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New Testament arrives for the Ikoma people of Tanzania

Strong community engagement leads to robust turnout for big celebration day

March 2023, Bwitengi Village, Mara Region, Tanzania
by Kenny Grindall (Communications Coordinator, SIL Tanzania)

"I'm really happy. God has given us the New Testament in our language, Ikoma. I can read it with my children, we can read it together. It's the work of God! God is good."
— Neema, Ikoma speaker at the celebration

In northern Tanzania, the Ikoma language community (about 34,700 people) lives on the very edge of the famous Serengeti plains. Despite a morning of threatening clouds in rainy season, a growing crowd flocks to the small village of Bwitengi for a celebration like no other.

Work began on the Ikoma translation project (part of the Mara Cluster) in 2009. Fourteen years later, the reason for this event may be a first for the community, but the scene is familiar. A large circle of outdoor tented seating is ready for several hundreds. As the hired sound crew makes final checks of their equipment, the day's Master of Ceremonies repeats for all within hearing the news of what is about to happen here:

On this day, for the first time, the completed Ikoma New Testament is available to all.

Several young men arrive on foot, each carrying a large plain cardboard box with "Ikoma NT" stamped on the side. They leave and return with more boxes. A few church choirs arrive early, standing out in their matching bright colours and patterns. Seats begin to fill, and a troupe in traditional costume parades in with style, drawing more people. Crowds part and cheer, some even joining in as the group brings their cultural singing and dancing to centre stage. The MC hurries to announce them while continuing to welcome arriving guests.

"My team shares the office with this Ikoma translation team," says Albinus Wayne, Mara Cluster's Translation Department Coordinator. A local pastor, Wayne also serves as a Translation Advisor for several projects and as a translator himself on the Simbiti project, in the same cluster. He and his wife Lucy came with a large group from that office in Musoma, about three hours away, to celebrate together with their colleagues, friends, and neighbours.

"We also share with each other," he adds, "everything we learn about how to translate God's Word faithfully and naturally. The very important thing to me now, for this Word of God in Ikoma language, is to see it transform their lives and make people live according to God's instructions."

“And I’ve been working as a reading teacher,” Lucy chimes in, “helping teach Ikoma people how to read and write in their language. It is very important to me, too, that they have Scriptures in their own language as they do now, so they can teach it to each other and know God.”

The crowd swells, and on the fringe of the grounds a sweet reunion is taking place. The Ikoma project team (and others from the office) have spotted a bus offloading their foreign colleagues, who once lived among them but have since relocated outside of Tanzania to work remotely for various reasons. In this warm culture, heartfelt greetings take some time.

As clouds break up, the day’s celebration gets well underway. Short speeches from distinguished guests and project team members alternate with dancing choirs for much of the morning. People keep coming, and groups of curious onlookers soon fill every patch of ground surrounding the packed tents. A small truck appears and quickly unloads another tent and many more chairs. Before it’s fully raised, the crowd is filling it to escape the sun.

“The Ikoma team were going around villages with a megaphone,” explains a colleague. “In the weeks before the dedication they announced it that way, and also on a local radio station many people listen to.”

Finally, the songs and testimonies take a turn many people have been waiting for all morning. From the back of the crowd, a dancing procession breaks into the open area inside the circle of tents. At the front of the line the Ikoma translators shuffle to the beat, carrying a large box wrapped in bright gold foil that gleams in the sun.

After dancing the box around the circle for all to see, the translators bring it to the table in front of the tent shading the day’s most honoured guests. The Ikoma Language Committee, a number of local pastors and church leaders, foreign colleagues who serve as Translation Advisors and Consultants to the project, and representatives from funding partner organisations all look on as a ribbon sealing the box is cut and the lid removed. The committee chairman raises a New Testament high above his head, and over a thousand people break into cheers and ululations.

As proud and excited as the Ikoma community is to have the complete New Testament in their language, many of those present are now eager to get their own copy. The Language Committee kicks off their distribution campaign with a simple but effective offer: “Our Guest of Honour will take a selfie with everyone who buys a book from this first box!”

Suddenly, the line is long. When the gold-wrapped box is empty, sales carry on throughout the rest of the day at a table just outside the tent circle. One of those first copies is put into service, filling one of its most vital purposes. The Word is being preached.

