Case Studies of the Translation of Divine Names in Papua New Guinea
Phil King, July 2013

This document gives details of the translation choices for YHWH, 'elohim and kurios that have been made in each of 31 translation projects across Papua New Guinea, and the issues that they have faced. The list is ordered alphabetically. This is a companion document to the paper ‘Perspectives on Translating Yahweh in Papua New Guinea’ (in press), giving fuller information for the summaries presented there.

In Adzera [adz], YHWH has been translated as Yawe, with a footnote in Genesis 2:4 explaining that Yawe is God's name and that in the Hebrew language it means ‘he lives forever’. The word Anutu is used for 'elohim, a word introduced from other Papua New Guinean languages by the Lutheran church. The Old Testament word 'adonay and the New Testament word kurios are both translated by Nifutsarif, which means something like ‘Exalted [One]’ or ‘Honoured [One]’, or more literally, 'mouth-praised' or 'raised up by mouth’. This is a term used also without capitalisation for highly respected big men. Both Anutu and Nifutsarif have been established in the translation for many years.

When translating Genesis, the team struggled to find a good term for YHWH that would be suitable for a name that would be used often. The first draft had just used Nifutsarif and thus lost the distinction between YHWH and 'adonay (as in the Tok Pisin Bible), so they wanted to improve on this. They did not want to follow the English translations and put NIFUTSARIF in all caps, especially in instances when 'adonay and YHWH occur together (as in Gen. 15:2, and where many English translations use ‘Sovereign LORD’), which could give the phrase Nifutsarif NIFUTSARIF. In these verses they have used dzi Nifutsarifaŋ’ Yawe ‘my Lord Yawe’. Another argument against using Nifutsarif for YHWH was the unnaturalness that would result when translating ‘the LORD my God’. It would be more natural to put the possessive on Nifutsarif ‘Lord’, rather than Anutu, thus giving the sense of ‘my Lord God’ and missing the sense of ‘my God Yahweh’. As a result, they decided not to use any form of Nifutsarif for YHWH. Since it was not easy to find a good meaningful term to translate YHWH, they decided to borrow the name, transliterated as Yawe, and put a footnote to explain it at the first occurrence. Using this term it is more natural to say something like agam Anutu gam Yawe ‘your.pl God Yawe’ (that is, ‘the LORD your God’). Other terms have not been tried, and people did initially ask about the term Yawe during checking, but now accept it. Although the church is not necessarily using the term much at this point, no negative reactions to it have yet been encountered.¹

¹ David Howard, 2012, personal communication.
In Amam [wer], the translation team met with significant leaders in the community to talk about key terms as they began their Old Testament translation project. They decided to use the phrase Aniak Tupup to translate YHWH, which they appreciated because it sounded like the vernacular, and actually had a meaning. In the traditional culture, they had a ‘haus man’ (a ‘holy’ building, which only certain men are permitted to enter, associated with a particular spirit) for a traditional god. This haus man was presided over by a certain man, whose name could not be uttered. Instead he was called Aniak Tupup, ‘man of the holy house’. When this title is used of YHWH, it conveys the idea that there is actually a holy name being referred to, although it cannot be explicit in the translation. When translating ’elohim, they use the word Akop, which the team gloss as ‘Most High’. For the Hebrew word ’adonay and for kurios in the New Testament, the team are using the translation Kesangep ‘big man’.

In Aŋaat [agm], Autaa haatîho is used for ’elohim, a word meaning something like ‘god above’ in English. At the current stage of Old Testament translation this word is used alongside Awaisîho to give the phrase Autaa haatîho Awaisîho when translating YHWH, which translates something like ‘god above, the big one’. The main reason for using this is to maintain familiar links to the Tok Pisin Bible which uses God Bikpela. Other options are being considered though, including the use of Susoaatîpîho, ‘the self-existing one’, who does not depend on any created being to minister to him. This is a translation of the presumed meaning of YHWH as the ‘one who is’. Another possibility being considered is the use of all capital letters to make it clearer that the name of God is being referred to.

In the Ap Ma [kbx] translation, YHWH is translated as Yawe, since churches in the Ap Ma area were already using this word. The word ’elohim has been translated as Yamom, a proper name that is also used in the New Testament for ‘God’. Yamom is the traditional creation God who created everything from story. In the New Testament, kurios is translated by Nabo which means ‘important leader’ or ‘big man’. The use of Yawe is still being debated. One translator who had been part of the New Testament team wanted to use YAMOM instead.

