

# The Crucial Role of Oral-Scripture: Focus Africa

*Nothing is more important than making the Gospel available to all peoples clustered in thousands of people groups. This article shows the crucial place of audio-Scriptures for this all important challenge.*

by Gilbert Ansre

**A** fundamental assumption of contemporary agencies involved in translating, producing, and promoting Scripture is that the printed Word is the ultimate objective. For diverse reasons, it has become necessary to re-examine this presupposition. This is even more urgent in places like Africa, where illiteracy is preponderant and the many efforts to increase literacy through the years have not been spectacularly successful. In some areas the annual population growth is higher than the annual increase in literacy. Moreover, even in the developed and hitherto 'highly literate' societies today, there is a shift from printed books to an audio-video orientation.

Audio-media makes it possible to reach many non-literate Scripture-hungry peoples, and is a promising alternative for the millions of non-readers in Africa and elsewhere. Evidence of this has begun to appear in significant pilot projects.

## Orality and Graphology

Human linguistic behavior can be viewed in terms of *reception* and *transmission* of the speech act. In verbal communication, a person either "receives" language or "transmits" it.

We have two common *speech media*: 'Orality' and 'Graphology.' Orality entails the use of the organs of speech and hearing in communicating, while graphology is the use of a writing system. These also can be understood as *listening* and *speaking*; *reading* and *writing*.

Virtually all normal human beings can hear and speak, but very few people in comparison can read and even less actually write. This state of affairs deserves serious attention.

In fact, a glance at the development of Scripture use, in both the Christian and the pre-Christian Hebrew periods, shows that more attention has been given to graphology than to orality. Muhammed's term "the People of the Book" has bestowed on the great faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam special privileges which have been maintained. 'The Holy Scripture' has been held in special honor. As early as the time of the Hebrew prophets, God's salvation message was expected to be preserved in writing. The period when literacy was not widespread has been called 'The Dark Ages,' and today, a society or nation with high illiteracy is regarded as backward, literacy being an important index of underdevelopment. Thus, graphology has attained a high status throughout the whole world. Orality, however, the natural and most frequently used communication system, has not been emphasized enough.

The invention of printing, which ushered in 'The Gutenberg Era', further enhanced graphology, producing vast amounts of printed matter. Alongside other literature, the Bible has been translated into many languages, and printed and distributed in colossal quantities. Although other faiths have also benefited from the graphology explosion, the Christian faith has been its foremost exploiter. The extremely slow and laborious process of manuscript copying vanished with the arrival of the printing press, and Gutenberg's 42-line Bible became the pace-setter. The invention of the typewriter and the stencil did not affect the primacy of printing, nor have personal computers and laser printing replaced mass production of written material on the printing press.

## Advantages of the Printed Page

Print-media does have many advantages, a few of which will be mentioned as related to translation, Scripture distribution and other literature use.

First, graphology ensures high textual faithfulness to the form and content of the message. This cannot be said for orally transmitted text. Even with the interesting array of deviations that appear over time, and the new flavor added when translating the text to another language, there is much less variation than with oral transmission or translation. Graphology has ensured a relatively stable text and a more faithful biblical and canonical certainty.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly written Scripture has reached many more people in more places than oral transmission. Coupled with what Lamin Sanneh has called "the translatability"<sup>2</sup> of the Christian faith and Scripture across cultures, graphology has been an extremely efficient tool for evangelism and teaching.

A third indisputable benefit of written Scripture is its durability. Books live longer than spoken words, and they certainly outlive their writers, rekindling the best ideas of the authors generations after their death. Written material has an advantage of potential longevity and resuscitability.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, written Scripture has immensely enhanced the spread of the salvation message, and even in non-literate areas of the world, the written Word has assisted significantly in evangelization.

