
Translation to the Third and Fourth Generations: The Gbaya Bible and Gbaya Language Enrichment

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Philip A. Noss

United Bible Societies Translation Consultant, retired

Abstract

The story of the Gbaya Bible begins with the first translation efforts of the early missionaries and the first Gbaya Christians. As the language was being standardized, the New Testament was translated and the Christian church was being planted. The second generation of translation was carried out by an interconfessional team of mother-tongue speakers who followed the principles of dynamic equivalence and Gbaya oral literary style. Shifting toward functional equivalence as they developed the language, their effort culminated in the publication of the Bible with the Deuterocanon. The third generation is represented by today's community of Gbaya theologians and scholars who build on their predecessors' use of the Gbaya language, employing it for the creation of written literature, for theological discourse, and for academic commentary. As they exploit the resourceful features of Gbaya expression, they continue to press the communicative world of the Gbaya ancestors into a future without bounds.

Keywords

interconfessional translation, revision, dynamic/functional equivalence, language development, borrowing, ideophones, Gbaya Renaissance

In appreciation of David Clark's lifetime of service to the Bible cause and for his gift of faithfully and eloquently drawing translators' attention to practical details and solutions which so often have long-lasting effect on the quality and influence of Bible translations.

Corresponding author:

Philip A. Noss, 5217 NW 59th Lane, Gainesville Florida 32653, USA.

Email: philip_noss@aol.com

I. Introduction

The Gbaya Yaayuwee who live in central Cameroon refer to themselves as “Comers out of the East.” The reference to the East is from the immemorial time of myth and epic. However, they did move westward in search of more plentiful game and fertile farming land to supplement their traditional “hunting and gathering” livelihood. Enjoying a dynamic culture, the language they spoke adapted to their changing environment over time and geographic space.

The earliest history of the Gbaya language is reflected in the vocabulary borrowed from other languages and language families. The vestiges of these languages exist in the individual and collective lexicon of today’s speakers of the language, most of whom live in Cameroon and the Central African Republic. The Gbaya language comprised a resourceful thesaurus that adjusted to the social, political, and religious pressures encountered by its speakers. They borrowed names for animals and crops from Bantu languages spoken in forest regions to the south. They adopted an initiation rite from the neighboring Sara people with its terminology and nomenclature. They took terms for metalwork from the Mbum whom they found as predecessors in land they came to occupy. In more recent times, itinerant Hausa merchants from Nigeria settled in Gbaya villages, bringing both their merchandise and the practice and terminology of Islam into the Gbaya milieu.

During the nineteenth century, the Gbaya were visited seasonally by pastoralists from the Sahel who needed fresh fodder for their herds, and who brought along special vocabulary to identify their milk products. The herdsmen were followed by horse-mounted warriors who brought jihad from the northwest with names of weaponry and centralized political structure, together with slave raiding. The first European colonial incursions by explorers, military officers, and administrators occurred at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth.

The earliest written record of a variety of the Gbaya language dates to 1896, while the first representation of a speech form closely related to the Yaayuwee dialect of Gbaya was published in 1915. German military forces passed through Gbaya territory, but it was the French who, after World War I, first became resident in Gbaya territory. They established an administrative and military base in Meiganga (located on the main road inland) in 1929 in response to an uprising led by the Gbaya prophet-cum-nationalist Karnu in next-door French Equatorial Africa. No remnants of German words can be found in the Gbaya lexicon, while French, through its long colonial presence, became a ready source of borrowed vocabulary.

2. The first generation—the missionary era

Adolphus E. Gunderson, his wife Anna, and two deaconesses, Olette Berntsen and Anne Olsen, arrived in Cameroon in 1923 as Lutheran missionaries from the United States. In January 1924, they settled in Mboula, a predominantly Gbaya-inhabited village. Mboula was located along the Djerem River south of the Adamawa Plateau in savannah country characterized by luxuriant gallery forests. In addition to setting up living quarters, the missionary team concentrated on preparing teaching and preaching materials. This first of all required studying the local language, devising a writing system, and setting about preparing written materials for teaching. They quickly prepared primers for reading, began translating Scripture texts and hymns, and started teaching reading classes. Thus, the first generation of Gbaya translation was launched, simultaneous with the founding of the Christian church in the Gbaya community.