In Bamu [bcf], YHWH is transliterated as Iawe, and ’elohim with the English loan word Godi. In the New Testament, the translation of kurios depends who is being referred to. When it is referring to Jesus, Abera Naramu ‘father older.brother’ is used, meaning an older respected leader in the community. When referring to God, Auna Dubu ‘big man’ is used, or eputu dubu ‘head man’. Both of these phrases are known in the community, although not used much because it is a culture with very little social hierarchy. The transliterated name Iawe was chosen in the Old Testament rather than any

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2 The Amam speakers consider Amam to be a separate language from Weri [wer], although this is currently the closest language listed in the ethnologue.

3 Awi Manga, 2013, personal communication.

4 Ainde Wainzo, 2010, personal communication.

of these because the translators wanted to be faithful to the original distinction between *YHWH* and *ʿadonay*, and there were no ways in the language to get close to the original meaning of the name. There have been no problems with these choices.\(^6\)

In **Binumarien** [bjr], the translation team are using *Karaambaiga*, the word usually used for a successful fight leader, to translate *YHWH*, although they are considering whether it is possible to use all capital letters instead. They use the borrowed word *Anutufa* for *ʿelohim*.\(^7\)

In **Bola** [bnp], *ʿelohim* is translated as *Vuri*, meaning something like ‘super-being’ in English. Each different tribe might have its own *Vuri*. In previous generations, the Latin loanword *Deo* was used for *ʿelohim*, and they also used a transliteration of Yahweh in songs and prayers within the church. However, the current translation uses *Vuri* as the translators feel this is actually the most appropriate word for *ʿelohim* in the vernacular. For *YHWH*, the translation team had considered using *Yaukanana* (literally, something like ‘me, just me’ in English), or possible switching to use *Deo* for *YHWH* since *Vuri* was being used for *ʿelohim*. However, the current consensus (and the one used in the published Bible) is to use *BAKOV† DAGI* for *YHWH*, literally meaning ‘big man’ in English.\(^8\)

In **Dedua** [ded], the translation team have followed the practice used in the Kāte Bible which people are familiar with (Kāte was the language used by the Lutheran church in the area for many years), using *KEBU* (in capitals) for *YHWH*, and *Anutu* for *ʿelohim*. Again there is a close connection with the translation of *kurios* in the New Testament, where they use *Kebu Yesu*.\(^9\)

In **Enga** [enq], *ʿelohim* is translated by *Anasu* (a borrowed word from the Kāte language, but rarely used now) or *Gote* (a traditional word for a religious sacrifice, predating contact with Christian missionaries). Although there is no published work from the Old Testament yet, the translators are considering using *Kamongo* or *Akali Andake* ‘big man’ for *YHWH*.\(^10\)

In the **Gapapaiwa** [pwg] language, *YHWH* is translated by *Miimiituwa*, literally meaning something like ‘the eternal one’ or ‘unknown one’. The loanword *God* is used to translate *ʿelohim* and *bada* ‘big one / boss’ is used for *kurios* in the New Testament. There have been no problems with these choices nor any alternatives tried as these terms were in use before the translation project began.\(^11\)

In **Gizrra** [tof], the translation team experimented with using both *Yawe* and *Yeoba* as translations of *YHWH*. The United Church (the main denomination in the area) already used *Yeoba* in church and in some songs, so they had no problems with this choice. However, some of the translators were

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\(^6\) Phil and Chris Carr, 2012, personal communication.

\(^7\) Namondi Unare, 2013, personal communication.

\(^8\) Brent Wiebe, 2010, personal communication.


\(^10\) Maniosa Yakasa, 2010, personal communication.

concerned because of the established presence of Jehovah’s Witnesses in the area, and the confusion that might arise. On the other hand, others felt that Yawe was neither used nor familiar to people in the area, so they did not want to use this. As a result the current plan is just to translate using the loanword LOD. For ’elohim, the translators began by using Adi, a traditional term for an ancestor, but have since changed to the loanword God, since the church has been around since the 1800s and this is a word everyone is familiar with (even though in the vernacular god also means a certain stage in the life of a coconut). In the New Testament, kuriós is also translated by Lod.12

