

Orality And Traditional Religions

Introduction

From September 29 to October 5, 2005, The Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization sponsored a consultation in Pattaya, Thailand, to discuss issues of orality and making of disciples in Christian mission. The consultation observed the growing influence of orality in today's world. Even in developed countries like the United States, researchers "found that 48 to 51% of adultsscored at the two lowest levels (out of five) of measurable proficiency at a range of literacy skills. While results of the NALS (National Adult Literacy Survey) study showed that only 4 to 6% of US adults were totally illiterates, 46 to 53% were identified as unable to function adequately in highly literate society or process lengthy written information adequately."¹ The International Adult Literacy Survey (ILALS) also carried a survey in twenty two countries from 1994 – 98 only to find similar results. ²

Evidence from United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) demonstrates that the situation is worse in developing countries. In February 2006 meeting in Mexico, UNESCO underlined the challenge of orality. Erasmus Alaneme, who covered the summit, writes:

¹*Making Disciples of Oral Learners*, (Bangalore: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization International Orality Network, 2005), 20-21.

²Ibid. Some of the countries surveyed include Australia, Canada, Germany, Ireland, and the United Kingdom See p. 21.

“UNESCO, which was expressing fear that the world may not meet its target of eradicating illiteracy by 2015, said the literacy level of Nigeria and other high population (E9) countries is of great concern to the international community because the (E9) countries account for more than half of the global illiterate population. It pointed out that Nigeria as a member of the E9 has 20,572,000 primary school age population, 17,328,000 secondary school age population, about 948,000 tertiary education participation, 1 to 42 teacher-student ratio, and a literacy level of 57.1 percent.

The international body also said Bangladesh, which has a population of 131.2 million as at July 2001, will hit 205.09 million by 2050 and its literacy level will be at 56 per cent with out of primary school children being 2,925,000 out of its 18,320,000 primary school age population. Brazil, whose population as of July 2001 was 174,468,575, will hit 206.75 million by 2050; and with a primary school age population of 13,188,000 million, has non of its primary school age population out of school, posting a literacy level of 83.3 percent.

China has out of primary school age population of 5.8 million and its population is to hit 1.47 billion by 2050. Egypt has 692,000 out of school children with a literacy level of 51.4 per cent and is expected to have a population of 113 million by 2050, while India, with a 14.58 million out of school children, will hit the 1.619 billion population mark by 2050 though still with a literacy level of 52 per cent. Indonesia’s population, which also is to hit 337.8 million by 2050, has a ratio of 1.97 million out of primary school children with literacy level of 83.8 per cent. Pakistan posted a figure of 131.2 million out of primary school children with a literacy level of 42.7 percent, and its population is expected to hit 267.8 million by 2050, while Mexico has no child out of school, and, with a literacy level of 89.6 percent, is expected to have a population of 153.1 million by 2050. The E-9 countries are Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan”.³

One of the revelations of the above global statistics is the understanding that much of the world still operates in oral mind set. Furthermore, some of the countries mentioned are non-western countries. These are countries where traditional religious practices are commonly found. Therefore, in this article, we will be examining orality as it concerns traditional religions in general and African Traditional Religion in particular. It should be noted that whenever we use the phrase traditional religion(s), we refer to the

³Erasmus Alaneme, “Nigeria’s Population to hit 304 m by 2050- UNESCO” in *Champion Newspapers*, February 15, 2006. [on-line]; Accessed February 15, 2006 Available from [www.champion – newspapers.com_7htm](http://www.champion-newspapers.com_7htm)

