

PRACTICAL PAPERS FOR  
**THE BIBLE  
TRANSLATOR**

*Published twice yearly  
(April and October)  
by the United  
Bible Societies*

Vol. 46, No. 4, October 1995

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**TRANSLATION OF NEPHESH “BREATH”, “LIFE”,  
“SOUL” INTO THE DAGARA LANGUAGE**

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Dagara is a Gur (Niger-Congo) language spoken by around 500,000 people in Southwest Burkina Faso and Northeast Ghana, West Africa. 65% of the people (who are also called Dagara) practise African traditional religion, while some 20% are Christian and 15% Muslim.

In this article I want to discuss how the Old Testament concept of *nephesh* can best be understood and translated by native speakers of Dagara. My approach will be:

- 1) to study the different meanings of *nephesh* in the Old Testament;
- 2) to study the Dagara terms that may have similar meanings, and in particular the idea of *sîé*;
- 3) to consider problems that are likely to arise in the process of trying to match the meaning of the Hebrew term with Dagara equivalents;
- 4) to make some suggestions about the way *nephesh* should be translated into Dagara.

**The meanings of *nephesh***

*Nephesh* is one of the key terms of the Old Testament, and it is a term which has a number of meanings. Each meaning depends on the context in which the word is used in the Bible; and as Wolff (*Anthropology of the Old Testament*) says, "... it is only in a very few passages that the translation 'soul' corresponds to the meaning of *nephesh*." However all the different meanings share in common the fact that they express some particular aspect of life.

The different meanings of *nephesh* found in Hebrew lexicons, Bible dictionaries, concordances, and encyclopedias are as follows:

**Neck** (Psa 44.25; 105.18; 119.25)

**Throat** (Psa 107.5; Eccl 6.7; Isa 5.14; Hab 2.5)

**Breath, breathing**

**Living being** (animal, human)

**Soul**

**Life (human or animal), principle of life, vital power**

**Corpse of a dead person**

**The common principle of desires, sensations, feelings ...**

**Somebody, people**

**Personal pronoun, reflexive pronoun, self**

Most of the reference works agree on the major distinctions between these different meanings of the term as indicated by the various contexts in which it appears in the Old Testament. According to *A New Concordance of the Bible* (editor Abraham Even-Shoshan), for instance, there are three major distinctions in the different meanings of the word *nephesh*. These are:

- (a) the principle of life which exists in all living beings;
- (b) human beings, persons, individuals;
- (c) the self, the individual himself or herself.

Following its definitions, this concordance lists other words sharing the same meanings, *chayyim* "life", *yetser* "image", *neshamah* "breath", and *ruach* "wind", and then other words that *nephesh* frequently occurs with.

In establishing the distinctive features of *nephesh* it is helpful to compare and contrast it with other words which have similar meaning, or which are closely related to it. When we do this we discover the following:

- 1) In its literal sense *nephesh* refers to the upper part of the body which is called "neck" or "throat", as opposed to the terms *leb* and *lebab* which refer to the "middle" or the "heart".
- 2) *Nephesh* applies both to human beings and to animals, as opposed to *ruach* which is not used of animals.
- 3) When *nephesh* applies to God, it has the same meaning as *ruach*.
- 4) *Nephesh* is an element which is abstract or spiritual, not material, as contrasted with *basar* "flesh" which is material, physical, concrete.
- 5) *Nephesh* survives after death, as opposed to *chayyim* "life" which ends at death. *Nephesh* can exist apart from the body.
- 6) *Nephesh* is seen as the principle of life, the source of power, an element which gives energy and life-movement to human beings and animals.
- 7) *Nephesh* has the meaning of "self" in its grammatical use as a reflexive personal pronoun. In this sense the term *nephesh* stands for the person who is the subject and the object of the verb at the same time.
- 8) After death *nephesh* returns to God.
- 9) *Nephesh* is immortal.

From the above we can see that *nephesh* has no negative meaning, (except in the book of Leviticus – where it refers to the dead body as an unclean element which defiles the person touching it and requires the intervention of the priest for the ritual of purification). On the contrary it is a concept which has a positive value. This means that in translation a good equivalent for *nephesh* should not have any negative undertones.