Early in 1929, the Sudan Mission, as the “Gunderson Mission” was officially named, moved to Meiganga. There they adopted Yaayuwee, the Gbaya dialect spoken in Meiganga and the surrounding area, for the work of the mission. Translation efforts for the young mission community focused on “the Gospel first.” They produced a songbook in 1934 in three languages, French with nine songs, Gbaya with thirty-six, and Fulfulde (Fulani) with twenty-nine. It included the Gbaya translation of the Lord’s Prayer, the Apostles’ Creed, and the Ten Commandments, together with Bible verses: Ps 19.14; Ps 51; Ps 119.11; Isa 55.1-13; and John 15.2. In 1939, they published the Gospel of Matthew, the first book of the Bible to appear in the Gbaya language.

The efforts of the missionaries were disrupted by World War II, and the second book, the Gospel of Mark, was not published until after the war in 1948. During the late 1950s and the 1960s, writing and translating in Gbaya benefited from the influences of outside literacy and translation experts. The orthography was improved over Gunderson’s early writing system, and the translation style became less awkward than the first translations. The Translation Department of the British and Foreign Bible Society in London provided manuscript and translation checking for the Gospels and Acts published in 1954 and for the complete New Testament published in 1968. John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, popular in mission settings, was translated by a Gbaya mother-tongue speaker, Joseph Bissohong, in 1963. The Old Testament books of Genesis and Exodus were published in 1970.

The normal translation procedure for the missionaries was to prepare translations of books of the Bible with the help of local Gbaya Christians.¹

¹ The leading Gbaya translator was Mohamadou Salomon from Abba, Central African Republic. Assistants included Elie Aguida, Ruben Baoro, Garga Joseph, Abel Wah, Paul Sippeson, and the first two Gbaya ordained clergy, André Garba and Darman Paul.

The translated text was based on the King James Version (KJV), with versions in other languages known by the missionaries used for reference. The language style was that of the expatriate missionaries, rather than of mother-tongue speakers.

A Roman Catholic delegation visited Meiganga in 1946 and a permanent Catholic presence was established in 1952 by Fr. Pierre Bodénès, OMI. His assignment was to study the culture and language of the Gbaya people. There was very little cooperation between Protestant and Catholic missionaries. The Gbaya New Testament was a result strictly of Protestant effort and resources and the Protestant and Catholic churches established their own distinct church languages.

3. The second generation— the post-missionary era

In December 1970, ten years after Cameroon gained independence from French colonial rule, leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Cameroon (EELC) and local civil and government dignitaries held a meeting in Meiganga at which they decided to take formal steps toward translation of the complete Bible in their language. This initiative resulted in the establishment of the Gbaya Translation Center through the auspices of the American Lutheran Church (TALC) with headquarters in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Although there were obvious links with the missionaries' effort that had culminated in the publication of the New Testament, there was a major difference between the old translation and the proposed new translation. The first was the product of the policies and procedures of the missionary era of translation. The second was a product of a new translation theory based on dynamic equivalence. This approach was being developed and taught by Dr. Eugene Nida of the American Bible Society and his team of global translation consultants, who had held a Bible translation workshop in southern Cameroon in 1963.

In the new effort, an interconfessional team of Gbaya mother-tongue speakers would seek to produce a translation that expressed the Scripture message accurately and clearly according to the norms of Gbaya language and expression, while remaining true to biblical culture, thought, and history. The focus would be on message content rather than language form. Formal equivalence or formal correspondence (so-called "literalism") would be avoided where it would not be consistent with Gbaya meaning and expression. Language use would be that of 25–35 year-old adults. Because Gbaya society was essentially oral, the language style would be modeled after the literary patterns of the Gbaya oral canon.

