Diaspora mission[[1]](#footnote-1) and Bible translation[[2]](#footnote-2)

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**Phenomenon of Change with Diaspora[[3]](#footnote-3)**

Due to the explosive growth of global church in the end of the 20th century and their leading role in the 21st century mission, the prospects of world mission are being changed. For example, the acceleration of Diaspora after the post-colonial era in 1960s will be avenue and challenge of future mission. Diaspora Mission is one of the most important changes. South American mission theologian Samuel Escobar also agreed that this Diaspora Mission is a significant issue in terms of avenue and challenge for the traditional forms of mission engagement. Therefore, it can be said that mission is not anymore “going there’ but is “from everywhere to everywhere” or “mission at our doorstep”.

In the area of the stereotyped Bible translation, it used to be initiated and done by missionaries with linguistic skills on the spot of the language group in need of Bible translation for more than a half century. Traditionally, Bible translation was regarded as a part of frontier mission and a majority of Bible translation works have been completed for ‘unreached and unwritten people group’ in mission fields as a prioritized one.

However, in the turn of the 21st century, a number of Diaspora from the non-western countries to the western countries like migrant worker, asylum seeker, refugee, international student, trafficked people, permanent immigrants unprecedentedly has increased. The Cambridge Survey of World Migration attempted to classify six patterns of migration based on push and pull factors of people: 1) internal versus intercontinental/international migration, 2) forced versus free migration, 3) settler versus labour migration, 4) temporary versus permanent migration, 5) illegal versus legal migration, 6) planned versus flight/refugee migration.

Among these people, it is noted that asylum seekers or refugees are identified strategically significant for ‘frontier mission’ because of their unique situations. Most of them are of/from ethnic groups coming from such regions that are hardly accessed by Christian worker without hindrances. Due to persecution, civil war, force majeure and political instability, etc., they are forcibly pushed out of their homeland and moved to refugee camps nearby or ended up in the cities of receiving countries in Europe and North America.

During my assignment with Wycliffe Global Alliance (the former Wycliffe Bible Translators) in Europe since 1992, the landscape of population in Europe has been changed drastically. For example, almost half of London’s population consisted of foreign origin and more than 300 languages are spoken in the city. In this context, it would not be hard to imagine if Bible translation for one ethnic group is executed in the centre of London. Particularly Europe is a unique place for Bible translation since a huge influx of Diaspora from Africa and other parts of the world began in 1960s after post-colonialism. In fact, even in the European continent there have been several Bible translation projects for ethnic language groups before and after the collapse of the former Soviet Union. My project (hereafter called ‘Sura’ Language project in Iran)[[4]](#footnote-4) was one of the projects that has been implemented in Europe due to many security reasons. In 1990, several clusters of the ‘Sura’ language group scattered all over the continent and were found in London, Oslo, Copenhagen and some of them were turned out sincere Christians.

In this paper, I attempt to illustrate two similar cases of Bible translation in Diaspora contexts: one is for the ‘Korean’ project in East Asia more than one century ago and the other one is for the ‘Sura’ project in Iran in which I was involved. Through this brief study on missionally significant cases, I expect to draw some relevant conclusions of missional implications on the Diaspora mission and Bible translation.

**Korean Bible translation with Korean Diaspora in China/Manchuria and Japan in the early stage of the protestant history in Korea[[5]](#footnote-5)**

For Korean Bible translation, three different ways of Bible translation have been used in history.

Firstly, in a way of Protestant minority nationality language translations in China, publications in Korean include the four Gospels and Acts in 1884 printed in Yokohama, a New Testament in 1897 printed in Fengtian, and a complete Bible in 1911 printed in Yokohama. Based on the up-to-now study, it would be assumed that this translation has been done intentionally for the ethnic Korean Diaspora in China as we can also find other evidences of translation[[6]](#footnote-6) for Manchurian, Mongolian, Xinjing, Kazakhstan Turkish, and Tibetan languages at that time.

Secondly, apart from the above story, another Korean Bible was translated by Scottish missionary, Rev. Dr. John Ross, John McIntyre and their Korean Diaspora team in Manchuria.

