In Their Own Language
By Bryce Wilner

Who in this world is competent to judge whether an Austrian waltz is better than a Makonde Ngoma?

—Walter Rodney[i]

The missionary tells the Indian: "Give us the form so that we can take care of the content."

—John Landabaru[ii]

i   Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* [1972] (Washington, D. C.: Howard University Press, 1982), p. 34.

ii   John Landabaru, "The Double-edged Sword: The SIL in Colombia," first published in *Alternativa* 28 (1978). Quoted by David Stoll in *Fishers of Men or Founders of Empire?: The Wycliffe Bible Translators in Latin America* (London: Zed Press/Cambridge: Cultural Survival, Inc., 1982), p. 252.

We want to:
- enable others to participate in our projects
- enable others to cater to needs for which we don't have the resources
- share our wealth of knowledge and experience in the area of writing systems and pass on our tools
- equip the community to meet its font needs[1]

This statement of intent appears in the SIL Open Font License (OFL), a 2005 legal framework used to release open source fonts and related type software. Any font published under the OFL is authorized by its creator to be downloaded, used, modified, and redistributed for free. A font can simply be inscribed with metadata pointing to the OFL and distributed in a package containing a detailed log that reiterates the terms of its release. Seventeen years on, the OFL is one of the web's most successful open source font licenses: innumerable websites make use of OFL-licensed fonts, and a clear majority of type families on Google Fonts, one of the most frequented font libraries on the internet, refer to it.[2] Many independent font bureaus, artists, and type designers—this author included—have used it as a framework to share their experimental projects or conjure the early techno-optimism of Web 1.0.[3]

The OFL is influenced by the standards of the Free/Libre and Open Source Software communities, two related but distinct computing traditions that valorize openly available source code and unfettered circulation. Free Software licensing language secures the user's right to decide how to use or distribute a program, and although this essentially requires access to the source code, the Open Source Software movement has historically had different computational, political, and financial motivations than those of Free Software.[4] The OFL hybridizes aspects of both the Free and

1   Nicolas Spalinger and Victor Gaultney, "SIL Open Font License" (SIL International, 2007). http://scripts.sil.org/cms/scripts/page.php?site_id=nrsi&id=OFL

2   https://fonts.google.com/attribution

3   The typeface you're currently reading, Linux Libertine, cites the OFL (Libertine Open Font Projects, 2003). In 2017, I collected a few more examples in a short article titled "Open Font License." https://librarystack.org/open-font-license

4   Richard Stallman, "FLOSS and FOSS" (GNU, 2013). https://www.gnu.org/philosophy/floss-and-foss.en.html

Open Source traditions for explicit use in type design. It legally secures the perpetual non-commercial nature of the font software itself, although it doesn't preclude that font's use in commercial projects, like being typeset in a book or bundled in an operating system. It also has a "viral" propagating clause that forces any successive derivative font, made by any author, to adhere to these same non-commercial rules.

The OFL was written by Nicolas Spalinger and Victor Gaultney for SIL International, an evangelical Christian non-profit that studies languages and promotes literacy, with the stated goal of translating the Bible into thousands of minority languages.[5] Toward this end, SIL has developed a range of open source software for linguistic field research, sound recording and annotation, keyboard layout editors, and font rendering for uncommon languages and script patterns. SIL operates the language inventory Ethnologue and hosts a sprawling knowledge base on global linguistics that has academic and professional users far outside the missionary field. The organization's website boasts a staff of over 4,300 employees involved in "approximately 1,350 active language projects in 104 countries."[6] Since the mid-aughts, SIL has focused on releasing free fonts for specific, underrepresented writing systems: Zaghawa Beria, one of the first fonts accommodating an alphabet based on camel branding marks in Sudan and Chad; Abyssinica, a script font supporting all Ethiopic languages; Andika, a sans-serif optimized for beginner literacy; and Gentium, a Latin, Greek, and Cyrillic font with extended support for languages from Africa, South America, and the Pacific. Arabic, Khmer, Tai Viet, and Nubian alphabets are also represented in SIL's font database. The OFL provides a legal architecture for their distribution.[7]

*   *   *

SIL International was founded by the linguist, missionary, and Presbyterian minister William Cameron Townsend. Born in 1896 as the fifth child in a family of southern California farmers, Townsend

5   https://sil.org
6   https://www.sil.org/about
7   https://software.sil.org/fonts

Zaghawa Beria   Glyphs designed for an alphabet based on camel branding marks in Sudan and Chad.