The Guhu-Samane [ghs] team have been working on Old Testament translation for over 30 years, so they have had a lot of time to check potential translation options. They use the word Ohonga for ’elohim, a word describing someone who is sitting on a chair all the time. This word is also used for a king, but modified to ohongapu to show that a human king is being described. For YHWH the community has agreed to use the translation QOBEROBA, printed in both all capitals and bold typeface. Qoberoba is a word used to address someone that you respect highly and also gives the idea of ‘forever’. In the traditional belief systems people believed there was an important spiritual being that they addressed as Qoberoba. However, since the dedication of the New Testament in 1975, these old beliefs have been dying out, and it is now felt by all the village communities that this is an appropriate way of addressing YHWH, without causing problems because of the previous connections of the word. The Hebrew word ’adonay (‘lord’ in most English versions) is translated as sopara, meaning something like ‘big boss’, and also used to describe Jesus in the New Testament.13

In Gwahatike [dah] the transliteration Yaweh has been used in conjunction with the phrase Al Kuruŋ (literally, ‘big man’) in the translated portions of Genesis. This allows links to the New Testament use of Al Kuruŋ alongside a transliteration of Jesus. There has been no negative feedback from the church on this translation choice. In the translation of Exodus, the word Nebonepo (literally ‘me, just me’) is being trialled.14

In Imbongu [imo], the Old Testament translators have begun using Yawe, a transliteration of the Hebrew name YHWH. However, they are also coupling this with teaching about the Ten Commandments and the importance of showing respect for this special name, so that the community do not use this name lightly. There has been initial positive feedback in meetings with local church leaders from the Catholic Church and other churches. However, there has not yet been any response from those with higher level theological training. For ’elohim, they use the words pulu iye (literally, ‘root man’) and ola iye (literally, ‘above man’) which are traditional names for spiritual beings who were approached for help during sickness or for hunting expedition.15

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13 Steven Ttopoqogo, 2010, personal communication.
15 Tande Tumbo, 2010, personal communication.
In Kamano Kafe [kbq], the community and churches have accepted the translation **RA ANUMAZANE** for **YHWH**, adding the word **Ra** ‘big’ to the word **Anumazane** which is used for God. **Anumaza** originally refers to the tree with the strongest wood, which is used for making bows and arrows and is very hard to cut. So when used of God it conveys the idea of strength. The word **Ra** is the same word used with Jesus in the New Testament (Rana Jisasie) where the Greek has **kurios** (‘lord’).16

In Kovai [qkb], the church was already using the term **YOBA** (an adaptation of Jehovah) for **YHWH** when the translation project began. **Yoba** is used in traditional-melody hymns and in preaching, and is written in small caps in the translation. **Maro** is used to translate ‘elohim, probably being a variant of the culture hero figure Molo’s name. **Anutu** is also known and used in hymnody, but is recognised by the people as being non-Kovai. Molo is not a divine figure, but was the figure who taught the people about gardening, sex and men’s houses. These choices were made before the translation project began, so it has been helpful to the translators to have solutions that already ‘work’ and are recognised by everyone.17

In Maiadomu [mzz], the transliteration **Iave** has been used for **YHWH**. The community struggled with this when it was first used because they were aware that Jews never say God’s name, but accepted the translation after the cultural background was explained to them. **Yaubada** is used for translating ‘elohim, and **Tomwaya** ‘big man’ for translating **kurios** in the New Testament.18

In Mailu [mgu], **YHWH** has been translated by **GUBINA** ‘master’, the same word that is used with lower case letters for **kurios** in the New Testament. **Boi ogoda** (lit. ‘Spirit big’) has been used for ‘elohim, and in church people prefer to use this term to refer to God, since they consider **Gubina** to be too much of an earthly title.19

In Misima [mpx], the name **YHWH** is translated by **Yehoba**, a transliteration of Jehovah. The existing New Testament translation also used this for ‘god’, even for the Greek gods of Acts 14:11. To avoid confusion, the newer translation team began by translating Exodus, to show the background of God’s name, and translated ‘God’ or ‘elohim with **Yabowaine** (as well as **Yehoba**), the traditional god who lives in the sky. Although little is known about this god, people used to call on him for help when making a long sea voyage or preparing to battle with an enemy group, and some say he made the world. **Yabowaine** is always used when talking about gods other than **YHWH**. **Kurios** is translated by **Babala**, someone in traditional culture who earned a position of ‘big man’ because of having

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19 David Loea, 2013, personal communication.
extensive gardens and holding large feasts. He was always looked to in decisions about village affairs.\textsuperscript{20}

