I was invited to attend a traditional Himba wedding. Excited, I took along my tape player. The cassette contained the latest Himba Bible stories I had recorded. I found an older man and gave him the player. Some hours later he sent for me. He said, “This machine you gave has stopped talking to me.”

Communicating the gospel is a challenge to many mission practitioners around the world. Missiologists often speak about communicating the gospel in the context of other religions. I would like to highlight a different context, that of oral people. Oral people are important because they cannot hear the gospel when their worldview is addressed with Western rhetoric. Their communication forms are different, so it is important that the mission practitioner speak so they can hear the gospel with the least noise interfering with the communication process.

This article holds the premise that mission belongs to God (missio Dei). The hypothesis for this article is that millions and perhaps billions cannot hear God speak because there is too much noise in the communication process. I propose that mission practitioners speak using the heart language including local genre, art forms, and communication styles. This article stems from my experience and my development in learning to communicate the gospel in an oral context among the Ovahimba of Namibia. Before concluding this article I will highlight some challenges the Adventist Church faces in working with oral people.

**Tongue-Tied**

I am a mission practitioner doing cross-cultural church planting among the Himba in Namibia, Africa.
northwestern Namibia in southern Africa. The Himba are a primary oral people living on the edge of the Namib Desert. I arrived as a Global Pioneer ready to “change” the Himba. Fresh from college, enthusiastic, and equipped with all the education I needed, I set out to convert a “simple” traditional people to Christianity. I had theological training, student missionary experience, literature evangelism experience, and I had participated in evangelistic meetings during my training. The anguish at the end of the first year when not one person was baptized was bitter to swallow.

I received a number of invitations to “come to my homestead, we want to hear about Jesus.” But after a year I was without a single baptism. I had experience in giving topical Bible studies; the audience had invited me. It baffled me. What went wrong? As I evaluated my first year I realized that my expectations and the local people’s expectations were very different. I was expecting them to be keen to embrace the gospel and learn to know Jesus because they had invited me to come. Yet I noticed my audience was primarily children, teenagers, and mothers. Men were rare. The invitation drummed through my head again and again, “Come to my homestead.” As I replayed the invitation I noticed a chorus from many fathers, “My children must learn about Jesus.” I realized the invitation was actually not a genuine desire by the father to know Jesus. Rather I identified four areas on how they benefited, which appeared to be the incentive for them having me come. These were:

1. They manipulated the situation for material gain—e.g., free dependable weekly transport into town (there is no public transport and most do not have access to transport) and free food while in town.

2. They were inquisitive and wanted to know more about Christianity, thus a desire for information to understand what the children at boarding school were learning.

3. They wanted to understand how Christians connect with their ancestors, about prayer for the sick, and prayer for rain, etc. (good animists want to cover all bases just in case, so they were looking to see if Christianity could help in any of these areas).

4. They needed someone to assist them in negotiating and learning about the Western cash economy and socio-political system that was gaining ground in the region.

I learned later that culturally, spiritual knowledge was not entrusted to a young person. Only the elders and those men with experience and wisdom could teach and lead out as spiritual mentors. I was too young for the role the church placed me in.

It was this discrepancy in the expectations we both had that reminded me of a quota-
tion I often read while a student missionary. “Christ’s methods alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Savior mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, ‘Follow Me’” (White 1905:143, emphasis added). I was preaching and teaching to a people I knew nothing about. I needed to get to know them before I could preach.

In my second year I started researching and getting to understand who the Himba are. This I did through literature research and then cultural research when visiting with the families. I had two families I visited each day, five days a week. I would ask questions about the culture based on my literature research. I also tried to use a different approach in sharing biblical truths. During the cultural discussions I would bring in a biblical principle. This approach was still based on my Western education of comparing two schools of thought and it also was not successful. Often my illustrations were incorrect as I only had a superficial understanding of the culture I was learning about. For example, I thought the concept of Jesus as a good shepherd would be something they could relate to. Later I discovered that a shepherd is one who looks after someone else’s sheep. Shepherds are someone of low rank in society. I should rather have spoken of one who manages, cares for, and oversees the livestock, especially the cattle that are the most valuable possession. The other problem was that our relationship centered around Bible information and my need for cultural knowledge, rather than around a friendship. I needed to build friendly relations and learn to respect and trust the Himba and they me.