In addition to this, the word used to translate *nephesh* should be different from the one used to translate *ruach*, if at all possible. The limited availability of words in some African languages often leads translators to use the same term to translate words which have some elements of meaning in common, but which are actually different in Hebrew. In this case the fact that *ruach* only applies to human beings and to God, whereas *nephesh* applies to animals and human beings, should be regarded as a major reason for distinguishing the two terms in translation.

### The Dagara understanding of human personality and nature

The term used in the current lectionary of the Roman Catholic Church as an equivalent for *nephesh* in Dagara is *síε*. Is this the best equivalent for translation? What are the dangers, if any? And how may the dangers be avoided? In order to answer these questions, we need to see what functions are performed by *síε* in Dagara thought.

The Dagara people are mostly farmers and peasants who used to live in small villages scattered in the bush of the tropical savannah. In traditional life they know of God's existence; God the supreme deity has for them a name in their language which is *Naamwun* (literally "Chief God").

For traditional Dagara people the human person is thought to be composed of physical and spiritual elements. The physical component is the *iāgan* "body" which is visible, and the spiritual component is the *síε*. In the Dagara way of seeing the world, this concept of the human person is reflected in the concept of the universe which is seen as composed of two main areas: the spiritual world (*kpume tēw*) and the physical world (*tēw zu*, literally "on the land"). There is no clear line or border between these two areas. Whereas the body lives in the physical world, the *síε* lives in the spiritual world called *kpume tēw* ("land of the spirits"). It is important to note that the Dagara do not think of any geographical separation between the two realms. They believe that the spirits dwell in the same region as people. There is no river to cross and no long journey to make in order to reach the next world.

The first function of *síε* is to give life to the body. It is the life principle which animates a person's body and makes him act according to his own personality.

When a person is going to die, the *síε* separates from the body. This always occurs before the moment of physical death when the person breathes his last breath. In other words, the *síε* anticipates the real death of the person and separates from his body. The separation can occur months, weeks, or days before the person dies. Separation of the *síε* from the body cannot be reversed when the cause of death is natural, but it can be reversed if the death is intentionally provoked through a mystical power, through evil magic, or through witchcraft by someone who desires the person's death for some reason. In addition to the effect of witchcraft, death is also often caused by an ancestor's spirit who is angry against the victim's mistakes or rebellion against the rules of the community.

According to traditional Dagara thinking, in all cases of death the departed *síε* goes through a gradual process of change from one state of existence to the next. However the change of state does not involve a change of identity – there is a continuity through the process of change, and the *síε* of a person remains the same. First of all the *síε* becomes a *nyaakpun* “living-dead”. The length of time in the state of *nyaakpun* for a *síε* depends on the quality of the funerals, or the number and types of sacrifices and offerings deemed necessary by the living members of the family to be completely sure of the reason for the death. When this period is over the *nyaakpun* becomes a *kpun* “spirit” to whom offerings are given and sacrifices made. Thus the *nyaakpun* is a temporary state. The final destination of the *síε* is the *kpunε tēw*, the place where the ancestors’ spirits dwell.

In the pure Dagara tradition it is hard to find evidence of any form of judgment or reward to be expected in the next life. Today, however, under the influence of Judeo-Christian civilization and biblical teaching, which first came into Dagara society more than sixty years ago, those beliefs are changing. Christian and non-Christian alike now tend to think that every instance of death is the expression of God’s will. “It is God who has called him,” people like to say when talking about a person who has died – meaning that his *síε* has been taken away from his body at God’s command.

After a person’s death, the *síε* which is clean deserves to live for ever in the Kingdom of God. But the *síε* which is unclean deserves to live in a place of great suffering and torment, outside the Kingdom of God. For modern and Christian Dagara it is the *síε* of a person which is accountable to God when it is separated from the body at the person’s death. For Christians *síε* is the link by means of which human beings are related to God.

#### The characteristics of *síε*

There are four major characteristics of *síε*. These are common to all spiritual beings in traditional Dagara belief.

