Literacy as a Mission Tool
to Reach Tribal Peoples

Understanding the various uses of literacy in tribal cultures is essential to using it effectively as a mission resource tool. Herewith are some key concepts which reveal strategic openings to reaching tribal peoples with the Gospel message.

by Stephen J. Barber

In a Guatemalan village a young Indian mother writes a letter to her husband who is working on a distant plantation. Although a reasonably reliable postal service exists, she doesn't actually send the letter until she can find someone she knows who is traveling himself to the plantation. The letter, detailing a serious problem needing an immediate solution, is sent via a courier known to the author, even though this hand delivery adds weeks to the delivery time.

In another Central American tribe, a group of women gather for a Bible study. Each woman reads the same passage out loud, beginning with the younger and moving to the older. Finally the oldest woman, who can not read, quotes the passage from memory, and explains its meaning to the group.

Members of a tribal church in Papua New Guinea like to decorate their Bibles. They write their names and slogans like "Jesus Saves" or "Praise God!" on the closed edges of their Bibles. Brightly colored inks are used, and the names and slogans are elaborately designed. The expatriate missionary is a bit peeved by this, thinking it disrespectful of the Holy Book.

Believers belonging to another Papuan tribe never have private devotions. People here never do anything entirely by themselves; everything is done in the company of others. Doing something by oneself is considered aberrant behavior. To do something so spiritually powerful as reading Scripture by oneself is unthinkable and could only have one interpretation: sorcery!

In an Amazonian village people constantly write notes to each other, usually delivered by hand via village children. Some of the notes request the loan of tools or food. Some notes are complaints about behavior. On occasion the notes are proposals of marriage...written by women to men.

Literacy in a Tribal Setting

Literacy is a communications technology, whereby words are encoded by an author as two dimensional symbols, transmitted over space and time, and then decoded by a reader. The technology itself is relatively simple, and any human being has the potential to learn to use it. Those of us who have been raised and educated in Western highly developed nations have been exposed to reading and writing almost from birth. We have received years of formal education, training us in the forms of literacy used in our society. Reading and writing activities are deeply woven into our economic, political, social and religious life. These literacy forms so fill our lives that we seldom notice or consider them apart from their immediate use.

Literacy as used by tribal peoples is shaped differently from the literacy with which Westerners have grown up. The differences in economy, education, social structures and religious institutions all have an effect on the ways in which literacy is used. This is especially apparent among the wide variety of tribal peoples. Until recently, it seemed helpful to talk about the differences between "oral" and "literate" cultures. Today, this distinction is more obscuring than helpful. Fifty, perhaps even twenty-five years ago, there were groups of people who had no idea what reading and writing were. Today, I am unable to identify any ethnolinguistic group which at this time has absolutely no concept of reading and writing, either in their own language or a national language. Since all have a concept and use for literacy, it is misleading to label tribal groups as simply "oral." Every culture, our own included, is primarily oral. Oral language is learned first, used most, and always predominates. Some have even

labeled television and radio as examples of "secondary orality," a yet more confusing term. The more useful approach, in regard to tribal peoples (or ourselves) and literacy, is to identify how reading and writing are woven into the communication patterns of a people. This is especially important when we consider literacy as a tool for missions.

Affects of Tribal Literacy

I am currently involved in analyzing the results of a study of literacy as it is used by the tribal peoples with whom the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) works.[1] SIL field members doing linguistic, translation, and literacy work among 147 ethnolinguistic groups around the world, filled out a questionnaire where they described in detail how reading and writing is actually used in their communities. The questionnaire also elicited data on social, economic, and religious factors. As a companion to the questionnaire survey, I personally interviewed over thirty of the SIL respondents in four regional centers. The results of this study give a clear picture of literacy as it exists among tribal people.

Literacy use among tribal peoples is highly varied, and almost always distinct from what Westerners consider "normal" literacy. Among tribal groups, economy, education, and church structure are directly related to *how much* people use literacy: how thoroughly it is interwoven into the communication patterns of the group. On the other hand, community social structure seems related to both *how much* people use literacy and *how* people use literacy: what they consider the benefits of literacy. Note that both of these differences extend to religious uses of literacy, such as Scripture reading or the use of hymnals and chorus and song books.