I soon changed my approach by getting involved in the daily family activities. If I found the people working in the garden, I worked in the garden for an hour or two. Whatever activity the family was doing, I joined in. They would still want me to pray with them. So I would take the activity and present a biblical principle. This worked the best but it was still not effective. I

Often my illustrations were incorrect as I only had a superficial understanding of the culture I was learning about.

This I did through literature research and then cultural research when visiting with the families. I had two families I visited each day, five days a week. I would ask questions about the culture based on my literature research. I also tried to use a different approach in sharing biblical truths. During the cultural discussions I would bring in a biblical principle. This approach was still based on my Western education of comparing two schools of thought and it also was not successful. Often my illustrations were incorrect as I only had a superficial understanding of the culture I was learning about. For example, I thought the concept of Jesus as a good shepherd would be something they could relate to. Later I discovered that a shepherd is one who looks after someone else’s sheep. Shepherds are someone of low rank in society. I should rather have spoken of one who manages, cares for, and oversees the livestock, especially the cattle that are the most valuable possession. The other problem was that our relationship centered around Bible information and my need for cultural knowledge, rather than around a friendship. I needed to build friendly relations and learn to respect and trust the Himba and they me.

I soon changed my approach by getting involved in the daily family activities. If I found the people working in the garden, I worked in the garden for an hour or two. Whatever activity the family was doing, I joined in. They would still want me to pray with them. So I would take the activity and present a biblical principle. This worked the best but it was still not effective. I
learned something new from my interactions and that was that there was no way the fathers would change if they heard the message secondhand from their wives or children. They were the tipping point and not the youth and children who were my audience. I needed to find a way to share with the adult men. I was “tongue-tied,” that is, I had no effective way of communicating with the adult men or even connecting with them in the activities I was doing.

**Becoming Bi-cultural**

All my sixteen years of education was insufficient for the realities of working with the Himba. I grew up in the city with little exposure to farming. Now I was living in a cattle-farming community. The nomadic lifestyle was different and their religion was foreign and strange. God jolted my Adventist ghetto mentality, transformed my prejudiced South African worldview, and propelled me into the Himba world.

Before I could share the gospel I needed to understand the people to whom God had sent me. I needed to become a cultural insider. Viggo Søggard states, “Good contextualized communication is, in essence, an understanding of the audience and its context, and an adaptation of the message to fit the needs of the people in that context” (1989:168). Søggard is suggesting that the missionary needs to understand the receivers’ worldview to communicate effectively. Shaw goes further and suggests that the mission practitioner must understand the receptor culture, the culture of the text (the Bible) and his/her own culture (1988:2).

I needed to understand the Himba before I could answer their questions. My cultural studies helped me realize a misconception. The Himba equated Christianity and Westernization as the same. That is, all Westerners are Christian and all Christians are Westerners. This implied that if they followed Christ they would have to give up their tradition and become Christian-Westerners. Although that was a false assumption it is a logical conclusion. This misconception begged the question; Can God speak to the Himba as a Himba? I understood God to be Immanuel, the God who desires to be with his people including the Himba. Shaw and Van Engen state: “The receptors will hear God speaking to the degree that the communicative event is relevant to them at a specific time and in a particular context” (2003:158). So the question I faced was how to present God so they could hear.

I started involving myself in the activities of the men. I went herding cattle. I went out to the cattle post where the young men were learning about being farmers. I herded the livestock. The most endearing activity I engaged myself in was walking with the cattle. The first time I
went out seeking lost animals was the day I earned my status as an insider. That day I walked over 45 kilometers searching for lost animals and then walking them back to the homestead. We left just after dawn and returned after dusk. When strangers enquired about me, people would proudly relate, “He can walk.” Immediately my status changed. I was no longer the missionary. I was the missionary who walks the cattle trails.

The Himba: “We Hear!”