The new Gbaya translation team, composed initially of two young Gbaya mother-tongue speakers, Kombo Samuel and Amadou Sarkao, was established in 1971. The following year, the project moved to Meiganga and was housed in the Gbaya Translation Center. It became a full-fledged Bible translation program. Seminary-trained pastor Darman Paul joined the team as exegete, while Kourine Darman and Oumarou Gilbert were brought on as typists. During its journey to publication, the complete Gbaya translation was typed manually, the equivalent of five times—before the age of Paratext. Philip Noss served as exegetical coordinator for the project.²

Benefiting from the closer inter-church relations that resulted from the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), close collaboration was established between the local Protestant and Roman Catholic communities. Preliminary drafts of a Catholic translation of the New Testament were given to the Gbaya team to serve as a basis for its first attempts to translate.³ The team's entire first draft of the Old Testament was based on *La Bible de Jérusalem* (1956, 1973). As the French ecumenical translation, *Traduction Œcuménique de la Bible* (TOB), became available (NT 1971, OT 1975), this version was adopted as the base text. From the time the French common-language version was published (*La Bible en français courant*, 1982), it was referenced as a model text by the team. The translation text was checked against the biblical language texts by translation consultants.⁴

Since the NT translation prepared by the missionaries and their Gbaya colleagues was already being used by the Christian community, the team started on the Old Testament. Its first assignment as a training exercise was translation of the books of Jonah, Ruth, and Nahum. Its first major assignment was translation of the Psalms. Published in 1975, the team's rendering of the Psalms in dynamic equivalence style, richly endowed with ideophones, was very well received by the Gbaya Christians. The Psalter became an important component of liturgy, both in Protestant worship services and in the Catholic mass. In the Catholic community, the Gbaya Psalms were frequently used as the basis for composing songs for the Sunday mass.

² Over the years, other translators engaged in the project included Jean Zim Kassala, Dogobadomo Béloko, Abo Michel, and Békawah Paul from Cameroon, and Nadali Nicolas and Zangona Philémon from CAR. A Gbaya pastor always served as team exegete: Darman Paul, first, followed by Yadjé André and Koulagna Abel. Roman Catholic OMI priests, Pierre Bodénès, Yves Blanchard, and Christian Rimaud, and American Lutheran theologian, Thomas Christensen, participated in testing and reviewing the translation. Wendell Frerichs, Professor of OT, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, spent a three-month sabbatical in Cameroon working with the Gbaya team on the Major Prophets.

³ The first Catholic translator was a school teacher, Ndongué Joseph.

⁴ UBS translation consultants Jan de Waard, André Wilson, and Krijn van der Jagt, followed by the Bible Society of Cameroon TCs Paul Bitjick and Aroga Bessong, successively had responsibility for checking and approving the Gbaya Bible translation.

It soon became apparent that the translation style adopted for the Old Testament would not be compatible with the existing NT version. Instead of attempting to revise the first New Testament, a new translation was undertaken using Nida's approach. However, when the team applied the dynamic approach to the NT Epistles, the translation drafts were too free and were deemed unacceptable by the Catholic priest exegetes. The translators moved from the whole-hearted application of "dynamic equivalence" to an approach of more functional equivalence. A first publication of the new interconfessional New Testament appeared in 1982, with a corrected reprint in 1985.

According to the Nida-era principles adopted for the Gbaya project, the translation was to be based on the form and style of oral art, that is, of myths, folktales, proverbs, riddles, and songs. Gbaya folk art belongs to all ages, from small children to grandparents, and therefore the translators were encouraged to use all the resources of the language and to respect the aesthetic norms of Gbaya oral art.

Ideophones are a form of expressive language that describe anything that a person's senses may feel or observe—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, emotion—often being combined in the same ideophone. They are an especially common feature of African languages, both in everyday language and in artistic expression. Very few ideophones were used in the first NT translation—only those that occurred commonly in daily use, for example, *sut* "early [in the morning]" (Matt 20.1). The new Bible translation team introduced ideophones generously where they were appropriate for expressing the meaning or tone of the text.

The Gospel writers Matthew and Luke both relate the parable about two housebuilders, one wise, the other foolish. The wise man built his house upon the rock and, when the storm came, it stood firm. The foolish man built his house on the sand and, when the storm came, according to Matt 7.27, "it fell—and great was its fall." Luke 6.49 describes its fall in these terms, "immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house." The Gbaya translators rendered the destruction described by Matthew as falling and being broken completely to pieces, expressed by the ideophone *gete-gete*, while Luke's depiction is expressed as being ground to pieces, *mutu-mutu*.

