

with all of his being, that is, completely, and such love will be shown in the way he lives, in the way he acts, and in the way he thinks. In Indonesian, it is therefore possible to translate the first two expressions with a single expression, that is *jiwa-raga* (literally "life-body"). The expression means all that a person is, both physically and spiritually.

3. Biblical expressions should not be introduced into a language if these expressions are not natural and are not commonly used, for instance "full of the spirit", and so on.

4. We should not try to create new expressions in the language when the available terms are already sufficient to translate the meaning of Biblical terms. For example, in Indonesia, the word *hati* has such a wide range of meaning that it overlaps with *ruach* in many ways. When the literal translation for *ruach* (that is, *roh*) is not adequate to cover a particular meaning of *ruach*, then the temptation to look for new terminology should be avoided, especially if it is discouraged by proper analysis that the particular meaning of *ruach* can be adequately conveyed by *hati*.

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## CLEAN AIR OR BAD BREATH?

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My title is not a question about air pollution in large cities, or about infections that cause people's breath to smell. It is a question of how to adequately translate the concept of *spirit* in such biblical expressions as *evil spirit*, *unclean spirit* and *holy spirit* in African languages.

A group of Africans was learning how to identify the components of meaning of words that are difficult to translate. To practice their newly acquired skill they were listing all the essential components of the words in their language which covered the area of meaning of *spirit*. This list included some ten terms, among them the names of several kinds of evil spirits, the human soul/spirit, and so on. There were also three expressions from the existing Bible in their language: *bad breath*, *dirty breath*, and *red/clean breath* which represented the translation of "evil spirit, unclean spirit", and "Holy Spirit" respectively. (In this language *red* and *clean* are either two different words which sound the same like English *whole* and *hole*, or they represent the literal and figurative meanings of the same word. *Red* is usually the first meaning people hear in unmarked contexts.) A school teacher was at the blackboard leading the group's work under the translations consultant's guidance. She had just finished getting from the group all the essential components of the natural expressions in their language; but when she came to the three expressions from the Bible listed above, she turned to the group and confidently said: "These three words have no components of meaning, isn't that right." Without hesitation the rest responded: "Yes, they have no components of meaning." When the consultant interrupted saying: "But surely the words *bad*, *dirty*, and

*red/clean* have some components of meaning”, she said: “Oh yes, by themselves they do; but in these expressions they don’t mean anything.”

Here were educated Christians, most of them of the second and third generation, insisting that the expressions used in their Bible were meaningless, and therefore saying that all passages relating to the Holy Spirit were really nonsense.

The situation in the language I have referred to highlights at least three kinds of problems: (1) How to translate the concept of *holy*. (This is often a very acute problem, but it is outside of the scope of this article. We only point to one solution suggested by the Bible itself inasmuch as it uses *Spirit of God* as an alternative in about half the occurrences.) (2) The translation of *spirit* (which is the main concern of this article). (3) The effort of this particular translation to match in form *evil spirit*, *unclean spirit*, and *holy spirit* with *bad breath*, *dirty breath* and *red/clean breath*.

Sad to say, this situation where people feel that the translation of *holy spirit* in their language is relatively meaningless, is not uncommon. It applies in varying degrees to a majority of African languages with which I have had any relationship.

Likewise, many existing translations have also tried to duplicate biblical usage by using the same word for *spirit* in such expressions as *evil spirit* and *spirit of God*. Usually this seriously violates African-language usage since African languages tend to have specific names for evil spirits. For them the really serious translation problem is *spirit* in *holy spirit/spirit of God*.

In this article I want to do a number of things: (1) consider the meaning of *spirit* in the expressions *holy spirit* or *spirit of God* as they occur in the Hebrew and the Greek; (2) look at how African translators have been handling this translation problem; (3) propose an alternative based on biblical usage (a bit like the holy-spirit/spirit-of-God solution mentioned above); (4) apply this solution to a series of specific passages to point out its limitations and shortcomings; (5) describe the search for a solution in one particular language.

### **What do the Hebrew and Greek words mean?**

Hebrew word *ruach* and the Greek word *pneuma* share two literal meanings, namely “breath” and “wind”. In Greek there seems to be a further distinction between *pneuma* as “forceful breath” and another word *psuchē*, “gentle breath”. However, it is the third meaning of *ruach* and *pneuma*, namely “spirit” that poses the serious problem for translators.