In 1998 after many requests from the Himba, I introduced literacy classes. I reasoned that once they learned to read and write, they would be able to read the Bible for themselves (the Otjiherero, the Himba language Bible had been published in 1987). As this process matured, I perceived the literacy classes to be idealistic. Although a blessing to the people, it would not bless their Christian experience. It confirmed their belief that one needed to become Western before becoming Christian. Further, for the majority, their literacy level would never progress beyond the basic level. Only a small percentage of the population would become proficient enough to read through a library of books (cf. Elwert 2001:55, 63). The question I found myself asking was, “Do these people need to read and write in order to enter the kingdom of God?” The obvious answer is no. This took me on a journey to understand how the Himba communicate important information and how they traditionally educate their children. Although they do not have school buildings, they do have an educational system that works. Their system allows their youth to become professional farmers and knowledgeable in survival skills in the semi-arid conditions of northwestern Namibia, and all this by the time they reach young adulthood.

Looking from the outside, I often felt frustrated seeing a pre-adolescent girl carrying a younger sibling on her back. I felt pity for the girl. I asked why such a young girl needed to do her mother’s work. Each day, without fail, while visiting a homestead there were little girls playing. They would be making a fire, grinding make-believe corn, and engaging in other games imitating maternal roles. As I observed these activities, I finally realized that play is a form of training and socialization. The children were imitating their mothers at work. The girl carrying a child on her back was doing so because her mother was busy and needed assistance. She needed an older daughter to care for her child. Not having dolls, the live “dolls” helped train the young girl. These activities give the girl the necessary experience in child rearing and home making. So imitation is an essential element of the Himba education process.

Connected to imitation is
modeling. I realized good modeling is essential or the children would learn poor habits. To be the best farmers the children need excellent models to copy. Mothers, fathers, or any family member can be heard correcting children and encouraging them to imitate good models. Without good models the smooth transmission of tradition from one generation to the next would falter.

One day I assisted in a search for lost animals. At the homestead I found the father sitting at the sacred fire chanting (the sacred fire is the place where the family speaks to the ancestors). When I enquired about the experience, I was told he was informing the ancestors about the lost animals. The sacred fire is placed at the center of the homestead. The father’s voice carries throughout the homestead. Family members, although engaged in their daily chores, participated in the unfolding story. They learned about the animals as the father sang to his ancestors. I learned the value of sharing information through chant. Mothers could not share some information and neither could older siblings—only the family priest.

I observed that nighttime is an important teaching moment. Families gathered at the family hearth. Here everyone is involved; older siblings, parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents share stories with the children. These are usually animal tales. These are teaching moments to build the child’s confidence, self-esteem, and establish good socialization skills. Storytelling is a thread that runs throughout the Himba society. The more I studied the culture the more I came to realize that storytelling was a major teaching skill.

Understanding Himba storytelling took center stage in my research. I asked myself the question, Is the Bible a storybook, a theological treatise, or both?

Stories are shared using diverse genre: parables, fables, poetry, prose, music, dance, and so forth. Understanding Himba storytelling took center stage in my research. I asked myself the question, Is the Bible a storybook, a theological treatise, or both?

The lessons I learned about Himba culture inadvertently taught me about orality. I was setting sail in unchartered waters. I was learning that God speaks to people in their heart language, and not merely
through the spoken language, but through the diverse communication styles that exist among the different peoples of the earth. In Western society logic or reason is debated and discussed through pen and paper. In oral societies logic or reason is dialogued through stories (Ong 1982:140-141, 152). I needed to learn about Himba communication styles.

My research was a mixture of observation and literature study. As I learned about orality, I realized that the Himba are a primary oral people. A colleague jokingly commented, “My (teen) daughter would fall into that category because she does not learn from books but from the internet, television, and other electronic media.” He was actually correct as I later discovered that she would be classified as a secondary oral person. She can read and write but prefers to receive information not from literature but from electronic sources. In the case of a primary oral person such as the Himba, information is enhanced if it comes from a respected individual in the life of the person or the community rather than just from any source. It was this study that helped me discover the value of audio recordings, but more importantly that I needed to use Himba genre rather than use the unfamiliar lecture or preaching style. Hunter (2000:71) calls these right-brained and left-brained cultures. He suggests that just as there are individuals who are right-brained and left-brained, so too are cultures. At this point my left-brained analytical thinking became a hindrance. I needed to put aside my analytical mindset and learn to communicate in narrative form. I needed to tune into the right side of my brain. Challenging? Indeed it was. Unfortunately for me, as I learned about Himba orature, I discovered it would take me a lifetime to learn their style of communication. Instead of trying to do it all by myself, I used Himba Christian poets, storytellers, and communicators.

