# AN ATTEMPT AT TRANSLATING KOM BIRTH SONGS (*NJANG WAYN)* INTO ENGLISH: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC APPRAISAL

.

ABSTRACT

|  |
| --- |
| **Aims:** This study examines the intricacies involved in translating Kom birth songs (*Njang wayn)* into English and whether the translated version can be sung using the Kom traditional air and if they reflect the same linguistic and cultural value of the source culture and whether non-indigenes can understand what is translated and sung. **Place and Duration of Study:** The study was conducted in Kom during birth and wedding ceremonies as research for the Advanced School of Translators and Interpreters at the University of Buea from January to July 2011.**Methodology:** The study used a qualitative analysis. Ten original birth songs were recorded, transcribed, translated (gloss and meaningful), analyzed and classified according to sociolinguistic features, literary devices and themes. This study also employed some translation theories like skopos and sociolinguistic to facilitate the rendition of tonal devices, musicality and cultural values while preserving the original local color and flavor. **Results**: It revealed that the translation of birth songs is possible and they can be successfully sung in the traditional Kom air. It revealed that birth songs are artistic productions rich in cultural substance, sociolinguistic traits, themes and literary devices that pose translation problems when trying to maintain their original local color and flavor. Through translation, oral traditions can be culturally retained and disseminated globally.**Conclusion**: It concludes that translated birth songs can be sung and can be culturally preserved and disseminated globally. |

***Keywords****:* Kom birth songs (*Njang wayn)*, culture, Kom language, poetry, translation, sociolinguistics

1. INTRODUCTION

In translation, one must mediate between cultural codes and cross limits of self-contained systems and linguistic theories. Such a venture is fraught with difficulties especially when translating birth songs (*njang wayn)* from an African language (*Itaŋikom*-language of Kom people) into English due to the risk of cultural and language loss. One must navigate through the musicality of lyrics, and the fuzzy boundaries between translation, adaptation and rewriting. Yet, this task can be fascinating and enriching especially when intended for an audience of English speakers and Kom people who have lost touch with their traditions and mores.

Birth songs express diverse aspects of life. Gestures, intonations, and facial expressions fit in this oral ambiance (Tonkin, 1992).[[1]](#endnote-1) In Africa, songs or poems represent profound forms of contrary emotive expressions.

Songs fall under oral literature or orature which also includes narratives, proverbs, and folktales. Orature comprises what people do, how they live, what they believe in and their history. Birth songs are stir the imagination and emotions. They are meant for relaxation and recreation. Some attempts to translate indigenous songs into English have resulted in bizarre renditions though such efforts provide spontaneity and fun. However, people tend to denounce the cross-cultural translator as a traitor or accuse him of corrupting the purity of meaning and symbolism.

The problem is whether non-indigenes participating at a ‘born house’ ceremony (*ndoh wayn*) can understand what is translated and sung. Do translated birth songs reflect the culture of the Kom people? What translation strategies can solve the linguistic and culture bound problems? These questions hinge on sociolinguistic and translation issues. It is presupposed that birth songs can be translated into English and sung.

Based on the foregone, this paper examines the intricacies involved in translating Kom birth songs (*njang wayn*) into English and if translated songs can be sung in the original Kom air. It also interrogates how translated birth songs can be culturally preserved and disseminated without culture or language loss in this age of globalization. The study employs theoretical constructs and translation approaches that facilitate the translation of tonal devices, musicality and cultural values in the songs while at the same time preserving some originality in local color and flavor.

The relevance of the sociolinguistic approach is to bridge the gap between peoples of different socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Since Kom language and English do not share the same cultural realities, reconciling them through translation of birth songs could be very enriching and fascinating. In the field of translation studies and African sociolinguistics, this paper could serve as a model for translating oral traditions across cultures.

**1.1 Background to the study**

Kom is a fondom in Boyo Division, North West Region of Cameroon. Kom is one of the largest tribes with a surface area of about 448 square kilometers. It has mountainous and rugged terrain. Its headquarters is at *Laikom* (Kom Country). Kom history is legendary. The story of a python trail is told how Kom people migrated from Babessi to their present site. Kom is widely known for its famous *Afo a’ Kom* (the Kom thing), a most revered wooden statue (*Mbang*)*,* of an upright man, crowned and holding a scepter. Kom people eke their living through agriculture. The society is organized with the Fon at the helm of traditional government. He is assisted by *Kwifon*, the dreaded secret society with unquestionable powers that ensures order and discipline (Nkwi, 2006).[[2]](#endnote-2)

In this study, Kom culture is portrayed through orature and language. Myths, legends, humor, proverbs, riddles, folktales and songs constitute Kom orature. Kom language (*Itaŋikom*) is a minority language of semi-Bantu origin and is a tonal language. It is a language of limited or lesser diffusion since it is spoken by a relatively small number of people who may face challenges accessing resources and services of their language.[[3]](#endnote-3) Folktales are spiced with songs. Birth songs (*Njang wayn*) are sung during birth and traditional marriages (*ndowi*). There is a nexus between birth and marriage since in African societies, marriage is only recognized when there is childbirth. In Kom, every marriage heralds childbirth and its celebration through birth songs.