In general we can say that commentaries and lexicons agree that the “spirit” meaning of these biblical words is not just another literal meaning like *breath* and *wind*, but it is an analogy. It refers to something that exhibits certain characteristics of *wind* and/or *breath*. If it is an analogy we are, of course, dealing with figurative usage; and we know from experience that languages differ markedly in which meanings can be extended to other domains and which words can develop figurative meanings. Consequently we cannot assume that the meaning of *breath* or *wind* in any language can be extended to or be used figuratively to cover the meaning *spirit*. In regard to the “spirit” meaning itself, lexicons tend to give us the following essential components of meaning: (1) it

denotes an entity without a body, (2) this entity is usually invisible and it is spoken of as visible only when it appropriates the body of another creature, (3) it is active and powerful, much stronger than man, (4) in the case of man, it functions as his life principle.

### How is "Holy Spirit" being translated into African languages today?

My experience with African languages is limited to some languages in eastern and southern Africa, and more recently to some West African ones. While there often are significant differences even between fairly closely related languages, we can generalize and say that existing translations in Africa employ one or other of the following five solutions.

1. There is a small minority of languages that have a word which exhibits most of the essential components of *spirit*, for example, Lobiri in Upper Volta. Usually this is an entity associated with spiritual healing. It is neither good nor bad by nature, but can be used for both good and evil ends by those who gain control of it. A small minority of these languages can use the same word for *spirit* in both *evil spirit* and spirit of God.

On the surface these languages seem to have a very easy solution to the translation of *holy spirit*. However we need to point out the following limitations: (a) Their word for *spirit* is narrower in its area of meaning than the biblical word. It often cannot be used as a label for *evil spirits* because these all have specific personal names. (b) These beings can be easily manipulated by humans. Once a shaman or sorcerer has gained control of them they are subservient to him to do either good or evil. (c) In some Nilotic languages (and this is based on reading rather than on personal experience) the word for *spirit* has a "divine" or "supreme being" component and can in some instances actually be equivalent to *God*. However even in this context the being can be either good or bad, and people's concern usually is with placating the evil side rather than worshipping the good.

2. By far the most common solution seen is translations which are based on the "breath" meaning of *ruach-pneuma*. These translations have assumed that it is possible to extend the meaning of the local word for *breath* to cover also the biblical figurative meaning of *spirit*. In some languages, for instance Zulu of South Africa, translators insist that this solution is natural to the language, but I must say that I have yet to meet a truly convincing situation in which the local African word *breath* can be extended to mean "spirit".

In some languages where the mission and the church already have a century or more of history, Christians readily admit that the *breath-for-spirit* solution has always been unnatural in their language: but they quickly go on to say that the generations of usage have hallowed it and that at least for Christians today it conveys the proper meaning (Ewe in Ghana and Togo, for example). In fact, models like Ewe are so strong that new translations being made in minority languages at present are often following these models, even though the translators confess to their being unnatural in their own language (for instance Bassari).

3. There are some situations where the Hebrew *ruach* in the form of its Arabic cognate has been transliterated and incorporated as a loanword into the African language, for example Sub-Saharan languages with Islamic influences.

This solution is very unsatisfactory because as a rule the meanings of loanwords for nonconcrete items are elusive and hard to define. And in the case of the Arabic cognate for *spirit*, the word usually has not been borrowed directly from Arabic into the African language, but has come to the particular language through a number of intermediate African languages, each of which has already filtered the meaning of the word through its own African worldview. The widely different meanings given for loanwords like *ruch* by mother-tongue speakers in such languages indicates that there is no common understanding of what that word really means.

4. In some instances translators have used the local label for the nonmaterial part of man, that is the *soul*, to express biblical *spirit*. Africans do not usually have the body-soul-spirit definition of man which some people claim to find in the Bible. Most African cultures have only a body-soul distinction in their view of man (a view also represented in the Bible). In this case *soul* is seen as covering the whole area of meaning of both *soul* and *spirit* of the Bible.

For many Bantu languages, as well as for a good number of other African languages, the use of *soul* for *spirit* introduces severe problems. In general we can say that Africans place little emphasis on the soul of a person during the person's lifetime. The soul really assumes an importance only when it survives the death of the person's body. For this reason it has often been given the equivalent "soul-of-the-dead" in anthropological literature. Again, certain African writers, like John Mbiti, stressing the continued relationship with the living, have used the term *living dead* for such souls. In such situations the use of *soul* in *holy spirit/spirit of God* would tend to imply that God had died. This African view stands in sharp contrast to many South American tribes where soul-wandering in dreams and soul-stealing as a cause of illness are common beliefs. In those languages the use of the local word for *soul* to express *spirit* has been a lot more successful.

