Let the Earth Hear His Voice

As many as three quarters of the world’s population are listeners rather than readers. Rediscovery of the value of telling the Great Story of Scripture needs to be matched by attention to the oral cultural context of the hearers. How do they formulate and pass on their stories?

by John D. Wilson

There has been a growing awareness in recent years of the significant role of Scripture itself as message, model, and strategy for evangelism and church planting. One issue that perhaps needs further examination is the contextualization of the telling of the Great Story.

Those already using the chronological method and the narrative approach to evangelism and Bible teaching need also to understand the role and validity of orality—the oral counterpart of literacy and literariness. It is one thing to recognize the value of recounting the Great Story as a mission strategy; but we also need to pay attention to the oral context—indigenous oral skills and media—when we do so. However, coming as we do from a highly literary society, most of us either need to learn such oral skills or hone any that we still possess.

By “literary culture” I am not simply referring to literacy, but to the whole literary mindset which affects the way we communicate orally. This is best explained by example. How often have you listened to a sermon which proved hard to follow despite obviously being beautifully articulated and replete with excellent content? Almost certainly, such a sermon was crafted and presented in a literary style, lacking the repetitiveness and redundancy which are a necessary part of oral communication. Such communication only becomes tolerable when we use other written media such as handouts, an overhead or a whiteboard.

It is important to appreciate and to employ the skills of oral cultures—representing a high percentage of the world’s peoples. We recognize the importance of vernacular languages, and the need to study and understand cultures in order to communicate effectively cross-culturally. However, as members of literary societies, we tend to come with a basic presupposition about the value—even the pre-eminence of literary forms of communication. Moreover, we (particularly Christians from the Protestant tradition) have inherited some basic assumptions about Scripture, and we tend to assume that oral skills and media are incapable of and inappropriate for transmission of Scripture.

We need to perceive the function of the revelatory word as Scripture (in its literary form). Historically, and rightly I believe, the written text has functioned as the canon of divine revelation—the norm and absolute of Christian theology and tradition. Canonicity is enhanced by rigid preservation, and in that sense, written Scripture functions as a natural extension or development of sacred oral texts, which would be couched in the form or genre most likely to preserve their essence, as well as ensure their faithful transmission.

But there was this other function of Scripture, less static, more dynamic; which was not restricted to the literary form, but paralleled it. Scripture as the message of God, on the lips and in the hearts of the members of the community, pervading every aspect of life and culture.

Literary cultures tend to lose this aspect of Scripture as the spoken word, and fail to appreciate its relevance. Scripture as a book becomes something I must read and study as an individual. Only short fragments are publicly read and exegeted week by week in our churches and consequently we miss getting the impact of the Big Story.

There is a need therefore to understand the nature and function of oral skills and media, and evaluate their potential and validity for communication of Scripture as story, including their relevance and significance for translation of the Bible for all cultures, but especially for oral societies.

Oral Cultures

Oral cultures are usually defined negatively. For example, they are often described in terms of the lack of writing, or as to their existence prior to introduction of script, or as those without writing in any form. We also talk about oral “literature” revealing our inability to think of a corpus of organized verbal material in any other way than some form of writing.

The problem is not simply one of
memory, but that people from a literary background and standpoint tend to be judgmental of oral peoples as being—not simply “non-literate” or “pre-literate”, but illiterate. In this way, the stigma of illiteracy with its implied deficiencies of learning are attributed to oral societies.

But oral cultures have their own devices and media which foreshadow literary ones in their function of storing and transmission of information. Orality is the antecedent of “literariness”. Orality is to oral cultures what literacy is to literary ones. Print media are not the only means for storing knowledge. Without the printed page oral societies store a great deal in genealogies, myths, fairy tales, songs or poetry, recitations, formulae, proverbs, riddles, etc.

Oral Skills
Oral communication is essentially a social activity with interaction between a speaker and his/her audience. Passively, the listener is incorporated in an event through shared experience or common understanding of the field of meaning of words and “paralanguage” (intonation, non-verbal signs, gestures etc.). Actively, the listener participates with vocal or other responses.

Occasions may be formal or informal—with a ritual; in singing of songs and story-telling around a fire and in “apprenticeship” situations. By participation in an event or occasion, storage is taking place through listening, repetition, and memorization.

