Chapter 5

Choosing Key Translation Terms

5.1 Introduction

In this section, Bisu religious terms are evaluated and compared to the Greek Terms in Louw and Nida's (1988) semantics domain 12: Supernatural Beings and Powers. Firstly, the Bisu term *Ang Cao* (อางๆๆ) is compared with *Theos* 'God'. Then Bisu spirit terms are compared with 'angels' and 'demons'. Next, the various Bisu spirits are compared with the Greek term 'Satan'. Then terms for Supernatural Beings such as 'ghost' and 'ancestor' are compared to the corresponding Greek terms.

5.2 Choosing a Term for the Supreme Being

In this section, translation issues surrounding the Supreme Being are discussed. In particular, common views of the Supreme Being among traditional peoples are discussed, in order to lay a foundation for the discussion of the translation of the Christian term for the creator God into Bisu. A short review is provided of Burnett's discussion of this topic and a more local view of the Supreme Being in other Lolo-Burmese speaking groups is discussed.

According to Burnett, in traditional societies, the Supreme Being generally has neither temples nor priests. He is regarded as too exalted to be concerned with human affairs (2000:31). Later, it is shown that some of these beliefs about the Supreme Being are found in other Lolo Burmese groups which are closely related linguistically to Bisu. But, we will also see that in some cases the Supreme Being does in fact have temples and priests. This fact will figure in later discussion, as the componential features of highest Bisu spirit to componential features of the Supreme Being in other Lolo Burmese groups are compared in order to evaluate its suitability as a potential term for the creator God.

Many translators have used the vernacular term for the Supreme Being for the term "God" in the Bible. Burnett notes the idea that the English term for "God" originated from the name of one of the German gods. As Burnett describes it, "A

biblical content was therefore given to each of these names which mixed a familiarity of the term with a newness of interpretation" (2000:32).

In the Bisu-related Lolo-Burmese languages of Hani, Akha and Akeu, *Miqyail* is the traditional creator God. This is the word used for the key term for the creator God in the translation of the New Testament into those languages. *Bi Yeh* who is a lesser being than *Mi Yeh*, is noted as being a spirit of the Akha who is responsible for the wellbeing of the villagers (Schliesinger 2003:51). *Ang Cao* is similarly the spirit in charge of the wellbeing of the Bisu. In Schliesinger (2003: 84, 119, 144) the spirit in charge of the wellbeing of the people is referred to as the guardian spirit.

In Akha, *Miqyail* is the traditional creator God. The word *Apoe* often precedes *Miqyail* and it means literally 'male ancestor' (Boyes 1997:55). This is the word used for the key term for the creator God in the translation of the New Testament into those languages. However, traditional beliefs about this being are very different from the Judeo-Christian concept of 'God'. The Akha have a creation story surrounding this being in which *Mi Yeh* was originally the only being to exist. He then created the sky, which is considered to be his son. All people on earth are descended from that son. He then created another being who consolidated everything *Mi Yeh* had created into the world as it is today. The legend also tells of two semi-divine rulers whom *Mi Yeh* sent to rule over the Akha, but they disobeyed *Mi Yeh*, so he called them back. *Mi Yeh* replaced these rulers with another legendary ruler who learned the Akha way by flying up to *Mi Yeh* each night (Lewis 1982: 217-218).

"The main way in which 'God' expresses his power among the Akha today is through his representative in the village, the village priest. He is considered to be 'next only to God' (Lewis 1982:218). The Akha believe *Mi Yeh* himself chooses the village priest for this task. His role is different from the function of the spirit priests and shamans who deal exclusively with spirits rather than with Mi Yeh. Further discussion of the Akha village priest dedicated to *Mi Yeh* as compared to the village priest dedicated to *ang cao* is found in section 6.1.

G'ui sha is the name of the traditional creator God of the Lahu people (Schliesinger 2000:169). There is a traditional creation story related to *G'ui sha* as well. This is also the term used for the creator in the various Lahu Bible

Translations. Some Lahu villages even have special temple houses dedicated to *G'ui sha* (Walker 1986:388).

