

Oral Communication of the Scripture

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Oral Communication of the Scripture: Insights from African Oral Art: by Herbert V. Klem. William Carey Library, Pasadena, 1982. Pp. xxiv + 256. Price \$ 9.95.

The prime concern of this stimulating volume is the communication of Biblical knowledge to illiterate Christians. In Nigeria, where lies the major experience of the author (and the more limited experience of the reviewer), these form a majority of the Christian population.

The book, which is based closely on the author's doctoral dissertation, consists of four sections. In the first, Klem depicts the complexity of the social structures and communicational patterns of contemporary West African society. The indigenous division of society into tribal units based on language has been complicated by the arrival of Western education based on literacy. This has penetrated different cultures to different degrees, and has created a westernised elite of mainly younger people which cuts across indigenous patterns of social status. Christian missions have placed a strong emphasis on literacy as a means of Christian growth, and some have even made it a condition of full church membership. This has alienated many mature people who should have been able to provide leadership in the church, and given the church a very Western image. The problem has been exacerbated by the highly tonal nature of most West African languages, and the difficulties of representing tone clearly and simply in an orthography based on

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Roman script. Prior to the arrival of Europeans, West African communication systems were oral rather than written, and oral communication has remained a very important part of society. So much so that in emphasizing literacy, the church has been perceived as rejecting African society. This has been a significant factor in the growth of African independent churches, which in general place a much higher value on oral communication.

In the second main section, Klem examines the social and communicational situations in first century Palestine. He maintains that they were in significant ways analogous to the modern West African situation. Not only were there different ethnic groups (Jews, Samaritans, Romans) but within the Jewish community there were sharp distinctions between religious parties—Pharisees, Zealots, Essenes, Am-ha-ares, Hellenizers, and the educated literate priestly Sadducean elite. Klem believes that the Am-ha-ares constituted as much as 85 per cent of the total population, and were mostly illiterate or barely literate. There were also various languages in use: Greek being the language of international prestige and education, Hebrew the language of religious prestige and Aramaic the language of the home which most people (even the educated) used most of the time. Where literacy was acquired, it was as an aid to memorization rather than a means of obtaining new information. Among the Aramaic-speaking masses oral poetry involving rhythm, rhyme and parallelism was a popular form of communication. Jesus chose to teach through this medium, and in doing so identified himself with the masses rather than with the privileged elite. This gave his message greater credibility with the audience. Klem contends that in bringing the Christian message to the illiterate majorities in Africa today, the choice of a more appropriate medium than literacy would give the message a wider welcome and a greater credibility.

The third main section outlines the principal features of oral communication in contemporary West Africa. Klem holds that Western mission agencies almost completely failed to understand the nature and effectiveness

of indigenous oral communication systems. They equated resistance to literacy either with stupidity or with resistance to the gospel. Klem interprets it rather as a defence of traditional social structures and values, oral art being an important aspect of social cohesion in the traditional societies. He draws on several recent anthropological studies to support this view. Stories, proverbs, poetry and songs are an important means of preserving and transmitting the collective wisdom of the group, and are often the focus of group activity, with oral virtuosity highly prized. Klem describes some of the main genres and functions of oral art especially among the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria that he is most familiar with. He points out that there is currently taking place a renaissance of indigenous oral art forms, and urges that the church should not miss out on this. For instance the development of hymns where the lexical tone of the words fits the local tunes would greatly increase the theological and didactic value of hymn singing. Skilled practitioners of African oral art make effective use of more than just the spoken word. Their "performance" includes the use of multiple symbol systems such as gestures, movement among the audience, playing the roles of characters in the story, using props, and so on. An essential part of the performance is audience participation and reaction, which give the performer encouragement and feedback. This is all very different from a standard Western sermon, yet there is nothing in it which is intrinsically unchristian. The utilisation of the full range of African modes of communication by Christians could lead to a much more effective and credible presentation of the gospel.

