



Cover: God, possibly.

1.

The Word was *THAMBURAAN*. But the problem, as the missionary Roberto de Nobili noted, arriving in Madurai in 1606, was that this word, chosen by his Jesuit predecessor Enrique Enrieque, was also one that Tamil men used to greet one another. The word, meaning something like, "Lord of Lords," was "not very elegant to designate God" de Nobili protested. He proposed instead *Sarveswaran*, or "Master of All Things," not knowing that the Word was merely one of Vishnu's thousand names, listed in the *Mahabharata*—to be precise, the 96th.

2.

The Word was *Dainichi*. Its translator was a samurai who had killed a man and was gutted with remorse. Anjiro had fled his home of Kagoshima, boarded a Portuguese trading ship, and ended up in Malacca, where, on December 7, 1547, the fugitive met Francis Xavier, the Catholic apostle, and early Jesuit founder. Anjiro confessed his sins to Xavier, and agreed to accompany him as interpreter on his mission to convert the Far East. En route, the samurai was baptized in Goa and renamed Paul, or *Paulo de Santa Fe*. When Xavier asked him what was the Japanese word for God, Anjiro answered: *Dainichi*. A fellow Jesuit, Nicòlo Lancilotto, marveled,

He said that they sometimes paint this *Denychy* with only one body and three heads. They then call him *Cogy*. This man said he did not know the meaning of those three heads; but he knew all were one, *Denychy* and *Cogy*, as with us, God and Trinity.

It seemed not even an act of translation so much as a miraculous discovery of the Trinity in the wilds of Japanese characters. Arriving in Kyushu, the Jesuits began to preach, "*Dainichi Samao Shinjimasho!*" or, "Believe in *Dainichi!*" Working day and night, Anjiro was able to convert his old friends and relatives, and began to translate catechisms into Japanese. "Paul, our dearest brother, will faithfully translate into his own language all that is necessary for the salvation of their souls," wrote Xavier optimistically in 1549. Yet sometime in the summer of 1551, following a debate with certain Shingon Buddhist monks, Xavier realized, to his horror, that *Dainichi* was actually the name of a celestial Buddha. The word was itself a translation into Japanese of the Sanskrit *Maha Vairocana*, a cosmic being who is the very embodiment of emptiness. Everyone had misunderstood the Jesuits as preaching either the Shingon creed or a new "Indian faith."

Tormented by the thought that the mistranslation was the Devil's scheme, Xavier instructed his Jesuits to shout in the streets, "*Dainichi no ogami*

asso!" "Do not worship *Dainichi!*" They decided to re-translate God as *Daiusu*, a simple, seemingly-Japanese pronunciation of the Latin *Deus*. Yet *Daiusu* was in many ways an even worse translation, for it sounded like *dai uso*, or "Great Lie." The preachers found themselves fleeing volleys of stones thrown by Japanese children gleefully shouting, "Liars!" Excommunicated by Jesuits and Shingon Buddhists alike, it was said Anjiro ended up a pirate, and was killed in a raid along the Chinese coast. In 1614, the military ruler Tokugawa Hidetada issued an edict expelling all Christian missionaries from Japan, for he knew it was not theologians but conquerors who liked to claim superior knowledge of things divine.

3.

There was a certain colonial logic that held that a territory ungoverned by a God was like a land without people, an empty frontier ready to be seized. In the mid-17th century, the first European settlers to colonize the Cape of Good Hope reported a race of people living there who had no concept of divinity at all. Yet in 1705, when the astronomer Peter Kolb arrived at the Cape to measure its winds and clouds, he also found that the race he referred to as "the Hottentots" had a religion of their own. Not only did they possess a High God or "Great Captain," but the Hottentots also apotheosized a certain insect: bright green, "of the Dimensions of a Child's little finger," and generally mistaken for a leaf. If this "little winged Deity" landed upon a person, they were revered as a saint, Kolb observed, and the tribe would erupt in ecstatic dances and sheep sacrifices, "as if the Lord of the Universe was come among 'em." Kolb could not speak their language, and would return to his native Germany to seek treatment for his failing eyesight. Yet his text became the long-authoritative account of the customs of the Khoikhoi and the San, whose populations were rapidly decimated by the violence and microbes arriving from another hemisphere.

The Word was */kaggen*. In the first dictionary of the */Xam* language, compiled in the 1850s by Wilhelm Bleek using prisoners incarcerated in Cape Town and on Robben Island as his linguistic informants, the word */kaggen* was translated as "praying mantis." The slash before the K indicates a click. Yet it also appeared to be the word frequently used for a "High God," or a Supreme Being, a double meaning that missionaries seized upon. While seemingly every other language on earth described the creature as a pious supplicant, from the Spanish *mantis religiosa* to the German *Gottesanbeterin*, "God-adorer," to the Turkish *peygamber devesi*, or "prophet's camel," for the Hottentots, the stick insect was the worshipped, not the worshipper — revealing a people seemingly in desperate need of religious instruction. An 1822 report in the London *Methodist Magazine* recounted a conversation between a missionary

named Mr. Evan Evans, and his unnamed wagon driver, who cradled a mantis in his palm. The driver allegedly exclaimed:

It is God, the Almighty God, who put this in the hearts of the good men in England; he said to them, "The poor Hottentots in Africa know nothing of me, the true God: They worship a poor Insect, that even they themselves can tread to death with their naked feet;" —Yes, here he is! here he is! This was our God, before God's servants came among us.