Abyssinica SIL   Glyphs designed to support all Ethiopic languages.

Fonts available from SIL's font database, all released under the SIL Open Font License.

Bryce Wilner

first took up missionary work at the age of twenty-one. With some knowledge of Spanish, he took a job as an itinerant Bible salesman in Guatemala, where he learned of the country's Kaqchikel-speaking Mayans, who were ignored by Catholic Guatemalans and over-looked by Protestant missionaries in favor of the Spanish-speaking working class.[8] When a Kaqchikel guide offered to teach him the language, Townsend received a vision. If he learned their language, he could use the Latin transliteration to translate the Bible into it, thereby spreading the gospel to a largely untapped group of potential converts. Townsend left his job and embedded himself in the Kaqchikel community near the city of Antigua.

Uneducated in the field of linguistics, he was initially frustrated with his attempts to grasp the Kaqchikel language through an English lens. His first breakthrough came from studying the work of Edward Sapir, the University of Chicago linguist who theorized that a language's structure could not be learned without first trying to understand how a culture's perspective differed from one's own. Townsend abandoned his comparative linguistics for a "descriptive" approach, one acknowledging that each language has its own pattern independent of the Latin mold.[9] He came to recognize Kaqchikel as a complex language that could embed time, place, number of subjects, or even different kinds of actions into a single verb. After a year of study, he enlisted a Kaqchikel Mayan to help him translate the Gospel of Mark. According to Townsend's biographers, the mayor of Antigua initially protested when he learned of Townsend's activities: "We're trying to get rid of the Indian languages. We want everyone to speak Spanish!" Townsend was aware of the discrimination against Guatemala's indigenous people by Spanish-speaking *ladinos*, and believed that a New Testament in both Kaqchikel and Spanish would allow them to more easily assimilate into western custom by first encountering Christianity in their own language. "The key to Indian education is the mother tongue, the language of the soul," he wrote. "Help them learn to read their language and

8   James and Marti Hefley, *Uncle Cam: The Story of William Cameron Townsend, founder of the Wycliffe Bible Translators and the Summer Institute of Linguistics* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1974), p. 35.

9   Ibid., p. 47.

၁၉၄၈ ခုနှစ်ဒီဇင်�‌ဘာလ ၁၀ ရက်နေ့တွင် ကမ္ဘာ့ကုလသမဂ္ဂအဖွဲ့ညီလာခံ အစည်းအဝေးကြီးက လူ့အခွင့်အရေး ကြေညာစာတမ်းကြီးကို အတည်ပြု၍ ကြေညာလိုက်ရာထိုကြေညာစာတမ်းကြီး၏ စာသားသည်နောက်စာမျက်နှာ များတွင် အပြည့်အစုံပါရှိသည်။ ဤကဲ့သို့ရာဇဝင်တင်မည့် ကြေညာချက်ကို ပြုလုပ်ပြီးနောက် ဤညီလာခံအစည်းအဝေးကြီးက ကမ္ဘာ့ကုလသမဂ္ဂအဖွဲ့ဝင် နိုင်ငံ အားလုံးအား ထို ကြေညာစာတမ်းကြီး၏ စာသားကိုအများပြည်သူတို့ ကြားသိစေရန် ကြေညာပါမည့် အကြောင်းကိုလည်းကောင်း၊ ထိုပြင်နိုင်ငံများ၊ သို့တည်းမဟုတ် နယ်မြေများ၏ နိုင်ငံရေး အဆင့်အတန်းကို လိုက်၍ ခွဲခြားခြင်း မပြုဘဲအဓိကအားဖြင့် စာသင်ကျောင်းများနှင့် အခြားပညာရေး အဖွဲ့အစည်းများတွင် ထိုကြေညာစာတမ်း

Padauk   Glyphs designed to support all Myanmar-script-based languages.

