For the Kassena, a person is more than body and soul

Panel	Kassena	English
1.	Yɩra	Body
2.	Joro	Soul
3.	Wɛ	Destiny
4.	Dʊŋa	Guiding Spirit
5.	Siun	Breath

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1.   INTRODUCTION

The Kassena people live in the south of Burkina Faso and the north of

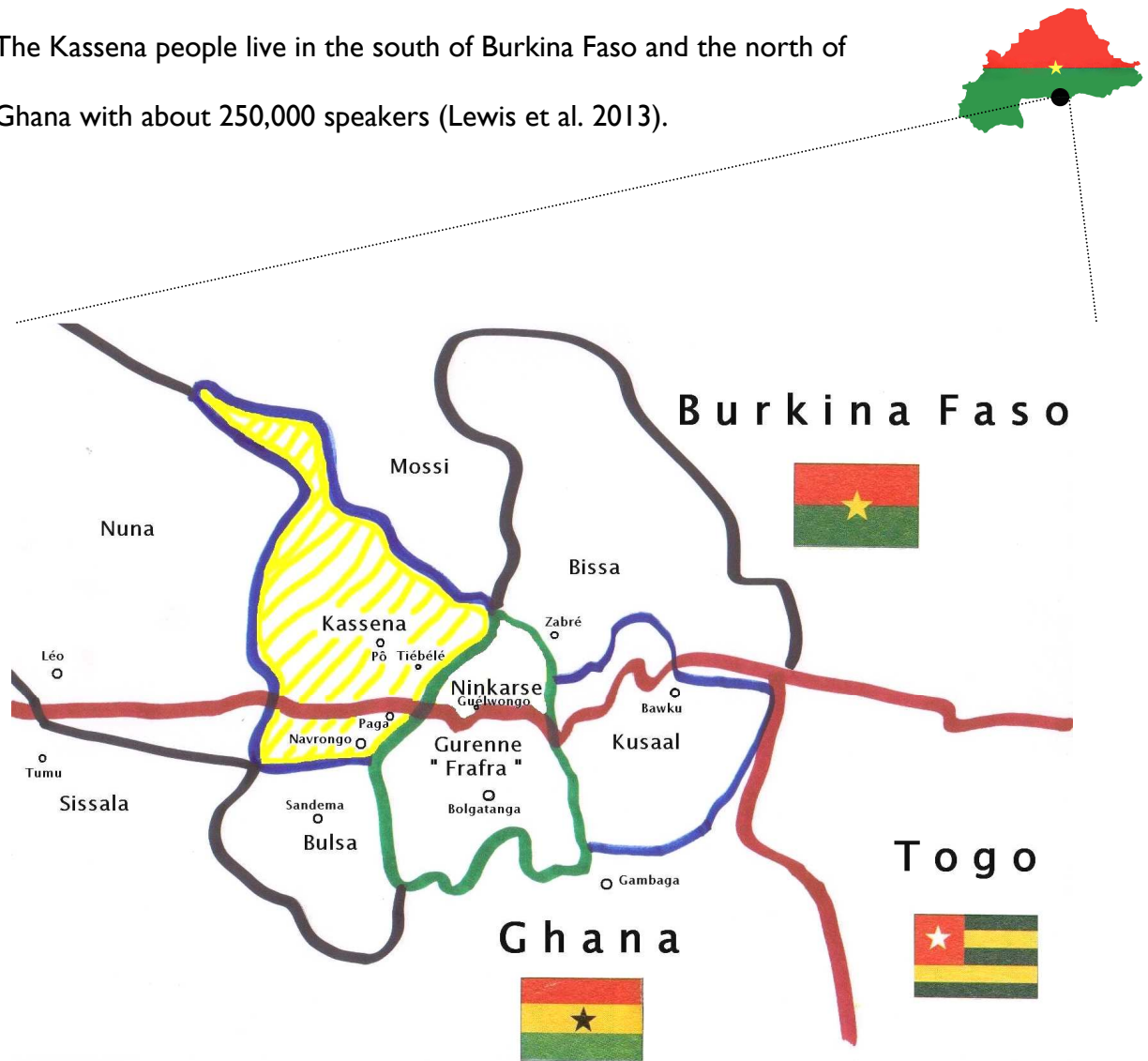Ghana with about 250,000 speakers (Lewis et al. 2013).