Such scenes, however invented, were grist for the mid-19th century's theorists of the new science of comparative religion, foremost among them the Oxford authorities F. Max Müller and E.B. Tylor. Using the accounts of Christian missionaries and military officers in the colonies as their raw data, scholars described how the world's "races" had developed along an evolutionary ladder of religious belief: from animism, the "savage belief" that the world is "swarming with intelligent and powerful disembodied beings" in Tylor's words, through jungles of fetishism, totemism and polytheism, to ultimately arrive at the cool heights of monotheism and rational worship of the One God. Situating races such as "Hottentots" as still on its bottom rung, such theories were deployed to justify the continuing presence of the white Christian supremacist rule, as they awaited a long evolution towards "civilization" and liberty. In Afrikaans, the word for "praying mantis" became *Hotnotsgot*, or "god of the Hottentot."

Under the system of apartheid in the 20th century, new generations of scholars would challenge the translation of */Kaggen* in its double sense, and argue that the word for the High God was merely similar in sound to the insect, and that the modest mantis, despite allegations, was never worshipped. Others argued that */Kaggen* was a Supreme Being who could take many forms, among them the mantis, but also "a hare, a louse, a snake, a vulture, a bull," and a man. Another school of thought held that */Kaggen* was best understood as a "trickster" deity—that ambivalent figment of folklore who intervenes for good & evil in human affairs. Yet still others contended that the "trickster" himself is only the invention of European theorists, used to lump together all inscrutable, irrational non-Christian divinities who seem to occupy dank "liminal spaces," and must be kept at a remove from heaven. Other scholars argued that the mantis, though it was given the same name of God, actually acted as its oracle, able to foretell the weather or the outcome of a hunt by moving its spindly legs. "The meaning of (*/Kaggen*) cannot be determined," concluded the anthropologist S.S. Dornan, an expert on divining bones. Whatever it was, it took flight from translation: "God" was treacherously inadequate for a lithe and green, elegant insect sometimes said to wear the moon as its shoe.

4.

The Word was *uNkulunkulu*. If to translate is to carry words from one language into another, it is also, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, “To carry or convey to heaven without death.” The O.E.D. quotes Coleridge, on someone who falls in battle, “*Pass’d off to Heaven, translated and not kill’d.*” The five syllables of *uNkulunkulu* were ferried up to the Christian heaven by John Williams Colenso, a theologian from Cornwall who in 1853 was appointed Bishop of Natal. Arriving in his new diocese, Colenso undertook a rigorous search to find out which indigenous Zulu concept of a Supreme Being most closely resembled the Christian God. The Bishop hoped to standardize the vast array of Zulu names-for-Him that proliferated, words such as *uThixo*, which earlier apostles such as J.T. van der Kemp had adopted. In Natal, *uThixo*, a Khoikhoi word, was rejected by Zulu converts who argued it was just another name for the notorious mantis that was somebody else’s god. They proposed *iTongo* instead, as a more universal and abstract term, yet missionaries soon learned it also referred to some kind of ancestral spirit or “sleep-ghost.” Worse, as E.B. Tylor recounted, the concept of *iTongo* came burdened with an associated *theology of sneezing*—a “savage doctrine of pervading and invading spirits,” or *iTongo* in the nose. Other missionaries invented hybrid words, such as the Methodist concoction *uJehova*, while Anglicans tried *uDio*. Following his extensive investigations, Colenso concluded that *uNkulunkulu*, or “the Great-Great One,” was the word most closely approaching the Almighty. In creating a Zulu prayer book and translating sections of the Bible, Colenso used *uNkulunkulu* for “God.”

The Church of England was not pleased with how its bishop repurposed a “heathen” word into the liturgy; in 1862, Colenso was accused of heresy and forced to return to London to testify. Although he was eventually acquitted, he continued to be criticized by other missionaries such as Henry Callaway, who with the Zulu convert Mpengula Mbande compiled his “authoritative” text, *The Religious System of the Amanzulu*. Callaway argued that *uNkulunkulu* was a proper name for the first ancestor—the Zulu Adam—and hence entirely inappropriate to designate God. Callaway, who favored the most militant and autocratic forms of colonial rule, asserted his knowledge of Zulu faith was superior not only to any European’s, but that he had “entered far deeper than the natives themselves could penetrate.” To Colenso’s defense came his friend Wilhelm Bleek, who had collected “primordial” myths revealing how *uNkulunkulu* had created humankind. *uNkulunkulu* said, “*The white men may live in the midst of the water ... The black people shall live within this land ... The white men shall carry guns ... The black men shall carry spears.*” For his own part, Bleek believed that all humankind was originally Khoikhoi or Zulu; that South Africa was the origin point of all the religions of the world; and that the different grammatical structures of the two