In the beginning of this translation, John Ross, as a cultural historian and linguist in Manchuria, made contact with some Korean Diaspora merchants who traded herbal medicines across the borderline between China and Korea in order to learn Korean language. John Ross met Lee Ungchan, who agreed to collaborate with him on a variety of translation works. Ross, with the help of Lee, published the Korean Primer (1877), The Korean Language (1878), Yesu sunggyo mundap (Bible Catechism; 1881), and Yesu sunggyo yoryung (Outline of the New Testament; 1881). In 1877 Ross and Lee began translating the New Testament, later aided by Mclntyre and several other Koreans, including Seo Sangyun and Paek Hongjun. In 1882 Ross published the Gospels of Luke and John, the first Gospels to be translated into Hangul. Then, in 1887 under the initiative of Ross, the first complete translation of the New Testament was finally published in Korean. Once published, these translated materials were smuggled to Korea and used by a wide indigenous audience. It is reported that Seo Sangyun, a team member of translation risked his own life to carry over 15,000 copies of Korean Bible in his backpack in three years.[[7]](#footnote-7) One of the unique contributions of Korean Bible translation is to help many people become Christians by reading the distributed Bible even before foreign missionaries came for ministry. According to Jung[[8]](#footnote-8), this laid the foundation for the early missionary movement in Korea later and the Korean Bible enabled Korean church to grow as a healthy and rapidly multiplying indigenous church.

Thirdly, the Gospel of Mark was independently translated by Lee Sujung, a Korean sojourning in Japan, and published in Japan. Copies of this translation were later taken to Korea by Underwood and Appenzeller, North American missionaries. Underwood once reported to his mission board at home: “Instead of sowing seed, we are already harvesting what has been already sown.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Bible translation with Diaspora: a case of the ‘Sura’ language in Iran**

* Displaced translation as a strategic mission in Europe with Iranian Refugees

The ‘Sura’ project was initiated by Diaspora Christians from Iran in 1990. A cluster of Diaspora Christians in UK gathered together with Wycliffe Bible translators in Cyprus and discussed about a possibility of translation work for the ‘Sura’ language in Iran. Since then one dedicated ‘Sura’ Christian volunteered to commit himself to this project. ‘Displaced translation’ means a kind of the translation that has to be done in the context of Diaspora due to many hostile environments towards Bible translation, particularly for ethnic language groups in the creative access countries. So, our team set translation work in UK as a base because a ‘Sura’ Diaspora community exists nearby London for helping our checking and reviewing work of the translated materials and Iranian Christian community as a wider communication group in the region was ready to support the project.

Furthermore, considering the escalated trend of Diaspora world widely more than 500 unreached people groups[[10]](#footnote-10) are estimated in Europe. It is assumed that displaced translation strategy could be one of the effective alternatives in Bible translation mission, working with people group who resettle around us in free societies. Otherwise, we seldom contact with them in the areas where the access is hardly granted. This Diaspora phenomenon is obviously a ‘Divine Conspiracy’ with which God plans to redeem every nation in the world through the scattered people.

* Holistic approach[[11]](#footnote-11) through the ‘Sura’ translation process

I have joined the project in 1994 when I waited for the new language assignment in UK with my family after finishing linguistic training with SIL[[12]](#footnote-12) in Singapore. After several trips and long-term stay in the Republic of Azerbaijan (the former part of CIS) and Istanbul, Turkey for the acquisition of the language, which is a dialect of the ‘Sura’ language, I moved to the place where a native speaker began translation work in the south-western part of London in 1997.

‘F’ (pseudonym), who was a key native translator and Muslim background believer in Iran, already produced the Gospel of John in Audio format for testing among ‘Sura’ people in 1994. Since then we began to make the drafts of whole New Testament working with the ‘Sura’ people in London, Oslo and Copenhagen for testing and reviewing the translated materials. Finally, we completed the first draft of the whole New Testament in 2003, and then in 2009 it was published in book format. Meanwhile, we developed many media for to enhance the accessibility of the translated books on the web site with some books like the Four Gospels in audio format for the sake of not only ‘Sura’ people in Iran but also Diaspora ‘Sura’ outside Iran who are able to access internet.

For this project, I served as a project coordinator and exegetical checker for the accuracy of the translated materials based on the original text. Besides these routine processes, one of the issues that caught me was about human relationship with native translator and helpers. The situation of ‘Sura’ Diaspora people in Europe was vulnerable and unstable in life as well as financially stricken. In fact, I could be attuned with them as a ‘Diaspora’ from the Far East in foreign land. While building up friendships with them, I felt concern for their real lives, for example, their jobs, Christian communities, family issues, legal status in UK, etc. apart from the Bible translation. Even in some cases, I had to be engaged with a language helper for painting houses and wallpaper work for the sake of financial gains for him prior to resuming translation work.

Through this kind of ‘holistic approach’, I had a chance to learn a lot of precious values related to Christian mission. Mission is a holistic process not for achieving our own immediate goals but for experiencing an incarnational life style for all who are involved in mission.