It should be noted that Northern Thai villages also have village priests who are dedicated to the guardian spirit of the village. Northern Thai people believe that there is a special spirit who is elevated above other local spirits and who oversees the welfare of the village and its residents. This spirit typically has a wooden shrine dedicated to him outside the village (Tambiah 1970).

Bi Yeh, in contrast to the creator *Mi Yeh,* is noted as being a spirit of the Akha who is responsible for the wellbeing of the villagers (Schliesinger 2003:51). *Ang cao* is also the spirit in charge of the wellbeing of the Bisu. In Schliesinger (2003: 84, 119, 144) the spirit in charge of the wellbeing of the people is referred to as the guardian spirit.

5.2.1 Componential Features of God and Translation Options

In this section, the componential features for 'God' in the original Koine Greek language used in the New Testament of the Bible are listed and each one discussed. The following list of primary characteristics for God is taken from Barnwell et al. (1995).

1. He is a spirit.

2. He is supernatural, having power that is greater than any other spirit.

3. He created the world.

4. He sustains the world.

5. He is good, being kindly disposed toward men.

6. He is holy, i.e. everything he does is totally just and right.

7. He stands in a father relationship to human beings.

8. He is eternal.

9. He has perfect knowledge of everything.

Barnwell offers three possible solutions for translating the key term 'God'. (1) Adopt a proper name for an existing spiritual being. (2) Choose a descriptive title. (3) Use a term borrowed from a major language. Barnwell notes that a proper name should only be chosen where there is sufficient identity between

the Christian God and the spiritual being. Barnwell notes that the first five features are most important for this identity (Barnwell 1995).

5.2.2 Componential Features of *Ang Cao* Compared to 'God'

The following chart illustrates how the componential features of *ang cao* 'village spirit' compare to Barnwell's (1995) list of componential features of *Theos* (θεός) in the New Testament. The chart demonstrates that *ang cao* 'village spirit' shares six out the nine important componential features of *Theos* 'God'.

Table 12: Application of Componential Analysis to *Ang Cao*

Features of *Theos* 'God'	*Ang Cao* '*Village Spirit*'	Explanation
Spirit	+	Fits the definition of *Dae Ya* (independent, non-material spiritual being).
He is supernatural, power greater than any other spirit	+	*Ang Cao* is the greatest of the spirits; there has never been any greater spirit.
Created the World	Neutral	Bisu do not know who created the world.
Sustains the World	Neutral	*Ang Cao* protects the Bisu people
Good, kindly disposed toward men	+	Seen as good and as the protector/helper of the Bisu people.
Holy; everything he does is totally just and right	+	Bisu has no word for Holy; however *Ang Cao* has never done anything perceived as bad.
Stands in a father relationship to human beings	+	Seen as the father of the Bisu people. It is natural to speak of him as such.
Eternal	Neutral	Bisu do not know when or how Ang Cao originated.
Has perfect knowledge of everything	+	Knows people's thoughts even as they think them; knows everything.

5.2.3 Componential Analysis of *Ang Cao* and *Mi Yeh*

As noted in section 5.2, the Lahu, Akha and Lisu peoples all believe in a supreme being. As Walker notes,

> There are fundamental similarities, along with some important differences, in the ideological premises and ritual traditions of the Lahu, Lisu and Akha peoples. An animistic ideology permeates the world view of all three peoples and all three have the notion of a great world-creating divinity (Lahu *G'ui sha*; Lisu *Wu sa*; Akha, *A poe Mi yeh*); but the cult of this divinity seems most highly pronounced among the Lahu (Walker 1992:59).

The Hani, a Lolo-Burmese group of China, also believe in the same creator divinity as the Akha (Lewis & Bai 2002b:129).

Since, the above-mentioned divinities, including *Mi Yeh*, were used to translate *Theos* 'God' in related languages, a comparison of the componential features of *Ang Cao* and *Mi Yeh* is presented below. *Mi Yeh* was chosen for comparison because a longer list of features in Lewis & Bai (2002b) and Walker (1992) could be found, compared to the other deities mentioned.