Tagmukay   Glyphs in Tifinagh script for the Tamajaq language of Mali, Niger, and Nigeria.

Fonts available from SIL's font database, all released under the SIL Open Font License.

become proud of it and their heritage. Give them the Bible to set them free from vice and superstition. . . . Once they have dignity, spiritual freedom, and self-assurance, they can move into the Spanish-speaking world as equals with the *ladinos.*"[10] With support from American mission agencies and a growing cadre of interested Christian linguists, Townsend spent the following decade completing the Kaqchikel translation of the entire New Testament. The manuscript was sent to the American Bible Society for printing in 1929, and the books reached Guatemala in 1931.[11]

In the early 1930s, Guatemala's economy was based on plantation agriculture: indigenous peasants worked on coffee or fruit *fincas* for little pay. Most fruit production, and the railroad infrastructure to export it, was owned by the United Fruit Company, headquartered in New Orleans. This extremely profitable, neocolonial order was maintained by Jorge Ubico's military dictatorship from 1931–44. While the literacy rate among the *ladinos* had reached 30%, the indigenous population's oscillated between 1 and 10%. Ubico, like Townsend, saw conversion to Christianity as an effective means to stave off communist organizing, and to more thoroughly integrate indigenous populations into a national economy increasingly oriented toward the North American market. When the Kaqchikel Bibles arrived, Townsend made sure the first one out of the box went not to the Kaqchikel people but into the hands of Ubico, who asked Townsend to do the same for the Kekchi Maya.[12] Townsend would later go on to fictionalize his experiences in Guatemala, with some anti-communist embellishments, in his novel *Tolo, The Volcano's Son*, which concludes with a Mayan Bible translation assistant foiling a Bolshevik-backed workers' revolution.[13] In Townsend's evangelical telling of the Christ narrative, material poverty is a symptom of a long-running spiritual debt rather than an economic necessity enforced by a ruling class.

10 Ibid., p. 72.
11 Ethel E. Wallis and Mary A. Bennett, *Two Thousand Tongues to Go: The Story of the Wycliffe Bible Translators* [1959] (New York/Evanston/London: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 33.

12 David Stoll, *Fishers of Men or Founders of Empire?: The Wycliffe Bible Translators in Latin America* (London: Zed Press/Cambridge: Cultural Survival, Inc., 1982), pp. 41–42.
13 William Cameron Townsend, *Tolo, The Volcano's Son* serial, *Revelation* (April through October, 1936).

Townsend's success in Guatemala attracted the attention of Mexican education reformer Moisés Sáenz, who invited the missionaries to continue their Good Work in Mexico. With blessings from the Dallas Theological Seminary, the "Old Fashioned Revival Hour" broadcast, and Chicago's Moody Bible Institute, Townsend organized the Summer Training Camp for Prospective Bible Translators in 1934, which connected his linguistic collaborators with students from American Bible colleges, who would now be spending their summers doing translation work in Mexico and Guatemala. Describing the project to the Central American Mission in Dallas, Townsend wrote: "We will enter Mexico as linguists rather than as missionaries. The Indian languages must be learned and the New Testament translated into them. It matters not to us whether we be classified as missionaries or ditchdiggers if we be given a chance to labor toward that end." The participants christened their international project the Summer Institute of Linguistics. "The advantage of a name like Summer Institute is that it doesn't sound too pretentious," Townsend reasoned. "A suspicious country wouldn't consider it a threat."[14] Evangelical institutions in the United States would question whether supporting a "scientific" linguistics organization was the best use of their funds, but the linguists required some gesture toward secularity to receive permissions from Central and South American governments. SIL was invited to join a center for the study of American indigenous languages at the University of Oklahoma in 1940, which provided academic validity and a basic stream of institutional funding. Townsend then founded a second organization better suited to fundraising among Protestants: Wycliffe Bible Translators, named after John Wycliffe, the translator of the first English Bible.[15] In *Thy Will Be Done: The Conquest of the Amazon*, historians Gerard Colby and Charlotte Dennett explain:

> [Townsend] worked out a delicate formula whereby those who supported his evangelical goals but were less keen on a scientific emphasis could be reconciled