Figure 1 : Location of Kassena people

My wife and I lived in a Kassena village called Tiébélé for seven years (1987 to

1995) and studied their language and their culture as well as doing language

development and translation of the New Testament in Kassem (see www.Kassena-

Ninkarse.org). During our work we were confronted with the question of how to

translate the concepts of 'spirit' and 'soul'. To answer this we needed to find out

whether in the Kassena perception a person consisted of three parts: body, soul and

spirit or if they held a bipartite view of just two parts: body and soul/spirit. Our investigation pointed to a bipartite view of *yɪra* (body) and *joro* (soul/spirit). Satisfied with our findings, we continued our translation work without further investigation.

It was only later that we discovered that the concept of the person in Kassena worldview is much more complex than just a body and a soul/spirit. I learned from existing literature that for the Kassena a person consists of five parts: *yɪra* (body) *wɛ* (destiny), *dʋŋa* (guiding spirit), *joro* (soul) and *siun* (breath). The purpose of this paper is to get a clearer understanding of the role that each of these components plays to make up a person. To explore this subject I compared notions of the person with neighbouring groups (see names and map in the Appendix). I realize that the notion of a person is complex and, in Kassena thinking, cannot be dissociated from the notion of reincarnation and from a wider cosmology.

1. COMPONENTS OF A PERSON

The general term for person is *nɔɔnʋ* (*nɔɔna* in the plural) but when the Kassena want to emphasise the contrast between humans and God, they use the term *nabiinu* (pl. *nabiinə*). This term is often used in proverbs to show the limitations of human life and power. To describe or define how the Kassena conceive the invisible concept of a person is a real challenge since they have more and different categories than Westerners usually have.

The *yɪra* (body), always a mass noun, is the physical and thus visible part of the person. It is the habitation of the invisible parts and it is therefore important to take care of it well. Once a person dies, the body is carefully washed and dressed as the corps is always treated with great respect and it is unthinkable to burn it (see also

Koabike 2003, 61) because death is not the real end. What Merz notes about the Bebelibe in Benin, is also true for the Kassena: 'For the Bebelibe, it is only the physical body that dies. The other components that constitute the person, however, do not die but move on' (2013, 5). The bond that existed between the body and its immaterial components are only dissolved after the flesh of the body has decomposed (see Merz 2013, 22).

Before a human being is born, his *wε* (destiny) is with *Baŋa-Wε* (High God). Fortes writing about the Tallensi, refers to their equivalent of *wε* as "inborn Destiny" (1987, 271). Before coming to earth, the *wε* (destiny) presents to God some wishes for its earthly life (see also Zwernemann 1960, 187; Cartry 1971, 28). Every compound has its own shrine *wε*, mostly on the roof of the ritual room. On this shrine sacrifices can be made so that negative prenatal wishes are canceled. *Wε* gives life and health to a person but also a wife, children, possessions, success, and so on. Zwernemann writing about the Nankanse, calls it 'Destiny ancestor' (1960, 189), while Merz renders the Bebelibe equivalent as 'agency/purpose/destiny' (2013, 21). *Wε* is unique to each person. When many bad things happen to a person, people say he has a bad or weak destiny. Swanson writes that for the Gourmantché '[e]verything that a person experiences or receives, good or bad, is part of "destiny"' (1985, 71). This applies also to the Kassena. After death the *wε* is accountable to God for what happened in the person's life and God will judge it accordingly. I think what Koabike writes about the *tagm* for the Moba could also be said for the Kassena *wε*: The *wε* functions a bit like a hard disc of a computer. Once the hard disk is ready, God makes a *yɩra* (body) and installs it (see Koabike 2003, 62–63). Of course, this is a reductionistic analogy but I

think it is nevertheless useful mainly because it illustrates that this is one of several intangible components working together.