In Mussau-Emira [emi], the translation team are experimenting with both \textit{iaue} (the transliteration) and \textit{Vau palepale} (literally, ‘paramount chief’), but the team has not yet reached a final decision. The idea to try a transliteration of \textit{YHWH} came from an SIL translation consultant, but it has had a mixed reception in the community. There is a history of using various forms with \textit{Vau ‘Chief’}, but it has been fairly fluid, with no agreed answers yet. The loanword \textit{God} (or \textit{Goto / goto} in certain contexts) has been used for ‘\textit{elohim}’. Occasionally, but never when referring to the true God, the translators have used \textit{kuturu}, which is a traditional term for a spirit to which one would make an offering. In the New Testament, when translating \textit{kurios}, the translation uses both \textit{Vau ‘Chief’} and \textit{Vau ngepona ‘Chief above’}. \textit{Vau ngepona} can also mean ‘Chief of heaven’, since heaven is translated as \textit{epona liu}, the place above. The translators have recognised that people like to have more variation than either the original languages or the more literal English versions.\textsuperscript{21}

In Nek [nif], \textit{YHWH} has been translated by \textit{Molom} (literally, ‘lord’ or ‘owner’) and ‘\textit{elohim} by \textit{Kunum Yambat} (something like ‘Heavenly God’). When \textit{Yambat} was used on its own, people felt it was talking about their particular gods, and that this was not correct in the translation. So the translators added the word \textit{Kunum ‘heavenly’} to make it clear that this is the God of the Bible, with the hope that in a few generations people will associate \textit{Yambat} most with this God, rather than their traditional deities. The translation of \textit{kurios} in the New Testament is \textit{Wopum}, ‘big’. The possibility of using \textit{Molom for kurios} was considered, but in the end the team decided on different words for \textit{YHWH} in the Old Testament and \textit{kurios} in the New Testament. Since the translation has not yet been published, there is still the option to make the translations of both words the same, if necessary.\textsuperscript{22}

In Nukna [klt], \textit{YHWH} is being translated as \textit{TÁWI}, literally meaning ‘Big’, or in this usage ‘Big-One’. This has been used by the church for three generations, and is also used to describe a village leader: \textit{ámna táwi ‘big man’}. This same word is used for \textit{kurios} in the New Testament, but with only the first letter capitalised, as in \textit{Táwi Jesu}. The translation team discussed using \textit{Yawe} to translate \textit{YHWH}, following discussion of this possibility at training courses and from an SIL consultant, but people in the community were quite opposed to it and were much happier with \textit{TÁWI}. For ‘\textit{elohim}, the word \textit{Ánutu} is used, the Kâte word for God that is common all over the Huon Peninsula.\textsuperscript{23}

In Onobasulu [onn], three different terms are used to translate \textit{YHWH}: most often, a transliteration, \textit{Yawe}, is used; other times \textit{Gode} is used (a transliteration of ‘God’, and the word used to translate

\textsuperscript{20} Bill Callister, 2012, personal communication.
\textsuperscript{21} John Brownie, 2012, personal communication.
\textsuperscript{22} Katri Linnasalo, 2012, personal communication.
\textsuperscript{23} Matt Taylor, 2012, personal communication.
'elohim); and at others Saminilo is used, the word for ‘leader’ that is also used to translate kurios. This Saminilo was traditionally used for a clan or fight leader, the one who was always ‘in the forefront’.

In Sinaugoro [snc], the word VEREGAUKA is used for YHWH. The first part, vere is used to describe any chief, or someone who looks after his children and people well. Gauka means that he does this even more than normal expectations. In the New Testament, Veregauka is used when describing Jesus’ lordship, whereas the Old Testament translation of YHWH uses all capital letters. The decision to use capitals was made as a group, and has met with general acceptance in the community.

In Somsi [bmu], the word Bemkoŋkoŋ used for YHWH in the drafting stages of the Old Testament translation is a word used for a traditional deity, and means something like ‘the God who lives forever and ever’ or ‘the god of all gods’. The translation for ‘elohim is Kembu Anutu, meaning the ‘creator god’.