## Can They Really Read?

A study of the *actual use* of printing raises very serious questions. For example, there are a lot of people in many parts of the world today who cannot

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read. How can they be systematically reached by the Good News? Secondly, there is a surprising number of people who can read but really do not. How can they be helped? Fortunately, the Church has never been under the illusion that literacy should precede receiving the Gospel message—not even in the case of the obviously literate Ethiopian eunuch. Literacy, while desirable and useful, has not been a criterion for receiving the Gospel. However, the model that evolved during the Gutenberg Era is that the ideal Christian should be able to read and diligently study the Scriptures by reading regularly. As demonstrated below, the chance of attaining this ideal simply does not exist for millions who are non-literate, who yet are people extremely rich in biblical interest. Despite the Church's noble efforts to enable people to read and write, an effective Christian readership is extremely scarce in many parts of the world.

However, the ever increasing demand to make Scriptures available to the innumerable non-literates or the 'literate but non-reader' needs to be met. This challenge, while not limited to it, seems to be most evident in the African continent. See center column for percentage literacy figures for 45, mostly Sub-Saharan, African countries.<sup>4</sup>

The percentage figures have been obtained from official records. Even though these statistics tend to be on the inflated side, such uncertain data can be still used for the present study.

To arrive at a realistic estimate of actual and effective Scripture users, it is necessary to examine these statistics and make some projections from them. Our position may be expressed in a series of five related statements:

1. Not all people who claim they can read actually can do so.
2. Not all who can read actually do read.
3. Not all who actually read do read well.

4. Not all who read well do actually read Scripture.
5. Not all who read the Scripture do so regularly.

### Official Percentage of Literate Population—Africa.<sup>5</sup>

Country	% Literacy
1. Angola	28.0
2. Benin	23.4
3. Botswana	73.6
4. Burkina Faso	13.2
5. Burundi	50.6
6. Cameroon	54.1
7. Central African Rep.	37.7
8. Congo	56.6
9. Cote d'Ivoire	53.8
10. Djibouti	33.7
11. Equatorial Guinea	62.2
12. Ethiopia	75.0
13. Gambia	27.2
14. Gabon	60.7
15. Ghana	53.2
16. Guinea	24.0
17. Guinea-Bissau	36.5
18. Kenya	54.3
19. Lesotho	73.6
20. Liberia	39.5
21. Madagascar	40.0
22. Malawi	41.2
23. Mali	13.2
24. Mauritania	34.0
25. Mauritius	81.8
26. Mozambique	20.0
27. Namibia	72.5
28. Niger	28.4
29. Nigeria	50.7
30. Reunion	82.6
31. Rwanda	50.2
32. Senegal	28.6
33. Saychellies	84.8
34. Sierra Leone	20.7
35. Somalia	24.1
36. South Africa	76.0
37. Sudan	27.1
38. Swaziland	67.0
39. Tanzania	89.6
40. Tchad	29.8
41. Togo	39.1
42. Uganda	57.0
43. Zaire	71.8
44. Zambia	72.8
45. Zimbabwe	76.0

For the purpose of this exercise, let us assume that as many as 70% of those who claim that they can read—*actually can read*, that 50-70% of those who can read *actually do read*, and that 70% of those who actually read *can really read well*. In addition, let us assume that 70% of those who can

read well *do actually read the Scriptures*, lastly, let us assume that 50% of those who read the Scriptures do read them regularly.

Based on these estimates, the following projections can be made. For instance, for Tanzania which has the highest claimed literacy percentage, and for Mali, it looks like this:

Claimed official literacy for Tanzania and Mali respectively: 89.6 13.2

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|--------------------------------------|------|-----|
| 1. Can actually read (70%)           | 62.5 | 9.2 |
| 2. Actually do read (50-70%)         | 43.8 | 6.4 |
| 3. Can really read well (70%)        | 30.6 | 4.5 |
| 4. Do read Scriptures (70%)          | 21.6 | 3.1 |
| 5. Do read Scripture regularly (50%) | 10.7 | 1.5 |

Consequently, the approximate percentage of the Tanzanian population (with 89.6% claimed literacy), who may regularly read Scripture is 10.7%, and that of Mali, with 13.2% claimed literacy, is about 1.5%. Furthermore, these figures completely ignore some serious historical, social and psychological factors such as the many adherents of non-Christian faiths like Islam or traditional religions. The point being that at most, only 11% of the claimed literate population of any African country (and most other countries, for that matter) is actually reading the Bible regularly.

