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Kabwa New Testament enjoys vibrant celebration, strong distribution

“What joy to see our community use and understand God’s Word for themselves!”

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

From a stretch of shoreline on Lake Victoria in northern Tanzania, sprawling inland toward the Serengeti plains, the roughly 14,000 people who speak Kabwa love their language. So it was a day of great joy and gratitude when they celebrated completion of the Kabwa New Testament.

It was also a day when rainy season delivered heavy storms throughout the early morning. But the project team had planned for this, and the celebration was to be held inside a church in the village. Thanks to concrete walls and tin roof, the dirt floor was clean and dry.

In 2009 the Kabwa partnered with SIL International and Wycliffe Bible Translators to launch their own project to invest not just in Scripture translation but also in the language development and Scripture engagement work needed to prepare the community to receive God’s Word. Now, fourteen years later, the rich fruit of their labour is easy to see.

“The first challenge was traveling around the community,” said John Masige, one of the translators. “Especially during rainy season! It was also difficult to find people who can translate the Kabwa language fluently. It was difficult to grow partnerships and raise funding for the work. But once the Kabwa community realised the importance of getting Scriptures in their language, then we began to see a very good response.”

Just as some guests who had farther to travel finally arrived, the rains ended and the festivities began with only a short delay of a couple hours. Latecomers entered the church to find it nearly packed, with almost everyone up out of their seats dancing. A boisterous group in traditional cultural costume sang a familiar song, accompanying themselves with a large drum, tiny police whistle, and a huge curved animal horn.

“I was very impressed by the response of the Kabwa people,” said John Mariro, another Kabwa translator. “They gathered from many villages to witness this launch of the New Testament in the Kabwa language. Also many leaders we invited from partner organisations and local government were there. This was a very big, very historic event for our Kabwa community.”

Once the celebration had been properly kicked off, the day’s Master of Ceremonies announced a street parade. Suddenly, the church nearly emptied. People hurried out into the muddy road and out of sight toward the village’s market area, about half a kilometre away. They quickly gathered

there and broke into song. Filling the narrow dirt road, the throng swelled in numbers as they marched and danced along back the way they'd come.

Inside the church again, several Kabwa church choirs took turns leading the people in praise. With every song, anyone in the crowd (even foreign guests) who wanted to get up and join them felt free. Somehow everyone seemed to know all the dance moves.

“What a genuine time of fun and celebration,” said one colleague from the SIL Tanzania team in Dodoma. “After the morning storm, those who came were truly dedicated. For a while the power went out, which disrupted some of the planned music. But the crowd broke spontaneously into their favourite songs and dances, which became a precious time of worship. The atmosphere was contagious joy and fun, celebrating God’s Word to the Kabwa people in their language.”

When everyone seemed ready to sit and rest, they enjoyed presentations from the Kabwa translators, the Language Committee, local pastors, and other honoured guests. “One of the expat Translation Consultants actually made his speech in the Kabwa language,” said Nora Hajian, a Linguistic Specialist. “That had quite a positive impact on the crowd.”

With so many partners and stakeholders involved in the Kabwa New Testament project, the speeches continued almost as long as the singing and dancing had done. But the whole crowd seemed to lean in, listening to every word. Murmurs and shouts of affirmation came from every corner of the church, even as a more formal ceremony began. With sober authority, the Kabwa translators and Language Committee read official statements declaring the Kabwa New Testament now belongs to the Kabwa people.

“I have been translating the Kabwa New Testament since the work began,” said Masige. “But many others have also been greatly involved. They have given their time, such as being part of the Language Committee for more than twelve years. They have given their work, such as contributing many ideas when we do translation checks. They have given even of their own resources as they are able, money and other gifts to support the work.”

Suddenly, the air turned festive again. The translators now stood in the back of the church, holding a large box wrapped in paper and ribbons of shimmering green and yellow. As an upbeat song began, they danced forward through the crowd. Almost everyone behind them followed. The huge procession circled and weaved under the rafters, finally stopping in front of the long table of honoured guests. The translators handed the box to the Guest of Honour, a high official in their local government.