**1.2 Literature Review**

We consider the conceptual, theoretical and empirical frameworks relevant to this study.

**1.2.1 Conceptual Clarifications**

Translation means bringing across a text from one language to another (Kasparek, 1983).[[4]](#endnote-4) The meaning of the message is transmitted from a source language (SL) to a target language (TL) (Newmark, 1993).[[5]](#endnote-5) In translation, there is negotiation between cultures or there is linguistic convergence.

A song is an art form belonging to poetry. It is an aspect of oral literature. Birth songs *(Njang wayn)* are used for celebrating fertility in marriage. They are spontaneous compositions that arise from personal experiences. Mbunda (2008)[[6]](#endnote-6) holds that nativity songs serve as an outlet for creativity, extolling womanhood or the fulfilled woman.

**1.2.2 Theoretical Framework**

Each translation theory provides principles, rules and hints for translating and criticizing texts. Our focus is on sociolinguistic and skopos theories relevant to birth songs.

The sociolinguistic theory seeks to bridge cultural and linguistic gaps of two different and contrasting cultures namely, Kom and English. In this theory, a target text must consider the culture of the target audience and their language. The target text uses resources of the target culture in order to convey meaning. Thus, a translation of dynamic equivalence completes the naturalness of expression and tries to relate the receptor to relevant models in his culture (Nida, 1984).[[7]](#endnote-7) As birth songs are translated from one culture to another, each translation has its distinctive and cultural realities. The target text must respect the meaning, linguistic norms and the cultural values of the source text.

Skopos is a Greek word for goal or purpose. In this theory, translation is determined by its skopos (purpose) which may involve equivalence to a source or social actors. This approach could dethrone the source text as more priority is given to the client’s commission and to the conceptual priorities involved. The same text could be translated in different ways based on the purpose and the commission given to the translator. This theory ignores the linguistic nature of the source text and focuses on teleological concepts as aim, purpose, intention, and function (Schäffner, 1998).[[8]](#endnote-8) A translation is produced for recipients with specific purposes in a given situation. Yet, given the excessive freedom of skopos, it can lead to misinterpretation of the source text. However, when the purpose of a translation is achieved, then the translated message has succeeded.[[9]](#endnote-9)

**1.2.3 Empirical Data**

A study by Franzon (2008)[[10]](#endnote-10) presents choices the translator or lyricist makes in translating songs to be sung. A song has properties as music, lyrics and prospective performance. Music has melody, harmony and musical sense. The translator may decide not to translate the lyrics; translate the lyrics without music; write new lyrics; adapt the music to the translation or adapt the translation to the music. Franzo’s proposal serves as a guide for translating birth songs.

*Ghesina ye’i Itaŋikom* (Let’s learn Kom language) is an effort to promote Kom language (*Itaŋikom)*. It attempts to translate activities like hunting, weaving and rearing and also genres of orature like fireside stories, riddles, folktales and proverbs. *Ilab sii nawayn a Kom* is a birth song loosely translated as “Decoration of a Pregnant Woman”. When decorated, she dances around the courtyard while people sing. An attempt to give a meaningful translation could lead to an absurd rendition.

Mbunda (2008) applied a functionalist approach to examine how Oku songs renounce, revise and assert their cultural heritage. She highlights the difficulty of reproducing oral and performant poetry from one language to another. Thus, translating extra linguistic features and rhythms of African songs is too complex given that tonal systems have no equivalents in European languages. The current study identifies with these issues because no translation can be an adequate reproduction of the original.

A study by Nkwi (2006)[[11]](#endnote-11) on Kom songs presents only their English translations from a historical and political perspective without their original versions. This study seeks to bridge that gap by presenting the original versions of birth songs before translating them.

2. methodology

This study adopts a qualitative analysis whereby concepts and translation theories like sociolinguistic and skopos are used. Ten birth songs were recorded with a tape recorder (from January to July 2011) during the celebration of birth (*Ndo wayn)* and traditional weddings (*ndo wi*) in Kom. They were transcribed, translated into English and classified according to their sociolinguistic features, literary devices and themes. Gloss translation was used to give their literal meaning and to get a singable version. Changes in the original form were made in this process.