A similar projection undertaken for Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria and Togo,<sup>6</sup> whose average percentage of claimed literacy is 39.7%, suggests that only about 5% read the Scriptures regularly.

Faced with this situation, a group of Bible Society executives who had participated in an audio-seminar in October, 1991 in Ghana, passed a 10-point resolution summed up below in this author's words. Every effort has been made to retain the spirit and import the original resolution. These are:

1. They are grateful that UBS has decided to emphasize audio-Scriptures.
2. They commend the Africa Region for recognizing the great importance of audio-Scriptures.

3. They call upon the Bible Societies in Africa to give high priority to audio-Scripture and recommend that as much as 50% of the Africa Budget be devoted to this project.

4. They request that a full-time Audio-Media Consultant be appointed for the Region with staff in all societies responsible for audio-media.

5. They suggest that up to 30% of the audio production be distributed free to the economically handicapped through the churches.

6. They call on UBS to provide hardware to enable the effective use of the software to be produced.

7. They request the Africa Regional Centre ensure that all National Societies benefit from audio workshops and seminars.

8. They recommend collaboration and partnership with other organizations in view of the vastness of the task.

9. They confess that they have hitherto failed to emphasize Scripture use and call on all concerned to promote it vigorously.

10. Aware of the great potential in audio-media, they prayerfully dedicate themselves to support its promotion.

Since Kokrobite, the Africa Region of the United Bible Societies has taken a number of administrative and operational steps. Various national Bible Societies have initiated or intensified programs for producing and distributing oral-Scripture on a wider scale. One such effort is the Pilot Audio-Project in Ghana that includes the recording of the whole of the N.T., in particular Ghanaian languages on cassette tapes, done through the collaboration of the Bible Society of Ghana and Hosanna, (Scripture in All Languages). These are then made available to local church groups through their organizers. Church leaders are contacted to organize listening parties starting from their local churches, but not limited

to these. The group then gathers together, at least once a week, to listen to the tapes, often beginning with music and prayer. Invariably active discussions follow these sessions of teaching and explanation.

#### Test Language Groups

The first tapes were in the Akuapim dialect of the Akan language, a good

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choice because of their close proximity to Accra, the headquarters of the participating Bible agencies. Also, the Akuapim Ridge has a large number of enthusiastic listening congregations.

Some 60 groups were started with average attendance of 100 to 200 people, reaching some 6,000 individuals in all. Reports of the usefulness of the project to both literate and non-literate groups are most encouraging.

The second effort was made in the Dagbani language, which is spoken by one of the highly Muslim ethnic groups of Ghana. It was launched in the regional capital town Tamale in an interdenominational rally. Special mention must be made of the cooperation of the local Summer Institute of Linguistics (GILLBT). Cassettes were dedicated and distributed to 97 listening groups from the Tamale metropolia as well as numerous surrounding farming villages. Reports indicate that the tapes are making significant impact on Christians and non-Christians in the

area. Some church leaders claim that they themselves have improved their reading by listening to the tapes and following the text in Scripture. Others say that they are hearing for the first time previously unknown sections of the N.T.. The groups enjoy the tapes and follow the words attentively. Interested Muslim listeners have gathered near where the tapes are played for some time before going to the mosque to worship. Pastors, itinerant evangelists and young Christian groups are getting a lot of use from the audio-Scripture in Dagbani.