Economy and Education

Economy and available education are the two most significant factors relating to how much literacy is used among tribal groups. As expected, communities which are more developed economically use literacy more than those which are less developed. Additionally, communities which have higher grade levels of education available to their children use literacy more than those with only lower grades of education available. These two factors parallel each other almost exactly: where one is high, the other is high, and where one is low, the other is low. Statistically speaking, economy and education account for about two-thirds of the variation in overall literacy use among tribal groups.

From the data generated by this study, it is impossible to say that a change in the economy causes a change in education and literacy, or vice versa. It is clear, however, that these factors are closely linked. Reasons for this are not hard to discover. Participation in a capitalistic economy demands strong literacy skills. Formal education is the most widespread means of gaining literacy skills. The development and maintenance of a formal education system, with its school buildings, teachers and curriculum, is costly, and requires a society to produce a significant surplus above bare survival needs. At the other extreme, a kinship economy[2] (hunter-gatherer and low level agriculture) has no intrinsic need for literacy. Everything a person needs, economically, socially and spiritually, is available by personal interaction with others in the group. Formal education, expensive and often irrelevant to daily life, is unlikely to exist unless an outside agency (national government or mission) develops and funds it.

Religious uses of literacy, such as Scripture reading or the use of hymnals and chorus books, also tend to track with economy and education. Where tribal people use literacy more overall, they tend to use literacy more for religious purposes as well. Notably, reading vernacular language Scripture translations is an exception to this tendency. Tribes functioning at a kinship economy level use vernacular Scripture the least. Those operating at the mercantile-tributary level use vernacular Scriptures and literacy more. However, tribes living in capitalistic economies, which use literacy the most, use vernacular Scriptures less than mercantile-tributary groups. Capitalistic tribal groups have a greater affinity for national language Scripture translations. This is probably due to their greater incorporation in the national economy and sociopolitical system. (The majority of tribal groups in this study were in the kinship or mercantile-tributary levels of economy.)

Church Structures

There has been a long standing connection between the church and literacy. In European history the church was often the keeper of literacy skills and traditions. While the government has taken over the task of literacy education in many nations, the church continues to play a significant role in literacy. Among the tribal groups examined in this study, the social structure of the local church has a significant relationship with the overall use of literacy (not just religious uses of literacy).

The tribal communities studied tended to be small, from less than one hundred people to two thousand. In such settings, a church tends to be not just a religious institution, but a significant social and political structure as well. The local church fre-

quently represents a point of contact with the national society, by virtue of its participation in a denomination or mission organization. Further, among the particular communities examined in the study, the church may have an even greater impact on literacy use: Often literacy, at least in the vernacular language, was introduced by the SIL member in connection with the local church.

It should be no surprise then that the local church has an impact on overall literacy use in the whole community. What is perhaps surprising is that it is the social structure of the church, not its theological stance, which is related to overall literacy use. The overall use of literacy is significantly higher among communities which have churches characterized by well developed social/religious hierarchies. Community churches with more egalitarian structures (minimal hierarchy) were related to lower overall use of literacy in the community.

There appears to be a three way connection in hierarchical church settings between literacy, holiness, and social status. Persons filling higher statuses in the church structure are regarded as being holier than others; they are seen as being closer to and more knowledgeable about God. They are also highly skilled in literacy, especially the specialized literacy skills needed in spiritual and religious tasks. People in the lower social ranks lack the religious literacy skills (at least) of the elite, and are also seen as less holy or farther from God. The desire for either higher social status or greater knowledge of God seems to support the development of literacy skills not just in the church itself, but within the community as a whole.

Community Structures

Community social structure not only relates to how much tribal people use literacy, it also makes a great difference in how they use literacy. Tribal communities, especially those not driven by a capitalistic economy, vary widely in what they regard as the benefits of literacy. Communities with different social structures use literacy differently.[3]

> While it is a wonderful goal that every believer should be able to read the Scriptures for themselves, it is not a realistic expectation in every situation. For more than a thousand years from its inception Christianity grew and flourished in societies with minimal literacy.