There is a classic story in Bruchko\(^\text{10}\) which illustrates this. A Motilone had come to faith in Christ, but despite the urgings of his missionary friend, he had not shared the gospel with his people. Then came the “Festival of Arrows”. On this focal tribal occasion, the Motilone sang the gospel story to his people. Telling the story in this way, and on this special occasion, had a greater impact than any missionary could have imagined or hoped for!

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**Memory Factor**

Memory is clearly a crucial factor in the ability of members of oral societies to preserve and recall oral traditions, information and other texts. Memory is a developed skill, not an inborn or inherent physiological faculty exceeding that possessed by members of technological societies.

The memory is developed and enhanced by the use of mnemonics. These are memory aids—devices, patterns and structures which function to fix the essential meaning (not necessarily specific words) in the listener’s memory, in a way that facilitates recall. Remembering the exact words is not normally essential except for ritual formulae and other sacred sayings. The important thing is to communicate the meaning and the message in a communicable form.

To be able to facilitate retention and recall of oral texts, through the creation and structured employment of mnemonic devices, is the goal of orality.

**Scripture in an Oral Culture**

In an oral culture, where no written style of language has been developed, initial translation will reflect the oral discourse structure, using normal discourse markers, and the translation will be biased towards the receptor as listeners, rather than the readers.\(^\text{11}\)

Written language lacks the paralinguistic features of normal oral communication (voice quality, loudness, speed of utterance, body movement and facial expression). The written form of language can never be the replica of the spoken.\(^\text{12}\) If the translation adheres rigidly to the spoken form it will result in a text that is ponderous and tedious to read. But a translation that favors written style, will lack oral features that facilitate listening with understanding, and therefore will be difficult to *listen to*. In translating for an oral culture, the potential *listening* audience must be kept in mind, not the *reading* one.

Each case will be different, and choices are not over clear-cut distinctions between oral and written styles, but about differences of degree in the use of certain oral features.\(^\text{13}\) Translators of Scripture and narrators of the Biblical story need to be sensitive to the function of the various “literary genres” or styles of the oral corpus, because correct use aids the listeners’ perception of meaning.

The appropriate literary form or oral genre must be employed: myth, fairy tale, other narrative styles, or poetry. Philip Noss has drawn attention to the significance of an “oral perspective” as conveyed by each oral genre.

The genre of a narrative itself conveys meaning. If I were to begin a story with, “Once upon a time...” the listener would immediately understand the genre to be a “fairy tale” therefore untrue but entertaining. However, if I begin my narrative with, “On a chilly day in December 1940...” my audience knows I am about to tell an historical event. When recounting, for example, Jotham’s fable in Judges 9:7-15 it is imperative to the clariy of meaning that the appropriate genre is employed; but if conveyed in ordinary narrative form, significant meaning is lost for the listener in an oral culture.

**Story-telling among the Yali of Indonesia**

Examples from the use of Scripture in Yali society may help to illustrate something of the role of orality for communication of Scripture and the Biblical message. The Yali are dawn to dusk subsistence horticulturists. Daylight hours are filled with food cultivation and harvesting, and the collecting of various materials for house building and making of useful artifacts such as rain capes, string bags, bows and arrows and so forth.

However, the evening hours are spent differently—in their huts around the central fireplace where routine con-
versations are supplemented by the telling of tales and singing of songs.

When missionaries first arrived and began to teach and preach, it was at these impromptu fireside sessions that those who had heard the teaching or stories would pass on what they had learned. Later, as interest grew, missionaries and evangelists were invited to tell their stories or to pass on the Christian teaching, in just the same way that their respected story tellers would be. Consequently, it has become part of normal village and church life, to have informal fireside services every evening in the huts, when some portion or story from Scripture will be recounted by an elder or other recognized teacher.

Traditional myths, narratives and fairy tales in the Yali oral corpus often have a didactic function, and it is therefore quite natural for them to pass on the Christian tradition in this way. But they also will freely talk Scripture at other times. It is evocative of Deuteronomy 6:7, where Moses exhorted the people of Israel to impress the commandments on their children, and to talk about them at home and on the road, as they lay down and as they got up. The story-telling function as well as the place and occasion of story-telling had a strong role in the acceptance and transmission of the Biblical message among the Yali people of Indonesia.