5. There are a few situations where translators have recognized the nonliteral nature of the "spirit" meaning of *ruach-pneuma* and have tried to find an equivalent figure of speech to express it in their own language. I can recall having met three such figures. They are life (I cannot recall the name of the language involved), *mind* or *personality* (Somba of Benin), and *power* (Tamachek of Niger).

In Somba the national translators (possibly under missionary guidance) reasoned that if the Bible saw man as a being consisting of three parts, *body*, *soul* and *spirit*, their own equivalent for that would be *body*, *soul*, and *mind/personality*. To their way of thinking *mind* emphasized that part of man's nonmaterial nature which operates during life rather than *soul* which, as suggested earlier, picks up importance only after death.

In the case of Tamachek the use of *power* developed more or less accidentally. It happened that as various words were tried, it was the only word which informants readily accepted as a description of or a replacement for the loanword from Arabic, *ruch*.

At first I felt that I must reject all three of these suggestions out of hand as quite inadequate, but as my exposure to the problem increased, and especially in the case of Tamachek (when I saw how vehemently mother-tongue speakers of the language rejected all other proposals except *power* and the Arabic

loanword *ruch*) I realized that I ought to consider the possibilities again.

What now follows is, in a sense, biblical support for the use of the word *power* to replace the word *spirit*.

### **Biblical evidence for the use of the word "Power" as a possible equivalent to replace "Spirit"**

Once I was ready to consider the use of *power* as a figure of speech for *spirit* I quickly saw that there is considerable biblical support for this usage. Here are three sources of it:

1. Contexts in which *spirit* and *power* are used as parallel terms with the same meaning. I will quote only one Old Testament and one New Testament example and then give some additional examples illustrating the same point.

"I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD", Micah 3.8 RSV. (Here *power* and *spirit* are used as terms in apposition, having the same meaning.)

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you", Luke 1.35 RSV. (This would be a typical Hebrew poetic doublet.)

Other references are: Luke 1.17, Acts 10.38, 1 Corinthians 2.4, 1 Thessalonians 1.5.

2. Passages in which *power* is used as a replacement for *holy spirit*. (Usually this is related to the Jewish desire to avoid pronouncing God's name.) Again we quote two passages and list additional references.

"Stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high" Luke 24.49 RSV. (Compare this with Acts 1.4-8 "charged them not to depart . . . but to wait . . . you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.")

"Stephen was a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit . . . Stephen, full of faith and power", Acts 6.5-8 KJV.

Other references are: Luke 1.35, Luke 5.17, Acts 4.7, 2 Corinthians 13.4, Ephesians 3.7, 3.20, 2 Peter 1.3.

3. Passages in which *power* is used as the distinctive attribute of the Spirit of God. Again we quote two passages and list additional references.

"You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you", Acts 1.8 RSV.

"Strengthened with might through his Spirit", Ephesians 3.16 RSV. Additional references are: Luke 4.43, Acts 4.33, Romans 15.13, 19.

### **Examples of translation using "Power"**

Here now follow a few verses in back translation in which *power* is used as the figurative replacement for *spirit*.

"God's power will sit upon you, it will be over you like a cloud" (Luke 1.35).

"You will become strong when God's power will sit upon you" (Acts 1.8).

"How God chose Jesus of Nazareth (to do his work) and made him strong by giving him his (God's) own power" (Acts 10.38).

We need to point out however, that even though *power* may be a meaningful substitute for *spirit*, it is not without problems: (1) It loses the distinction between *spirit* and *power*. (2) *Power* lacks the additional components of meaning which *spirit* has. Sometimes it may be possible to add some of the missing

components, as for instance in, “God is power and we cannot see him, but if we want to pray to him truly, we need his (God’s) power to help us” (John 4.24). (3) Perhaps by far the most serious problem is the fact that *power* being such a common word, it is difficult to personalize it and to preserve the biblical usage of the *Holy Spirit* as a personal being, as for example in Acts 5.3: Is it possible for Ananias and Saphira to lie to the “power of God”? Someone has suggested that “the powerful one” or “the one of power” would personalize it, but this would seem to blur the intimate linkage between God and his Spirit.