The gloss translation used the guide proposed by Shultz (1997).[[12]](#endnote-12) For tenses we used P1-recent past; P2-today past; P3-yesterday past; P4-remote past; F1-near future; F2- remote future. For markers, we applied Asp-Aspectual marker; Ass-associative marker; Comp-completive marker; Inc-incompletive aspect marker and Pl –plural marker.

A non-indigene was asked to give meaning of the gloss translation and since some meanings betrayed the original version, there was need for a meaningful and singable translation. The songs were titled based on the first words of the first lines.

**2.1 Translation of Corpus**

Here is the original Kom version of birth songs with their gloss and meaningful translations.

 **Song 1:** *Wo wayn* **(One’s Daughter)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Kom Version** | **Gloss Translation** | **Meaningful Translation** |
| ***Solo****: Wo wayn tya jelí ighòɳ a ni kayn mbzi o* | Child p3 walk war ass mother think world | Oh when one’s daughter was pregnant |
| *wayn kfa meyn sí ighoɳ ka nì dyal* | child return comp from war so mother joy | The mother, she was worried  |
| *wayn tya jelí ighòɳ a ni kayn mbzi o* | Child p3 walk war ass mother think world | Now that she has put to birth |
| *wayn kfa meyn sɨ ìghòɳ ka nì dyal – o* | child return comp from war so mother joy | The mother, she is happy |
| *ALL: wo wayn tya jeli ighoɳ a ni kayn mbzi o* | Child p3 walk war ass mother think world | Oh when one’s daughter was pregnant |
| *Wayn kfa meyn si ighoɳ ka ni dyal eh* | child return comp from war so mother joy | The mother, she was worried |
| *Wayn tya jeli ighoɳ a ni kayn mbzi o* | Child p3 walk war ass mother think world | Now that she has put to birth |
| *Wayn kfa meyn si ighoɳ ka ni dyal eh* | child return comp from war so mother joy | The mother, she is happy |

**Song 2: *Abayn a wayn (*Childlessness*)***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Kom Version** | **Gloss Translation** | **Meaningful Translation** |
| ***Solo****: Abayn a wayn a lam nda ka yi visi* | Fufu child mix who neg you leave | Who has prepared the child’s *fufu* |
| *dum wayn gv ɨ be’ tɨ boŋ yɨ* | barren child come break also eat | Don’t let the barren eat it |
| ***All:*** *Abayn a wayn a lam nda ka yi visi* | Fufu child mix who neg you leave | Who has prepared the child’s *fufu* |
| *dum wayn gvï be’ tɨ boŋ yɨ*  | child barren come break also eat | Don’t let the barren eat it |
| ***Solo****: dum wayn zɨ be’ti boŋ yɨ* | Barren child enter break also eat | Don’t let the barren eat it |
| ***All****: Abayn a wayn a lam nda ka yi visi* | Fufu child mix who neg you leave | who has prepared the child’s *fufu* |
| *Dum wayn zɨ be’tɨ boŋ yɨ* | Barren child enter break also eat | Don’t let the barren eat it. |

**Song 3: *Ghal fɨbom* (Hold Calabash)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Kom Version** | **Gloss Translation** | **Meaningful Translation** |
| ***Solo*:** *Ghal fɨbom fɨ wayn* | Hold calabash of child | Hold the child’s calabash |
| *Ka wa ghal lidio* | Neg you hold radio | Hold not the radio |
| *Ghal fɨbom fɨ wayn* | Hold calabash of child | Hold the child’s calabash |
| *Ka wa ghal lidio na keyna sɨ nɨ lum* | Neg you hold radio turning front asp husband | Hold not the radio, to dance before your spouse |
| ***All****: ghal fɨbom fɨ wayn* | Hold calabash of child | Hold the child’s calabash |
| *Ka wa ghal lidio* | Neg hold radio | Hold not the radio |
| *Ghal fɨbom fɨ wayn* | Hold calabash of child | Hold the child’s calabash |
| *Ka wa ghal lidio na keyna si ni lum* | Neg you hold radio turning front asp husband | Hold not the radio, to parade before your spouse |

**Song 4*: Ma tî na ghɨ ta itfɨs (*I Was short as a hearthstone)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Kom Version**  | **Gloss Translation**  | **Meaningful Translation**  |
| **Solo :** *Ma tî na ghɨ ta itfɨs ma ngaŋtɨ ee* | Me p3 like fireside stone me asp high | I was as short as a hearthstone, I have grown |
| *Ma tî na ghɨ ta itfɨs ma ngaŋtɨ* | Me p3 like fireside stone me high | I was as short as a hearthstone, I have grown |
| *wayn wom ko’ meyn dyèbsɨ ma.*  | Child mine climb comp tall me | My child has grown and made me tall |
| *All: Ma tî a ghí ta itfɨs ma ngaŋtɨ ee* | Me p3 like fireside stone me high | I was as short as a hearthstone, I have grown |
| *Ma tî na ghí ta itfɨs ma ngaŋtɨ* | Me p3 like fireside stone me high | I Was as short as a hearthstone, I have grown |
| *wayn wom ko’ meyn dyèbsɨ ma* | Child mine climb comp tall me | My child has grown and made me tall |

