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One Little Vowel

July 2012

Dear Colleagues,

Translator Lee Bramlett was confident that God had left His mark on the Hdi culture somewhere, but though he searched, he could not find it. Where was the footprint of God in the history or daily life of these Cameroonian people? What clue had He planted to let the Hdi know Who He was and how He wanted to relate to them?

Then one night in a dream, God prompted Lee to look again at the Hdi word for love. Lee and his wife, Tammi, had learned that verbs in Hdi consistently end in one of three vowels. For almost every verb, they could find forms ending in i, a, and u. But when it came to the word for love, they could only find i and a. Why no u?

Lee asked the Hdi translation committee, which included the most influential leaders in the community, “Could you ‘dvi’ your wife?” “Yes,” they said. That would mean that the wife had been loved but the love was gone.

“Could you ‘dva’ your wife?” “Yes,” they said. That kind of love depended on the wife’s actions. She would be loved as long as she remained faithful and cared for her husband well.

“Could you ‘dvu’ your wife?” Everyone laughed. “Of course not! If you said that, you would have to keep loving your wife no matter what she did, even if she never got you water, never made you meals. Even if she committed adultery, you would be compelled to just keep on loving her. No, we would never say ‘dvu.’ It just doesn’t exist.”

Lee sat quietly for a while, thinking about John 3:16, and then he asked, “Could God ‘dvu’ people?”

There was complete silence for three or four minutes; then tears started to trickle down the weathered faces of these elderly men. Finally they responded. “Do you know what this would mean? This would mean that God kept loving us over and over, millennia after millennia, while all that time we rejected His great love. He is compelled to love us, even though we have sinned more than any people.”

One simple vowel and the meaning was changed from “I love you based on what you do and who you are,” to “I love you, based on Who I am. I love you because of Me and NOT because of you.”

God had encoded the story of His unconditional love right into their language. For centuries, the little word was there—unused but available, grammatically correct and quite understandable. When the word was finally spoken, it called into question their entire belief system. If God was like that, and not a mean and scary spirit, did they need the spirits of the ancestors to intercede for them? Did they need sorcery to



Dangwa Pierre (L), current president of the Hdi Translation Committee, with Lee Bramlett, translation advisor to the committee.

relate to the spirits? Many decided the answer was no, and the number of Christ-followers quickly grew from a few hundred to several thousand.



Abraham – The original translation committee president who passed away in 2011.

The New Testament in Hdi is ready to be printed now, and 29,000 speakers will soon be able to feel the impact of passages like Ephesians 5:25: “Husbands, ‘dvu’ your wives, just as Christ ‘dvu’-d the church...” I invite you to pray for them as they absorb and seek to model the amazing, unconditional love they have received.

Around the world, community by community, as God’s Word is translated, people are gaining access to this great love story about how God ‘dvu’-d us enough to sacrifice his unique Son for us, so that our relationship with Him can be ordered and oriented correctly. The cross changes everything! Someday, the last word of the last bit of Scripture for the last community will be done, and everyone will be able to understand the story of God’s unconditional love.

Do you have stories about finding the footprint of God in other cultures? Please send them to me at connectus_orlando@wycliffe.org . If you’d like to share this story with your ministry team, drop me a note and I’ll send you some photos of Hdi people to illustrate it.

Warmly,

Bob Creson
President
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