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## Your Sins Shall Be White as Yucca (Part 1 of 3)

Wycliffe missionaries Gene and Marie Scott gave nearly 40 years of their lives translating the New Testament for a small tribe in the jungles of Peru. Was it worth it?

POSTED OCTOBER 27, 1997



Squeezed into the rear of the six-seater Helio Courier float plane, I gazed out the small window at the shimmering surface of Lake Yarinacocha—our “runway”—in the Amazon jungle near Pucallpa, Peru. My husband, Bob, and I had been invited to attend the dedication ceremony of the Sharanahua (pronounced *Shadah-nah-wah*) New Testament recently completed by Wycliffe Bible translators Gene (“Scotty”) and Marie Scott. Ours was the last of four small planes taking off from Wycliffe’s translation center, also called Yarinacocha, bound for the village of Gasta Bala.

With engines roaring, our pilot, Pete, skimmed the lake, and after the windows cleared of the spray, I saw the saltbox shanties of Pucallpa become a distant shadow.

A thick carpet of rain forest soon subsumed all evidences of civilization. There were no roads, no houses, no power lines. Only the snaking brown Ucayali River offered any contrast to the sea of green below.

Gasta Bala is home to about 150 of the 450 members of the Sharanahua tribe. The only way to get there is to fly two and a half hours into the heart of the jungle. (One tour book offered little information about this part of Peru, citing “inaccessibility.”)

Gene and Marie Scott first entered this jungle as newlyweds in 1958. Forty years later—and four children, raised alternatively between the jungle and Yarinacocha; a fire that consumed all their work; a flood that washed away their village; and Scotty's five-year bout with chronic fatigue syndrome—Scotty, now 69, was hand-carrying the only copy of the leather-bound Sharanahua New Testament that he could secure. The other 499 copies were stalled in customs at the airport in Lima. He kept the New Testament in a Ziploc bag to protect it against the rain-forest humidity. He called it "a pearl of great price."

For good reason. Apart from the transcendent value of this newly completed translation, the monetary cost alone of such an undertaking gives one pause. The Scotts estimate that their support when they were raising their kids on the field (30-some years ago) fell somewhere between \$1,500 and \$2,000 a month (and they never had enough to put aside funds for their children's college education). That figure can be easily doubled today. The work associated with translating one language often requires decades of effort by at least two people.

So the obvious question is, as one journalist put it: "Is taking some of the brightest recruits, training them and sending them to spend 20-30 years translating the Bible into a language that in some cases is only spoken by 100 to 150 people and, in many—if not most—cases, is a dying language, the best use of the church's resources?" Or, to put this into the context of the Scotts' work: Is 40 years of work for 500 copies of the New Testament—sold for about \$2.00 each (giving the books value so that the delicate pages won't be used as toilet paper)—with only plastic bags separating them from jungle rot, worth the monetary and human cost?

Wycliffe's strategy has been challenged for other reasons in anthropological circles. In his book *Fishers of Men or Founders of Empire?* David Stoll charged that the missionary enterprise has introduced Western "imperialistic" values into Amazonian cultures. A more recent—and more scathing—book, *Thy Will Be Done*, by Gerald Colby and Charlotte Dennett, asserts that Wycliffe founder Cameron Townsend worked in cahoots with Nelson Rockefeller to advance oil interests and destroy tribal culture. (Charges so spurious that even Stoll, in a review, enters a plea in Wycliffe's defense: "The authors never found the missing link between their two epic figures.")

Yet it has been commonly regarded that, despite their "religious" motivations, the linguistic work of Wycliffe (known on the field as sil, for Summer Institute of Linguistics) is unimpeachable. Giving these tribes their own written language (and teaching them to read it) has vouchsafed these cultures from total assimilation.

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Looking down on all that green as the Helio hummed over the *selva*, I wondered how these tribes could be found at all, let alone raised to literacy and cultural engagement with the larger world. Hidden so far in the heart of the jungle, how easily they could have been either completely forgotten by the larger world, or—like

the victims of the turn-of-the-century rubber barons—exploited and abused, left at the mercy of whatever forces or influences might stumble into their world.

