

Training Oral Leaders: An Adventist Challenge

By Gideon Petersen

Have you ever wondered why unreached people groups are unreached? True, some are isolated and never had the privilege of meeting a Christian. But what of the many unreached people groups that live side-by-side with Christians? Or, they may not live near Christians, yet have the technology and exposure to learn more about Christianity but choose not to? These are often called resistant unreached peoples.

In 1995 I went to work among an unreached people group, the Himba of northern Namibia. The Himba as a people have consistently rejected Christianity and Westernization for 100 years. I

often responded positively to the appeal, “Come teach my children about Jesus!” Upon going I would seldom be able to teach the adults, especially the men. When I did get the opportunity, they were polite but not interested. As I struggled and researched, I discovered that as the children became adults, their interest in Christianity waned and they returned to their traditional ways. Christianity was equated with being Western and that did not fit the nomadic lifestyle (see Petersen 2006).

I realized two important things. First, I needed to divorce Christianity from Westernization. God is a God of the nations. No one needs to change his or her culture to be saved. The second thing was that the traditional Western way of doing church, evangelism, Bible studies, and discipling just would not work in the Himba context. It was too different. I wrestled with this, praying for guidance, searching literature, and researching the culture. I realized that as an oral people, oral genre and communication forms were needed for evangelism. As I contextualized the evangelism and discipleship phase, I noticed there was also a great need to contextualize the



Gideon Petersen is a Ph.D. in Missiology candidate at the University of the Free State and currently serves as a cross-cultural church planter in Namibia, Africa.

theological training of spiritual leaders. (In this article a spiritual leader refers to one who is considered a pastor in the Adventist Church. That is, someone trained theologically.) A church planting movement's success centers in the training and nurturing of local spiritual leadership. How can one theologically train and nurture indigenous spiritual leaders in an oral context?

This article's hypothesis is that for the church to grow in an oral community the traditional leaders cannot be overlooked as spiritual leaders. For the older generation to retain their status as leaders it becomes imperative that the church establishes theological training for oral spiritual leaders. This article is aimed as a launching pad for discussion on theological education for oral communities. I do not propose to have the answers; however, I would like to raise the question, How can churches be effectively planted in an oral community without theologically trained local spiritual leaders? This question presupposes a unique spiritual leadership is required to ensure spiritual growth in an oral community. A brief introduction to the theory of orality is presented.

Second, to demonstrate the need for oral training the effects of literacy on oral communities will be highlighted. These sections present the why of doing oral education. The next section will present a case study of my observations of how the Himba, an oral people, traditionally do

education. The article ends with a summary of the motivations for an oral training program and the challenges facing such a program. These provide the reader with a context to discuss the need for oral training.

Understanding Oral Societies

In my previous article, "God Speaks in the Heart Language," I shared the value of using oral communication methods in order to effectively communicate the gospel in oral societies. However, I did not define orality, neither did I extrapolate on how oral people reason and do things. In this section I will define orality and share some characteristics of oral societies.

Havelock states: "Orality, by definition, deals with societies which do not use any form of phonetic writing" (1986:65). Finnegan argues that orality is a complex term. According to her it can be interpreted as meaning only that which is spoken or it can imply anything non-written. She suggests the former "excludes deaf signing and nonverbalized material culture, [while] the [latter] includes them" (2007:10888). Jacobsen adds: "Orality describes cultures or populations whose worldviews, rhetorical principles, and mental constructs develop in the absence of widespread, systematic, and habitual literacy and also refers to the coexistent or residual presence of orality in habitually literate cultures" (2001:3278). Thus an oral person may have learned to read and

write, but has an inclination to orality. In Jacobsen's definition one can speak of a primary oral person or society and a secondary oral person or society. The primary oral person is one who lives where there is little or no exposure to writing or literacy. The secondary oral person is one who has exposure to texts and knows how to read and write but prefers oral, auditory, and/or visual ways to interact with knowledge and information. She or he is also one who "mimics orality but bases [the mimicry] on textual practices" (Jacobsen 2001:3279). These can be radio or television where the text is still primary.

for the community. As orature is used, an interaction between the storyteller, poet or musician, and the audience develops. "What, after all, is orality all about, if not a performance of a person's mouth, addressing another person's ear and hearing with his own personal ear the spontaneous personal reply?" (Havelock 1986:64). The knowledge is therefore a shared knowledge and the poet or historian is more of a mentor than a reference. In oral communities the interaction with an inanimate object (a book or screen) is secondary to the human interaction.