The chart below summarized how the Bisu *Ang Cao* 'village spirit' matches closely in componential features to the Greek *Theos* 'God' as compared to the Akha *Mi Yeh*. *Mi Yeh* possesses two features, creation and eternal existence, that are not attributed to *Ang Cao* 'village spirit'. On the other hand, *Ang Cao* 'village spirit' does possess two features that *Mi Yeh* does not. He is kindly disposed toward people, and he is always just and right in his actions.

Table 13: Componential Analysis Comparing *Ang Cao* and *Mi Yeh*

Features of *Theos* 'God'	*Ang Cao* 'village spirit' (Bisu)	*Mi Yeh* 'God' (Ahka)
Spirit	+	+ (Boyes 1997:55)
He is supernatural power greater than any other spirit	+	+ (Boyes 1997:55; Lewis 1982:219)
Created the World	?	+ (Boyes 1997:55)
Sustains the World	?	Neutral
Good, kindly disposed toward men	+	Neutral
Holy; totally just and right	+	Neutral
Father relationship to human beings	+	+ (Boyes 1997:55)
Eternal	Neutral	+ (Lewis 1982:217)
Perfect knowledge	+	+ (Lewis 1982:219)

There are two additional features of *Mi Yeh* that might also be of interest. He gave the Akha, Akeu and Hani their traditions (Boyes 1997:56). Also, according to the Akha tradition, *Mi Yeh* gave out books to all the peoples of the earth, but the Akha lost theirs by eating them (Boyes 1997:56). *Mi Yeh* also created all the other spirits (Lewis 1982:217). But, these beliefs are not attributed to *ang cao* 'village spirit' (Bisu).

Eight other possibly relevant features shared by both *Ang Cao* 'village spirit' (Bisu) and *Mi Yeh* (Lewis 1982:218):

1. Both can be called upon for aid in some manner.
2. They both require sacrifice.
3. They both have a singular priest who represents him and him alone.
4. The deity himself chooses the priest.

5. Both are considered to be different from other more ordinary spirits as evidenced by not calling him a spirit like other spirits.

6. Both punish people who show them disrespect.

7. Both have personal names.

8. Both have imposed certain prohibitions or taboos, especially sexual transgressions.

There were also two features attributed to *Mi Yeh* that are not attributed to the God of the Bible. Firstly, in the past he turned the world over to be ruled by two semi-divine rulers. Today the village shaman is his sole representative. Secondly, the sky is also believed to be his son. Neither of things is true of *Ang Cao* 'village spirit' (Bisu).

In conclusion, there exists a strong case for using a term *Ang Cao* for the key translation term *Theos* 'God'. *Ang Cao* 'village spirit' (Bisu) is similar enough in its features to *Theos* 'God' to warrant its consideration.

5.3 Choosing New Testament Terms for Angels and Demons

In this section I discuss the componential features of 'evil spirit' and 'angel' and compare these features with particular types of Bisu spirits. It will be shown that finding a term for 'evil spirit' is much more straightforward than finding an appropriate Bisu term for 'angel'.

Barnwell lists ten characteristics of evil spirits as seen from the scriptures. They are independent spiritual beings, not the spirits of people who have died. Evil spirits serve and work for Satan (Mark 3:22-27). They can be identified with the fallen angels who followed Satan in rebellion against God (Revelation 12:7-9). They have names such as in Mark 5:9 and can take control of a human being. When in control of a person, they can afflict him in different ways: They can cause him to act violently and to try to destroy himself (Mark 5:2-5). They can cause a person to have convulsions and foam at the mouth (Mark 9:17-27) and cause dumbness (Matt. 9:32; Mark 9:17-27). They can cause the person who is under their control to attack others violently (Acts 19:16). They can speak and hold conversations with another person (Matt. 8:29-32), and they often scream or shout loudly (Mark 5:7; Luke 9:39).

Of the above features of 'evil spirit' in the New Testament, eight out of ten are true of the particular Bisu spirit called, *daephakdae* (แด่พากแด). However two of the above features are not true of them; they do not serve Satan nor do they have personal names.

As eight out of ten features of 'evil spirits' are shared by the Bisu term *daephakdae*, it would seem that is a strong case for using this term for an 'evil spirit' who possesses people in the New Testament.