* Ultimate partnership for the Kingdom of God

The Bible translation in diasporic context gives us a challenge to reflect ourselves in many aspects of mission activities. One of the overriding concerns for the ‘Sura’ project was an issue of partnership among stakeholders. In the early stage of the translation, I was involved in the northern dialect team of the ‘Sura’ project in the Republic of Azerbaijan in order to get mutual cooperation between two similar dialect projects. For that project, the partnership formed with United Bible Society, Institute of Bible Translation, Kitab Sirketi (Azerbaijan Bible Society), SIL, local churches in Baku, Azerbaijan, and Iranian Mission organization in UK. In spite of several discords on policies and processes in translation among these organizations, eventually the whole Bible in the northern dialect of the ‘Sura’ language was published in 2010. In a similar way, the ‘Sura’ project also faced partnership issues among several organizations that were involved in early 1990s in UK including SIL. However, since operating partnerships together, every partner and person encouragingly learned to share burdens equally for the completion of the translation according to proper job descriptions. For example, the indigenous mission organization for Iran took the initiative including the copyright of the Bible and SIL provided technical support and financial aids. In real translation process, there were mother tongue translators, several local testers, reviewers and IT supporters and so on. Some Diaspora in London like Korean churches and Christians committed themselves to support by prayer and finance. One local Baptist church in New Malden, Surrey adopted this project as a part of their mission in the church. Through the synergized and voluntary efforts by each kingdom partner, at last the ‘Sura’ New Testament was published in 2009 and in 2012 the whole Bible is planed for publication.

Mission is not the property of one institutional mission organization or a mega-church that has power and money any more. Mission will come true by the power of the Holy Spirit and the ultimate cooperation of whole body of the Christ. In this sense, Diaspora mission is one of the most significant causes to shift our pre-occupied mind set on mission towards the kingdom partnership in the twenty-first century.

**Some missional implications on Bible translation and Diaspora mission in the future**

In recent times, Global Diaspora generated a ‘theology of Diaspora’ and consequently, what we call, ‘Diaspora missiology’ in Christian mission. The Third Lausanne Congress in Cape Town, South Africa in 2010 was a very encouraging occasion for the Global Diaspora mission movement. In fact, the issue of diaspora and its missiology was featured as one of the predominant features of the whole programme and acclaimed as a new paradigm for the world evangelization for the coming era.

As Tereso C. Casino conclusively summarized in his article, Why People Move: A Prolegomenon to Diaspora Missiology, “missionary efforts among people on the move are biblically valid, theologically consistent, and historically grounded. Under the redemptive plan of God, people move because the migratory or diasporic flows and transitions provide them with opportunities to encounter more of God’s redemptive acts.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

In order to fulfil God’s redemptive plan for people on the move, Bible translation could be more effectively and strategically utilized if the ‘displaced project’ is mobilized in the diasporic context for the unreached and unwritten people groups with the following missional implications.

Firstly, Ethnic Bible translation in the diasporic context may bring effective mission strategy for the people who are not yet evangelized but are in the limited access area. As seen in the case of Korean Bible translation, they could access the word of God through the Bible translated in China and Japan with Korean Diaspora and grow as a Christian by reading it without aids of outsiders in the beginning of the Korean church.

Secondly, Ethnic Bible translation could be more mobilized in the diasporic contexts. Traditionally, Bible translation happened in the very place of ethnic language groups and in many cases, it turned out to be almost hard to access, particularly to the least reached people groups in the frontier areas of mission. However, considering a large scale of geographical and demographical mobility of people in this century, it is estimated to have more possibilities of implementing ‘ethnic Bible translation’ in the diasporic context as seen in the ‘Sura’ project executed in Europe in this decade.

Thirdly, Ethnic Bible translation in the diasporic context may be a good example of the holistic approach of Christian mission. The goal of Bible translation is not only to produce a vernacular Bible in a certain language but also to reproduce disciples of Jesus in the course of translation work. Eventually everyone who is involved in the translation has to grow together as a body of Christ. In the context of Diaspora, ethnic people are easily exposed to natural human propensity of dependency on others due to isolation, fear, insecurity, bereavement, and trauma and so on. This vulnerable situation provides more opportunities for us to access them with the practical aids as well as spiritual ones. In this sense, Bible translation is one effective tool for illustrating ‘holistic approach’ as it is not only a long-term process in translation but also life- changing journey through translation process for one language community.

Fourthly, Ethnic Bible translation in the diasporic context will provide a symbiotic partnership for the kingdom of God among participants. As I illustrated with the ‘Sura’ project, Bible translation in its nature is not the project that a sole person manages to finish by oneself. In fact, Bible translation is the product of many Christian bodies under the supervision of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, ultimate partnership in translation should comprise of all sorts of people who can help including local and other ethnic churches, Christian individuals, interdenominational resources which would be available in the region of executing translating work. Consequently, Diaspora mission certainly causes our pre-occupied mind-set of mission to shift to the kingdom partnership in mission.