Orature is not a photocopy or an exact duplication (Goody

The knowledge is therefore a shared knowledge and the poet or historian is more of a mentor than a reference.

Knowledge, in literate societies, is stored as text in the form of books or electronic media. Individuals in the search for knowledge seek the texts at the library, on the Internet, or other media. Oral societies have no text, neither do they have libraries or do they? How is knowledge and information stored in an oral context? Primary oral communicators and societies store information in orature (Kavari 2000:111) or oral literature (Finnegan 2007:10888). The orature or oral literature form becomes a means to store knowledge. The orator is the library where the knowledge is stored

1987:155). Rather it is poetry, parables, stories, song, dance, proverbs, laments, eulogies, myths, and so forth. These require specialists, such as historians, poets, storytellers, etc., who use them (see also Havelock 1986:74-78). Very seldom is verbatim memorization used. Rather, the repetitions in oral communication build or grow the story, i.e., it is additive (cf. Havelock 1986:76 & Ong 1982:36). The information is stored in various genres using diverse mnemonic forms and recalled as key thoughts, principles, story lines, etc. For example, the Genesis creation story uses repeti-

tion to build the story of a Creator who effectively forms the world (Niditch 1996:13). “God said; ‘Let there be light’ and there was light . . . and God saw that the light was good.” The narrative form with its many repetitions (about the Creator’s creative power) draws the listener into the story and helps him/her recall the story later. The additive aspect of the narrative (the power of God) is how the story is stored for the oral person. Havelock suggests that besides the narrative form, orature requires a “formulaic verse” (1986:74). Thus, orators use rhyme and rhythm. This could be played out in a chant or a song. The rhythms of the voice aids memorization and in so doing the story is stored. This is used extensively in the book of Psalms in the Bible. These mnemonics: additive, repetition, rhyme or rhythm, are partnered together in a story to assist recall. That is, they are seldom used in isolation of each other.

Havelock (1986:65) speaks about the relationship between the individual and his/her society as being acoustic in a primary oral society. However, the uniqueness of oral societies is not the orature or acoustics per se. Ong (1982:36-57) identifies nine characteristics of an oral society. He perceives them as:

1. Additive rather than subordinate
2. Aggregative rather than analytical
3. Redundant or copious
4. Conservative or traditionalist

5. Close to the human life-world
6. Agonistically toned
7. Empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced
8. Homeostatic
9. Situational rather than abstract

These characteristics suggest oral societies are unique and different.

Hunter (2000:71) highlights similar characteristics but refers to them as right-brained and left-brained and gives terms relative to psychology for them (see table below). In Hunter’s estimation the oral society is perceived as right-brained and literate communities as left-brained.

Note: these characteristics are prescribed from a literate perspective.

Left Brain	Right Brain
Concepts	Emotion
Abstraction	Imagination
Language	Art, Music, Poetry
Rational	Experience

As these two authors highlight, orality does not refer to a primitive or pre-literate state of existence from which one evolves to become literate. Rather orality denotes a state of being equal, yet different, to being literate. The term orality accepts the person for being different and suggests that literate people be transformed when entering an oral community. The idea of being pre- or non-literates speaks about a human evolution-

ary process, indirectly elevating literates as superior. It is this superiority complex that needs dismantling to effectively communicate the gospel and to identify a leadership-training program that is unique to oral peoples. Essentially these characteristics suggest that oral people learn differently to literate people. They also indicate that oral people view the world from a different perspective and this must be respected. For literates, learning takes place in a confined environment (books or classroom) but for oral people learning is communal (the family or age mates) and experiential (life experience).

The Impact of Literacy on Oral Societies

In the previous section a basic definition and some characteristics of an oral society were presented. This section discusses the impact of literacy on oral communities. This article does not give a chronology of literacy through history; however, it gives the reader an introduction of what can possibly happen to an oral community when literacy is introduced to the society.

Triebel states: "Definitions of literacy are not innocent. They are subject to renewed political evaluation" (2001:23). Triebel is suggesting that the political power of the day presumes to define literacy. It is the ruling powers that will promote an oral culture or a culture of literacy or both.

Literacy was introduced, primarily, through colonization

in which the Christian church played an important role. Christian mission through the centuries used schooling "in the service of Christian proselytism, while producing social elements amenable to the service of the colonial enterprise" (Prah 2001:133). With a great emphasis on schooling, missionaries focused on educating the youth. The impact of educating the younger generation transformed their roles, authority, and status in society. Prah (2001:134) refers to this as the "denationalization process." A key change was the relationship between the youth and the elders. The elders became dependent on the youth (the "emerging elite of literates") as a broker between them and the wider society and missionary (134). The youth acquired the new language and could read and write and understood the new ways (e.g., cash economy). This new skill gave the youth authority and status without the wisdom and knowledge of age. This impacted the traditional roles between family members. It also impacted the relationship that existed between old and young. The idea of being an apprentice to an elder fell by the wayside.