**Song 5: *Deŋsɨ du’ i a wa achɨ (*Sit comfortably on your chair)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Kom Version**  | **Gloss Translation** | **Meaningful Translation** |
| ***Solo****:Deŋsɨ du’ i a wa achɨ tum wayn wayn ee,*  | Feel good sit your chair send child child | Sit comfortably on your chair; Send your grandchild ee |
| *deŋsɨ du’ i a wa achɨ tum wayn wayn* | Feel good sit your chair send child child | Sit comfortably on your chair; Send your grandchild ee |
| *bae wu ndu – a wu yàŋsɨ gvi.* | Say he go ass he quickly come | Say when she goes she should return quickly |
| *Deŋsɨ du’ i a wa achɨ tum wayn wayn ee,* | Feel good sit your chair send child child | Sit comfortably on your chairSend your grandchild e e |
| *deŋsɨ du’ i a wa achɨ tum wayn wayn* | Feel good sit your chair send child child | Sit comfortably on your chairSend your grandchild  |
| *bae wu ndu – a wu yàŋsɨ gvi.* | Say he go ass he quickly come | Say when she goes, she should return quickly |

**Song 6: *Su wayn* (Bathing the child)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Kom Version**  | **Gloss Translation**  | **Meaningful Translation** |
| **Solo** : *Su wayn su a wu’ kem a sisita ee* | Wash child ass wash hand mine sister | Bathe the child for me too sisita e e |
| *Su wayn su a wu kem a sisita* | Wash child ass wash hand mine sister | Bathe the child for me too sisita |
| *Wa si ghi ta na bo wayn* | You are like mother father child | You’re a grandma to the child |
| ***All****: Su wayn su a wu’ kem sisita ee* | Wash child ass wash hand mine sister | Bathe the child for me too sisita e e |
| *Su wayn su a wu kem sisita* | Wash child ass wash hand mine sister | Bathe the child for me too sisita |
| *Wa si ghɨ ta na bo wayn* | You are like mother father child | You’re a grandma to the child |

**Song 7: *Wayn wi nɨ ma* (My Daughter)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Kom Version** | **Gloss Translation** | **Meaningful Translation** |
| Solo: *Wayn wi nɨ ma ee wayn lumnɨ* | Child girl ass mine child boy | my daughter ee my son e |
| *ma tin a – n boŋ va kula ndu ma’ ikfɨl* | me p3 pick you tie go throw toilet | If I‘d conceived you, and aborted you |
| *ma adeŋ akema lu wo layn e.* | pride mine come where day | Where would my joy come from today? |
| *Wayn wi nɨ ma ee wayn lumnɨ* | child girl ass mine child boy | my daughter ee my son e |
| *All: Wayn wi nɨ ma ee wayn lumnɨ* | Child girl ass mine child boy | my daughter ee my son e |
| *ma tin a – n boŋ va kula nduma’ ikfɨl* | me p3pick you tie go throw toilet | If I‘d conceived you, and aborted you |
| *ma adeŋ akema lu wo layn e.* | pride mine come where day | Where would my friends gather today? |
| *Wayn wi nɨ ma ee wayn lumnɨ* | child girl ass mine child boy | my daughter ee my son e |

**Song 8*: Ma Weyn Ghayni kal* (Gathering and spreading news)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Kom Version** | ***Gloss Translation*** | **Meaningful Translation**  |
| *Ma weyn ghayni kal ta tuŋli a nté 2x* | Me this stroll round like ear ass village | I am going round like the ear of the village |
| *Ni tu layn ma la’i ndu*  | So day clear me announce ass go | So that at dawn, I will spread word |

**Song 9*: Bayn Nda wayn (*Who hates children?*)***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Kom Version** | **Gloss Translation** | **Meaningful Translation** |
| *Bayn nda wayn ma kong a eh* | Hate who child I like comp | Who hates children, I love them |
| *Bayn nda wayn ma kong a eh*  | Hate who child I like comp | Who hates children, I love them  |
| *Wayn ni ghi inka’ mi ndvin* | Child asp is firewood of age | Children are the comfort of old age |

**Song 10*: Lumgvi* (Cock)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Kom Version** | **Gloss Translation** | **Meaningful Translation** |
| *Lumgvi ni se tong a, bobe nyu ma 2x* | Cock F1 crow- father of compound touch me | Before the cock crows, husband tickles me  |
| *Ma beynsi gvi ku a adeng keyn* | Me turn come take ass pride this | That I should turn and take this joy |

In translating birth songs, some intricacies at the linguistic and cultural levels were encountered.