These missionaries didn't "stumble" upon this, or any, tribe. They sought them out. Lambert Anderson, translator for the Ticuna tribe, explains, "We hear about them and then go down the river looking for them."

The Helio banked left, then right, and the temperature and humidity level rose inside the cabin. We were getting close. At last I could see a clearing below us—the landing strip (the only visual marker for the pilots), skirted with thatched-roof huts.

"The river is up. That's good. Lots of water to land on," Scotty said. (I wondered what we would have done had the river been "down.") We circled the village from the air—the plane attracting swarms of curiosity seekers to the riverside to watch us land—and then Pete pulled the Helio into the path of the Purus River, which seemed to rise up and swoop us into its course. We idled to the water's edge, pulling up next to some dugout canoes. It seemed as if the entire population of children had descended the bank to greet us.

We had powdered our feet and ankles with sulfur to keep the chiggers from burrowing into our legs; the "deet" factor in our insect repellent exceeded 95 percent (Cutter is about 7 percent). The gnats swarmed and attacked as expected, but my toxic repellent kept them at bay. (Some in our group, though, who had arrived earlier, looked like they had skin diseases, their faces and necks were so ravaged with bug bites.) It was so hot and muggy that we instantly wilted, and so buggy that we wore long pants tucked into our heavy socks, despite the heat. With our backpacks, drinking water, and other supplies in hand, our small crew—led by children and other members of the tribe—hiked the ridge that led from the river to the village.

The landing strip dictated the layout of the village, with most of the huts extending the length of it on one side. We walked in single file, headed for the government-built schoolhouse where we would be bunking, staying on the path, away from the chigger-infested grass. We greeted residents who dangled in hammocks suspended from ceilings of their open-sided huts. Some sat casually on the raised floors. In this kind of heat there is little else they can do at this time of day. The tribe greeted us in Sharanahua: *Maw maw owa* ("You have come").

## **HARD EDGES**

SIL came to Peru in 1946, working out of a rented hotel room until 1948. Their interest stems from what one writer calls a "multiplicity of Peruvian cultures"—including some 55 Amazonian tribes and 26 Highland Quechuan Indian groups. Eighty-one Indian languages are still in use. Wycliffe personnel now work in 32 Peruvian languages, having completed New Testament translations in 26 languages (25 by SIL and one—Cusco Quechua—with the United Bible Societies), with two more "at the press" in South Korea. The Scotts' translation of the Sharanahua New Testament is one of the most recently completed.

When the Scotts arrived in 1958 they had no transporting visions that their destiny lay with the Sharanahuas. "I was originally asked to go to the Cashinahua Indians," says Scotty. And the only way to reach them was by way of a seven-day canoe trip. So members of the Sharanahuas escorted Scotty. He remembers thinking, *They seem a lot more proud than the Cashinahuas. They'd be hard to work with.* "You should never say what you *don't want*," he reflects. "That may be what the Lord is going to ask you to do."

Plans changed, and the director thought the Scotts should go to the Sharanahuas instead. Scotty recalls a meeting of all the translators in Peru when a group leader asked, "How were you called to your tribe?"

Many answered with "glowing reports" on how the Lord called them to go to a given tribe. But when it came to Scotty, he said, "The director told me to go. That's how I got my call."

They first entered the tribe bringing medicines to treat such common ailments as parasites and the flu. This approach, commonly employed by SIL, predisposes the tribe to see the missionaries as healers, not as destroyers. Marie, upon entering the tribe for the first time, says she was "in shock." She walked into the "house" made for them, covered top to bottom with muslin cloth (to keep the bugs out), and thought, *Well, this is going to be my home. I'll just have to get used to it and then like it.* She adapted (eventually doing away with the muslin cloth, which only made the home darker and hotter) and felt blessed when she had a new palm-leafed roof: "As long as you have a new roof, you're okay. When the roof gets old, every time the wind blows, pieces fall into your food."

When the Scotts reflect upon their early days with the Sharanahua, they recall many "hard edges" that divulged the "tribal personality." Steve Scott, 36, Gene and Marie's second son, recalls some names given to children: *I Ate My Dog in the Remote Past* and *I Killed My Father in the Remote Past*. Dave Scott, 39, the oldest of the Scotts' four children, remembers a young girl named *Nobody*.

