alphabetization and also under the root. Working out from the root of a lexeme frequently gives greater meaning to translating an inflected form.

Thus, the cultural dictionary as a concept falls in that unoccupied zone between a standard dictionary and an encyclopedia and supports culturally relevant translations.

2.0 Appendices

Critical to developing a cultural dictionary is the use of appendices. Any dictionary has the impediment of listing items torn from their cognitive system, or paradigm. Each cognitive system provides full meaning to lexemes by placing them in their important context, their contrast with other lexemes in that particular cognitive system. For example, the kin term for father is listed under one letter of the phonemic alphabet of the language and the term for mother in another. Yet these are a critical part of a system of relationships that can only be understood when they are placed in the context of their full cognitive system, the kinship terminology. Thus we have a number of appendices to the Rungus Cultural Dictionary that display these cognitive systems, such as:

Kin terms; Pronouns; Body Parts; Stages of Human Development; Counting; Seasonal Round; Phases of the Moon; Times of Day; Varieties of Rice; Growth stages of rice; Varieties of Dalai (Maize); Growth Stages of Dalai; Female Dress (hampo); Types of Dapu (property items); Types of Armaments; Housing Structures; Parts of the House; Types of Weaving; Sounds Made by Animals; Sounds

Used to Call Animals; Supernaturals and Their Residence; Rogon (potentially malevolent spirits); Types of Ceremonies; Knots; Plants and Their Uses; Terms of Address in Tangon (myths) and Rina'it (ritual texts); Metaphorical and Poetic phrases (Sambatan); Ceremonies for the Household; Ceremonies for the Longhouse; Ceremonies for the Village; Variety of Pigs; Field crops.

Among the Rungus, their major form of art is their language, and therefore these appendices may be more extensive than those for another sociocultural system. Thus, the extent of appendices may vary dependent on the form of the language and culture of the sociocultural system being analyzed.

3.0 Building a Cultural Dictionary on the Roots of Words

I have included below an example of a Rungus root, *panaw*, and its various inflected form:

panaw - journey, way, path, walk

p. **lumpa**

pamanahon - journey to be made; path to be taken, destination

p. **podlumpa'on**

panahon - to be the path, to be journey. ex. *siombo ~ nu*: "where is your path?", "where is your way?"

kapanahan - leaving, going; ex. *sira kapanahan nu?* "When are you to be going?"

käpanaw - just left

kapanaw - can walk, able to walk

kopipamanaw - have you ever gone there

mamanaw - walk, to. to go,

p. **lumumpa**

mamanaw nopo - let's go; let's get going

mamanaw no - walks now, ref. child about 2 years old

minamanaw - was going, was walking to

mirimpanaw - wander about, to

nakapanaw - to have walked to, went to

napanaw - gone reference: place gone to

panahon - place going to

pinanahon - place went to

p. **linumpa'on**

pirimpanahan - place where wandering about

pinamanahan - place that an individual has gone to

tipamanaw - want to go. want to get on the road

Note: p. = ritual term or alternative term: *patalasan*

The inflected forms are also entered in the cultural dictionary under the appropriate letter of the

phonemic alphabet with a reference to see their roots for a full explanation.

This particular example of organizing by the root of a word does not include much cultural data. Other entries do have information as for example the term for a particular skirt and when it is worn. Below are examples that show how a cultural dictionary includes important cultural material which contrasts with standard dictionaries.

4.0 Contrasting Standard Dictionary Entries with Entries from a Cultural Dictionary

STANDARD DICTIONARY

linggaman- knife for rice cutting

indogupon kalavat - variety of tree

toli' - penis

toli'on - having a penis

bubuhuk ompulalangoi - a variety of grass

ruazon - a variety of wild yam found in the forest

CULTURAL DICTIONARY

linggaman - small knife held in palm of hand to remove the heads of rice at harvest. Any larger knife removing multiple heads would frighten odu-odu (rice spirit) away and result in a smaller harvest.

indogupon kalavat - a variety of tree; lit. "Gibbons' washing place". Priestesses put the leaves in water to wash their face and prevent them from forgetting the ritual texts.

toli' - penis

toli'on - a substitute word for a baby girl used when asked the sex of the newborn. This is to confuse and keep any malevolent spirit from identifying the infant to make her ill.

bubuhuk ompulalangoi - a variety of grass used by spirit medium/priestess to bathe her hair when she has gone into trance on the roof of the longhouse during the *Moginum* ceremony so she will not get ill.

ruazon - an edible variety of yam found in the forest with red leaves and meat of the root is white. Found deep in the ground and planted by the *rogon kominan* (spirit named *kominan*). In searching in the forest and digging the root a substitute

term must be used, *golot*, otherwise if *ruazon* is used the *kominan* will become angry and make the root very deep. A circle of a brass armlet is put on the stump of the *ruazon* and left there. This will make the root come closer to the surface. There are times when the digging finds no root.

binatang - longhouse

binatang - Rungus longhouse composed of domestic family apartments cojoined laterally on to the first apartment built (the *monginan* - "builder of the body") and subsequent apartments. They range in size from 3 or 4 to 22 or more apartments. The longhouse is not a jural or ritual entity.

tagad - swidden for rice

tagad - the primary swidden in which rice, maize, cassava, and a variety of vegetables are grown. After the forest is cut and burned a special ritual plot is prepared (*lotong*) which includes certain ritual plants, a central post, and seven small posts. This is used to call the rice spirits (*odu-odu*, or *bambarazon*) to the swidden to ensure a good harvest. Other swiddens cut in the off season are *taras* for maize and *pinatingaha* for maize, cassava, etc. There is no ritual for the rice spirits of these.

Notes:

* This problem arises with the interpretation of certain expressions in the Homeric epics, the Iliad and Odyssey. The phrase "wine-dark sea" has puzzled scholars and scientists for centuries. See John Noble Wilford, 1983, "Homer's Sea: Wine Dark?", Science Section, New York Times, December 20, 1983.

John Noble Wilford

1983 Homer's Sea: Wine Dark? New York Times. December 20.