**2.1 Constraints Encountered**

We argued that translating across cultures and self-contained linguistic systems is a venture fraught with difficulties.Translating birth songs and poetry is challenging since poetry by nature is not translatable, and nothing the muses touch can be carried over into another tongue without losing its savor and harmony (Stankiewicz, 2011).[[13]](#endnote-13) For Mapanje and White (1983),[[14]](#endnote-14) there is no perfect translation due to betrayals. In translating poetry, Nama (1990)[[15]](#endnote-15) provides strategies like phonemic, literal, metrical, poetry into prose, rhyme, blank verse and free interpretation. We employed some these strategies that were appropriate for birth songs.

To ensure the singability of songs, we relied on Low’s (2005)[[16]](#endnote-16) four-step-guide for translation whereby the target text must be singable otherwise any of its virtues are meaningless; the target text must sound as if the music is fitted to it even though it was actually composed to fit the source text; the rhyme of the original must be kept because it gives shape to the phrases; and, liberties are taken with the original meaning when the other requirements cannot be met.

Franzon (2008)[[17]](#endnote-17) provided a five-point guide of choices like leaving the song untranslated; translating the lyrics without taking the music into account; writing new lyrics to the original music with no relation to the original lyrics; translating the lyrics and adapting the music accordingly to the extent that a new composition was deemed necessary; and, adapting the translation to the original music. Since no translation strategy is absolute or solves all problems, we ensured that the singable version of the birth songs followed Low’s (2005)[[18]](#endnote-18) guidelines where translation has specific purposes. Due to contracted words, some translated versions were longer or shorter than the singable versions.

For Tymoczko (1999),[[19]](#endnote-19) source culture has distinct cultural practices, concepts, beliefs, and values without close counterparts in the receptor culture. Thus, there were difficulties related to Kom symbols, signs or notions with no lexical equivalents in English. As religious and traditional customs were not obvious to the target reader, we needed a socio-cultural approach that added valuable information in order that the translated text is understood. This approach was not considered by linguistic-oriented theories, but it rendered songs more comprehensible and better appreciated (Nama, 1990).[[20]](#endnote-20)

Another challenge hinged on what technique was appropriate to transfer cultural meaning and values into English. We could only translate part of the source text due to varied structures of the Kom language, grammar, stylistics and norms. Since there is hardly a faithful translation, we were cautious such that our translations were not tainted by cultural beliefs and attitudes. This is because a sociolinguistic norm could be successful in one socio-cultural setting and have a negative impact in another. No translation can mean the “same thing in another language, producing the same effect on the mind” (Selver, 1966:11).[[21]](#endnote-21) No doubt, sociolinguistic and socio-cultural specificities posed problems of fidelity to the source texts. Since staying faithful to the source text could risk sacrificing meaning, we had to look elsewhere for better alternatives.

There were lexical distortions of some English words which have become part of Kom language. Words like *lam* (lamp), *lidyo* (radio) were distortions in song 3. The word *sisita* (Song 6) is the distortion of the word ‘sister’ referring to reverend sisters in charge of the maternity. These are borrowings of English words which do not exist in Kom language and are used to reflect the concept. Borrowing helps overcome translation conflicts between different languages.

Some Kom lexical items sounded almost the same (homophones). Words like *ngò’* means stone and *ngò* means termite. Words like *tim* could mean ‘to trip against a stone’, a name given to males, or to throw something. Others like *lam* (Song 2) could mean ‘cook by mixing’ and *lam* to mean delay. The loan word *lâm* (lamp) made translation difficult but we sought which word best suited the context. Thus, translating from a tonal and minority language like Kom is problematic since one word could be mistaken for another. Experts in Kom language assisted us get the differences in intonations and to map out their contexts.

Birth songs were spiced by spontaneous cultural ejaculatory exclamations and extra-linguistic interjections ranging from verbal expressions alone, to verbal expressions and gestures, and to gestures alone. In some songs, one person shouts *ɨfɨkuenɨ!* and the rest answer*, ɨfɨntèmnɨ!* This refers to locally made belts from animal skin or raffia palms a pregnant woman was decorated with. When she gave birth, these belts were taken off. Like most exclamations in African languages, it is difficult to get a meaningful translation and an interpretation might not capture their symbolism.