religious practices of African, Asian, and South American people that are non-textual in nature, nondogmatic and indigenous to the region. We are referring to the religions of the natives before the introduction of Christianity or Islam. These traditional religions are still practiced today. The influence of the traditional religions is so pervasive that some of those who had been converted to either Christianity or Islam still return to their ancestral way of worship in times of crisis. However, our concern in this article is not about syncretism, but an exploration of the relationship between orality and traditional religions. Douglas E. Thomas in a new book entitled *African Traditional Religion in the Modern World* complains that “African traditional religion has not been given the scholarly attention it deserves since most scholars conducting research have little or no interest in African forms of religion. Others show a great deal of interest in Egypt because European scholarship has managed to isolate Egypt from Africa.”⁴ He therefore insists that “until more non-Christian and non-Islamic scholars begin to unearth the riches that lie buried beneath the African soil due to centuries of invasion and neglect, many African men and women will continue to look outside their religious culture for salvation and religious sustenance.”⁵ However, while there may be some measure of truth in the charges of Thomas, anthropologists have written general description of traditional cultures, and African cultures have not been neglected. Moreover, there are notable African writers like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka that have vividly portrayed the African culture for non-Africans from non-Christian and non-Muslim perspectives. Nevertheless, even if the charges were true, things are changing as more cross-cultural

⁴Douglas E. Thomas, *African Traditional Religion in the Modern World* (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2005), 5.

⁵Ibid.

workers, diplomats, business men and women, missionaries and missiologists are exploring ways of understanding people of other cultures. For a start, we would like to define the concept of orality, explore the relationship between orality and traditional religions and cultures, and communication in traditional religions. Finally, we will draw some missiological implications that could be useful for cross-cultural ministries.

What is Orality?

Orality may be construed in different perspectives depending on the writer's disciplinary background. For students of literature and humanities, it is "a quality of anything that is spoken, chanted, recited, sung, read aloud rather than written down or read quietly."⁶ From this perspective, it is in contrast to written material(s). When the concept of orality is used by anthropologists, often it applies to characteristics of a traditional culture. For instance, in reference to traditional narratives, orality signifies epics, magic tales, legends, jokes, and folk drama.⁷ The concept may also be used to qualify a culture. In this case, oral cultures are contrasted with written or modern cultures. Walter J. Ong differentiates between "primary orality" and "secondary orality." Primary orality is defined as "orality of a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print. It is 'primary' by contrast with the 'secondary orality' of the present-day high technology culture, in which a new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television, and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on

⁶"Folklore: Some useful Terminology" National Endowment for the Humanities, [on-line]: Accessed April 13, 2006. Available from http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson_images/lesson407/folkloreterms.pdf.

⁷Ibid.

writing and print.”⁸ Furthermore, Ong admits that primary oral cultures in a strict sense hardly exist.

Therefore, Ong insists that, most cultures know about writing and have some experience of its effects. “Still, to varying degrees many cultures and subcultures, even in a high –technology ambiance, preserve much of the mind-set of primary orality.”⁹ In this sense, orality becomes a frame of mind, a thought pattern, a worldview, a deep rooted perspective of looking, receiving, and processing information. In other words, orality is a system of understanding and discourse of a given culture, involving learning, language, literacy and processing information. It is more than mere communication; it is rooted in worldview and culture of the people. It is a way of life. Oral cultures do not “separate knowledge from the knower as it is the case in literate societies. The preferential mode of learning is through songs, drama, and stories.”¹⁰ Harriet Hill states, unlike literate cultures, in oral cultures, “meaning is not all in the text. Meaning is inferred from the dynamic of text and context. Utterance meaning does not equal speaker’s meaning. Texts have different meanings in different contexts. Audiences need both text and context to get the intended meaning.”¹¹ Moreover, while truth is conceived as factual in literate cultures, in oral cultures relationship is more valued than simple facts. It is relationship that counts.

⁸Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*. (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2005), 11.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰James W. Bledsoe, “Issues in Orality” A Seminar paper presented in The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for 86130. March 10, 2004. 4.

¹¹Harriet Hill, “Why Storying Works” (presentation prepared for Orality, Literacy, and the Oral Bible Conference, January 2004). [On-line]. Accessed April 13, 2006. Available from http://www.oralbible.com/obc/downloads/Why_Storying_Works-Slideshow.pdf.