Frequently tribal communities exhibit a strong sense of group identity, but are without a developed social hierarchy. People identify themselves in terms of the tribal or village group more than the individual, and the group boundary is very clear. People place a high value on their relationships with one another. No person is of much higher rank than another. Leadership within the group is either very weak and diffuse, or centered upon a single charismatic individual. In this type of community, letters and notes are common. Letters maintain relationships with community members living temporarily in other places. Notes are used in the community as "intermediaries" to facilitate potentially disruptive interactions. For instance, a person may send a note to a relative asking to borrow a tool or some food. Another person may send a note to someone complaining of a certain behavior. Even marriage proposals may initially be handled by notes. Religious use of literacy is strongly group centered. Scriptures and hymnals are used in communal worship. Private use of Scriptures is limited, and may even be banned as sorcery.

Another common tribal social pattern is to have a strong sense of group identity along with a well developed hierarchy. The group is still very strong here and relationships are still important, but there is a clear sense of status and rank. People are able to define anyone's place in the social hierarchy. Leadership is highly structured within the social hierarchy. Literacy is used in these communities for maintaining interpersonal relationships (as in the social setting above), and for keeping the social hierarchy distinct. Letters and notes are common. Religious use of literacy is group oriented, though private use is a bit more frequent than the case above. Literacy specialists develop to fulfill their social role. Literacy is also used to maintain social order: lists are used to record people participating in events (good and bad), identity documents and certificates verify status and achievements. Leaders are either more literate than followers, or have special literacy assistants to help them fulfill the literate requirements.

Both of these communities with a strong sense of group identity tend to have more use of literacy than communities with weak group identity. While the strong group communities can reject literacy altogether, the strong group dynamic seems to encourage participation in literacy use once the group has decided to incorporate literacy into their communications patterns. If the community

rejects literacy altogether, literacy will not be an option despite the best efforts of outside agencies. These strong group communities come to define their own concept of literacy through a process of internal dialogue and debate. This is a process that can take years, but can be very difficult to change once a pattern is accepted.

Not all tribal communities have a strong sense of group identity. Some are very individualistic. In this case, each person is out for his own good. "What's in it for me?" seems to be the underlying orientation. Community work is only done under duress, or when workers are certain they will get paid for it in some way. Literacy use here is based on the perceived payoff potential, either economically, socially, or spiritually. If I can see that I will gain something from using literacy, I'll do it. Otherwise, I'm not interested. Religious uses of literacy tend to be private, with private devotional reading of Scriptures or hymnals being the most common. Public reading of Scriptures is uncommon, sometimes even in the church itself.

A final type of tribal community finds itself at the bottom of a larger social hierarchy, outside the group without power, unable to do anything to change their fate in any way. These communities are typically dominated by some outside social or political entity. Typically, literacy seems to be used as a tool to keep them from achieving any power to change their lives. School systems do not seem to educate. Bureaucracies never work to their advantage. Licenses and other critical documents are impossible or ruinously expensive to obtain. While a few people use literacy skills to break out of the system, most are unable to even think of changing their lives. Among tribal peoples in this type of community, there is little use of literacy, religious or otherwise.

Literacy as a Mission Tool

As a tool for missions, the primary benefit of literacy is access to the Scriptures, either in vernacular or national language translations. The spiritual growth and maturity of any church or individual is always limited without some form of access to God's Word. Further, given the multiplicity of religious structures which call themselves Christian, the Scripture provides us with the only changeless measure by which to judge orthodoxy.

For thousands of years, God's Word has been preserved in written form. Ready access to the Scriptures has only been available to people who could read, and who had a translation of the Scriptures available in a language they read. Over the last several hundred years, the EuroAmerican Protestant expectation has been that every believer should be able to read the Scriptures for themselves. While this is a wonderful goal, it is not a realistic expectation in every situation. For more than a thousand years from its inception, Christianity grew and flourished in societies with minimal literacy. Its predecessor, Judaism, also developed and grew in a society of less than universal literacy. A careful reading of the Pentateuch reveals a number of devices used by the Israelites to remind non-literate members to contemplate their understanding of the Law, live by the Law, and teach their children the Law (see, for example, Deut. 11:18-21). Similar devices can still be used today.

Universal or near-universal literacy is a difficult and expensive achievement for any society (or church agency). For various reasons, it may not be a valued goal for specific tribal groups or their national governments. By now it should also be clear that literacy among tribal peoples is highly variable, depending on a number of social, economic, and religious factors. What then can be said about literacy as a tool for missions?