Enlightenment style education altered the worldview, values, and beliefs of the youth in oral societies. Traditionally, the elders were the source of knowledge. Now they were replaced with inanimate objects, books (Goody 1987:164). It took them from an experiential learning mode to one

where books became the highest authority (and for Christians this meant the Bible). In the literate world reason replaced experience. The knowledge the youth received was also out of context to their “lived” world. This new knowledge alienated them from their society (Goody 1987:141). The confinement of a classroom further impacted the relational way in which oral people learn. Dialogue, an essential element of oral learning, was removed by the classroom and the learner became passive and a mere receiver of knowledge. In literate communities the author (dispenser of knowledge) stands at a distance.

process. It implied they learn the appropriate technology (writing) in a foreign language with the result that they were technically challenged. Without the availability of reading resources it was difficult for local languages to grow into a literate language. For many, the challenge meant failure (Olson and Torrance). The “failure” impact is dramatic. In my Namibian experience, the literacy process overwhelms a number of children, as it is a second or third language in which they learn. Adults too are overwhelmed. Generally, in oral societies, adults would be people with great confidence and self-worth, very skilled at the work

Dialogue, an essential element of oral learning, was removed by the classroom and the learner became passive and a mere receiver of knowledge.

The dialogue is between ideas and not individuals. The human interaction is removed. In Goody’s estimation societies initially had the two (literate and oral peoples) living side by side not in opposition to each other. The leaders used scribes and secretaries to achieve their tasks. However, when the value of literacy became essential for upward mobility it altered the literates’ view of tradition.

Olson and Torrance (2001:14) contend that not having an orthography (writing), oral peoples were disadvantaged in the literacy

they do. However, society places such a high emphasis on literacy that the adults are relegated to the backbench. I observed that, although leaders in their homes and work environments, at church, because adults lack literacy they are alienated.

A further impact facing oral communities when literacy arrives is that the traditional knowledge residing in the community is not readily transferable to outsiders. Whereas literates store their knowledge in inanimate objects, oral communities store their

knowledge in the members of the community. When members of the community become literate the oral knowledge is retained within a smaller pool of members. The oral knowledge is transferable as the child grows within the community. Schooling gives the learner a different knowledge base. As the knowledge base changes the oral knowledge will shrink.

Writing impacted oral societies in numerous ways. This article gives a glimpse into how literacy affects oral societies. Literacy and the expectations that go along with it, discards

Oral Education: A Himba Case Study

Orality has been defined and the impact of literacy on orality shared. The first section suggested that oral people learn differently. The second section highlighted the impact of literacy on oral communities. These sections demonstrated the significance of training traditional leaders and using oral teaching methods. The question remains, How do oral people learn? To give the reader an insight into oral education I will now share a brief cultural perspective and extrapolate some points. This will be taken from the

Writing impacted oral societies in numerous ways. . . . Literacy and the expectations that go along with it, discards the concept of a God of diversity.

the concept of a God of diversity. Christian workers need to be aware of the disruptive influence literacy can exert on a community as highlighted above. The 21st century mission practitioner needs to build communities rather than tear them down. Giving the elders their traditional role will speak volumes for the introduction of Christianity into oral communities. This suggests that the Christian community contextualize the training of spiritual leaders for the oral learner.

Himba society, the community in which I work as a mission practitioner. The Himba are a primary oral people although they do have an orthography and schools are widely scattered throughout the area. These were recently introduced to the community and a major portion of the population still has little access to a “habitual literate” environment. The primary reason being that literature, in the Himba context, is primarily available in a foreign language. Once again this will not be an exhaustive study. It just gives the reader an idea of how oral edu-

cation is done in this particular oral community. The actual educational process is complex and the space here limited.

Generally speaking, it is the mother's role to teach her children. She can be an adoptive mother or the biological mother. In the Himba society all children prior to puberty live in the same house as their mother. While in her care the child learns household chores, gardening and edible plants, food security, construction of dwellings, weather patterns, basic first aid, basic animal husbandry, and other important activities related to the tasks around the homestead. Once a child reaches puberty the boy-child moves on his own and is taken under the wing of an older brother or male cousin who in turn is under the directorship of his father. Here he takes up a farming apprenticeship. His classroom becomes the cattle posts high up in the mountains. This training is usually done over a period of three to five years. At puberty a girl is taken under the care of her "young mother" (*mama ngero*, her mother's younger sister). She will be taught to be a woman and how to provide for her husband and family.

