

Jamaica patois advocates launch first Bible

When English teacher Faith Linton first proposed translating the Bible into Jamaica's patois tongue in the late 1950s, most people who heard the idea shook their heads.

Some on the deeply Christian island believed it was sacrilegious. Others opposed it because the unique mixture of English and West African languages was widely disdained by the elites as a coarse linguistic stepchild to English, which is the only official language in this former British colony. "There was shock at the mere suggestion," said Linton, now 81, a longtime board member of the Bible Society of the West Indies. "People were deeply ashamed of their mother tongue. It was always associated with illiteracy and social deprivation." Decades later, Linton's vision is becoming a reality: After years of meticulous translation from the original Greek, the Bible Society is releasing in Jamaica print and audio CD versions of the first patois translation of the New Testament, or "Di Jamiekan Nyuu Testament." The battle lines have softened somewhat, but there is still substantial opposition to patois in the pulpit. Critics say it will dilute Scripture and undermine the already weak hold many poor Jamaicans have on standard English. Advocates see it as a bold, empowering move that will finally affirm the indigenous tongue as a distinct language in Jamaica. For patois expert Hubert Devonish, a linguist who is coordinator of the Jamaican Language Unit at the University of the West Indies, the Bible translation is a big step toward getting the state to eventually embrace the creole language created by slaves. "We've now produced a major body of literature in the language, whatever people may think about it one way or the other. And that is part of the process of convincing people that this thing is a serious language with a standard writing system," Devonish said. The Rev. Courtney Stewart, general secretary of the regional Bible society, said there is a widespread conviction that Scripture is best understood in a person's spoken tongue. He predicts many Jamaicans will be inspired to hear and read the translation in which the shortest verse — "Jesus wept," following the death of Christ's friend Lazarus in the Gospel of John — becomes "Jiizas baal." In the depiction of the angel Gabriel's visit to the Virgin Mary that foretold the birth of Jesus, the New King James Bible's version of Luke reads, "And having come in, the angel said to her, 'Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women.'" The patois version says: "Di ienjel go tu Mieri an se tu ar se, 'Mieri, mi av nyuuz we a go mek yu wel api. Gad riili riili bles yu an im a waak wid yu aal di taim.'" "It goes straight to their hearts and people say they are able to visualize it in a way they've never experienced before," Stewart said.