With much camera snapping and applause, the box was opened and the first Kabwa New Testament held high. A prayer of thanks and dedication was offered. Finally, distribution could begin. Boxes and boxes of New Testaments had been ordered and paid for in advance by churches and other groups in the community. They were recognised, thanked, and given their books one after another — for over twenty minutes.

“We sold many New Testaments on that first day,” said Kitajo Nyemaga, a member of the Kabwa Language Committee. “Our churches were well prepared to receive the New Testament, so they bought more than 380 copies at the celebration.”

Then the invitation was made to all: “If you want a Kabwa New Testament for your own, you can buy from these boxes here. We have plenty!” Response kept the team busy for a while. Another

choir sang while people filed, queued, and traded their 5,000 shillings (about \$2.10 USD), receiving their copy with a joyful smile.

“It was very special to be there with my family,” said John Walker, a Linguist with SIL Tanzania who began work with the Kabwa project in 2008, even before the first translators. “So we know this team and the language committee very well, and many of the church leaders and others who were honoured guests.”

Walker’s early efforts in helping to develop the Kabwa orthography (writing system and rules) later shifted to a focus on lexicography, working with the team for years on a Kabwa dictionary that will now arrive in just a few months after the New Testament. “Seeing the impact of these roles on the translators’ work,” he added, “and experiencing for myself a deep engagement with the Kabwa community, I am greatly encouraged to see how highly the people value their language.”

When all who would purchase a New Testament had theirs, the day’s celebration had just a few more treats in store. With Scriptures now in hand, a young man took the lectern and read a passage in Kabwa. Then one of the local pastors shared a brief word to encourage everyone in their new journey as God speaks to each of them when they read or listen.

“Watching the Kabwa people celebrate reminded me,” said Hajian, one of Walker’s colleagues on the dictionary project, “that Bible Translation and Scripture Engagement are deliberate strikes at the bondage of sin and darkness. Scripture under the Holy Spirit’s influence is active and offensive, ‘sharper than a two-edged sword’. It is empowering. It seeds hope for the future. This feels like the tide turning in a war.”

With closing prayers, another invitation was made: Welcome to the feast! Huge pots of the culture’s best foods covered tables in and around the church. The honoured guests were served, and everyone else helped themselves. Eventually the crowd slowly thinned as people began to walk back to their homes and other villages in small groups.

“Another challenge,” said Emmanuel Makingi, a Kabwa Scripture Engagement worker, “is how to get the Old Testament translated for the Kabwa. But the joy we have now is to use the New Testament in the Kabwa language, and to see our community understand God’s Word directly for themselves.”

SIL International is a global leader among academic and professional organisations which offer language development services. SIL works alongside speakers of more than 1,700 languages in over 100 countries. Active in Tanzania since 1989, the organization makes its services available to all without regard to religious belief, political ideology, gender, race, or ethnolinguistic background.

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Kabwa New Testament enjoys vibrant celebration, strong distribution

“What joy, to see our community use and understand God’s Word for themselves!” Morning rain storms may have kept some away, but a determined crowd packed the small village church for hours of singing, dancing, ceremonies and feasting to mark the completion of the New Testament translated in the Kabwa language...

>> [Read the story on TanzaniaScripture.com](https://www.tanzaniascripture.com)

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The ceremonial first Kabwa New Testaments arrive into the celebration at the lead of a joyous procession, in a beautifully wrapped box carried by two of the Kabwa translators.

Photo: Jaroslav Tomasovsky

> [Link to original image file](#)

4928 x 3264 JPG, 4 MB



Almost everyone who gathered for the Kabwa New Testament launch joined in a parade, singing and dancing through the village, led by a troupe dressed in cultural tradition.

Photo: Jaroslav Tomasovsky

> [Link to original image file](#)

4928 x 3264 JPG, 4 MB



Rain storms meant celebrating inside a village church and losing power a few times, but nothing stopped the singing and dancing of a determined crowd and their local choirs.

Photo: Rebekah Meszaros

> [Link to original image file](#)

6000 x 4000 JPG, 6 MB



Once boxes were opened and the first Kabwa New Testaments were distributed, everyone enjoyed listening as a young man gave the first public reading of a Scripture passage in the Kabwa language.

Photo: Kenny Grindall

> [Link to original image file](#)

4032 x 2268 JPG, 2 MB

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