One of the local pastors has been asked to deliver a sermon. The Scripture is read first from the new Ikoma translation, then in Swahili and English. As the pastor gives his message in Ikoma, he is also translated twice for the diverse audience. When he finishes with a prayer, his ‘amen’ is followed by happy applause and another choir’s song. Even the song itself is in Ikoma.

“Many songs being sung this day are in the Ikoma language,” says André Kamphuis, a Translation Consultant involved with the project since its early stages. “This usually happens more after translated Scripture has been in use a while, but the Ikoma have started much earlier. I remember many decisions we made after discussing key Biblical terms for days and testing them in the

communities. I am so happy to hear how many of those terms were used in these songs. It shows that the terms are accepted already and appear to be meaningful to people.”

While singing and dancing keep the crowd engaged, the workers who have been preparing food since early morning alert the team that everything is ready. Some quick closing announcements and prayers are made. The many guests are invited to lead the lines. Despite the late surge in crowd numbers, every plate is heaped with the favourite foods of celebration.

"I am rejoicing," said Muya, one of the Ikoma translators. "This is from God. We hoped and we hoped, and now it has happened. We have the desire for the Old Testament, too. We don't know quite how it will happen, but we ask God and we have hope. We have the desire. Let's pray that God will make it happen."

"This day reminds me why I joined the work in the first place," said Ellen Walker, an SIL staffer involved in literacy work with the Mara Cluster project since 2009. "It's been challenging and often thankless," she explained. "The team wondered if our work would ever be used. Now, seeing the Ikoma excited to receive the Scriptures, seeing people read it who I helped teach to read, and hearing about the work of the language committee and literacy teachers... this all greatly encourages me that our labour has not been in vain."

Late afternoon, the cleanup begins as the crowd disappears. Colleagues of the translation project say their thanks and goodbyes to each other and all the special guests. All along the road through Bwitengi, people are gathered on stoops in small clusters around someone with the Ikoma New Testament open in their hands.

"The challenge of the project," said Wayne, "the challenge was — and still is — where to get funding so the work can continue. But God has helped us get this far, by prayer and by contributions from all around the world. God's people have a burden from above in their hearts for this translation project."

"I spoke with one of the Language Committee," says Michiel Louter, another of the project's Translation Consultants. "He told me that their committee, in all these years, never broke up or even had a major conflict. I think that speaks well of their commitment and perseverance."

"The Ikoma are incredibly engaged," added Kamphuis, "arguably one of the most engaged communities in Mara region. The Language Committee plans to go around all the villages in the weeks ahead to distribute hundreds more New Testaments. Many people have cheered the translation team on to complete the New Testament, and now they ask us to continue with them on the Old Testament."

God is with the Ikoma in a powerful new way, speaking to them in the Ikoma language. A new kind of day has dawned on their lives. As Jesus prayed for us all in John 17:17, may God (from the new Ikoma translation): "Neghaghusabha obhakörë kubha abhaato bhaacho inkong'orimu mo-bhuhëënë bhoocho, gho kubha ang'ana yaacho niyo obhuhëënë." In English, "Make them holy by your truth; teach them your word, which is truth." (NLT)

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Driving through the village after the long celebration day, a group of guests saw this Ikoma man happily showing off his New Testament. He approached the car to thank them and explained that, since he cannot read Ikoma well, he will enjoy hearing his children read it to him.

Photo: Kenny Grindall

> [Link to original image file](#)

4032 x 2268 JPG, 3 MB



"I'm really happy. God has given us the New Testament in our language, Ikoma. I can read it with my children, we can read it together. It's the work of God! God is good."

— Neema, Ikoma speaker at the celebration

Photo: Rebekah Mészáros

> [Link to original image file](#)

3000 x 4000 JPG, 4 MB



Moments after being one of the first to buy a copy of the Ikoma New Testament at the celebration, this woman is back in her seat reading intently.

Photo: Susan Chance

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New Testament arrives for the Ikoma people of Tanzania

On the edge of the Serengeti, threats of rain could not keep away the crowd as the Ikoma community celebrated completion of a 14-year work to translate the New Testament in their own language. Speeches and preaching, dancing and singing went on for hours. “Even the new songs were in Ikoma!” one guest cheered. A colleague of the translation team added, “This day greatly encourages me that all our labour has not been in vain”...

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