While researching the Himba communication modes in 2002 I received an invitation from the Lutheran Bible Translators (LBT) to attend an ethnomusicology workshop. This workshop
helped my wife and me launch a pilot project in using the heart language to communicate the gospel story. A follow-up recording was conducted in 2004. Based on these pilot projects I am now working towards actual evangelistic material which should be produced by January 2010. The discussion below is based on these pilot projects.

At the 2002 ethnomusicology workshop, the Adventist and the Nazarene church groups partnered together in working towards a Himba production. Our task was to create Himba Scripture songs. At the end of the weeklong workshop the LBT media consultant recorded our Scripture songs. In testing these Himba-Scripture songs the community reported that the concept was great. We also noticed it broke down a lot prejudice in using traditional music for Christian purposes. The Scripture songs were random verses from the Bible put to traditional Himba music (ondjongo, om-bimbi, omuhiva, etc.) as well as poetry (omiimbo).

The report concerning the actual concept was great. However, many felt that our singers did a poor job. So instead of listening to the message, people often commented on the mistakes that were made. It was this reaction that spurred our group (Adventist and Nazarene) to work towards another recording session. In 2004 the LBT returned and this time we decided to record in the natural surroundings of the people rather than in the confines of brick walls.

In 2002 we did not have time to prepare for the workshop. This time preparation was easier as the prejudice was much reduced. We identified singers and actors. We designed an “oral text” that helped the actors learn the story without sounding literate. Our challenge was choosing stories. We identified the Chronological Bible Story format as the way to go. The goal was to share Old Testament stories that point to Jesus. Since this was going to be a pilot project we looked at a small pool of stories that would use different Himba genre that directed the listener to Jesus. The recording location was the next hurdle. We were convinced that working in a room made our singers and actors claustrophobic. It was unanimous that we record in natural Himba surroundings with all the sounds (cattle, sheep, birds, donkeys, chickens, etc.). At this point we were not going to address any specific worldview issues. We were mainly testing the impact of the different genre. We also wanted to know how not-yet-Christians would respond to the story of Jesus.

We spent about two months training the actors, poets, and singers. The venue was chosen and everyone assembled. However, since this was the sowing season people needed to be at their gardens. This meant we
reduced the number of recording days. We spent the first day rehearsing with everyone assembled. (It was the first time the men and women were in the same location.) The next day we recorded from early in the morning and did nine different stories. We started with creation. We moved on to the fall of humanity, Noah, and so forth, and ended with Jesus—the story of his birth, life, and resurrection. We used different Himba genre. The story of Isaac and Rebecca was dramatized using Himba engagement imagery and Himba wedding songs. One old lady loved this story the most. She would play it and replay it several times when listening to the cassette. It honored the Himba culture and it spoke about an important value—belonging.

The response to the second recording was phenomenal. Christian leaders who discouraged me from delving into the study of traditional communication styles responded, “We did not know that Christianity can use our traditional genre, . . . we thought only Western styles are appropriate.” They forgot that God’s house is for all nations. Are the nations expected to learn a new language and way of worship to enter heaven? Christian youth leaders commented, “This is what we need to evangelize our parents.” In our testing of the material, people responded, “We hear (understand)! ”

Since this recording, many interruptions have come our way. However, we created a consultancy network among the churches in the area. The consultants are local Himba pastors (trained and semi-trained) who inform our oral committee on cultural issues. These have taken the reports of the evaluations and have listened to the recordings and made recommendations. At present we are creating an oral evangelistic “curriculum” that would address the Himba worldview.