### **The Somba find their answer**

Somba is a language spoken in northeastern Benin by some sixty thousand people. The first draft of the New Testament in their language was completed in 1979 and it is now being extensively revised in cooperation with the UBS translations consultant.

Somba has a series of names for particular kinds of evil spirits; but it does not have a general word for *spirit* to match the biblical usage of *evil spirit* and *holy spirit*.

The Sombas believe that man has a soul, but little importance is attached to it during a man’s lifetime. As in so many African cultures, they see the importance of the soul emerging only when it survives the person’s death and when it begins its work of supervising the moral behavior of living relatives.

As suggested earlier, the missionary partners in the translation team had presented the Sombas with a three part view of man as the “biblical view”, and so the Sombas had tried to match *body*, *soul*, and *spirit* and had come up with *body*, *soul*, and *mind* (literally: thinking). Since they had no real equivalent for *holy* they used *clean* as a substitute, and so they spoke of *holy spirit* as *clean thinking*. It was this usage that the translations consultant met when he began to check their translation in 1981. Even a very brief check revealed that this was an entirely artificial expression and that it was a very inadequate rendering for *holy spirit*. Look at the following back-translations of two verses from the Gospel of Mark:

“I have plunged you into water, but the one coming at my back he will plunge you into *clean thinking*” (1.8).

“At once *clean thinking* pushed him to go into the place where no people lived” (1.12).

In the search for a solution to the problem of which the mother-tongue speakers also were very much aware, the translations consultant proposed a two-pronged approach: (1) The community of believers should begin to pray, “God, how would you have expressed this if you had spoken in our language in the first place?” This prayer was designed to develop an expectant attitude among the believers. (2) The entire community—believers, Muslims, and traditional religionists—should begin a cultural-linguistic search for alternative expressions. To stimulate the discussion the translations consultant proposed a series of leading questions, such as: What was our grandfathers’ concept of God? Did they see him as having a body? A soul? Who did his work for him? Did he have spirit-slaves or helpers such as traditional healers often use? Were there neutral spirits that could do either good or evil, or were there only evil

spirits? What is the origin of known evil spirits? Is there a generic name for *evil spirits* or are there only specific names for the different kinds?

The questions quickly stirred up intensive discussions. These discussions were carried on for the best part of a year with the translations consultant making additional suggestions or posing additional questions for the group to discuss. Here now are some of the findings:

“Our fathers probably believed that God had a body similar to that of people. However, Muslims and Christians ‘know’ he really doesn’t have a body, he merely assumes one when he appears to people. God’s body is ten, twenty or maybe even a hundred times bigger than a man’s body.

“Yes, God has a soul because he is obviously alive. This soul is much bigger and much more powerful than man’s soul. It probably matches the enormous size of his body.

“There is no question that God’s soul has power, but God doesn’t send it to do his work. In fact, our fathers probably would have believed that God’s soul could only leave his body when he died, just like human souls.

“No, there are no neutral spirits, but healers can use evil spirits to accomplish both good or evil ends.

“No, you cannot add *good* to the name of a demon, it would be a contradiction just like a *good evil spirit* in English or French.”

However, unexpected help did come while the group was discussing the functions of evil spirits. Older people recalled that healers often tried to avoid the names of certain evil spirits for fear that even pronouncing their names would increase their danger. To escape pronouncing such names, healers resorted to a euphemism *impure air*. They would diagnose a patient’s condition and say: “Impure air has taken you”. Since such evil spirits were invisible, the people now reasoned that if God is a spirit and is invisible, maybe they could refer to his presence as *pure/clean air*.

About this time the translations consultant proposed *power* as in *power of God* as a possible figurative replacement for *spirit*. Now the church began to seriously put the two alternatives to God in prayer asking which of these two he would have used had he spoken in their language in the first place.

It soon became apparent that the *pure air* solution was the more natural of the two; but since the air people breathe is normally considered clean, they saw a possible ambiguity between *clean air* (breathing) and *holy spirit*. To resolve the ambiguity they decided to use *air of God* to express both *spirit of God* and *holy spirit*. In the same vein the “principalities and powers of the air” spoken of in the epistles would be called *impure air*.

The Somba are still at least a year from publishing their New Testament, but in the meanwhile they are using *air of God* in their teaching and are waiting to get additional confirmation that this is indeed God’s choice for their language. Comments from other translators would be welcome.