---

14 Hefley, op. cit., pp. 83–96.   15 Wallis and Bennett, op. cit., p. 46.

with those who supported SIL's work but were leery of a scientific organization focusing on the Bible. [His] solution was simple: two organizations, both incorporated in California, one retaining SIL's name and 1937 constitution, the other adopting . . . the name Wycliffe Bible Translators. The organizations would have the same members and interlocking boards, but they would also offer the membership and its supporters two faces, one turned toward science, the other toward God.[16]

This splitting of identities allowed Townsend and his colleagues to fundraise from reassured North American church-goers and publish as Wycliffe Bible Translators (WBT), while simultaneously obtaining long-term field work contracts as SIL from governments both anti-clerical and Roman Catholic. This approach was immediately successful, and allowed SIL to begin establishing branches around the world. A prolific propaganda effort emerged alongside that expansion: an official bulletin-magazine (*Translation*), a film (*O, For a Thousand Tongues*, 1950), a commissioned institutional history from SIL-employed authors (*Two Thousand Tongues to Go: True Life Adventures of the Wycliffe Bible Translators Throughout the World Today*, 1959), and a case study of one particularly powerful conversion success story (*Tariri: My Story from Jungle Killer to Christian Missionary*, 1965). In 1957, SIL missionary Rachel Saint made an appearance on the NBC television show *This Is Your Life* alongside Dayuma, the first member of Ecuador's Huaorani tribe to leave the jungle for a Christian life.[17] Throughout the program, Saint and the show's host refer to the Huaorani as "Auca," a pejorative Quechua term for "savages."

SIL's growth brought with it a need for safe, reliable aviation

16 Gerard Colby and Charlotte Dennett, *Thy Will Be Done: The Conquest of the Amazon—Nelson Rockefeller and Evangelism in the Age of Oil* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers 1995), p. 123. David Stoll, in *Fishers of Men or Founders of Empire*, treated this same topic a decade earlier: "For decades some North American brethren were not impressed: they felt that SIL/WBT was violating the separation of church and state, entering into unholy alliances for the sake of expediency, and generally being dishonest. Gradually its success in penetrating closed fields and making converts demonstrated that it was a worthy cause. To this day SIL can prove, to its own satisfaction if no one else's, that it is not really a religious mission." Stoll, op. cit., pp. 4–5.

17 *This Is Your Life* featuring Rachel Saint (NBC, 1957).

Townsend and company at the 1936 Camp Wycliffe training session, Sulphur Springs, Arkansas. Hefley, op. cit., p. 97.

Rachel Saint, Dayuma, and other SIL International personnel on the television show *This Is Your Life* (NBC, 1957).

Bryce Wilner

and radio communication in increasingly remote parts of South America. Townsend campaigned for support from the Moody Bible Institute, who pledged money and surplus military equipment. In 1948, Townsend and his colleagues founded the Jungle Aviation and Radio Service (JAARS), a SIL subsidiary dedicated to jungle transport through air, land, and water. In 1961, Reverend Henderson Belk, son of the department store mogul William Henry Belk, donated 552 acres of land in Waxhaw, North Carolina to be developed into a JAARS office facility, runway, and hangar. By establishing new aviation infrastructure into parts of the Amazon rainforest, SIL could use JAARS to quickly transport their own workers and information technology to branches in Peru, Brazil, Colombia, and Ecuador, and to offer otherwise inaccessible flights to these regions for various industrial or political interests. Colby and Dennett note that, in addition to chartering planes for oil companies for as much as $35,000 a year, JAARS trained the Peruvian air force in jungle flying. One JAARS pilot, Larry Montgomery, took a leave of absence in the early 1960s to sell planes to CIA client regimes in Africa.[18] These entanglements with American geostrategic policy (including recurring geographic overlap with CIA operations or natural resource extraction sites) continued into the early 1980s, catalyzing a vocal indigenous resistance and political tensions within host governments.[19] Mexico, Panama, Columbia, Brazil, and others all abruptly shut down SIL missions in the years following. Colby and Dennett map SIL's financial backing throughout the mid-century: funding had come from an opaque chain of anodyne committees, education initiatives, academic departments and international institutes, many of which traced back to the Rockefeller Foundation. Cloaking the money flow, like controlling the alphabet, is an ancient technique of power, but a conspiratorial reading of SIL's history might be both accurate *and* paranoid. SIL plainly benefitted from its proximity to American networks of influence, but that didn't necessarily make it power's agent.[20]

18   Colby and Dennett, op. cit., pp. 248, 560.
19   Colin Clarke, *Class, Ethnicity, and Community in Southern Mexico: Oaxaca's Peasantries* (Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 182.