"It was a respected thing to be able to lie to a person in such a way as to gain favor for yourself and get away with it," Dave Scott explains, which predictably resulted in intratribal rivalries and hostilities. It was not uncommon for one member to lead several families downriver to settle in a new location as a result of some conflict.

The men of the tribe routinely took more than one wife and regularly beat them as a means of controlling their households. "If a wife ran away, the husband would beat her so that she wouldn't do it again," says Scotty. "You could sometimes hear them being beaten." Growing up, Dave remembers the chief had six wives and spent days chasing up and down the river to reclaim them after they had run away. Many times the Scotts dressed the wounds of these hurting women and occasionally intervened during the beatings, despite tribal protocol that no outsider interfere with tribal business. The women often lived in fear of their husbands.

But the men had fears, too. Says Marie, "They didn't go out at night unless there was a full moon so they could see. They thought evil spirits were lurking around in the dark." They also feared death and the spirit of loved ones who died. When a person died, the family would wail exceedingly and then take the deceased person's belongings and bury them or throw them in the river. The home and garden would be destroyed, and the family would move to a new location. "They did not want to think about that person, because they didn't want his or her spirit bothering them," says Marie.

So when "Fasanahua" and "Yambacora" (the names given to Scotty and Marie, respectively, when the tribe took them into their kinship system) first talked about this man named Jesus, "We thought, *This is a very nice story.* We liked hearing it," remembers Cuscopindi (Cusco), a rising leader in the church and a cotranslator. "It was like hearing one of our own stories, only it was a nice one."

But the tribe was slow to appropriate this “nice story.” Gustavo (“Gus”), the tribe’s chief, was the first to make Jesus his “Owner” in 1965, but, as Scotty says it, “his life was up and down,” and the confession offered little inspiration. “We didn’t see any fruit for a long while,” Scotty says.

Not for 25 *years*, to be exact. All the while, the Scotts faced many setbacks. The members of the first village where they lived allowed them to “butcher” the language as they made feeble attempts to learn it, never correcting them (and sometimes mocking them). (“We never realized we were saying [things] wrong until we went into another village,” Scotty says.) Then, in 1965, their jungle home caught fire, and all of their translation notes were lost. They were forced to move to another Sharanahua village, San Marcos, elsewhere on the river, where they lived for nearly 20 years.

In the meantime, Gus’s volatile disposition periodically erupted into hostility toward Scotty, slowing, sometimes thwarting, the translation effort. His erratic temperament became a source of heartache for the Scotts.

The early 1980s brought mixed blessings. By now the tribe had fully embraced the Scotts. They had taken them into their kinship system and came to accept that the Scotts were not there to exploit them, as the rubber barons had done. “One of the most wonderful times for us was when Gustavo got up and said that Marie and I were not there to get anything from them—that I hadn’t come there to take their women, like some of the traders had done—but that we were there to give them God’s Word. They realized that we cared about them.”

But disaster struck another time. The river was rising due to rainfall, but “the Sharanahuas told us the water level never rose any higher than the airstrip,” says Scotty, so they were not concerned. Soon, however, a house on one side of theirs collapsed in the swiftly running water, and then another member of the tribe came over and said, “Our house is beginning to tilt. Would you mind if we came over to your house?” Scotty’s house was new, and the support poles were deep into the ground, so those who hadn’t escaped on what remained of the canoes (the others had been swept away) took refuge there.

*Part one of three parts; [click here to read part two.](#)*

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Wycliffe missionaries Gene and Marie Scott gave nearly 40 years of their lives translating the New Testament for a small tribe in the jungles of Peru. Was it worth it?

POSTED OCTOBER 27, 1997



Part two of three parts; [click here to read part one.](#)

"The water kept coming—you could hear it rushing under the house."

This was the first and only time the Scotts pushed "the panic button"—a switch on the back of the radio that alerted the team at Yarinacocha that an emergency situation was at hand. The Scotts asked for prayer that the water would stop rising. That long, sleepless night they rehearsed the promise in Isaiah 43:2: "When you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you."