**Apprenticeship**

Much of sacred and secular traditional knowledge is passed on by the Yali through informal apprenticeship. A mother teaches her daughter about plants with fibers suitable for string, natural dyes, weaving of netbags, women’s lore and so forth as they go about the routine activities in the daytime, or as they sit by the evening fire cooking food or rolling string or making netbags. Similarly, boys learn from their fathers and maternal uncles about hunting, warfare and gardening. There are always myths, stories and sayings that are passed on.

There was another kind of apprenticeship, when young men were learning to become medicine men. However, in addition to on-the-job training through participation with the experienced, or learned healer in the performance of healing, cleansing, fertility and initiation rites, the young novices underwent more formal instruction in esoteric sacred lore, healing chants and formulae. Faithful transmission of such texts is imperative as it is essential to their efficacy.

Today there are no practicing medicine men, but the Yali see their role as filled or superseded by the Christian elders and pastors, who pass on the sacred text of Scripture. Consequently, Christian teaching and pastoral duties are now communicated in a similar way, both through participatory apprenticeship and the more formal instruction. While precise verbatim quotation of Scripture is unusual, because so much is in narrative form, all Yali elders exhibit a wealth of Biblical knowledge, and a great ability to recount Bible stories and give free quotations.

We need to be asking ourselves the following: Who are the story tellers? Whom can we involve in the transmission process? What is the appropriate form? When is the appropriate occasion?

**Oral Reading**

The traditional Protestant view is that people ought to be able to read, and indeed, ought to read the Scripture for themselves. It is this concept that is usually the underlying motive for the Scripture translation undertaken by missionaries. However, in oral societies the majority may never learn to read for themselves, and for them the Bible is a closed book. But oral reading of the Old and New Testament has been practiced for longer than they have existed in their written form. In fact, public oral reading was expected. The “silent, solitary individual reader” probably was not known.

Both the vernacular literacy program and the Yali New Testament translation have been undertaken with a view to oral reading of Scripture. To encourage this, the entire book of Acts was recorded using a number of speakers for narrator and characters. During the recording sessions, the text was read aloud several times to the actor, who then spoke in a natural manner into the microphone. The final version was transferred to a series of cassettes which were played on hand-cranked playback machines in the villages, where they had an unquestionable impact. Care must be taken, however, to ensure that audio Scriptures are prepared and recorded with the listener in mind.

**Scripture in Song**

Hymns have always played an important role in Christian worship and witness. In Colossians 3:16 there is a clear allusion to the use of various types of hymn in worship and linking this to Biblical instruction. There are a number of historical accounts of the use of the indigenous hymn or spiritual song for communication of Scripture and its message.

In oral cultures and societies, indigenous hymns are an appropriate medium for oral communication of Scripture. Firstly, as a corporate expression of feeling and belief about God, they imbed the Gospel within the culture.
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Above all they facilitate transmission and recall of the Biblical message.

In narrative communication of the Biblical story, greater attention needs to be paid to the form and function of oral genre together with other participatory media like song, dance, ritual and play.

**Lesson for Tellers of the Big Story**

*Be memorable.* Enable people to think memorable thoughts. This is only possible by using oral mnemonic devices and stimuli that are indigenous and therefore natural to the culture. Study and learn to use the appropriate local oral “literary” styles.

*Be repetitive.* Repetition in various ways assists memory. One aspect of repetition that tends be lost by highly literary people who are used to honing their speech to a minimum of choice words and phrases is the repetitive “redundancy” of normal speech. In fact, such repetition is not redundant, but essential for the listeners.

*Be context oriented.* Memory and events tie together. If we want something to be really memorable, we should make an event out of it—an occasion! Memorable meaning is rooted in the occasion and the place. Appreciate the value of repetitive events such as ritual and festival. These are full of memorable meaning. Be receptor oriented.

Focus on the communication of meaning, and not merely on words. Communication of meaning is more important than the use of specific words with a view to verbatim memorization. Ask yourself, “How is the meaning being perceived by the audience?”

*Be participatory.* Participation assists learning, and in most face-to-face societies, learning is by participation—by observation and hands-on apprenticeship. Participation is a type of repetition, that enforses a kind of patterning between speaker and audience.