Therefore, Douglas Burton-Christie observes that the “difference between oral and written discourse can be real and deep. When literacy is introduced into predominantly oral cultures, profound tensions often arise concerning the understanding of language and how to interpret experience.”¹² Consequently, oral cultures have been subject to misunderstanding; they are considered essentially unskillful and not worthy of serious study.¹³ Unlike the literary cultures, oral cultures have much respect for the spoken word. They are sensitive to the power of the word, as Burton-Christie points out. “Oral peoples commonly, and probably universally, consider words to have power. Sound cannot be sounding without the use of power. In this sense, all sound, and especially oral utterance, which comes from inside living organisms, is dynamic.”¹⁴

Religions and Oral cultures

Religions in most oral cultures are so intertwined with culture and worldview that it is extremely difficult separating them. Religious symbols, rituals, ceremonies or festivals are perceived both as cultural icons and events, as well as religious observations. With the advancement in transportation and colonialism, Western missionaries and anthropologists came to greater contact with other cultures from the Seventeenth to early

¹²Douglas Burton-Christie, “Listening, reading, praying: Orality, literacy and early Christian Spirituality” *Anglican Theological Review*, [on-line]; Accessed April 13, 2006. Available from http://newssearch.looksmart.com/p/articles/mi_qa3818/is_200104/ai_n8929951/print.,2.

¹³Ong., *Orality and Literacy* 9.

¹⁴Burton-Christie, 5-6.

Twentieth centuries. For most anthropologists, it is an opportunity to study exotic cultures and primitive ways of life.¹⁵

However, in regard to early missionaries of the colonial era, every effort was made to civilize the savage people as the gospel was preached to them. One principal method adopted by the missionaries was teaching some few elites the Western culture and inducting them into the literacy club. There was no concerted effort on the part of the missionaries to either understand the culture or the religious belief of their host cultures. The effect to the new converts was a separation from their worldview; and even though the newly trained national leaders were supposed to teach their people, they could not communicate the gospel in the dominant oral culture because of the nature of their worldview. Most oral cultures have what Paul Hiebert calls an organic worldview. In an organic worldview, the world is seen in terms of “living beings in relationship to one another. Like humans and animals, objects may initiate actions and respond to the actions of others. They may be thought to have feelings, thoughts, and wills of their own.”¹⁶ In Africa, for instance, a typical worldview sees the “universe as a multidimensional entity inhabited by hierarchical cadres of spiritual beings and forces. The earth is seen as an

¹⁵Much of Western Europe was not in contact with Non Westerners of the New World, Africa South of Sahara and much of Asia. Western Europe was cut off by the Ocean in the West and Islamic powers in the East. It was this situation that partly led to the discovery of sea route to India and opened other parts of the world to European powers. This is not to say that Western Europe was never in contact with other cultures, for there were traders traveling to China, India and North Africa. But the contact and relationship that developed into colonialism came after the discovery of sea route to India. For more on the situation of Europe before colonialism, see Stephen Neill’s book, *Colonialism and the Christian Missions* London: Lutterworth Press, 1966.

¹⁶Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapid: Baker Books, 1994), 195.

arena where those spiritual beings and forces interact with people for either good or ill, depending upon the circumstances.”¹⁷

On the contrary, in the Western mechanical worldview, “all things are thought to be inanimate parts of greater mechanical systems. They are controlled by impersonal forces or by impersonal laws of nature.”¹⁸ Hiebert observes that in mechanical worldview, living beings are essentially deterministic because they are subject to impersonal forces. However, “if they know how these forces operate, they can manipulate or control them for their own advantage.”¹⁹ This perception of life is amoral as forces are intrinsically neither good nor evil. They can serve both purposes. While in an organic thought pattern, there are ethical considerations because one being’s actions would of necessity affect other beings.

In the West, most traditional religions like African Traditions are called animism; they have the same characterization. Gailyn Van Rheeenen defines animism as the “belief that personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces have power over human affairs and, consequently, that human beings must discover what beings and forces are influencing them in order to determine future action and, frequently, to manipulate their power.”²⁰ From this definition, Van Rheeenen notes the key elements in animistic belief. (1). It is a system of belief that assumes that the unseen world relates and interacts with the seen world. The divine and the human, secular and sacred, spiritual and

¹⁷Osadolar. *Imasogie Guidelines for Theology in Africa* (Ibadan, Nigeria: University Press, 1986), 66.