"At daybreak, the water was touching the bottom of our floor, but not one of the children was wet. Soon they came in their canoes and took us out."

The village was destroyed by that flood. Gustavo had taken several families and moved east to Gasta Bala and urged the Scotts to join them there. "We went through a fire to move to one place and through a flood to get moved to another place," says Marie.

Gasta Bala has been their tribal home ever since.

The Spirit broke through in 1984 shortly after the flood and subsequent relocation to Gasta Bala. This was the first authentic evidence the Scotts had seen that the Spirit was beginning to operate. Gustavo, who had asked Jesus to be his Owner 20 years earlier, owned up to his wayward lifestyle and repented. "Gustavo was translating the Books of Matthew and John with me," says Scotty. "The Holy Spirit was driving the Word deeply into his 'innermost.' One Sunday, when most of the village had gathered for a meeting, Gustavo stood before his people and said, 'I have been a poor example to you as your chief. Not only have I been getting drunk myself, but I have been bringing the liquor to you. Also I have been living in immorality.' He prayed and asked the Lord to forgive him and said that he wanted Jesus to give him victory."

Shortly after that several men from the tribe gathered around him and laid hands on him, "as they had read in the Book of Acts," and prayed: "Lord, help him not to get angry. Help him to preach the Word plainly to us. May he not beat his wife."

But it is a quantum leap to get from the early days of scribbled notes to the place where the tribe can pray "as they had read in the Book of Acts."

### **"GETTING IT RIGHT"**

The translation process for the Scotts unfolded, in its early stages, according to the "typical" trajectory for translation work. Starting from scratch (including teaching tribal members which way to hold a book and how to grip a pencil), it usually takes about five years to get a complete picture of the basic language in order to begin translating. The first four or five years the Scotts simply listened and took notes. "We would ask them things like, 'How do you say "our house" and "my house"?' We would write a symbol for each sound. Then we'd have to find out where the word breaks are and then begin analyzing the grammar."

By 1962 they had written an alphabet and developed a preliminary vocabulary. At this early stage, they began the process of Bible translation (though nothing was published). "We started about three or four years after we got out there," says Marie. "We didn't wait until we had learned everything about the language—we learned it as we were working. Gene was working on the Bible translation, and I was working with the literacy, making schoolbooks."

"I think the first translation I did was the flood story," Scotty recalls. "When we finished translating it, I gave it to the [then] chief, Alfonso, and he began to laugh.

" 'Alfonso, why are you laughing?' I asked.

" 'My grandmother told me this story,' he countered. 'But she didn't have it exactly right.' "

Over the next 10 to 15 years, a translator will collect and assimilate more data, rehearse syntax, decipher tonal distinctions, constantly refining. (Marie says, "There are *still* aspects of the Sharanahua grammar that we don't understand.") Computer technology has expedited the process, but sometimes unforeseeable complications thwart this trajectory. The health of the linguists, family problems, tribal problems, and how

far the tribe has to come all play into the time it takes. And beyond translation, the linguists serve as the tribe's only access to the outside world, so they are frequently sidetracked with urgencies and demands unrelated to Bible translation. They become overwhelmed and exhausted. After several months of living with the tribe, they need to return to the SIL translation center and living community in order to get any serious translation work done.

Translating the Bible into these heretofore unwritten languages and making it accessible to these isolated cultures sometimes requires a radical departure from conventional translation principles. "You do not just translate *words*," says linguist Wes Thiesen (who translated the New Testament for the Bora tribe in Peru), "you translate *meaning*. You can translate it word for word, but then it won't make any sense to them." This is what linguists call the "functional" approach (vis-a-vis the "formal" approach) to translation.