20   David Stoll, "Missionaries and Foreign Agents," *American Anthropologist*, Volume 98, Number 3 (September 1996).

The JAARS campus is still in operation today, regularly hosting tours of its fully-operational airport, training facilities, office buildings, archives, visiting-worker housing, recreation spaces, gift shop, and two museums. Townsend and his second wife, Elaine, are buried on-site. Emblazoned across the former's tombstone, an ominous call-to-action:

Dear ones:
By love serve one another. Finish the task:
Translate the Scriptures into every language.
Uncle Cam.

* * *

Across the street from the JAARS offices sits the campus's most public-facing entity, the Museum of the Alphabet, a modest, densely-packed, one-story building dedicated to world alphabetical history as observed by SIL employees over eight decades. Its dozen-or-so rooms feature artifacts and books from Townsend's travels, but are mostly filled with homespun models, hand-painted dioramas, text panels, murals, and infographics portraying alphabetic writing from around the world. Upon entering the lobby, visitors are immediately flanked by a welded sheet metal sculpture of the Tower of Babel, and a human-sized, wooden "Alphabet Tree" illustrating some of the innumerable forks that writing systems have taken throughout human civilization. Branches labelled "Linear B" or "Mixtec Aztec" abruptly end not far above the ground, while others marked "Modern Roman," "Armenian," "Gujarati," or "Chinese," carry us high up the tree and into the present day. This forking tree motif—where certain writing systems simply die out in some kind of seemingly natural selection—recurs throughout the museum's galleries. Between the Tower of Babel and the Alphabet Tree, a large wall graphic assures visitors: "About 750 million are still waiting for . . . the Word."

The history charted by the museum will be familiar to anyone who's taken an introductory typography class. It begins with models

of cuneiform tablets and Egyptian hieroglyphics, which slowly lead into alphabets by the North Semitic, the Phoenicians, the early- and classical-Greeks, the Etruscans, and then the Modern Roman characters we read in the west today, with significant attention paid to the technologies that made such writing and printing possible. The museum also features rooms dedicated to the development of Cyrillic, Aramaic, Arabic, Hebrew, Thai, Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, Chinese, Cherokee, and Indic writing systems. Each room communicates a profound fascination with—a love for—languages of the world; a love troubled by SIL's insistence that the Christian God is the "supreme authority in all matters of belief and practice."[21] The curators are careful to highlight consequential figures in the history of Bible production: Ulfilas, the Visigoth Bible translator who developed the Gothic alphabet; Alcuin of York, the English scholar who devised writing standards for Bible scribes; Mesrop Mashtots, who designed the Armenian alphabet to strengthen national identity through Bible translation; and Johannes Gutenberg, whose innovations produced the first printed Bible. SIL clearly sees itself as a spiritual successor to these figures. Future histories might list Townsend as a person of comparable typographic influence.[22]

Some of the Bibles on display in a nearby building were just published by Wycliffe Bible Translators in the previous year, featuring scriptures newly translated into Tegbo (Ghana), Nali and Ura (Papua New Guinea), Hawaiian Pidgin, and others. They represent the end-stage results of a focused global strategy. In 1999, WBT adopted a plan to initiate a Bible translation project "in every language community that needs it" by the year 2025, which was largely reliant on field research databases and operational tools then being developed by its sibling organization.[23] Over the subsequent two decades, SIL's Language Technology team and Vernacular Media Services unit (now called SIL International Media Services) have expanded their

21 https://jaars.org/about
22 During my visit to the JAARS campus in 2021, a gallery attendant told me that their next exhibition will showcase some of JAARS's decommissioned helicopters, whose cockpits will be available for visitors to sit in as they watch projected video of actual SIL flights over Papua New Guinea and other territories.