¹⁸Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 195.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰ Gailyn Van Rheeenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1991), 20.

impersonal forces all participate and shape the happenings in the seen world; (2). These beings may include God, gods, ancestors, ghosts, angels, demons and they are related and interact with one another; (3). The essence of animism is power, the struggle to control affairs and the destiny of those living in the physical realm of life. The power can be used either for good or ill. (4). Most animists live in fear and seek to understand the forces influencing them, and, by the means of sacrifice, appease or manipulate those forces for their benefit.

In some other writings, Traditional Religion may also be called “Folk Religion,” as in Hiebert, Daniel Shaw and Tite Tienou’s book, *Understanding Folk Religion*. The authors generally agreed with Van Rheenen’s assessment of the animistic worldview. However, they note that folk religion or animism is “particularistic in nature,” meaning the practice differs from one place or one group to another. Furthermore, the authors argue that folk religionists are primarily concerned with existential questions which have to do with now and here. Moreover, much of their practice and information are transmitted orally. They are “highly immediate, personal, and relational. Words are spoken in the context of specific relationships, and they die as soon as they have been said.”²¹

Communicating in Traditional Religions

Nabofa in his book, *Religious Communication: A Study in African Traditional Religion*, points out that religion and culture are interwoven in African worldview. Culture, he insists, “is born from age to age and from place to place on the wings of

²¹ Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response To Popular Beliefs and Practices*(Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 83-86.

religion. Thus, to communicate religious beliefs and practices to someone, especially to young ones, is to promote the totality of the people's culture. It is a way of intimating the person with the culture in which that religion is being practiced."²² The Willowbank Report also states, "Culture holds people together over a span of time. It is received from the past, but not by any process of natural inheritance. It has to be learned afresh by each generation. This takes place broadly by the process of absorption from the social environment, especially in the home."²³ Furthermore, the Willowbank Report observes, "in many societies, certain elements of the culture are communicated directly in rites of initiation, and by many other forms of deliberate instruction."²⁴

However, communication in traditional religions is through oral means of recalling past religious experiences which are transmitted from one generation to another through stories, parables, and other forms of verbal art. Anthropologists and historians regard these mediums of communication as oral traditions and they constitute the primary means of conveying message in traditional African cultures. Religion and culture in African context are inseparable; therefore, to transmit religious ideas traditionally is to communicate the entire culture and worldview. Nevertheless, when there is a revelation from the divinities, it is transmitted often through the religious leaders like the priests, prophets, seers, visioners, mediums, diviners, and ritual leaders. Then, the information or revelation received is added to the tradition and culture of the people. Carol McKinney

²²M. Y. Nabofa, *Religious Communication: A study in African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Daystar Press, 1994), 5.

²³"The Willowbank Report: Report of a consultation on gospel and culture." Lausanne Committee of World Evangelization. [On-line]: Accessed September 12, 2003. Available from <http://www.gospelcom.net/lcwe/LOP/lop02.htm>, 3.

²⁴Ibid.

states that “oral traditions are recollections of the past that are commonly known in a given culture; you can view oral traditions as verbal folk art in a culture. They include folktales, proverbs, riddles, praise songs or shouts, performances, origin narratives and founding charters, legends, poetry, music, myths, dirges, historical accounts, trickster narratives, tall tales, and other stories.”²⁵ Furthermore, Jack Goody and Ian Watt insist that “the transmission of the verbal elements of culture by oral means can be visualized as a long chain of interlocking conversations between members of the group. Thus all beliefs and values, all forms of knowledge, are communicated between individuals in face contact; and, as distinct from the material content of the cultural tradition, whether it be cave-paintings hand-axes, they are stored only in human memory.”²⁶

Another important factor in oral culture is that the meaning of each word is ratified, according to Goody and Watt. “Each word is ratified in a succession of concrete situations, accompanied by vocal inflections and physical gestures, all of which combine to particularize both its specific denotation and its accepted connotative usages. This process of direct semantic ratification, of course, operates cumulatively; and as a result the totality of symbol-referent relationships is more immediately experienced by the individual in an exclusively oral culture, and is thus more deeply socialized.”²⁷

²⁵Carol McKinney,. *Globe-Trotting in Sandals: A Field guide to Cultural Research* (Dallas: SIL. International, 2000), 229.