This means, as SIL's biblical researcher David Henne explains, that translators on the field "aim to preserve the meaning of the original text in a way that is understood in the community according to their customs and language structures." The translator ascertains the biblical author's intent and then introduces that intent into the frame of reference of the tribal culture. The Sharanahua, for obvious reasons, have no concept of snow. So to introduce the idea of "whiteness" such as Isaiah 1:18 reflects ("your sins ... shall be white as snow"), Scotty would interchange the snow metaphor with "freshly peeled yucca" (a plant native to warmer climes, with stout stems and edible, potatolike roots). He applied the "yucca" metaphor to his translation of Matthew 17:2/Mark 9:3 when Jesus' clothes, during the Transfiguration, also become "white as ... yucca."

*"Lord, I've tried to step out from this,  
and no one is coming to volunteer to do  
the translation ... I'm just going to  
lay myself in your arms and trust you to  
give the strength to see it through."*

This is called finding the "mutual cognitive environment." And that can get complicated. When Jesus reiterated the Law (Matt. 19:5), saying, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife," Scotty extrapolated the thrust of the text and recast it in terms the tribe could appropriate. "The Sharanahuas don't leave father and mother when they get married; they often stay right in the same house. One thing they do differently than in our version of marriage is share a mosquito net. So we translated it: 'For this reason a man shall have the same mosquito net as his wife.'" This evokes, in Sharanahua terms, both the "leaving" and the "cleaving" aspect of the command.

Scotty used more than eight different English versions of the New Testament, as well as a Spanish version, along with a Sharanahua cotranslator, and still wrestled with how to make many biblical concepts accessible. For example, greeting one another with a "holy kiss" (1 Thess. 5:25) was an alien concept in this culture where it was "a respected thing" to lie and gain advantage. Scotty interpreted the essence of Paul's mandate and translated it, "Tell good to each other."



Scotty struggled with how to render 1 Corinthians 11:7-9, because the Sharanahua grammatical structures did not conform to Paul's meandering style. He came up with this translation: "Therefore, a man when he praises God and when he's telling God's Word, is not to put his hat on. God made man to be like himself. Therefore my dear friends if we are in God we will be hearted like God. God made man first. Then he created woman. And God made woman for a man. And he did not make man for the woman. God made men and women to companion together."

## **PERSEVERANCE**

Many times in the course of their life's work, the Scotts felt overwhelmed with discouragement. The natural disasters took their toll; the decades of seeing no spiritual fruit began to wear on them; Gus's spiritual peaks and troughs didn't help. Scotty recalls a time when he and Marie were so discouraged, and Marie stepped outside on a starry night—the stars there adorn the night sky like Christmas lights—looked up, and prayed, "Lord, we are so discouraged. If we're really supposed to be here, I know you could cause a star to fall."

"That instant," Scotty says, "she saw a star shoot across the sky. So I went out, being equally discouraged, and did the same thing. I asked the Lord to show me a shooting star as a sign of encouragement."

"No star," he laughs. "I guess one sign was enough."

Elaine Townsend, Wycliffe founder Cameron Townsend's wife, once asked, "Scotty, have you ever felt like quitting?"

He answered, "Which time do you mean?"

Twice he asked to be replaced. "I went to the director and said, 'It's going so slowly. I think someone with a Ph.D. could come here and do a better job than I am doing.'"

But the head of the linguistic department told Scotty outright that that would be "a catastrophe."

"So I said, 'Well, Lord, I've tried to step out from this, and no one is coming to volunteer to do the translation for the Sharanahuas. The director does not want us to go. I'm just going to lay myself in your arms and trust you to give the wisdom and the strength to see this translation through.'"

## **TRANSFORMATION**

During the season of awakening that broke out in 1984, as tribal members were gaining literacy, every member (save five adults) gathered every evening to study the Scriptures (Gustavo read them aloud) and pray. This lasted "eight years for sure," says Scotty, which carried the effect of tribal members becoming more "hearted like God." Facing death, the dying began to hope for living with Jesus, while family members no longer grieved with unrestrained wails or feared visiting spirits of the dead. Gustavo's sister, Yahuandi, when she was dying of cancer, told everybody, "Now I'm going to go be with Jesus. I'm going to die. When I die, I don't want you to burn the house down. Don't throw all the good things in the river. I'm going to be with Jesus, and it's much better there. It's okay to wail, but don't wail too long."