In the first Bible translation to be made in a language, it is often convenient to borrow terms from other languages for items not known locally. However, in revisions or in second translations, greater effort may be made in seeking existing words that may be adapted for biblical use or to use features of the language, such as creating compound words, to describe new items. The first translators borrowed *alkawal* from Arabic for "testament, covenant," while the second group used *noo-tok* "drinking blood,"

the traditional Gbaya expression for “making a covenant.” In the first New Testament, *sinagog* was borrowed from French for “synagogue.” In the new translation “synagogue” became “the gathering house [of the Jews].”

While the translation of the Old Testament was underway, a wide variety of written material was being prepared and published through the Gbaya Translation Center: primers for literacy training, booklets of hunting tales, advice-giving stories, folktales, health information and advice, fish-raising procedures, poetry, and easy-reading Scripture texts. A Gbaya grammar was published in French in 1981, followed by a Gbaya–French dictionary in 1982. The Gbaya Translation Center was officially recognized as an “antenna” of the Federal Linguistic and Cultural Center in Yaoundé. It adopted the orthographic system proposed by the University of Yaoundé in 1984 for the languages of Cameroon for its own work in the Gbaya language.

The first interconfessional edition of the Bible in the Yaayuwee dialect of Gbaya was published in 1995. Following the launching of this edition, containing the sixty-six books of the Protocanon, a Roman Catholic team composed of two women and two men,⁵ led by Fr. Bodénès, translated the deuterocanonical books. During the early years of the Bible project, the translation team had made Gbaya translations of the liturgical prayers for use each week in Sunday mass. In 2005, the Roman Catholic Missal was published, using Scripture text from the Gbaya Bible. The following year, the Bishop of the Diocese of Ngaoundéré gave the imprimatur for the publication of the edition of the Gbaya Bible that included the books of the Deuterocanon.

Finally, in 2011, the Gbaya Bible was published in two editions by the Bible Society of Cameroon, the Protestant edition with sixty-six books, and the Roman Catholic edition with the additional books of the Deuterocanon (the Apocrypha). The publication of the two editions for Protestants and Catholics was interpreted in Cameroon as a symbol of national unity. Dedication and launching of the two new editions took place in 2012 in Garoua Boulai, a Cameroon city on the border with the Central African Republic, representing the international status of the Gbaya language spoken in the two nations of Cameroon and the Central African Republic.

From the initial standardization of the Gbaya language by the early expatriate missionaries and their Gbaya assistants, the second generation of translators was engaged in the development of their own mother tongue.

⁵ The members of the team for the deuterocanonical books were Marie Béatrice Patouma, Rachel Doudou, Koulagna Abel, and Abdoulaye Serge.

4. The third generation—the church and beyond

Today's translators do not know the missionary-era generation of translators. Although they perhaps know some members of the second generation, they did not participate in its activities. Touka Daniel, a Lutheran pastor and a mother-tongue speaker of the Yaayuwée dialect, has earned theological degrees from the Lutheran Institute of Theology in Meiganga and the Faculty of Protestant Theology in Yaoundé, and a master's degree in linguistics from the University of Yaoundé. He studied Koine Greek in Cameroon and Biblical Hebrew in Jerusalem through the Home for Bible Translators. He held the position of Director of the Gbaya Literature Center (the former Gbaya Translation Center) before being appointed to the posts of EELC churchwide Coordinator of the Department of Communication and Director of Translation and Literacy.

While still a student, never having been trained as a translator or having practiced translation, Touka Daniel and two companions translated the Augsburg Confession into Gbaya (pub. 2007) and Luther's Smaller Catechism with Explanation (pub. 2012). He explained that in the face of increasing numbers of sects in Cameroon, it was important for Christians to know what they believed and what they stood for.

The Augsburg Confession arises out of the context of the Bible. However, it differs significantly from the Bible in that it is polemical interpretation that carries biblical concepts to a high level of theological argumentation. Although he had not been part of the team that translated the Bible into Gbaya, Touka Daniel used their translation, with its theological terms and expressions, as the linguistic basis for his rendering of Martin Luther's theological discourse.