²⁶Jack Goody and Ian Watt. “The Consequences of Literacy” in *Literacy in Traditional Societies*. Jack Goody.Ed. (Cambridge, London, New York, Melbourne: University press, 2005), 29.

²⁷Ibid.

Missiological Implications

Considering what has been said, there are some important facts of orality and traditional religion with missiological implications that we would like to note. First, adherents of traditional religion are mostly people of oral culture with an integrated worldview. Therefore, it follows that missionaries can not present the gospel in a secularized system. The gospel must be presented with the cognizance of biblical worldview which never separated the secular from the sacred, public or private life, but considers the whole of life as unite under the lordship of the sovereign God. All of life is to be lived in the presence of God who is active in history and is involved in the affairs of humans. Second, in oral culture, religious experience is a shared experience. Whatever encounter the individual has is shared with the community, friends, kindred, and family members. Consequently, it could be used for outreach purposes as those who will be touched by the gospel can invite their neighbors, friends and family to share their new-found faith. Third, in traditional religious culture, much respect is accorded to priests, diviners, and prophets, and their words or messages are treated with uttermost importance. In presenting the gospel, the life and words of the missionary must be in harmony with the teaching of the gospel. Furthermore, the missionary as an interpreter of the gospel must recognize that he is held in honor and respect, and his actions speak louder than words. Fourthly, in the traditional oral societies, the primary means of communication include stories, parables, idioms, and other verbal arts.

It is heart warming that in some countries like Sudan, Burkina Faso, and other oral cultures, missionaries are now using Chronological Bible Storying not only as discipleship materials for new converts but also for theological training and evangelism.

Some texts like *Oral Communication of the Scripture: Insight from African Oral Art*; *Beyond The Written Word: Oral aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion*; *Reconnecting God's Story to Ministry: Cross-Cultural Storytelling at Home and Abroad*; *Towards An African Narrative Theology*; and *Story Journey: An Invitation to the Gospel as Storytelling*, all insist on either presenting the gospel in a story form or presenting the gospel in a contextualized manner with orality in focus. These authors advocate employing the recipient's relevant traditional method of communication, which include folktales, proverbs, riddles, praise songs or shouts, performances, origin narratives, founding charters, legends, poetry, music, myths, dirges, historical accounts, trickster, narratives and tales in preaching, teaching, and training of leaders. It may be wise to listen to their counsel.

Conclusion

We have noted that it is imperative that a missionary understand the traditional religious worldview as he or she presents the gospel to people of oral culture. In presenting the gospel, the love and personal relationship with God should be emphasized. It should be noted that most traditionists have personal deities or idols; therefore, in sharing the gospel, it may be necessary for the missionary to emphasize the fact that God wants to be their personal God, redeemer, defender and protector. The traditional religionists will be overwhelmed with joy to understand that the God of the universe longs to have a personal relationship with them. Again, missionaries should be bold in addressing the secret fear of most traditional religionists, the fear of death, and fear of

attack by malevolent forces. The book of Colossians speaks of the victory of Christ over principalities and powers. The traditionist may be taught that protection, deliverance and assurance come as one relates to God through Christ Jesus. It is this knowledge and love of Jesus Christ that will ultimately drive out all fears (1John 4:18).

The missionary should teach the new converts how to pray. The God revealed in the New and the Old Testament is a prayer answering God. This is where most Pentecostal missionaries are doing a better job than mainline evangelical missionaries. As the missionary has no power to save a sinner but trust that God is able to save the sinner when the gospel is presented, it is the same principle with prayer; the missionary should pray and teach the converts to pray for all their needs. When prayer is offered, the result will be left in the hand of God. An answer to a simple prayer may do more in building the faith of the new converts than months of systematic exposition of doctrines.

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