- 1) *Síε* is immortal, because it is a spiritual being. A spiritual being exists for ever; it never dies. Witches can use their mystical power to catch hold of someone’s *síε* and tie it up, thus causing the sickness or death of a person. But they can never kill or eat or destroy the *síε*.
- 2) *Síε* is invisible. This means that human eyes cannot see it in normal circumstances. However the *síε* of a person who has died can make very short appearances to close members of his or her family. This may happen while the *síε* is in the state of *nyaakpun*. Such appearances are generally feared by the living members of the family. Appearances are made by an angry *nyaakpun* who wants to do harm to his relatives held responsible for doing wrong. A *nyaakpun* can possess people and is often blamed for certain forms of illness, madness, or sterility. A woman possessed by the *nyaakpun*

of her dead husband can become suddenly barren. Appearances often occur at night, or during certain dreams. In any case the dead person is recognized in his appearances by the people who knew him when he was alive, and who have the gift of seeing his *nyaakpun*. People endowed with this power are called *nyaakpun nyerbe* (literally "seers of *nyaakpun*") or simply *nyenyerbe* ("seers").

- 3) *Síε* is able to be everywhere. This means that it can go to any place, whatever the distance or the obstacles. There is no barrier to a *síε*. It can enter a room where doors and windows are closed. There is no way for a person to escape from an angry *nyaakpun*. There is no protection from the torment caused by the frequent appearances of an evil *nyaakpun*. That is why they are so feared by the Dagara.
- 4) *Síε* applies only to human beings. Animals and plants have no *síε*. God has no *síε* either. *Síε* is an attribute of human persons. In Dagara belief the basic feature which distinguishes human beings from animals is that human beings are composed of *síε* and body, whereas animals are deprived of *síε* and have only a body.

As far as meaning is concerned, *síε* can be contrasted with other terms such as *iāgan* "body", *vuvuvu* "breathing, breath", *nyovuvuvu* "life", and *socir* "heart". The *iāgan* "body", for instance, is similar to *síε* in that it is a component in the makeup of the human person. But as a physical element it differs from *síε* which is a spiritual element. *Síε* contrasts with *vuvuvu* "breathing", since *vuvuvu* is a physical or biological function of the body whereas *síε* is a spiritual component which gives life to the body. *Nyovuvuvu* "life" is different also, in that it refers to the biological existence of a person or the ethical dimension of his personality. And whereas *vuvuvu* ends at death, *síε* continues to live after death. *Socir* "heart" is in the first place an organ of the body; it is also regarded as the seat of certain feelings and emotions, such as courage, love, and hatred. In contrast, although *síε* can become unclean as a result of wrongdoing or become clean after sins are forgiven, it is not considered by the Dagara people to be the seat of the moral life. It can, however, benefit from the positive moral life of a person or be the victim of negative morality.

From all the above it appears that the features or components of meaning of *síε* are as follows:

- 1) *Síε* applies only to human beings, not to animals.
- 2) *Síε* is one of the two components of the human personality, not a biological function or organ of the body.
- 3) *Síε* is a spiritual element, not a physical one.
- 4) *Síε* is the link by means of which a person is related to God and can have access to eternal life.
- 5) *Síε* is affected (positively or negatively) by the moral life of a person. Consequently it can be clean or unclean depending on the quality of the person's life.
- 6) *Síε* is invisible, and can be anywhere.

- 7) *Síε* is immortal. It survives after death, as opposed to *nyovvuvv* "life" which ends at death.

#### Is *síε* an equivalent of *nephesh*?

Features shared by both *nephesh* and *síε* seem to indicate that *síε* is a good Dagara equivalent for *nephesh*. Both have in common the features of being spiritual, immortal, invisible, and applying to human beings. Each is seen as the vital principle of life, the source of life for the body. And both survive after death; they go back to God. In all contexts of the Old Testament in which *nephesh* has at least one of these as a basic component, *síε* is an acceptable equivalent for it in Dagara.