Once a boy reaches his teen years and demonstrates his abilities as a good shepherd, his uncle (his mother's older brother) and his biological father or maternal grandfather will share with him the more "important" family knowledge. All through his grow-

ing years the boy learned some of this but at a distance. Now that he can be entrusted with the knowledge, he comes directly under the tutelage of his father and/or uncle. He becomes a specialist and receives his training from the best. It is at this time he learns the professional aspects of farm management: range management, animal husbandry, breeding, diseases and cures, strategic short-term and long-term planning, trading, environmental conservation, climatology, and other important knowledge needed to survive in the harsh conditions under which they farm. He will also learn some family history. This includes how the animals came to be part of the family herd. An important highlight of the Himba knowledge base is to know one's roots. Knowing where one comes from is essential to where one is going. This heritage is given through the specific family *omiiimbo* (poetry). It is through this heritage that the family heroes and legends are identified and held up as models.

The oldest son in the clan will receive special tutelage from the clan *omuepeye* (priest). His role will be one of receiving the spiritual inheritance. He will need to learn about how to keep the family connected to the ancestors and the Creator.

This in broad strokes is the educational process within the Himba tradition. Learning in the Himba society is not an event nor subject-based, but a process that incorporates a lifestyle. It further

incorporates all the characteristics of an oral society (as given by Ong above). Education in an oral context is not segmented or compartmentalized per se. Rather it is communal and holistic. These elements are required to have an effective leadership program for Christian spiritual leaders in oral communities. Upon becoming Christian, the traditional leaders should not be excluded from participating (as leaders) in the church community. The traditional leaders need to learn theology in ways that are familiar to them, that is, orally rather than through books.

Being different and expecting others to learn differently alienates the host not so much from the message but from the attitude of respect for the host culture. (This includes a respect for the traditional roles of elders and leaders.) The primary reason then for establishing oral theological training is to demonstrate the Immanuel God of Christianity.

Second, Elwert believes that oral culture has several strengths. In stating this he is suggesting that orality is a different mode of learning. Learning in this environment requires not a new way of learning but that

Learning in the Himba society is not an event nor subject-based, but a process that incorporates a lifestyle.

Motivations for an Oral Theological Education

The above discussion gives a foundation for why and how oral training is needed. This section summarizes some reasons for making oral education a priority. It will also highlight the challenge in moving forward with this process.

The primary motivation for oral training is that the Church is missional by nature. Being missional and representing the Creator it is imperative that the Church demonstrate the incarnational character of God. That is, a God who belongs to all people.

one builds on the strengths that exist within that worldview. He suggests:

1. The information one receives can be validated by the community and through one's own experience. In other words one is not dependent solely upon the thoughts of an expert.

2. "Communication takes place on several channels in parallel: the words are accompanied by gesture, mimes, varied speed, varied pitch, and intonation." That is, communication in an oral society is reliant upon the good use of the voice and non-verbal language.

3. "Oral communication can easily carry several meanings simultaneously: text, subtext, and emotional appeal." Because oral communication is visible and auditory diverse nuances are noticeable immediately.

4. "Oral communication is parsimonious." That is, it is specific and intentional and uses fewer words as the shared experience of the teacher and student is the teaching moment.

5. "Oral dialogue allows for direct reference." That is, no need to search for information to prove a point (2001:55).

In Elwert's estimation oral communication is relational and trustworthy. It is not elitist as the community is involved. Therefore a good reason for establishing an oral theological training program is simply because being oral demands an oral learning milieu. That is, use the strengths of orality advantageously.

A third motivation for establishing an oral theological program is respecting culture. As argued above, literacy has the potential to disrupt the cultural roles and values. For the sustainability of the church plant adults are needed to give value and credence to the newly adopted Christian values. In the Himba community where this principle was overlooked Christianity has been unable to take root (see Petersen 2006). Prah (2001:134) makes the point that often when the "emergent elite" (the Western trained youth) come to leadership their linguistic basis is a foreign

tongue. Shaw warns: "As long as individuals are dependent on other people [and/]or languages for their knowledge about God, Christian development will be less dynamic" (1988:254). The three-self mission principles of Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson almost a century back continue to be idealistic because the church has failed to take cognizance of the value of traditional roles when entering a new culture. The natural growth of the church in an oral community should spur the church to developing an oral theology program.

