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## **Faith grows among Nyiha speakers even as they celebrate their recently translated complete New Testament**

*“Scripture teaches we should love each other — that’s how this is happening!”*

13 May 2023, Igamba Village, Songwe Region, Tanzania

Wilhelm Mwakavanga is a Bible translator. The gray-haired man with a constant smile is also a pastor, and a speaker of the Nyiha language of western Tanzania. “I’ve seen God moving in our churches when I preach in Nyiha,” he said. “When preaching is in Swahili or another language, most people they just don’t get the real meaning. They go out with many questions and not the answers. But when we preach in Nyiha, it is very different.”

“When I preach in Nyiha language,” he went on, “people get so quiet. It’s because they understand very well. And when they understand, they repent and change. So many people ask me to come and preach. They are very anxious to hear the Word of God in their language.”

As they entered the tent for special guests, Mwakavanga and his fellow Nyiha translator, Kassim Mwashilindi, were celebrated with cheers and long greetings. Pastors, chiefs, and other community leaders were ready for the long-awaited dedication of the Nyiha New Testament.

Hundreds more arrived, many in a boisterous singing march, to gather in the shade of a warehouse bordering the grounds or fill benches in the open area. Opposite the warehouse, only a narrow and dusty dirt road separated the celebration from a row of busy local shops. Passersby slowly added to the crowd, either sitting on stoops across the road or crossing to join the benches.

Translation of the Nyiha New Testament began in earnest by 2007. The language community numbers around 276,000 in Tanzania, with tens of thousands more in bordering Malawi and possibly hundreds of thousands in diaspora elsewhere. In addition to the New Testament in print and audio, the project team has also published a Nyiha songbook and a translated version of the “Jesus Messiah” comic book. A Nyiha dictionary is in the works.

The Nyiha project was part of the Mbeya Cluster Project, which has included over a dozen language development and translation teams. The cluster’s Team Leader, Richard Yalonde, also happens to be Nyiha himself. “When I started working with Scripture translation years ago,” he said, “I was very discouraged to hear Nyiha people say, ‘I cannot read my language.’ But now many people are reading Scriptures and other materials in Nyiha. This really touches my heart. It is so encouraging to watch people learn that they can use their ‘heart language’ to communicate with God!”

“This greatly excites me,” Yalonde continued, “to see not just my own Nyiha people but many minority language communities around the world developing their languages and proudly speaking them. When I was younger most of the Nyiha only wanted to learn Swahili or English. Now they are happy to use Nyiha, and they no longer want to abandon it.”

From the first moment, the celebration was loud and joyous. When choirs took their turns presenting a song — several of them in Nyiha and new for the occasion — they often found themselves surrounded with dozens from the crowd who ran to join in their dance.

When speeches were given, one of those was in Nyiha, too. Hearing this, the Nyiha chief was so happy that he offered twice the announced price for a copy of the New Testament. He also promised to support the project in their future plans to translate the Old Testament.

In all, copies of the Nyiha New Testament sold that day equalled nearly one for every five people who attended the celebration. One of the honoured guests promised several million Tanzanian shillings (just over two thousand US dollars) to help buy the team a plot for an office building.

“That guest also offered a cow to support us,” added one of the translators. “A cow is considered a precious sacrifice in the Nyiha community. It is often a sacrifice to the ancestors, or paid as a bride price. So for him to offer a cow, it shows that he values and highly appreciates the translation of the New Testament in the Nyiha language.”

The Nyiha people’s ancestors hold a powerful role in their culture. They are believed to exert great influence in daily life and are traditionally remembered through special rituals. “So having the New Testament now,” said a team member, “this will impact the Nyiha’s religious tradition, because in the Scriptures the centre of worship is Jesus — not the ancestors.”

During one song, Mwakavanga and Mwashilindi (two of the translators) led a dance procession to carry a large gift-wrapped box through the crowd. As most in attendance joined them, they brought the box, filled with New Testaments, to the table in front of their guests of honour. All the local pastors and other key leaders placed their hands on the box and lifted prayers of blessing and thanksgiving for what God has given them.

“I have seen God working through the Nyiha translation project,” said Yalonde, “as I see the different church denominations working together. I see church and government leaders working together. God’s Word teaches us we should love each other. That’s how this is happening.”

“I thank God,” he added, “for this Bible translation work in my Nyiha language. Years ago, our community was expecting all of this to come from outside help. But these days it’s exciting to see the Nyiha people are really owning it, and some are even talking already of plans to translate the Old Testament.”

Indeed, early plans are taking shape for a community-owned Old Testament translation project. “The Nyiha Language Committee has already registered a Community Based Organization,” explained Yalonde. “This CBO will manage their Old Testament translation. They have even trained two new translators as their initial preparation to begin the work.”

Meanwhile, having the completed New Testament in their own language will help the Nyiha church, and individual Christians, to grow in their faith walk. “The Nyiha New Testament is very friendly to the reader,” said one translator, “because we translated in a way which is natural and clear to the Nyiha speakers so they can understand right away. We have put many helps, such as footnotes and

glossary, to supply cultural information which the Nyiha cannot access. The church will benefit so much, and every individual will be able to grow in understanding of God's Word."

"Before this translation work," said Mwakavanga, "even in Bible school I thought maybe God only really speaks the 'big' languages like Swahili or English. But now I am happy to know that God speaks to all people in their own languages. He speaks all of our languages!"

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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See next page for images, captions, excerpts, and more



#### FEATURED IMAGE

Two of the many local pastors who joined the dedication event as special guests enjoyed showing and reading their Nyiha New Testaments, even as the celebration continued.

Photo: Leonard Mwasandube

[Link to original image file](#)

3872 x 2592 JPG, 4.3 MB



One early choir so excited those already present that another choir and most of the crowd joined them, forming circles around dancing circles.

Photo: Kenny Grindall

[Link to original image file](#)

1505 x 847 JPG, 3 MB



Wilhelm Mwakavanga (blue suit) and Kassim Mwashilindi, two of the translators on the project, lead a dance procession carrying the first Nyiha New Testaments through the crowd to the honoured guests.

Photo: Leonard Mwasandube

[Link to original image file](#)

3872 x 2592 JPG, 4 MB





The ceremonial first box of Nyiha New Testaments is surrounded by a circle of local pastors, who pray over the newly translated Scriptures before official distribution begins.

Photo: Ezekia Mwakatwila

[Link to original image file](#)

5184 x 3888 JPG, 9 MB



Several elder men and women from the crowd join pastor and translator Wilhelm Mwakavanga to sing a traditional song during the official launch of the Nyiha New Testament.

Photo: Ezekia Mwakatwila

[Link to original image file](#)

2624 x 1968 JPG, 2 MB

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**Excerpt content for web, social media, email, etc.**

## Faith grows among Nyiha speakers even as they celebrate their recently translated complete New Testament

“Scripture teaches we should love each other — that’s how this is happening!” Alongside a dusty dirt road lined with small shops, hundreds of Nyiha spent a day loudly celebrating a huge milestone in their history. “I once thought God only speaks the ‘big’ languages,” said a translator. “But now I know he speaks to all people in their own languages. From today, all Nyiha people can grow in understanding God’s Word...”