This approach to evangelism is premised on the foundation that God owns the missional task (John 20:21, see also Søgard 1989:163). I asked the question, “When God chose to save humanity, did he come as an alien?” I will never be a Himba, but I can learn to understand their world. This will not be achieved through literature study alone, but by living with the people and putting off my cultural baggage and my Adventist heritage and becoming a citizen of heaven first (Eph 3:21, see also Moreau 1995:175). God does not call me to be a Himba, but asks me to communicate his love with as few barriers as possible. That is, I must let God speak as a Himba, using Himba genre and communication styles. When I started to do this, a pastor of an African Initiated Church said, “You really want to reach the heart of my people, don’t you?” That is God’s desire, to capture the hearts of his prodigal children.
**Adventist Mission and Oral Peoples**

The above discussion was my experience working with an oral people. Using traditional Western logic and communication styles became a barrier to sharing the gospel story. Once I recognized that the people shared information differently and used a different logic, the onus was on me to contextualize the message. In this section I want to share challenges facing mission practitioners working among oral people. These challenges become relevant since they are issues that an individual missionary cannot address in a little corner of the world. These are universal concerns that must be addressed by the Adventist Church as a corporate body.

Unity in diversity has been a hallmark of Adventism. However, the promotion of English or Western hymns has stunted the growth of the church among the least reached peoples, especially those who are traditionally resistant to Westernization and Christianity. Allowing and using local communication styles will liberate local leaders.

It will allow local creativity to surface, and local ownership of the mission to be realized. Communicating in Western styles has isolated too many elders in oral societies. Bosch says it well, “The Christian faith never exists except as ‘translated’ into a culture” (1991:447). That is, God must communicate to his prodigal children using styles familiar to them. If he speaks using unfamiliar forms, he will not be heard. He must speak French to the French, Pedi to the Pedi, Khmer to the Khmer, and so forth. Using local genre, logic, and communication styles would endear the people to a God who calls himself Immanuel.

The greatest challenge in Christian oral societies today is the lack of an oral Bible. The Bible has been translated into many languages, but the readers are few. Oral people need an oral Bible. God has given the contemporary world the gift of technology; this must be utilized for his glory. Gutenberg revolutionized the world and put books into the homes of the common people. Today oral people beg to know the Word of God, and they need a form that can speak to
them. Using modern technology, the Bible can be placed in oral forms and reach a multitude of people. With the numerous educational facilities Adventists own, it is sad that none specializes in Bible translation. The challenge of planting churches across cultures appeals to our sense of responsibility. However, it should also appeal to our creativity in helping oral people mature as people of God. To achieve the goal of sharing the gospel across cultures, it is imperative that media and mission consultants be introduced to each other and begin working together. Such an approach will broaden the mission program of the Church.

Who will lead the church in the oral societies? A great challenge facing the Adventist Church in the 21st century is training oral spiritual leaders. Running literacy classes will not be sufficient. Opening schools and educating youth will not achieve the goal. Young people may have a role, but they cannot lead the spiritual community (cf. Petersen 2006. I will address this challenge in a subsequent article). Hunter (2000) asks whether the Celtic Church has any lessons for today. Although he is speaking about addressing a secular world, the principles are applicable to oral peoples. To embrace oral societies Western modes of thinking must be placed on the back burner. As Einstein said, “The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them” (quoted in Covey 2004:19).

These are just some issues that Adventist mission encounters in working with oral people. These need to be addressed for effective evangelism to take place and they need to be addressed both locally and globally.

**Conclusion**

Initially the old man (at the wedding) was skeptical. But when he heard the sounds of his traditional music his ears perked up and his eyes sparkled. But I was stunned by his reaction hours later, when I informed him the batteries were flat. He was so excited to hear the Bible in familiar genre that he said with almost righteous indignation, “I want to hear what God is saying.” And I was
preventing him from hearing because I would not produce more batteries.

This article highlights the need to remove God from the Western cultural mold and display him as being from all nations to all nations. He speaks to the nations using local communication styles. To accomplish the task of sharing the gospel, diverse communication styles are required. These must be studied and applied so all can experience the rich diversity of God.

**Works Cited**