tongues had led men to develop religions of two distinct kinds — those that revered ancestors and those that deified the distant bodies in the sky. Although it is impossible to ever give a single answer as to what *uNkulunkulu* is or was, its meaning seemed to change depending on how disrupted or damaged communities were by colonial violence and missionary encroachment, as the scholar David Chidester would show in his *Savage Systems*. Groups that were still intact, and farthest away from centers of colonial control, tended to maintain that *u* was the local ancestor of their particular tribe, and that each nation had its own *uNkulunkulu*. Yet people from communities that had been shattered or displaced tended to reinterpret *uNkulunkulu* as the progenitor of all humankind. People who, in their daily life, interacted with evangelists and settlers, tended to describe *uNkulunkulu* as a Supreme Being that could compare with the Christian deity, a universal Almighty that could bestride the earth. *uNkulunkulu* became a power that could fight the discourse that posited Zulu people as lower on an evolutionary chain of religion, a god that could compete in a globalizing arena of divinity. He became an answer to the question as old as YHWH and his many, unspeakable names. How to find a word for a concept whose magnitude, by definition, human speech is not enough to convey? Are five syllables better than one? If *uNkulunkulu* had once been a man who lived long ago and perished, he was carried up to heaven. And his death was so obscured in the process, it was as if it had never happened at all — translated, and not kill'd.

5.

In 1609, Henry Hudson arrived at the river in New York that now carries his name, aboard the Dutch ship the Half Moon, or the mantis' shoe. According to the colonist Adriaen van der Donck, retelling the story in 1650, the Lenape people were watching from the shore. They wondered whether it was an enormous floating house, a sea monster, an unusually shaped whale. "When some of them first saw our ship approaching at a distance, they did not know what to think about her, but stood in a deep and solemn amazement, wondering whether it were a ghost or apparition, coming down from heaven, or from hell," van der Donck recounted. The Word, it turned out, was *MANITOU*. In his *Key into the Language of America*, composed in 1643, the Baptist minister Roger Williams had translated *Manitou* as "God." As the Moravian evangelist John Heckewelder, who lived among the Lenape, later wrote, the people determined the mysterious craft was "a remarkably large house in which the *Manitou* (the Great or Supreme Being) himself was present, and that he was probably coming to visit them." In such accounts of "first contact" narrated by Heckewelder and other missionaries to the New World, the Lenape were torn "between hope and fear" at the approach of their

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God. Because the Lenape mistook the European captain for Mannitto, it was certain proof, wrote van der Donck, a lawyer and advocate for New Netherland's claim on the land, that *the Dutch* had been there first. For the Indians had never before seen men so different in appearance from themselves, and concluded they could only have come down from the sky.

Yet as later scholars of Algonquian languages would contend, there is no evidence that Manitou meant anything resembling the Christian concept of divinity before the arrival of the European missionaries. Even Williams had noted that, besides designating the Supreme Being, the Word was also used in an all-purpose way. He observed,

a generall Custome amongst them, at the apprehension of any Excellency in Men, Women, Birds, Beasts, Fish, &c. to cry out *Manittóo*, that is, it is a God, as thus if they see one man excell others in Wisdome, Valour, strength, Activity &c. they cry out *Manittóo* A God. ... When they talke amongst themselves of the *English* ships, and great buildings, of the plowing of their Fields, and especially of Bookes and Letters, they will end thus: *Manitôwock* They are Gods: *Cummanittôo*, you are a God, &c.

Writers, in particular, possessed *Manitou*, according to Heckewelder, a writer himself. When "thoughts etc. are put down on paper & conveyed to a distant friend," he reported, it is considered "as a piece of *Manittowoagan*, the writer being endowed with a supernatural power." Rather than designating some all-powerful, Algonquian "God," the word *Manitou* captured a spectrum of powers and prized qualities.

If the Lenape had spied the impressive craft of the Half Moon and called it *Manitou*, it might only have been a compliment taken too seriously. Yet the New World became imbued with its colonizers' animism, the tendency to discover gods inside every leaf and stone. New deities were found in translation. As they set about their task of converting the Indians, apostles such as Heckewelder preached about the *Kitchi*, or "Great," *Manitto*, "our Almighty Creator." The Moravian missionary attempted to map concepts of Manitou onto the Christian split of good and evil: he taught his pupils that, alongside the *Kitchi Manitto* there must also exist the *Matschi* or "bad" *Manitto*, the devil. The task then remained for the missionaries to sift out this power of Manitou from the quotidian world of men, beasts, and fish—to push the Christian heaven away from the base earth and to erect firm boundaries between sacred and profane. *And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.*

The Word was a stick insect, or it was Vishnu. It was a dead ancestor, or excellence, or emptiness. And the Word spoke the dangers that lie in giving a thing a name that belongs to something else.

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