The third language involved in the project in Ghana is Ewe. The newly retranslated N.T. had been recorded earlier by the Bible Society of Togo and Portable Recording Ministries. The distribution system is different from that of the other two languages. The Bible Society has made the tapes available

to a church-planting organization called Christian Outreach Fellowship for use in the Tongu area of Eweland. The Fellowship uses them to introduce the Gospel mainly to the non-literate population. They also play them at church and preach sermons from the text. This is followed by a question period. In a recent seminar, to appraise the value of their methods, leaders spoke highly of the cassettes. The leaders are receiving much and the general listening groups are learning Scripture in ways that would have been impossible without the tapes. One note-worthy development is that many 'walk-man' carrying youths, who did not previously have time for church worship, find the cassettes 'trendy' and gather to listen to them with more interest.

In all, the project is too young to give us concrete results, but one theme is certain: enthusiasm and interest for oral-Scripture is extremely high. The Nzema translation has been put on cassette and is being reproduced for dis-

tribution. Other languages planned for are Ga, the Asante and Fante dialects of Akan, and Dangme. Adequate training for the leaders of listening groups is another aspect of the project receiving attention, as well as the perfection of skills needed to monitor and improve on the programs.

### The Post-Literate Age

So far, we have been focusing attention on audio-Scripture for the non-literate millions. However, there is another growing audience for audio-Scripture. At the close of the 20th Century, we are witnessing the coming of a new age, that we could call the "Post-Literacy Age," in which even those who can read and write well are not doing so. The epoch of the audio-visual, termed by some "the Multi-Media Era", has set in. Information on sound and video cassettes are replacing books. The Gutenberg captivation seems to be on the decrease. People receive the day's news by radio or T.V, rather than by reading newspapers. It appears that some highly sophisticated people prefer to hear the day's Scripture passage on their car sound system as they drive to and from work, rather than reading it at home in the printed Bible. That is the direction in which modern man appears to be moving, and little can be done to stop it. What challenges do these trends and developments pose to the Scripture translator, producer, and distributor? We are obliged to face the challenges of faithful and accurate audio-visual Scripture production if we are to keep pace with the hunger for God's Word in the African continent and all over the world.

### In Conclusion

To sum up, oral-Scripture in Africa is the highest potential medium of outreach for the salvation message on the continent today and into the 21st century. This is because it is capable of reaching both the literate and the teeming millions of non-literate people.

It is a challenging medium for reaching Africa's (and the world's) "Post-Literacy" population. Oral-Scripture will also reach those who, because of their rushed life-style, do not have the time or inclination to 'sit back and read' but actually listen as they are in transit—in cars, trains or in the air.

It is a great alternative to the 'walk-man' throw-away entertainment syndrome which is so rampant among today's youth, even in Africa.

Lastly, provided the flashy mentality of "entertainment-for-its-own-sake" does not entrap us, audio, and soon, video-Scriptures have potentially the same response-invoking capabilities as their counterparts in modern radio and TV broadcasts.

We who are in the "Bible Cause" have a duty to see this vision clearly and work towards its realization. If oral-Scripture presentation is necessary for other parts of the world, it is even more so for Africa.

### End Notes

1. The techniques of literal and textual criticism and exegesis have enhanced our ability to get closer to the earlier texts. In fact, these tools themselves would not have been possible without graphology.
2. Sanneh, Lamin. 1989. *Translating*

*the Message, The Missionary Impact on Culture*, New York: Orbis pp. 29, 51, 157, 174, etc.

3. It is our hope that technological developments in the storage of oral material on magnetic and electronic tapes and discs will achieve similar results.
4. The data is obtained from the United Bible Societies Bulletin No. 168/169-*World Annual Report*, 1993.
5. The figure for Britrea is not available.
6. These were the countries represented at an audio-Scripture seminar when this topic was first presented by the author.

*Dr. Gilbert Ansre is a native of Ghana and a leading linguist in Africa. He served for over 15 years as a Translation Consultant to the United Bible Society. He and his wife reside in Accra, Ghana.*

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