The final main section assesses the probable future of oral literature in Africa and the way in which it can be harnessed for Christian service. Songs in particular have been and are being used as a means of political propaganda, both to convey the views of leaders to the people, and to convey the people's reactions to the leaders. Rather than insist on literacy as the mark of a sincere Christian, why cannot the church learn from this and meet people where they are, using songs and poems

as a medium of Christian instruction? Klem put this to the test in a controlled experiment. With the cooperation of a committee, he prepared a paraphrase of Hebrews 1-6 and had local composers set the text to music, using a variety of local styles. The musical version was then carefully recorded on tape by competent choirs.

The experiment consisted of holding a series of eight Bible studies on selected themes from Hebrews 1-6 with four different groups in different villages. Each group used a different method. In the first, the classes had only a teacher and written texts. In the second, the classes had a teacher, written texts and a taped reading of the text. In the third group, they had a teacher, written texts and a tape of the text set to music. In the fourth group they had only the teacher and a tape of the text set to music. Teachers rotated among the groups to even out any differences in their teaching ability. Class members were interviewed both before and after the series of studies to ascertain what they knew about Hebrews 1-6, and so to determine what they had learnt from the studies. About half the participants were literate.

The results showed that the use of the written text plus a tape of the spoken text (the second group) significantly increased the comprehension of the group. The use of the written text plus sung text (the third group) increased the comprehension still further, and also the enjoyment of the group. The use of the sung text only (the fourth group) was less effective, but still gave better results than the traditional church method of using the written text only (the first group). In all groups except the first, the difference in performance between literate and illiterate members was minimal. The sung version of the text was very easy to memorise, and so popular that even Muslims started listening to the tapes.

Klem concludes that the combination of oral and written scriptures, especially when the oral rendering is set to indigenous music, is a much more effective way of teaching the Bible than the traditional written-text-only method. In addition to increasing people's retention of

what they learn, it reduces the difference between literate and illiterate Christians, and so gives the latter a better chance of playing a full part in leadership and evangelism. It also makes people feel that the message itself is more relevant to their needs, since it is presented in an indigenous medium.

The book ends with seven appendices, a bibliography and an index. One of the appendices gives a detailed description of the statistical analysis used in calculating the results of the experiment. This would doubtless be of interest to those who understand such things, but will be beyond the ken of many readers—including the reviewer. The general interest and readability of the book are high, although without particularly looking out for them, I noticed over 60 typographical errors, and at least one error of fact, the placement of Bishop Lowth in the 19th century (p. 69). The bibliography is not complete, and lacked details of such works as Filson (1938) and Nida (1960) which were cited in the text. These are however minor irritations rather than serious defects and do not detract from the author's case.

How shall we assess the validity of that case, and does the church in India have anything to learn from it? To deal first with a subsidiary point, the analogy which Klem draws between first century Palestine and twentieth century Nigeria is less than fully convincing. The social structures are not closely parallel and the language situation is not obviously comparable. But a detailed comparison is not central to Klem's case. The main point of the analogy is to show that Jesus in his situation did what Klem is advocating for his: he used a non-prestigious, non-elitist oral medium in order to reach the illiterate masses. In terms of communication principles, it would not seem to be vital to prove that Jesus did this, in order to justify a modern experiment along these lines. But in practical terms, to claim a dominical example may well be an effective way of diminishing resistance to a new method among Christians who are accustomed to a traditional one. On this level, we may accept both the validity and the utility of Klem's

argument. As another historical precedent, he might also have mentioned the example of Caedmon's poems in spreading Biblical knowledge in seventh century England.