First, universal literacy, either in the society or the church, is not a necessity for spiritual growth. Given proper contextual support, a person or community church can have access to the Scripture by means other than universal literacy. Weekly public reading of the Scriptures at church gatherings, a norm in New Testament times (see Luke 4:16ff, Col. 4:16), allows people to hear and contemplate God's Word on a regular basis. In some social settings, one family or lineage member can read the Scripture for his or her kin. In other settings, a religious literacy specialist can read the Scriptures for tribal members. This can be followed by a time of discussion or instruction, where the stories and concepts are discussed and applied (again, a Scriptural model: see Neh. 8:8). Mission leaders need to seriously consider the nature of the group, the resources available, the languages used, and the probable functions of literacy before committing to massive literacy projects.

Second, different tribal groups may have different reasons for wanting to read God's Word. Missions personnel should be aware of these different motives. For example, people in competitive, individualistic tribal groups may want to read the Scriptures for their own personal benefit. Their question will be, "What's in it for me if I can read the Scriptures?" People in tribes with a strong sense of group may be motivated to read the Scripture because of group expectations ("This is what we do because this is who we are"). They tend to appreciate the Scriptures as God's letter to them. They may also be oriented to group Scripture reading or discussion. Tribes with hierarchical structures will expect and usually accept

specialists to read or interpret the Scriptures to them. They may even expect "Bible specialists" to have secret knowledge of "hidden" meanings in the Scriptures. While this expectation is contrary to American Protestant tradition, some hierarchical tribal peoples may view it positively, and may even support it from the Scripture itself (see Heb. 5:11-14). Failure to take motivations into account can doom a mission's literacy efforts.

Third, literacy forms that to European or American missions personnel may seem non-religious may be used by tribal peoples in spiritual ways. Group oriented tribal people frequently use letters to encourage each other spiritually. Some EuroAmerican missions personnel have expressed discomfort to me about receiving or writing these "epistles" ("It's like they expect me to write like Paul"), but they can be powerful in the lives of tribal believers. Hierarchical tribal believers may use church member lists, attendance records, and giving records to keep track of church life. These help ensure that everyone is fulfilling their proper roles. Group oriented tribal churches may also use lists, but to ensure that the burden for meeting needs is evenly distributed through the community.

Fourth, God's Word can be made very accessible when put in appropriate local forms. Gospel and Scripture choruses can be incredibly effective for making the Scripture available in an easily memorizable form. Once learned, the song makes that portion of Scripture instantly accessible. Such songs can often be quickly learned by aural means, then used as the basis for introducing the printed form of the language. More than one tribal person has learned to read a vernacular Scripture translation by repeated exposure to the print version of a song he or she already knew.

Finally, it may be that in some tribal settings, vernacular language literacy may rightly be very limited. Today mission agencies are making increasing use of the Scriptures in non-print media, such as audio and video tapes. Where the appropriate level of technology exists to use these media, they can be very effective for making God's Word accessible.[4] Keep in mind that the introduction of any new communications media brings problems as well as benefits. Plus, even with the most sophisticated of electronic media, someone must still learn to read to provide the initial sound track!

Conclusion

My father was a carpenter, and his basic tools included the hammer and saw. But Dad did not have just one hammer, nor one saw. He had a roofing hammer, a flooring hammer, a tack hammer, ball peen hammers of different weights. Each hammer was recognizable as a hammer, but designed to meet a specific need in carpentry. Likewise, he had a variety of saws, both hand powered and machine driven. Rip and crosscut, mitering and jig, sabre and circular, table and keyhole. Each one was designed for a specific situation.

Literacy likewise is a tool, useful, even necessary in missions. We have tended to limit ourselves, though, to just the "regular" tool. When working in literacy with tribal peoples, we need to remember that specialized tools, specialized forms of literacy are the norm, not the exception. Do not just reach for the same old tool. Consider the situation, and use the appropriate literacy tool to reach the tribal peoples with the Word of God.

End Notes:

1 A detailed account of the study is available in Barber, Stephen J., 1995 *Literacy Use and Incorporation in Culture: the "How" and "How Much" of Literacy*, Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms Incorporated.

2 The terms for economic levels, kinship, mercantile-tributary, and capitalistic, are taken from Wolf, Eric R., 1982 *Europe and the People Without History*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

3 The descriptions of social patterns is taken from the grid-group model, developed by Mary Douglas and Sue Harris.

4 See Special Edition of the *International Journal of Frontier Missions.*, "Reaching Non-Literate Peoples." Volume 12:2, April-June 1995.

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