23 "Vision 2025 Rapidly Accelerating the Pace of Bible Translation: An Interview with Bob Creson, Wycliffe Bible Translators," *Mission Frontiers* (July–August 2006), pp. 13–15.
https://www.missionfrontiers.org/pdfs/28-4-cresson.pdf

Do you see why no zero is needed in any of the additive systems?

H = hekaton, **hundred**
▷ = deka, **ten**
Γ = pente, **five**
O stands for **one**; the rest are fractions.

OBC
50,
rals.)
haic

Replica of one of the earliest examples of writing, from Uruk, Sumer. Stylus was held at an angle to the clay surface for D-shaped impressions, and perpendicular for circular impressions.

col-
ca)
0

Etruscan - ROMAN - from 600 B.C.

Numerals are letters, but were derived, by Etruscans, from pre-writing notches in tally-sticks, except for M.
Some represent powers of 10, others are these halved.
Note: a symbol is divided in half to represent half its value.

Numbers recorded on these tally sticks are--top to bottom--19, 190, 42, 257.

Values	tally-stick notches	Etruscan	Roman
1	I	I	I
10	+ or X	+ or X	X
5	T or Λ	Λ	V (half of X)
100	* or *	*	C (* , ɔ|c , ɔ|c , c)
50	⊻ or ⋏	⋏	L (half of * = ↓, ↓, ⊥, L)
1000		⊕ or ⊠	M (formerly Φ, c|ɔ , cıɔ , ∞)
500			D (half of Φ)
10,000			ccıɔɔ (⊕ , ⊕ , ccıɔɔ)
5,000			Iɔɔ (half of ccıɔɔ)
100,000			cccıɔɔɔ (⊕ , ⊕ , ccↄ)
50,000			Iɔɔɔ (half of cccıɔɔɔ)

Examples:
CCCXXI = 321
MMMDCCV = 3,705

What numbers are these?
MLXXXVIII
IↃↃDCLXXX

Subtraction feature - a smaller number placed before a larger is subtracted.

er
zes.

GREEK ALPHA

Numerals are let... termined by a... In contrast to th... the numerals... the first 3 pow...
Either Capitals o... were used. Th... added to fill o...

Digits	
A or α = 1	I
B or β = 2	K
Γ or γ = 3	Λ
Δ or δ = 4	M
E or ε = 5	N
Ϛ or ϛ = 6	Ξ
Z or ζ = 7	O
H or η = 8	Π
Θ or θ = 9	G

Examples:
IA or ια = 11 (10
IB or ιβ = 12 (10
KA or κα = 21 (20
Compounding dev...
"apostrophe" ...
ʼA = 1000   ʼBΞ
ʼAA = 1001   ʼBΦ
M means multi...

Displays inside the Museum of the Alphabet, JAARS campus, Waxhaw, North Carolina. Photos taken by the author.

information technology resources to include audio and video production, media literacy, mobile app development for Biblical storytelling, and of course its now quite formidable catalogue of open source typographic software. Given its broad linguistics expertise, field work capacity and global reach, UNESCO had granted SIL official Consultative Status in 1992, and the Open Font License itself grew out of SIL's consulting role on the 2003 UNESCO "Initiative B@bel," which provided research support on rendering multiple character sets across different web browsers. SIL's evaluation of the technical and intellectual property issues at stake highlighted the need for a better legal framework to attend new font designs as they moved between operating systems and display codes, and were variously forked, modified, and embedded.[24] SIL today is a leading organization of font technologists, and even advises the Unicode consortium, which maintains encoding standards for text processing software, on the entry of new glyphs and characters. SIL is a unique case study in how our textual ecosystem itself encodes histories of American political intervention, and the religious motivations and linguistic dispossession that accompany neoliberal development.[25] If SIL's first sixty years were mutually coextensive with American hegemony, its last thirty have found a niche within the new imperialism of global computation, where its obsession with