It would be wrong to give the impression that Klem debunks literacy, for he does not. Indeed he sees clearly that a modern state cannot survive without it, even if it is the prerogative of a minority. He does maintain that literacy alone is not sufficient to meet the communicational needs of the Christian Church. In Africa, literacy is, and is perceived as, an alien attainment, and the closer Christianity identifies itself with literacy, the more alien its image. If literacy can be conjoined with indigenous means of communication, this can both reduce its alien aura and increase its effectiveness. Though Klem's experiment was a limited one carried out under difficult organisational conditions, its results did seem to establish clearly several significant facts: (1) indigenous means of communication can be harnessed to the pedagogical service of the African church; (2) literacy and indigenous communication can reinforce each other; (3) when this happens more Christian knowledge becomes available to more people; (4) when literacy and indigenous communication work in harness, Christians enjoy learning more, and so learn better; (5) when Christians enjoy learning more of their faith, then non-Christians are also attracted.

These are important issues, and we have to conclude that Klem has carried his point. In his Nigerian context, there is obvious scope for further experiment along the same lines, and although there may be areas where for some reason it does not catch on, we may expect to hear of his type of approach spreading widely in Africa.

What about India? There are some obvious similarities between the Nigerian churches and the Indian churches, but there are also some radical differences which are bound to affect the situation. The main similarity, that there is plenty of illiteracy both among Christians and non-Christians, especially in rural areas, is perhaps rather superficial. We can more profitably focus on the differences, and can start by raising two

- questions: (1) What is the status of literacy in India?
(2) What are the practical problems of Indian scripts?

(1) As for the status of literacy, no one can claim that it is alien to India in the way it is to Africa. Indeed, literacy has been available here, even if only to a privileged minority, for far longer than it has in Western Europe. The major Indian languages, with the exception of Urdu, use home-grown scripts which owe nothing to colonial influence, and generally match the phonology of the languages rather well. Literacy in itself then, is not a foreign attainment, imposed by an alien culture. There should therefore in principle be a much lower resistance to literacy. However, it may be that the attitude that literacy ought to be a norm is alien at least in origin. The spread of literacy may be government policy, but how much do the illiterate masses want to become literate? Do they perceive literacy as a desirable means of economic and social self-advancement, or are they indifferent or even hostile to it? Does the highly stratified nature of Indian society inculcate in the members of the lower strata the attitude that they have no right to expect to be literate? How do attitudes vary between different areas of the country, or between tribal people and members of majority groups? Or for that matter, different churches? What information is available on these topics? I do not know the answers to these questions, but clearly these answers will be highly relevant to any attempt to transplant Klem's methods to India.

(2) The practical problems of Indian scripts are quite different from those of West Africa. Klem states explicitly that a major problem there is the representation of tone. None of the major languages of India employs lexical tone in the way that most West African languages do. Even in the minority languages such as some of the Tibeto-Burman languages of the north-east, where lexical tone is used, it does not operate as extensively or carry the same heavy functional load as it does in Yoruba. Thus one of the major problems that

facéd Klem is either absent or much less acute in most Indian situations.

Again, in West Africa, the Roman script has almost always been the base for the formation of indigenous orthographies. Being alphabetic in nature, it offers a meagre 26 symbols in total, and a miserly five for vowels, which is grossly inadequate for many West African languages. Indian scripts are syllabic rather than alphabetic, and thus offer a considerably larger number of symbols for those attempting to devise orthographies for previously unwritten languages. Except in the north-east, Roman script is little used, and there is no question today of using this colonial import as a basis for newly written languages.

The problems in India are of a different nature. What happens when tribal groups occupy an area that crosses state boundaries, say Andhra and Orissa, or Gujarat and Rajasthan? State governments naturally expect minority language groups to use the script of the state language, and this can prevent the spread of a uniform script throughout a linguistic community that is already small by Indian standards. Where rival scripts are supported by different state governments, who can blame tribal people for losing interest altogether? A further disincentive to literacy among minorities is an insistence by some state governments that literacy should be achieved first in the state language rather than first in the minority language and only afterwards in the state language. When they are expected to jump both a language barrier and the literacy barrier at one bound, most people give up, and again, who can blame them? On the other hand, in more enlightened states such as Andhra, where minorities have been encouraged to become literate in their own language first (using an orthography based on Telugu script) and then move on to literacy in the state language, there has been some remarkable progress in recent years.