On the other hand, there are occurrences of *nephesh* in the Old Testament where *síε* cannot be regarded as a good equivalent for it, because the major component of meaning in Hebrew is not found in the Dagara concept. I have explained above, for example, that *síε* never refers to an organ of the physical body. Therefore when *nephesh* means "neck" or "throat" in the Old Testament, *síε* cannot be used as an equivalent. The Dagara language has a special word for these parts of the body which is *kokor* "neck" or "throat", which must be used as the equivalent for *nephesh* in these contexts.

We have seen above that *nephesh* applies both to human beings and to animals. *Síε*, however, applies only to human persons, and never to animals, plants, or God. Therefore in all contexts where *nephesh* is used in reference to animals, the Dagara cannot use *síε* as its equivalent. The most suitable term in this case is *nyovvuvv* "life" which applies both to human beings and animals. We have also noted that *síε* never applies to God in Dagara; but in Hebrew whenever *nephesh* is used with reference to God it has the same meaning as the term *ruach*. This suggests that the equivalent of *ruach* in Dagara will be the best rendering for *nephesh* when it applies to God. This equivalent will be *seseb* "wind" or "breath".

Finally there is a special meaning of *nephesh* which relates to its grammatical use as a reflexive "himself", "herself", "yourself", "myself", and so on. This usage is entirely unknown in Dagara, and so *síε* cannot be used as an equivalent for *nephesh* in this sense. There are, of course, other expressions and constructions in Dagara which carry the reflexive sense, and which can be used where the context requires this.

Regarding the features of the term *síε* in Dagara, a number of its features have negative overtones which are not found as components of the meaning of *nephesh* in Hebrew. In the first place the Dagara hold that the *síε* of a person can be caught by a witch; and the *síε* can be tied up until the person dies. Also the ancestors' spirits are thought to have power to exercise authority over the *síε* of their living descendants; *síε* can be taken away by the angry spirit of an ancestor who wants to punish one of his relatives, thus causing the death of the person. A consequence of these beliefs is that there are some people who have a negative mystical power over *síε*. There is no such negative belief in the Old Testament concerning *nephesh*. Also the dreaded appearances

of the *nyaakpun* in the physical world, during which it can punish the living by giving them all kinds of illness and disaster in their lives, are a negative element which is alien to the Old Testament culture.

We see, then, that *síε* is not a perfect equivalent for *nephesh* in the Old Testament. It is an equivalent in some respects and in some contexts. This serves to remind us again that there is no one-to-one correspondence between words from one language or culture to another. And especially in the case of concepts which are so culturally rich and revealing as *nephesh* in Hebrew and *síε* in Dagara, we should not expect this. The situation is well summed up in the observation of Wierzbicka:

"Within a particular language every element belongs to a unique network of elements and occupies a particular place in a unique network of relationships. When we compare two or more languages, we cannot expect to find similar networks of relationships. Nonetheless, we can expect to find certain correspondences."

("Japanese Key Words and Core Cultural Values"  
in *Language in Society*, 20(3), page 336.)

### Conclusion

Terms such as *nephesh* and *síε* which have special and unique meanings in relation to their own language and culture are among the most difficult problems which translators have to face. Dealing with them requires all the resources translators are able to gather. As far as the source language is concerned, access to the full meaning of Hebrew terms is possible through the use of Bible dictionaries, lexicons, encyclopedias, commentaries, Handbooks, and other resources. There are real problems, however, in the lack of resources for the languages in which translations are being made. Very few languages in Africa have such reference books as dictionaries, lexicons, and commentaries. These tools are rarely available to translators in their mother tongues.

When it comes to studying the meaning of terms in their own languages, most translation teams in sub-Saharan Africa rely solely on their own knowledge about their culture. Such knowledge is usually limited, and this is certainly not the best way to go about things. And we may add here that usually the more translators are educated, the longer they must have been cut off from their African cultural roots and the less they know of the components of meaning of the culture-laden words of their mother tongues.

Translators should be trained more seriously to study, explore, compare, and explain the biblical cultures and their own cultures in terms of their key concepts. This work should be done carefully as a preparation before translation actually starts. In this way the fruit of their research and study could be used most profitably, not only in the translation of the source text into their own language, but also in the writing of introductions, glossary explanations, and footnotes – which are so essential for communicating the biblical message faithfully to foreign African cultures.