Birth songs have proverbs which pose translation problems for lack of English equivalents. Such were given a literal translation for lack of a semantic equivalent to express them due cultural gap between the sociolinguistic communities. To get idiomaticity, we had to understand the background to the proverb. *Wayn nɨnghɨɨnka’ mɨ dvɨyn (*Song 9), is translated as ‘children are the firewood of old age’. This means children are one’s comfort at old age. ‘Firewood of old age’ was maintained for its local color, the African air and for passing the English language through Kom’s cultural background.

Explicitation strategy was used to introduce information into the target language which was only implicit in the source language but derived from the context. Thus, the translated version has more information than the source text since most songs are shrouded in meaning. In song 7, *ma tin a – n boŋ va kula ndu ma’ ikfɨl,* was literally translated as: ‘if I had picked you, tied and thrown in the toilet’, yet in the proposed singable version, it ran, ‘if I’d conceived you and aborted you’. Abortion is implied in the source text, but in the translation, abortion is made explicit.

 In translating similes, we resorted to literal translation to transfer the source language text into a grammatically and idiomatically appropriate target language text. In Song 4, *ma tia ghi tiitfis, ma ngaɳti e e*, was literally translated as ‘I was as short as a hearth stone’. This is a simile in Kom language and similes like metaphors should translated literally (Newmark, 1993).[[22]](#endnote-22)

3. results and discussion

3.1 Results

 This paper set out to resolve various constraints of translating Kom birth songs into English and if translated songs can be sung. The study revealed that birth songs are artistic productions with cultural substance that poses enormous translation problems especially when the tonal devices, musicality, local color and flavor are to be maintained.

It was realized that participating at childbirth, a non-indigene will not understand what is sung, because song performances are done in the traditional Kom rhythm and language*.* Hence, the translation of Kom birth songs is possible and the songs can be sung. Yet, the translated versions were sometimes longer or shorter than the musical phrase. We employed ‘nonsense syllables’ to lengthen short songs. Where longer translations were due to repetition, some repetitive phrases were dropped to make them singable. Thus, translation betrays as some items in the Kom culture like ululations, interjections and proverbs could not be conveniently translated. We had to use loan words, borrowings and literal translation to maintain local color and flavor.

 Birth songs can be a very good didactic tool for youth education since they are easily remembered. Traditional education through the use of songs can be quite rich and elaborate. Songs also play a big role in language change especially as the Kom culture interacts with other cultures and uses some borrowed words to express concepts that were hitherto unknown. These borrowed words were replaced by their original English words in during translation. With changing times, new compositions come up at every occasion.

There was always the thorny issue of fidelity to meaning and form thus leading to departures from words. Form had to be redefined to capture the formal features and peculiarities of each song. From such a vantage point, the conflict between form and meaning was resolved and the goal of translation which is communication was achieved.

 Some songs have the same music. Sometimes the words were changed to fit the context during different occasions (marriage, birth and death) but the music remained the same. This was intended to preserve Kom culture and enshrine it into documents for posterity. Though what is presented here cannot capture the entire scenes surrounding performance, it is however a means of preserving Kom culture. By translating birth songs into English, they can be culturally preserved and disseminated globally.

**3.2 Discussion**

3.2.1 Sociolinguistic Appraisal

From a sociolinguistic perspective, Kom birth songs are performed orally in socio-cultural and linguistic contexts. Culture and historic factors make oral tradition successful and sensible. These aspects give songs impetus, shape, and direction. Thus, cross-cultural translation must have a sociolinguistic basis. The target text needs the resources of the target culture to convey meaning which is perfectly understood at the target end (Pergnier, 1978).[[23]](#endnote-23) Hence, the translation of Kom birth songs must be considered in their originality.

*3.2.1.1 Features of Kom Birth Songs*

African music like Kom birth songs is characterized by communal and inviting spirit, attraction of a wide range of consumers, skilled and unskilled, spontaneous and authentic expression of emotions, integration with social and natural life, human material significance, and themes which are topical and of sharp contemporary relevance. The themes are sometimes humorous, satirical, sad, affecting, often profound and of extraordinary range and depth with musical and artistic resources (Agawu, 2003)[[24]](#endnote-24).

Kom birth songs are usually short. Brevity is vigor and shows how graceful the performance can be. This helps participants to master the lyrics, rhythm and melody and join in the singing and dancing. Hence, the meaning often shrouded in some is easy to unveil.

They have lots of repetition that makes them less boring and enhances their performance. It gives room for all the people to join in the singing, dancing and clapping of hands. For meanings that are hidden, a series of repetitions can gradually unveil them.