Gbaya traditional religion recognizes *Sõ*, the "Spirit who put people," the Creator God of Genesis. The person of Jesus is found in the Bible, and also the Holy Spirit, but how would the Gbaya language express the concept of "divine essence" as referred to in the first article of the Augsburg Confession? There is a certain Gbaya expression that describes the essence of something, "the real heart [lit. 'liver'] of the matter." This concept as expressed by the Gbaya compound word was adopted by Touka Daniel to describe Luther's "divine essence," that is, "the essence of God-ness." Gbaya uses the word *bii* to mean "person, people." Therefore, the declaration that "in that divine essence there are three persons" was rendered in Gbaya, "All those three *bii* ('persons') are only one essence of God-ness *dot*." The last word *dot* is an ideophone that portrays something standing alone, independent, all by itself. In adopting the scriptural language of his translator forebears to express

Luther's sixteenth-century theological argument, Touka Daniel was pressing the language in ways that would not have been possible without the corpus of text that was familiar to the Gbaya Christian community through liturgical reading and personal use of the Bible.

The Gbaya language has been a subject of research in the universities of Cameroon. Three master's degree "mémoires" were presented at the University of Ngaoundéré in 2013 and 2014 describing aspects of the grammar and syntax of Gbaya Yaayuwee. The Gbaya poet, Yajji Paul Sorey, a mother-tongue speaker of the Yaayuwee dialect, presented a mémoire for a Master of Arts degree at the University of Maroua in 2011. His study was on the theme of conflict in Gbaya oral literature. In 2017, he presented a Ph.D. dissertation entitled "Littérature orale gbaya du Cameroun: valeurs et figuration" at the University of Maroua.

Yajji Paul's work, written in French, is a psycho-sociological study of Gbaya life and worldview, based on an extensive collection of Gbaya oral art. He uses his research as a means of proposing and formalizing Gbaya intellectual terminology. He places Gbaya terms alongside French technical terms, defining them and expanding their fields of meaning. For example, *kia-mɔ* means "searching." Adding the modifier *mgbak* "exact, precise," forming *mgbak-kia-mɔ*, expresses the concept of "scientific research." He discusses the virtues and norms of Gbaya culture within the framework of *demɔ* "good, goodness" and *daɲmɔ* "evil, crime," which are common biblical terms.

Yajji Paul observes that the Gbaya dictionary provides no gloss for "zero," and that counting is presented only briefly, from 1 to 20, with the counting structure given by 5s and 10s to 100 and 200, ending with both the borrowed Fulani and Arabic words for 1,000 and 1,500. The Gbaya Bible uses the borrowed Fulani word *booro* for "thousand" and the borrowed French *miliɔŋ* for "million." Yajji Paul proposes a term for "zero," *gee*, which is an adverb meaning "nothing, empty." Rejecting the borrowed terms for 1,000 that are in daily marketplace speech, he presents an expression "ten-hundreds" which is based on the Gbaya system of counting. Then in a chart, he gives constructions counting from 10,000 to 100,000, to 1,000,000, to 1,000,000,000, and to 1,000,000,000,000 both in ordinals and in full written form. Interestingly, the Gbaya form "ten-hundreds-times-ten-hundreds" that he offers for "million" is the same construction as the Biblical Hebrew "thousand thousand" (1 Chr 21.5 KJV).

The theologians and scholars of today's generation have found ways to press their own Gbaya language further than the first generation had been able to do, and beyond limits that the second generation had not dared to pass, into a future that is indeed limitless.

5. Conclusion

In 1993, Gbaya intellectuals and dignitaries in Cameroon created a secular cultural organization named “Gather Family,” to gather the clan together, as it were. The purpose of the organization is to unify the community of Gbaya-speakers nationally and internationally. Partly through the efforts of “Gather Family,” and partly through parallel activities occurring in Gbaya society, a renaissance is taking place that has its roots in great part in the Gbaya Bible. From traditional forms of blessing and greeting to the Gbaya names of the days of the week and months of the year that had almost fallen into disuse, the authentic nature of Gbaya expression is being reasserted in the face of heavy sociolinguistic influence from Fulani, the foremost trade language of northern Cameroon, and from French and English, the predominant international languages of the nation of Cameroon. From ecclesiastical liturgy and academic discourse to ordinary daily conversation, Gbaya expressions are increasingly heard that are reflective of language decisions taken by generations of translators of the Bible into the Gbaya language.