Lastly, Ethnic and ‘cluster’ Bible translation is a key role for the diaspora mission and multi-ethnic societies. For example, in Europe a number of clusters in the society increase and these clusters tend to characterize their own subculture and communities. Recently, it is reported that a street kid’s Bible in Amsterdam was published as many street kids were not able to understand the contemporary Bible in Dutch. And another example of the ‘cluster’ Bible translations are for Bike Bible and Metal Bible.[[14]](#footnote-14) It should be essential to provide relevant materials like the Bible for the people or cluster group to be evangelized in the diasporic mission environment.

**Conclusion**

It is legitimate to say that there is no era than the current century in which a huge human tidal current flows unprecedentedly from everywhere to everywhere in the world. This phenomenon brought forth a change even for us in mission to respond to it. Therefore, Diaspora mission is necessarily adopted for finding a new avenue of mission because of this remarkable phenomenon that God causes on his redemptive plan for all nations.

In Bible translation for vernacular language groups, it is inevitable to re-consider the pattern of the conventional approaches and methodologies that were employed more than a half century. ‘Displaced translation’ or ‘Ethnic Bible translation’ is one of the effectively strategic approaches for the unreached and unwritten vernacular language groups in the diasporic context. This approach ultimately implicates significant issues that the current mission faces such as ‘holistic mission’, ‘discipleship’ through the translation process, symbiotic ‘kingdom partnership’ and ‘Scripture in use’ for ethnic and social clusters in the diasporic context.

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1. ‘Diaspora’ mission in this article is intended to distinguish it from overseas mission avoiding unnecessary confusion between two concepts. Here ‘Diaspora’ mission is a mission effort to mobilize potential human resources on the move for mission and to reach out unreached people for evangelism in diasporic context. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‘Bible translation’ is defined here as a translation work for vernacular languages that has no Bible. The recent statistics shows that 4141 languages and 508 million people are known to have no scripture (refer to <http://www.wycliffe.net/resources/scriptureaccessstatistics/tabid/99/Default.aspx> ) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In this paper, ‘Diaspora’ is used as the same meaning as ‘migration’ that includes all sorts of people on the move for the sake of convention of my writing even though according to Tereso C. Casino, ‘diaspora’ refers to the overarching structure under which all forms of mobility take place, while migration serves as a tool to account for a diasporic process or condition.(Regnum 2011). However, Enoch Wan and Joy Tira separate it from ‘migration’ as it implies Biblical concept, particularly in terms of Diaspora missiology. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For security reason, I have to use pseudonym for my language project in this paper, protecting people who have been involved in this translation. ‘Sura’ language is one of major language groups in Iran. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Excerpted from the article: *The Bible in Chinese* written by Wang Weifan for the Institute of World religions of the Chinese Academy of Social Science and appeared in the Nanjing Theological Review, 1993. P.85. and *Korea: A Historical and Cultural Dictionary* by Keith Pratt and Richard Rutt (Curzon, 1999) extracted from <http://faroutliers.blogspot.co.uk/2010/01/manchurian-roots-of-korean.html> accessed on 25th June 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid (in The Bible in Chinese). P.85. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Min-Young Jung, 2011. *Diaspora and Timely Hit: Towards a Diaspora Missiology*, Korean Diaspora and Christian Mission(Eds., Hun Kim & Won Suk Ma), Oxford: Regnum. P. 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. P. 64 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. P. 64 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. An unreached people group refers to an [ethnic group](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethnic_group) without an indigenous, self propagating [Christian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian) [church movement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_movement). Any ethnic or [ethnolinguistic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethnolinguistic) nation without enough Christians to evangelize the rest of the nation is an Unreached People Group. It is a missiological term used by Evangelical Christians The term is sometimes applied to ethnic groups in which less than 2% of the population is Evangelical Christians.(Wikipedia) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Originally ‘holistic approach’ of mission means that the church’s mission is intrinsically holistic or ‘integral’. Word and deed must work together to complement on another(C. R. Padilla, in Dictionary of Mission Theology, 2007.). However, In this article, ‘holistic approach’ is a kind of practice for focusing both on work and human need in the diasporic context of mission. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. SIL is an Institute that supports technical skills needed for the Bible translation including linguistics. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. S. Hun Kim & Won Suk Ma, 2011. *Korean Diaspora and Christian Mission*, Oxford. Regnum. P. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The Bike Bible contains the whole New testament and life stories of bikers, published by a group of Christian Motor Cyclists Association, and Bible for the Nations. The Metal Bible is a Bible for those who love Hardrock/Metal, published by Johannes Jonsson and Roul Akesson in Bible for the Nations. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)