The songs are based on the ‘*Call – Response’* pattern where a leader chants and others respond. Sometimes the leader (caller) sings the same melody as the response. Call and response involves the audience and is participatory in nature. For Agawu (2003),[[25]](#endnote-25) the basis for song performance is the Call-Response principle highlighting African communality.

Kom birth songs have improvisation and spontaneity which enable the songster to change the words *ad libitum*. For Mapanje and White (1983),[[26]](#endnote-26) songsters with good and fresh songs are admired and praised for their creative imagination and when the song is badly sung or simply repeated without new insight, it is rejected. However, such ingenuity and spontaneity raise translation problems because new words are introduced each time the song is sung.

*3.2.1.2 Literary Devices*

Literary devices of birth songs provide a gateway into an understanding of their socio-cultural and linguistic contexts. These devices present a translation challenge to non-indigenes.

Kom culture is rich in proverbs. In song 9, *Wayn ni ghi inka’ mi ndvin* translated as ‘children are the comfort of old age’ can also be rendered as ‘when a sheep gets old, it is suckled by its young. In a typical African society where there are no homes for the old, children cater for their parents. Children are like an investment or comfort for old age (Jick, 2006).[[27]](#endnote-27)

Symbolism is a semiotic feature of Kom birth songs. In Song 3, *Ghal fibom fi wayn* is translated as ‘Hold the child’s calabash.’ The calabash (gourd) signifies a new born child. It is covered with a peace plant and used in preserving water for the mother. Women are invited to hold the child’s calabash and not the radio or modern gadgets to show off before their spouses.

Hyperbole is used to highlight the eagerness to receive news of childbirth. In song 8, the woman personifies herself as the ear of the village (*Ma weyn ghayni kal ta tuŋli a nté)* that gathers good news at night to spread at dawn (*Ni tu layn ma la’i ndu)*. News spreads like wildfire through gossip. Hence, the Kom greeting: *isa’ gha?* (what news?) indicates this eagerness for the good news of childbirth that brings joy to the village. The hyperbole indicates how far and swift news can go.

*3.2.1.3 Thematic Categorization*

The themes in birth songs communicate ideas about the socio-cultural environment, community and human behavior. These themes help the audience who do not partake in the actual song and dance to live the experience through this translation process.

Birth songs portray obscenity or vulgarity especially when alluding to the act of copulation that leads to childbirth. In another context, the interjection, *nyiɳighibo, lalighital*, means ‘if two should lie, three should get up’. Though this is euphemistic, the message is clear that the consummation of marriage is only celebrated when it is fruitful.

The theme of marriage is prominent in birth songs. Birth songs are also performed during traditional weddings (*ndowi*). Song 5 portrays the theme of marriage, *Deŋsi du’I wa chi tum wi wayn e e* (Sit comfortably on your chair and send your child’s wife e e). When one’s son gets married, the wife assists the mother-in-law in certain chores for her to relax. When children come, they take on these chores. An elderly person performing such chores is looked upon with pity since they are no children or the children are wayward. Here, telling the child to return quickly could also mean conceiving soon after marriage.

Infertility or bareness is highlighted in birth songs. Childlessness is hardly welcomed in Kom and such a woman is considered a man. Mbiti (1982)[[28]](#endnote-28) underscores the severity of childlessness when he says unhappy is the woman who fails to get children. For whatever other qualities she might possess, her failure to bear children is worse than committing genocide. She has become the dead end of human life. The childless woman does not participate in the ‘born-house’ activities. In Song 2, the barren woman is banned from preparing food for the child (*Abayn a wayn lam nda; Ka yi visi).* When this song is performed, such women are maltreated.

Also, childbirth ushers in great joy that runs through birth songs as the women’s God-given duty is accomplished. This immeasurable joy is portrayed as follows: *Dyal ili nawayn nin dyal a; Wo bae yi dyal teyn a ta yi yeyn wayn* (What great joy mother has today? She says she’s happy to have seen a child).The joy is even greater when she has waited a long time before giving birth. She gives glory to God who has taken away her shame and scorn (cf. song 8).

 Abortion is a vice shunned by some birth songs. It is an abomination because life is invaluable. In the past, abortion was rare and scandalous as there were no teenage pregnancies. Recently, abortion is no longer a strange phenomenon in Kom. Song 7 castigates abortion: *ma tin a–n boŋ va kula ndu ma’ ikfɨl* (if I had conceived you and aborted you) *ma adeŋ akema lu wo layn e (*where will my joy come from?). The women warn their daughters not to abort their unborn children.