The Challenges Facing an Oral Theology Program

The challenges of orality are multifaceted and diverse. I will not discuss them in detail but merely mention a few. First, the challenge of financing such a venture is important to recognize. That is, the financing of such a program and the ability of students to pay for the service. This requires the Church to become innovative in its approach to training. A second challenge is that of trainers or teachers. Skilled theologians trained in oral methods are required. Here the issue of language plays a key role. The medium of "instruction" would need to be in the student's mother tongue. A further challenge connected to the trainer/teacher is that of the curriculum. What will the curriculum be and what format will the training take? A third challenge facing oral education would be

the location. Oral people are usually people who are busy and do not have copious amounts of time that allows them to be away from home. Here the issue is where will the trainees be trained. In some communities a fourth challenge may arise—polygamy. This is more of a theological challenge to the Church. The Church will need to work through this challenge prior to entering the area. A final challenge I want to highlight is that of standardization of the oral educational programs across the

has the best possible soil. Essential to the task is ensuring the reproducibility of the church plant. Christianity needs to be transferable from one generation to the next. Overlooking the need for oral learning would pose the greatest threat to reproducing the church in oral communities.

Conclusion

The Church is missional by nature. For the gospel to be effectively planted in oral communities the role of communal

For the gospel to be effectively planted in oral communities the role of communal leaders needs to be affirmed and incorporated into the church family.

globe. How will the oral training be standardized or is there even a need to standardize such training? In other words, will oral training go through the same rigors of accreditation as Western style institutions? These give the reader a brief look at some of the challenges that confront an oral educational program. It would be important to be aware of these challenges, however, the missional purpose needs to be weighed against the challenges.

Church planting is a faith venture—no one knows whether the church will grow or not in a new area. Mission practitioners need to ensure the seed sewn

leaders needs to be affirmed and incorporated into the church family. This suggests the strategy of evangelism must include a leadership training program. Whereas training programs normally target the youth as future leaders, this ignores the existing traditional roles. To do evangelism in an oral community suggests the church contextualize its teaching methodology. The contextualization process must continue from the evangelism phase, discipleship phase, and into the training of spiritual leaders. Using oral methods for evangelism and discipleship begs the question, Why aban-

don it in the leadership phase? The Church cannot do effective evangelism without an effective training program.

Works Cited

- Elwert, Georg. 2001. Societal literacy: Writing culture and development. In *The making of literate societies*, ed. David R. Olson and Nancy Torrance, 54-67. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers.
- Finnegan, Ruth. 2007. Oral and literate culture. *The Blackwell encyclopedia of sociology*. Ed. George Ritzer. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.
- Goody, Jack. 1987. *The interface between the written and the oral*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Havelock, Eric A. 1986. *The muse learns to write: Reflections on orality and literacy from antiquity to the present*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Hunter, George G., III. 2000. *The Celtic way of evangelism: How Christianity can reach the West . . . again*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Jacobsen, Martin M. 2001. Orality. *International encyclopedia of the social and behavioral sciences*. Ed. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes. Oxford, UK: Elsevier.
- Kavari, Jekura U. 2000. Orature in Kaoko: Poetry and Prose of Ovaherero and Ovahimba. In *New notes on Kaoko*, ed. Giorgio Miescher and Dag Henrichsen, 111-125. Basel, Switzerland: Basler Afrika Bibliographien.
- Niditch, Susan. 1996. *Oral world and written word: Ancient Israel literature*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Olson, David R., and Nancy Torrance. 2001. Conceptualizing literacy as a personal skill and as a social practice. In *The making of literate societies*, ed. David R. Olson and Nancy Torrance, 3-18. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers.
- Ong, Walter R. 1982. *Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word*. Cornwall, UK: TJ Press (Padstow) Ltd.
- Petersen, Gideon P. 2006. Contextualization and the Ovahimba youth. MA thesis, Bloemfontein, South Africa: University of the Free State.
- Prah, Kwesi, K. 2001. Language, literacy, the production and reproduction of knowledge, and the challenge of African development. In *The making of literate societies*, ed. David R. Olson and Nancy Torrance, 123-141. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers.
- Triebel, Armin. 2001. The roles of literacy practices in the activities and institutions of developed and developing countries. In *The making of literate societies*, ed. David R. Olson and Nancy Torrance, 18-53. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers.
- Shaw, Daniel R. 1988. *Transculturation: The cultural factor in translation and other communication tasks*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library.