Finding an appropriate indigenous term for 'angel', however, proved extremely difficult. Firstly, all spirits or *dae ya* (แดยา) are considered malevolent and capricious in nature. They are independent and serve only themselves. Louw & Nida define *angelos* (ἀγγελος) as 'a supernatural being that attends upon or serves as a messenger of a superior supernatural entity'. There are no spirits that remotely match these features in the Bisu cosmology.

Finding a Bisu term that matched the feature 'head of evil spirits' was also difficult. The Bisu spirits are not ordered in terms of a hierarchical power structure. If there is any order amongst them at all, then they can only be arranged according their relative importance in the lives of Bisu people. Some are more dangerous than others. There are also spirits for which it is important to too make offerings, but these spirits do not lord it over spiritual beings.

5.4 Choosing Terms for Religious Specialists

In this section, the problem of choosing appropriate terms for religious specialists in Bisu is addressed. In particular, a term for 'priest' is sought. The term most often considered as good candidate for 'priest' in the New Testament is the local term for 'Shaman'. In the case of a shaman, Burnett (2000) notes that the term has been used to refer to a broad category of related observations. The three main features of a shaman are 1) that he is healer and protector of the people from spiritual forces, 2) He cooperates with the spirits, while not being controlled by them, and 3) He is often believed to make flights or journeys into the spirit realm (2000:175-176).

Schliesinger says of the Bisu, "The village sorcerer called *bhu dtang,* serves as a medium between the people and the spirits. The *bhu dtang* is chosen among the venerable males of the village, whose parents already passed away, by the means

of a rotating stick" (2000:187). However, the results of questionnaires show that this statement would appear to be inaccurate according to the definition of 'sorcerer' in Burnett (2000:141) and in Sitton (1998b:109). According to responses in the worldview questionnaires, the *bhu dtang* is not associated with multiple spirits, but is only concerned with *ang cao* 'village spirit'. Rather, he is the village priest charged with ritual sacrifices to *ang cao* 'village spirit'. Performing sacrifices to *ang cao* is his main duty. The *putang* (ปุตัง) as he is called, is distinct from the local shaman or spirit doctor, who performs sacrifices to spirits that are believed to have made a person sick. He also offers sacrifices to territorial spirits on behalf of other for the protection of land or property. The local spirit medium possesses special gifts such as 'clairvoyance', but does not offer sacrifices.

Given the above evidence, it would seem that the term *putang* 'village priest' is a strong candidate for the key translation term 'Priest' in Bisu.

5.5 Choosing Terms for Taboos and other Offenses

Burnett discusses the notion of 'taboo' in various traditional societies around the world. Burnett refers to Margaret Mead's definition of the term in *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* published in 1937. "Tabu may be defined as a negative sanction, a prohibition whose infringement results in an automatic penalty without human or superhuman mediation" (2000:75).

Regarding the concept of 'sin', Burnett explains that the notion of sin is generally universal, but that the particular offences that are perceived as 'sin' vary from among cultures. Burnett explains that the concepts of taboo, pollution and sin overlap each other and that the relationship between pollution and morals is often unclear (2000:85).

Burnett goes on to state "All societies tend to have an informal classification of the degree of seriousness of various sins" (2000:87). In traditional societies, the greatest sins are those committed against your own people, because it affects the solidarity of the group. In contrast, Burnett notes, sins such as murder and rape by insiders of outsiders is often considered insignificant. Burnett also notes that prohibitions against stealing, murder and adultery are almost universal, but the specific definitions of what constitutes these sins vary from one culture to another (2000:88).

According to worldview interviews there is a Bisu word that describes the breaking of taboos or the moral code. *Ang si* (อางซี่) is more serious than simply making a mistake. It includes moral failures such as pregnancy out of wedlock. It can also be used to talk about the breaking of taboos set up by *ang cao* 'village spirit' as well as social sins such as 'stealing'. It was evident that in worldview interviews offenses committed against the group or within the village area were more serious than offenses outside the group or village area. However, the term does have moral and ethical implications and is stronger than simply making a mistake. It is therefore a strong candidate for the key translation term 'sin'.