All living things (humans, animals, trees) possess a *dʋŋa* (guiding spirit); having a guiding spirit is being alive. Fortes calls the Tallensi equivalent 'ancestral guardian' (1987, 271). It is a non-material being, assigned by God to each individual for the accomplishment of that individual's prenatal destiny (see Swanson 1985, 163). The *dʋŋa* is like an eye that orientates and gives foresight, thought and wisdom to the person. It can guide the person in a good or bad direction. Without it, a person is blind. It can leave the human body when the person sleeps. The *dʋŋa* can ask for sacrifices from the person of which it is part (see Koabike 2003, 63) and the person is obliged to obey the *dʋŋa* in order to maintain a good relationship so that it continues to guide the person well. In computer terms, I would compare the *dʋŋa* to the Central processing unit (CPU: the microchip where all processing goes on). But the person is not complete yet, it needs also the *joro* (soul), in computer terms the motherboard (where all the communication goes on).

Every human being has a *joro* (soul), which is the life of a person. Merz refers to the component that gives life as the 'vital force' (2013, 21). When a person sleeps and dreams, the *joro* too can leave the physical body and walk around. The person experiences this as dreams. Swanson says that 'a wandering soul may be likened to a shadow' (1985, 105). The *joro* can also be seen as the spiritual double of a person (see Fortes 1987, 267). An enemy, such as a witch or a spirit, can 'catch' the *joro* and harm it; the result is sickness or death. Merz, writing about the Bebelibe of Benin, indicates that '[w]hen *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ* work together in harmony; the person is well balanced emotionally, mentally and physically' (2013, 20). This applies to the Kassena

when I consider the Mbelime *kɛbodikɛ* being the equivalent of the Kassem *joro* and

mtakimɛ being the equivalent of the Kassem *wɛ*.

    At death the *joro* (soul), the *wɛ* (destiny) and the *dʊŋa* (guiding spirit) return to

God for judgment and then go to stay with the ancestors. The *joro, wɛ* and *dʊŋa*

together are the *ŋwɩa* (life), they are all necessary for the person to 'be' and exist

(comparable to the software of a computer), but they need the *siun* to live on earth.

    The *siun* (breath) is like the electricity or the battery that allows the computer

to run (see Koabike 2003, 65). *Baŋa-Wɛ* (God) gives it to the person just before

sending him into the womb of his mother. When God removes the *siun*, the person

dies; the body becomes a *tʊ* (corps) and decays. No sacrifices are made to the *siun*.

No human being, spirit or witch can take it away except *Baŋa-Wɛ*, the High God who

gave it and takes it back when the appropriate time has arrived. Having returned to

Baŋa-Wɛ, the High God then keeps the *wɛ, joro* and *dʊŋa* ready to send back again like

seeds that are kept for the next planting season.

2. REINCARNATION

Parrinder wrote that the notion that '[t]he return of the dead, or some part of their

life force, to their family is widely held in Africa' (1969, 84). He also said that rebirth is

into the same family as it strengthens it and ensures continuity (1969, 85). This kind of

reincarnation differs from Asian ideas, in which the same soul reincarnates again and

again. In Kassena thinking, it is not the single 'soul' of the ancestor that passes from

one embodiment to another in an endless round or chain of existence (see Parrinder

1969, 85). It seems that reincarnation is partial; the *wɛ, joro* and *dʊŋa* help to 'seed'

new lives. For example when people harvest the grain they keep some to sow again for

the next farming season, thus in a way the same vitality or seeds go on and on year after year producing or empowering new life/seeds. Like the seed continues and is renewed by 'old seeds', so *ŋwɩa* (the life force/energy/power) is passed on or reincarnated in newborn babies. In the same way as a single seed can produce several new seeds, so an ancestor can put its vitality into several persons (see also Swanson 1985, 157–161; Koabike 2003, 29; Merz 2013, 8). Thus one or more characteristics can be reoccurring in several of his or her descendants.