Singing is one of the best “participatory didactic” media. Indigenous songs are very effective for reinforcing a lesson, whether Biblical or otherwise. Songs frequently occur in myth and didactic storytelling and function as mnemonic prompts and aid participation. Another means of participation is play acting and role playing. In the telling of the Big Story we need to involve people as participants.

**Conclusion**

In oral societies, the immediacy and warmth of speech, and the social and participatory characteristics of oral communication, are inherently understood, valued and enjoyed. In re-telling God’s Great Story in ministry, we have to consciously avoid our literary bias and take time to learn and employ the oral skills and media of the host culture or audience.

As *indigenous* skills and media they prepare the way for wide acceptance and internalization of the message. The use of foreign literary media may limit the effectiveness of our communication or worse stigmatize the Gospel as alien and irrelevant.

As *receptor-oriented* and participatory skills and media they assure effective and acceptable communication. Just to read a literary translation of the Scripture, or to tell the story according to one’s own style without adjustment to the natural oral style in the host culture will result in inadequate and ineffective communication of God’s Word.

As *oral* skills and media they facilitate transmission and recall, and make the Biblical message available for all, not limiting it to the literate or prestigious members of society. If received in such a memorable form, we can be sure it will be spontaneously retold and retold within the society as well as from generation to generation.

**End Notes**

1. For example, see Klem (1982), Wilson (1988), McIlwain (1991), Hessel-
grav(1994), Hiebert and Meneses
(1995:151-154). Also see several
articles in International Journal of
Frontier Missions Vol 12, No 2, 1995.
2. Steffen (1996) makes a significant
contribution in this regard, but does
not deal specifically with orality.
3. I am referring to McIlwain’s Building
on Firm Foundations or similar
material.
4. The number of people dependent
on oral over literary communication of
Scripture may be as high as 70%
(Klem 1982:xiii).
5. Steffen draws attention to the
causes and consequences of this frag-
mentation (Steffen 1996:42-48).
6. Clearly, orality has its limitations, and I
am not denigrating the role of lit-
eracy. God’s revelation is given to us
in Scripture (written form) and
must needs be read—at least by some.
Basically I am calling for greater
attention to be paid to the oral context
of oral societies and cultures.
7. For example the theme of International
Journal of Frontier Missions Vol
12, No 2, 1995 was "Reaching Non-
literate Peoples”.
11. I am amazed from personal experience
at how quickly revisions have to
be made in a Bible translation because
of adjustments in language usage,
and the influence both of literacy and
of a dominant national or trade
language. However, Klem cogently
demonstrates that in Nigeria
which has had literacy for decades,
oral communication of Scripture
still has a significant impact (Klem,
1982:xvii). There were basically
two inter-connected reasons for this:
1) Cultural orality. The society
was still inherently oral. 2) The effect-
ive literacy rate was not high
enough to foster a literary society.
13. See Eckert 1981:29-31; Kilham
15. Klem 1982:9-10, 14-18; Olson
1983:3; Weber 1957:33-34.
16. For example, Deut. 17:18-19;
Josh 1:8; Neh. 8:2; Luke 14:16;
Acts 13:15; 1 Tim. 4:13; Rev. 1:3.
Meier and Meier 1982:16-21;
man 1968:73ff; Olson 1978:152-153;
20. Various portions of both Old and New
Testaments were mimeographed
in limited editions and used in church
leadership training. The New Test-
ament was published in 1992, and the
entire Bible will be published by
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Oral Tradition and Ethnohistory: The Transmission of Information and Social Values in Early Christian Fiji
You have been made to hear his voice from heaven so you may be instructed. And he showed you his great fire here on earth, and you heard his voice from the middle of that fire. A Conservative Version. Out of heaven he made thee to hear his voice, that he might instruct thee. And upon earth he made thee to see his great fire, and thou heard his words out of the midst of the fire. American Standard Version. Out of heaven he made thee to hear his voice, that he might instruct thee: and upon earth he made thee to see his great fire; and thou hearest his words out of the midst of the fire. Amplifi Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, Let the earth hear His voice; Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, Let the people rejoice; Oh, come to the Father, through Jesus the Son, And give Him the glory; great things He hath done. 2. Oh, perfect redemption, the purchase of blood, To every believer the promise of God; The vilest offender who truly believes, That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.