The same can be said of their fear of darkness. "We're not terribly afraid of tigers in the jungle, because we know how to kill them," says Cusco. "But the people who do not know the Lord will not go far from their homes at night because they are too afraid of the dark. But we are not afraid. The spirits are nothing."

"Telling good" to one another has meant, Cusco adds, that "we don't lie to one another anymore." This, in turn, has diminished intratribal conflicts and jealousies. And as the men have begun to "companion together" with their wives, the beatings have dissipated, and women do not live in fear of their husbands. According to Cusco, the men no longer feel it is "necessary" to have extramarital relationships.

I noted this transformation in the faces and demeanor of the women of the tribe. The older women, in many instances, bore a wizened countenance betraying the brutal realities of their hard lives. Their cheekbones were jugged and asymmetrical, their eyes crestfallen and sad. I asked one woman if I could take her picture, and she recoiled in horror, shooing me away. She feared that if I took her picture I would steal her soul.

The younger women, on the other hand, interacted casually and freely. Their chiseled features, wide smiles, and shining eyes proclaimed—without their realizing it—that the gospel ethic had made a difference in their quality of life. They didn't fear their husbands *or* my pointed lens; they smiled and asked for copies.

*Part two of three parts; [click here to read part three](#).*

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### THE DEDICATION

It took 40 years for Scotty and Marie to see this special day when the church building filled up with Sharanahuas celebrating their finished task. There was no relief from heat that Sunday morning when we ambled down the village path to attend the dedication service. (I looked and smelled like a withered flower, but I had to let go of it.) We carried chairs from the schoolhouse to accommodate what would be "an overflow" crowd (members from other Sharanahua villages up the river were attending). They came as families, or alone, wearing hand-me-down Western clothes and sitting on the dirt floor.

The service began with Cusco leading simple choruses sung in Sharanahua. Gus spoke in a monotone but used extravagant arm gestures—and his hearers remained engaged. Cusco said that it was a sign of the end times that the rest of the New Testaments couldn't be here. The single New Testament to be presented that morning was hidden in Scotty's notebook, not to be unveiled until the final moments of the service.

Scotty had asked my husband, who is a pastor, if he would bring a message. So Bob told a story (as Scotty interpreted) about Charles Spurgeon. One day Spurgeon encountered a "bad" and "sly" little boy who had a field sparrow in a cage. Spurgeon asked the boy what he was going to do with the bird. The boy said, "Play with it for a while, then torture and kill it." (This evoked laughter from the Sharanahuas because some of their little boys do that to birds, too.) Spurgeon asked how much the boy wanted for him to purchase the bird. The boy mocked: "It's a worthless bird. You don't want it." But the boy sold it for "400 [Peruvian] soles—\$200." (The Sharanahuas gawked.) Spurgeon then opened the cage and set the bird free.

The Sharanahuas liked my husband's story. He had them laughing and gasping and shaking their heads. My husband continued: Spurgeon took the empty cage and placed it on his pulpit at church the following day. He told his parishioners how—just as he himself had done with the boy—Jesus went to the Devil and engaged in a similar discourse. "You don't want these people," the Devil mocked. "They're worthless." The Devil said he wanted to "play with" and then "torture" them. But Jesus wanted to purchase the people in the Devil's cage, so the Devil finally relented. He would sell them, the Devil said, but it would cost Jesus his blood.

"There's a problem," Bob said. "Some people are still trapped in the Devil's cage. Some are there by their own choice. But others are in darkness because they don't know that the cage is open. The Sharanahuas needed to hear that, and God asked many people to go and tell them. Many said, 'It's too far.' 'It's too hot.' 'I don't know their language.'

"But," he continued, "Scotty and Marie said, 'We'll go and tell the Sharanahuas.'"

Bob finished his message by recalling the passage in Revelation (a book the Sharanahuas now recognized): "There before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne ... crying out in a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God' " (7:9-10).

"Your language will never be lost," my husband said. "Sharanahua will be spoken in heaven."