The *vʋrʋ* (diviner) can detect which ancestor had been reborn by recognizing facial features and other resemblances. He then tells the parent which *na* (ancestor) has come back and the child gets a name like *Kojoori* 'Father came back'; *Akotue* 'My father has come'; *Anuyɩrɩ* 'My mothers name'; *Nabaarɩ* 'Ancestor'; *Nabanu* 'Mother of the ancestors' and so on. Ancestors are the dominant supernatural agencies believed to control human existence (see also Fortes 1987, 258).

As with the Tallensi, women can also be recognized as ancestors but the ideal of a person is to be 'an adult male who has reached old age and lineage elder-ship, who has male descendants in the patrilineal line and who is qualified by a proper death to become their worshipped ancestor' (Fortes 1987, 264).

A person can only become an ancestor if the living people perform all the burial rituals correctly and completely. Becoming an ancestor has the benefit that one can take part in reincarnation and that one can intercede with superior powers on behalf of the descendants and, last but not least, one becomes an object of veneration for the descendents. Thus an ancestor continues to live eternally. As the living might become lazy or negligent, an ancestor may afflict them from time to time 'so that they are forced to call out his name by way of sacrifice on one of the family shrines' (Mendonsa

1975, 68). In this way he/she remains a remembered ancestor and that is ultimately the aim of many Kassena.

Understanding the concept of a Kassena person, however, is much more than describing a person's components. This is just one side of the coin; the other side is the identity and the place in society. A Kassena is not just an individual person but he/she is part of a wider puzzle. One's self is very much shaped by the person's place in society: '[p]ersons are kept aware of who they are and where they fit into society by criteria of age, sex, and descent, and by other indices of status, through acting in accordance with these norms' (Fortes 1987, 282). Describing the concept of a Kassena person in regards of his or her place in society would be a good topic for further study but this would go beyond the scope of the present paper.

3. CONCLUSION

I have demonstrated that from a Kassena perspective human beings are not just composed of body and soul/spirit. The invisible components consist of *wɛ* (destiny), *dvŋa* (guiding spirit), *joro* (soul) and *siun* (breath). These components are distinct and yet complementary and interdependent in their respective functions. The Bebelibe, Gourmantché, Moba, and Tallensi worldviews recognize components that are comparable. Once a person is dead, parts of the same energy or 'seed' is reincarnated into other human beings and thus life continues. Therefore from a Kassena perspective a person is not just an independent individual living for a certain amount of years on this earth and then all is over. A person is rather part of something bigger that was here before in past generations and that will hopefully be reborn in future generations as part of a complex cosmological energy stream called 'life'.

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5. APPENDIX

Comparison of terms used by
(in alphabetical order of the author):

Author: People group:

Fortes   for   Tallensi
Koabike   for   Moba
Merz   for   Bebelibe
Niggli   for   Kassena
Swanson   for   Gourmantché
(Components for   computers)

**Figure 2: Google Map, showing 5 language areas,
adapted by Urs Niggli**

	body	**soul**	**destiny**	**guiding spirit**	**breath**
Tallensi	*neng* (p. 257) (body)	*sii* (p. 255) (soul)	*yin* (p. 150) (destiny)	*segher* (p. 271) (ancestor guardian)	*vohem* (p. 266) (breath)
Moba	*gbannand* (p. 61) (le corps)	*nalnŋ* (p. 64) (le double, l'âme)	*tagm* (p. 62) (l'essence, le destin)	*cicili* (p. 63) (l'intuition, le bon sens)	*fuom* (p. 64) (le souffle, respiration)
Bebelibe	*ukuɔnu* (p. 6) (physical body)	*kɛbodikɛ* (p. 20) (Vital force)	*mtakimɛ* (p. 7) (Agentive purpose)	*diyammade* (p. 21) (thinking, decision making)	*mfoosimu* (p. 21) (breath)
Kassem	*yɩra* (body)	*joro* (soul)	*wɛ* (destiny)	*dʋŋa* (guiding spirit)	*siun* (breath)
Gourmantché	*gbannandi* (p. 195) (physical body)	*naano* (p. 91) (soul)	*cabili* (p. 57) (destiny)	*ciciliga* (p. 163) (guiding spirit)	*?*
Computer	hardware	motherboard	hard drive (operating system)	Central processing unit	electrical power