Birth echoes prosperity. Kom people value children, food and prosperity as captured by the statement: *I wo’Kom twal iwayn afoghina inyan gvin*. In song 4, the woman who was short as a hearthstone has grown tall by giving birth. The birth of child changes her status. The women sing to wish the child luck and caution him to tread with caution, and return quickly with a booty from his mission (*Wayn wes ghes i tume: Kali jeli; Wa ndu a wa ghangsi gvɨ).*

4. Conclusion

 Birth songs belong to orature which is a modest contribution to the preservation of Kom culture. An attempt at translating these songs was to make them singable, preserve and disseminate Kom culture in its original color and flavor. This study made use of skopos, sociolinguistic, explicitative, and interpretative approaches. Literary devices were identified and the songs were categorized into themes. We applied some guidelines for song translation. Since birth songs are performed within socio-cultural and linguistic contexts, reliance on socio-cultural and historic factors enhanced their analysis in the original mores and traditions of Kom people. The study revealed that translated birth songs can be sung in the Kom traditional air as they convey the same linguistic and cultural value.

Birth songs should be presented in the original indigenous language before an English rendition. In translating certain cultural aspects, words and notions that cannot adequately translate original meaning can be given an explanation or interpretation to enhance understanding. Some local words in the original version should be maintained to preserve the local color and flavor.

AcknowledgEments

Deep appreciation goes to the experts on Kom Language who endorsed the translations and the women who allowed themselves to be recorded.

Competing interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest in publishing this paper.

**Authors’ Contributions**

Ita Nawom Itanghi conceived this article, collected and analyzed the data, wrote it and edited it.

Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)

Option 1:

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

Option 2:

Author(s) hereby declare that generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models, etc. have been used during the writing or editing of manuscripts. This explanation will include the name, version, model, and source of the generative AI technology and as well as all input prompts provided to the generative AI technology

Details of the AI usage are given below:

1.

2.

3.

References

1. 1. Tonkin, E. M. (1992). Narrating our Past: The Social Construction of Oral History*.* New York: Cambridge University Press. (year not match) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. 1. Nkwi, W.G. (2006). “Folk-song and History amongst the Kom of Northwest Cameroon.” In *Humanities Review Journal,* 12 (VI):62-76. (year not match) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Boguslawa, W. & Natasa, P. (2021). Translating Languages of Low Diffusion: Current and Future Avenue. In *The Interpreter and Translator Trainer* 15(2).

https://doi.org/10.10.80/1750399X.2021.1917172. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. 1. Kasparek, C. (1983). The Translator’s Endless Toil. *The polish review*, XXVIII, (2): 84-87. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. 1. Newmark, P. (1993).Paragraphs in Translation*.* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. 1. Mbunda, N.F. (2008). “Nativity Songs and Social Concerns: The Case of Oku.” In *Epasa Moto,* 2(3):10-50. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. 1. Nida, E. (1984). Towards a Science of Translating. Leiden: Brill. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. 1. Schäffner, C. (1998). Skopos theory. Routledge encyclopedia of translation studies, 17, 235-238. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. 1. Munday, J. (2012). Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications. (3rd edition) New York: Routledge. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Franzon, J. (2008). Choices in Song Translation: Singability in Print, Subtitles and Sung Performance. *The Translator*, 14(2), 373-399. http://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2008.10799263 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. 1. Shultz, G. (1997). Kom Language Grammar Sketch Part 1. Yaounde: Ministry of Scientific and Technical Research. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. 1. Stankiewicz, E. (2011). Linguistics, poetics, and the literary genres. In New directions in linguistics and semiotics (pp. 155-178). John Benjamins Publishing Company. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Mapanje J. & White L. (1983). Oral Poetry from Africa: An Anthology. New York: Longman [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. 1. Nama, C.A. (1990). “A Critical Analysis of the Translation of African Literature.” In *Language and Communication,* 1 (X):75-86. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. 1. Low, A. P. (2005). “The Pentathlon Approach to Translating Songs.” In ed. Gorlée, L. Dinda (ed). *Song and Significance: Virtues and Vices of Vocal Translation*. New York: Editions Rodopi B.V. 185-210. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. 1. Tymoczko, M. (1999).Translation in a Postcolonial Context: Early Irish Literature in English Translation*.* United Kingdom: St Jerome Publishing. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. 1. Selver, P. (1966). *The Art of Translating Poetry*. Boston: The Writer Inc. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. 1. Pergnier, M. (1978).Fondement Sociolinguistique de la Traduction*.* Paris: Champion. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. 1. Agawu, V.K. (2003). Representing African Music: Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions. New York: Routledge. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Jick, H.K. (2006). Folklore and National Development Kom and Bakweri Proverbs*.* Limbe:

Design House. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. 1. Mbiti, J.S. (1982). African Religions and Philosophy*.* London, Heinemann. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)