## **WHERE IT'S NEVER DARK**

I met Charles Love, a geologist and anthropologist from Western Wyoming College, during the latter portion of my Peru adventure. We stood face to face on the summit of Huayna Picchu, the jutting mountain overlooking the famous Incan ruins of Machu Picchu. Wiping his sweating brow with a kerchief while I leaned on my walking stick, he boldly inquired about our trip to the jungle tribe: "Were you there with some of *those missionaries*? What do you think of *all that*?" he asked.

Never one to shirk a good row, I took the bait: "Well, their language is written down; they know how to read; they have their oral tradition documented; they have learned to interact with the larger world; they aren't afraid of the dark anymore; the men don't beat the women anymore. I guess you will have to decide whether or not that's a 'good thing.'"

He demurred: "I'll bet if you ask any one of those old women if they thought wives ought to be beaten, they'd say yes." He argued that *any* influence, redemptive or not, is not "good." The tribes are better "left alone" rather than corrupted by "Western imperialism," and worse, the Bible.

I countered that, if anything, the intervention of "those missionaries" staves off the inevitable encroachment of the outside world that would otherwise assimilate the tribe into the larger societal pool.

*Is 40 years of work for 500 copies of New Testaments—sold for about \$2.00 each (so they won't be used as toilet paper)—with only plastic bags separating them from jungle rot, worth the cost?*

But there was no convincing him. Some will never concur that introducing the gospel is right. They will always argue that it is "better to leave them alone"—though I wonder how many of them have heard the wails and dressed the wounds of a bloodied and bruised wife.

But it is a different question, whether the human and monetary cost of this ministry is worth so disproportionate a "return." Arthur Lightbody, director of public relations for wbt, responds with three points: First, he says, nobody questions a pastor who earns \$40,000 a year to serve a small congregation of a hundred for 20 years. Second, he points out that, were it not for SIL's presence in some of these hard places, translation work would not be done. Should we *not go* until it is cheaper? he asks. Third, he says, SIL is working more through the nationals, rather than sending in people from the West—though he adds that in some countries there is so much intertribal or ethnic hostility that outsiders have a greater impact as neutral third parties.

Yet even these reasonable responses did not answer that question for me as well as a story that Scotty told did: Shortly after he arrived, before he knew the language well, an elderly man in the tribe was lying in his hammock, dying. Scotty felt an urgency to share about Jesus with this dying man, despite his being tentative with the language.

He went to the man and said in halting Sharanahua, "You are going to die." He tried to explain to him who Jesus was and then asked him if he wanted to go and be with Jesus after he died.

The man said no. Why would he commit his afterlife into the hands of a complete stranger?

Scotty persisted. He helped the man understand that Jesus was good, that he was a friend. After a bit more persuading, the old man said that he would go with Jesus into the next life. Scotty helped him to pray: "Jesus, please take me."

Death closed in when suddenly the old man's strength returned and his eyes widened: "I see him!"

But the story doesn't end there.

As the Sharanahuas were burying him, throwing dirt on his body along with his machete and his few personal belongings, a man from the tribe said to Scotty: "It is dark where he is."

Scotty said, "It is dark where his bones and flesh are, but where his spirit is, it is light and will never be dark."

"Never dark? Did your father know about this place?" the man asked.

"Yes, my father knew about it," Scotty said.

"Did your grandfather know about it?"

"Yes."

"Did your ancestors know about it?"

"I suppose they did," Scotty said.

Crestfallen, the man replied, "My father and my grandfather never knew about this place where it is never dark. And I am hearing about it only now."

### **THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE**

The rustic church building was packed that steamy Sunday morning when the Sharanahua New Testament was dedicated. But on the grand scale of things, the number who came was minuscule—it was a small building. "Fasanahua's" single copy of the New Testament represented the culmination of his life's work—the pearl of great price. And the price *has* been great, for the benefit of only these few.

But when Scotty presented that one copy, holding it up for all to see, I looked into the faces of our brothers and sisters, people like *I Ate My Dog in the Remote Past* and *Nobody*. They understood that that book carried promises: That their sins are washed as white as freshly peeled yucca; that there is a place where it is always light and never dark; that the Sharanahuas will stand with the nations of the world around the throne of God in heaven; that they don't have to fear the night anymore.

I wondered, how do you put a price on a field sparrow set free?

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