24 "Initiative B@bel" came in the wake of two legal cases that sharply delimited the copyright protections and legal definitions of digital fonts, parsing the aesthetic expression of their glyphs from their instantiation as computer software: Bitstream Inc., et al., v. SWFTE International Ltd. (1993) and Adobe Systems, Inc. v. Southern Software, Inc. (1998). In August of 2003, Victor Gaultney noted both cases in a summary research document on font licensing and the surrounding intellectual property law questions, all of which clearly point towards the Open Font License that would evolve a short while later.
https://scripts.sil.org/cms/scripts/page.php?item_id=UNESCO_Font_Lic

25 Many nominally benevolent projects that document, teach or "preserve" languages have played a role in the subjugation of indigenous populations or the permanent alteration of the language itself. As linguists Lise M. Dobrin and Jeff Good point out, missionary work can radically change language ecologies and reshape indigenous speech forms: "SIL's commitment to Bible translation necessarily leads it to promote vernacular literacy, even though such interventions can be problematic in fragile linguistic ecologies without an indigenous written tradition. Missionary literacy work can carry with it certain biases, prioritizing reading over writing and approaching texts as inherently truth-bearing. Cultural assumptions about how the very process of speaking works may be at odds with Christian views; for example, the alignment of speech with inner belief that is so valorized by Western Judeo-Christianity (being truthful, nonsecretive, and so on) is by no means universal." Lise M. Dobrin and Jeff Good, "Practical language development: Whose mission?" *Language*, Volume 85, Number 3 (Washington, DC: Linguistic Society of America, September 2009), p. 621. While SIL might defensively claim that literacy, even apart from Biblical study, is its own virtue; forced literacy, even in an indigenous community's own language, is still the imposition of Empire. Dobrin and Good go on to point out that even SIL's font naming conventions, which serve as a standard for linguists of myriad backgrounds, take their names from Christian theology: "Doulos from the Greek for 'servant,' Charis from the Greek for 'grace,' Gentium from Latin 'of the nations.'"

linguistic interoperability, however divinely inspired, has provided a natural adaptation.

<p style="text-align:center">*　　*　　*</p>

In present-day Guatemala, Mayans are still fighting to work and teach their children in their own language. In a country where a minority of non-Mayans make the majority of public policy decisions, Mayans have founded their own alternative schools, media outlets, publishing workshops, and linguistics institutes to decolonize their children's education. Nikté Sis Iboy, one of the founders of the Mayan linguistics center Oxlajuuj Keej Maya' Ajzt'iib' (OKMA), explains the necessity to lead these endeavors themselves: "We've seen the great need that results because of the social and political situations that the Maya community faces these days. The government isn't interested in seeing Maya languages develop, spread, or be updated, so we can't wait for the government to do it. So we're doing it in order to somehow elevate the social status of Maya languages."[26] She acknowledges that OKMA must collaborate with European and North American linguists, epigraphers, archaeologists, and anthropologists—whose expertise is the direct result of settlers exporting vital Mayan artifacts from colony to metropole, and institutional wealth supporting centuries of their study—but insists on the importance of doing so while maintaining Mayan control of the restoration and education process within Central America.

In the 1990s, a group of farmers, students, and teachers founded the Cultural Association of Poqomam Qawinaqel, which lead to a primary school and radio station designed to further the use of the Mayan Poqomam language throughout southern Guatemala.[27] The Qawinaqel school adorns its walls with murals that commemorate Mayan experiences throughout history.[28] One such mural depicts the sixteenth century Franciscan missionary Diego de Landa

26 Nikté Sis Iboy, interview transcript (Night Fire Films, 2005), p. 6.
27 Cesar Gomez Moscut, "A Tale of One City, Two Languages," *Cultural Survival* (March 2013).
https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/tale-one-city-two-languages-palin-guatemala

28 "Living the Language—Guatemala: The Maya," *Al Jazeera* (April 25, 2021).
https://youtube.com/watch?v=zn4ZtNdqY5M

Murals at the Mayan alternative school Asociación Cultural Poqomam Qawinaqel in Guatemala City.
Al Jazeera, op. cit.