In Ubir [ubr], the translator did not feel comfortable transliterating YHWH into his language, nor did he feel that people would understand who was being talked about if he chose to translate the meaning with something like ‘I am who I am’. As a result he chose to follow the ‘respectful’ method used in the English Bibles, translating YHWH with BADA ‘big man / chief’. The same word is used (with only an initial capital) to translate kurios in the New Testament. For ‘elohim, since there is no suitable equivalent for God in the language, and no other alternatives met with approval, ‘elohim has generally been translated with the borrowed English word ‘God’. The Translation Committee has supported these choices, affirming the use of borrowed terms since both young and old people are using this church terminology. The reasons for these decisions and the meanings of these borrowed terms are explained in the New Testament glossary.

In Urim [uri], there are no individual names for God, so they have just used the word maur, which refers to any kind of spirit, in conjunction with wailen (‘big’) to translate ‘elohim. Wailen on its own is used to translate YHWH. It is also used with Jesus, as in Wailen Sisas to translate the Greek kurios.

In Waboda [kmx], the word YHWH is transliterated as Iawe, and ‘elohim as God. These were the words already in use in the church and in the language which the translation was adapted from. There has been some resistance to using Iawe in the Genesis adaptation. Kurios has been translated by Ohu Dumereke ‘high person’, a term that is only used for God, and so generated some surprise when it was used with Iesu ‘Jesus’ to translate ‘Lord Jesus’ in Mark 16:19.

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26 Fesi Rumu, 2010, personal communication.
27 Duncan Kasokason, 2012, personal communication.
28 Sam Akrakg, 2012, personal communication.
29 Karan Allen, 2013, personal communication.
In Waskia [wsk] (spoken on Karkar Island), *YHWH* has been translated by *Jawe*. People are pleased with this, and it was familiar from the use of the Graget (Bel) language (gdd) in the area as a church language. *Jawe* has been used by people in songs they write themselves or have translated from Graget. The translation team consider that this translation works particularly well in verses where *YHWH* occurs in conjunction with the Hebrew word for ‘lord’ (*’adonay*), as often occurs in the Psalms, as well as noting that there are no Jews in the vicinity to take offence. The word *’elohim* is translated by *Kaem*, a general word for spirits that people revere, and that has been used for ‘god’ ever since early missionaries first came to Karkar. Very occasionally, *Kaem Biya* ‘God Big’ is used. All these words for God are also discussed further in the glossary that is part of the translation.\(^{30}\)

In West Kewa [kew], the team are currently working through various options for translating *’elohim* and *YHWH* in the Old Testament. In the traditional Kewa culture, there was belief in a supreme God called *Yaki*, who was more highly respected than the different individual spiritual beings associated with individual communities. When someone died, or when people needed help with something, they would call out to this god, *Yaki*. In the past *Yaki* was considered as an option for translating *’elohim*, but now the loanword *Gote* is used instead, so there is a possibility to use *Adaa Yaki* ‘big.one Yaki’ for translating *YHWH*. However, the traditional associations mean there is still some resistance to doing this. Another possible option is to use *Adaa Yaweh* ‘big.one Yaweh’, or *Adaa Mudu* ‘big.one who goes first’. In the New Testament, *Adaa* is used with Jesus to translate the Greek *kurios* (‘lord’), so all of these options maintain a link between the word used for *YHWH* in the Old Testament and the title used for Jesus in the New Testament.\(^{31}\)

In the Yele [yle] language of Rossel Island, *YHWH* has been translated as *Chóó Lémi* ‘Himself Big Man’ or ‘the one who is of himself an important man’, with just initial capitalisation to show this is a title. The word *’elohim* is translated by *Yápwo* ‘sacred’ (with an initial capital letter), which is used for the sacred places in the traditional religion, and also means ‘forbidden’. The translators wanted to distinguish *YHWH* from *’elohim*, but did not want to use an expression like ‘Lord’ for *YHWH*, because Pharaoh says, "Who is this *YHWH* that I should obey him and let Israel go?" Having an equivalent to ‘Lord’ on its own in this verse is confusing, but it works well for Pharaoh to say, "Who is Chóó Lémi? Why should I hear his voice and let the Israel people go?" The first attempt was *Chóó Pi*, ‘Himself Person’, but that can be used of a stubborn person who does not listen to others, so changing *Pi* ‘Person’ to *Lémi* ‘Big Man’ helped, and they also added a glossary entry to explain the term. *Kurios* is translated by *Lémi*, ‘Big Man’ on its own.\(^{32}\)

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\(^{30}\) Fay Barker, 2012, personal communication.

\(^{31}\) Wopa Eka, 2010, personal communication.

\(^{32}\) Jim Henderson, 2012, personal communication.