In short, where people become resistant to literacy in India, it is much less likely than in West Africa that a church perceived as Western oriented is a contributory

cause. If the sources of literacy problems here are different from those which Klem encountered, then it is likely that his solutions will be less effective here.

We may now raise some other issues. What are the main media of communication in non-literate communities in India? Stories, proverbs, poems and songs are likely to be widespread, and other forms such as dance, drama and epic may also be valued. Which of these, if any, are likely to be adaptable to Christian use? The answer will be closely related to the religious associations which these media already have in a non-Christian setting. Some forms of communication will be religiously neutral, and may lend themselves readily to Christian use provided there are Christians who can perform effectively through them. Other forms may be so closely associated with non-Christian religious activities that Christians would not feel comfortable to try and use them in the service of the gospel. Klem does not deal with this issue in any detail, but he does mention (p. 169) that none of the musical styles used in his experiment were felt to have associations incompatible with Christian standards. The associations that different forms of communication have will surely vary from one culture to another in a land the size of India. But in any culture there will almost certainly be some indigenous form of communication which is suitable for Christian use.

A further factor in an Indian context is that in the major language groups, many songs are classical in both language and tune, and for this reason do not communicate well to people of lower education.¹ They may be indigenous, but they are not popular in the sense of being readily understood. An attempt to marry classical musical forms to everyday spoken language could well provoke a hostile reaction from the more educated people who are influential in shaping public opinion. And where there is a classical tradition, any musical form which is of a more popular nature may not be considered dignified enough to carry a religious message.

1. For this observation I am indebted to Dr. E. J. Lott.

This leads on to further questions: what do the churches need in the way of improved techniques for Christian nurture? And what do they want? (Which may not be the same thing.) The aim of Klem's experiment was to provide better access for non-literate Christians to a knowledge of the teaching of the Bible, which was apparently accepted as a desired aim in his church setting. Is this a priority in Indian churches? My own experience in India is not long enough to allow dogmatism, but I have the impression that churches here often put a greater emphasis than I have noticed in other parts of the world upon liturgical observance rather than growth in Bible knowledge. If this impression is correct, it may mean that Indian Christians will be less interested than Klem's friends in experiments designed to increase Bible knowledge.

Again, one could ask for a comparison of the social and psychological attitudes of Christians in India with those in Nigeria. In a situation such as we have here, in which the Christian community is and always has been a small minority (again with exceptions in the north-east), there may be more interest in preserving group identity than in stimulating individual Christian maturity. If so, this also might dampen interest in communicational experiments.

In sum, we could say that the general situation of the church in India, and the problems of literacy here, are sufficiently different from those in Nigeria, that one would expect a similar experiment here to produce somewhat different results. But an experiment, or better a series of experiments in different areas, would be well worth making, especially so if they could be carried out by Christians operating within their own cultures. Researchers would need a sensitivity to the values and feelings both of the Christian community and the non-Christian majority culture, and an ability to communicate well within the forms of indigenous media.

Finally, we could ask what is already being done in India to put non-print media to Christian use. One could mention radio broadcasts and disc and tape recordings, but

These are hardly indigenous means of communication. They are used more for evangelism than for Christian nurture, and, especially in the case of radio broadcasts, take place largely outside the context of normal church life. So although they have their value, they are not directly comparable with Klem's work. Christian songs have already been developed in many areas, and this can surely be encouraged. Perhaps such songs could be given, especially in rural areas, a wider didactic use than they have usually had in the past. But there must also be room for experiment with other forms of communication. Are there Indian Christians able and willing to take up the challenge? At the very least, an attempt to replicate Klem's methods here and compare results would offer scope for a doctoral thesis. And it could come up with some very valuable pastoral and pedagogical tools for the church at large.