In Their Own Language

who, after destroying nearly all written record of Mayan civilization in 1562, embarked on a campaign to teach Mayans the Spanish alphabet so that they could use it in translating and transliterating their own language, and then more easily be converted to the Catholic faith. This instruction was used by the Mayans to compile and preserve what they could of their cultural heritage as it fell victim to settler barbarism. A Kaqchikel Mayan, Francisco Hernández Arana Xajilá, used the Latin transliteration of his language, so soon after being forced to learn it, to write *The Annals of the Cakchiquels* (c. 1571–1604), a history of his people that competes with those then being written by the Spanish.[29] Xajilá's text was found two hundred forty years later in the convent archives of the Saint Francis church in Antigua, and has since provided invaluable clues to the meaning and pronunciation of Mayan hieroglyphs. Some contemporary Mayan scribes still record prophesies and prayers in an archaic form of Latin script identical to what the sixteenth century friars taught their Mayan students.[30] Language and literacy are unpredictable. The settler can only gamble that imposing his own language will aid indigenous assimilation or hasten their arrival at salvation. It may also be used to reanimate what was lost in the process, or to convince future generations of his wickedness.

29 Charles Gallenkamp, *Maya: The Riddle and Rediscovery of a Lost Civilization* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1976), pp. 12–13.
30 David Lebrun, *Breaking the Maya Code* (Night Fire Films, 2008), 01:46:30.

Following page:
Detail of a diagram by Colby and Dennett, op. cit., p. 45.

Rockefeller Philanthropies

W. C. Towns[end]

WILLIAM CAMERON TOWNSEND

FEDERAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

INTER-CHURCH WORLD MOVEMENT (1919–20)

[VOLUN]TEER MOVEMENT FOR FOREIGN MISSIONS
John Mott
Robert E. Speer
James M. Speers

1915

1927

COMMITTEE ON COOPERATION IN LATIN AMERICA
John Mott
Robert E. Speer
Rev. Samuel Inman

COMMITTEE ON BENEVOLENCE
Raymond Fosdick
(John Mott)
Rev. Wm. S. Richardson
Rev. Arthur Packard

COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL & RELIGIOUS SURVEYS
John Mott
Raymond Fosdick
Rev. G.E.E. Lindquist

INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL & RELIGIOUS RESEARCH

Home Missions Survey
American Indian Survey
"The Red Man in the United States" (1924)
Foreign Missions Survey

LAYMEN'S FOREIGN MISSIONS INQUIRY
(John Mott)
James M. Speers

"Rethinking Missions" (1932)
"Native" clergy orientation

YWCA

[F]. Gates

[LA SPE] ROCK[EFELLER] MEM[ORIAL] F... (B. ...)

SO[CIAL] SCIE[NCE] RES[EARCH] COU[NCIL] (B. R...)

M. Gamio
MEXICO
Anthropology

M. Sae...
MEXIC[O]
Rural Education

ROCKE-FELLER SANITARY COMMISSION

ROCKEFE[LLER] UNIVERS[ITY]

INTERNATIONAL HEALTH BOARD

Almon C. Bacone

BACONE SCHOOL FOR INDIANS (INDIAN UNIVERSITY)
later called BACONE COLLEGE

INTER-[NATI]ONAL [MISSION]ARY COUNCIL
[John] Mott

HOME M[ISSIONS]

Rev. Harry [E.] Fosdick

[RIVE]RSIDE [CH]URCH

UNION THEO-LOGICAL SEMINARY

COMMISSION [ON I]NDIANS IN [L]ATIN [AM]ERICA
[Tho]mas C. [M]offett [(E]C. SEC.)
[L.] Legters [(FIE]LD REP.)
[Pioneer] Mission [Ag]ency

[INTE]R-[NAT]IONAL [MIS]SIONARY [COUN]CIL
[John] Mott
Robert E. Speer

ROCKEFELLER MEMORIAL

ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION
George Vincent (Pres. 1917–...)

Agri. Science Health Div. Div. Div.

COMMITTEE ON COOPERATION IN LATIN AMERICA (1916)

COMMITTEE ON COOPERATION IN A[MERICA]
(John Mott)
Rev. Wm. S. Richardson
Rev. Art...

COMMITTEE ON [COOPERA]TION