

Chronological Bible Storying to Tribal and Nomadic Peoples

The storying approach puts faith in the Living Word to penetrate the tribal heart and change lives—and so learn to trust its inherent power.

by J. O. Terry

At first light we were stepping into a shallow boat propelled by an irrigation pump motor in a river estuary north of Dhaka, Bangladesh. Gliding through the swift stream we at last came to the tribal village where we were to story that day. After a greeting and cup of tea the storying place was agreed upon and a line fastened on which to hang pictures. At eight in the morning we began with a story about the Bible and how it came to us. The stories continued to introduce the characteristics of God, the creation of the spirit world, creation of the heavens and earth and creation of man and his broken relationship with God because of sin.

The group took a quick break for tea and the stories continued until lunch. We ate and rested for an hour and then began again moving on toward the story of Jesus. Another mid-afternoon tea break and then the stories about the suffering and death of Jesus. At last we finished with the resurrection and an invitation at five in the afternoon for we had to leave while it was still daylight. For the last two hours the Koch villagers sat like stones, hardly breathing. When the last story was finished they continued to sit very still, no one talking. At last one young man volunteered through the interpreter, "We've never heard a story like this before." A similar experience had happened the day before in another Koch village along another river.

The Koch primarily inhabit the central forested area northeast of Dhaka and eke out a meager living as woodcutters in the forests. They are part of the Sino-Tibetan peoples related to the highly Christianized Garos to the north.

Besides living at a subsistence level, there is also widespread illiteracy, especially of the older people. Culturally they are not a very aggressive people. The central area group is not large having been reported at less than 40,000 in 1973, though certainly more numerous now. They are a basically animistic people with an unstructured system of appeasing and avoiding the ire of the spirit world. Generally they have been open to the preaching of the gospel, but at the same time they have not been overly responsive or organized in their response.

Beginning in the early 1980s an audio-cassette project of nine cassettes with programmed teaching sessions was aimed at developing village leadership. It was then necessary to provide hand-cranked cassette players among designated leaders. The project was plagued with poor care of the players in the field resulting in a high failure rate. The principal speaker on the cassettes was a noted Christian pastor and teacher whose Bengali is said to be "quite high Bengali."

Bible Storying Among the Koch

It was into this setting that Chronological Bible Storying was introduced in 1990 after the initial two all-day probes among selected Koch villages. Several of the Koch leaders had been exposed to Bible storying in an overview session given in Dhaka. Selected lay leaders were invited to attend a five-day Bible storying training camp during which a trial set of stories was taught seven hours a day for five days. Three evenings were used for the group to give practice stories, at least one Old Tes-

tament story of any of those previously taught, and then one of the stories of Jesus previously taught. Drama was encouraged as an additional training activity.

A teaching session ran about two hours until tea break. It began with sensitizing questions which the following stories would address. A portion of the story was read from the Bible and then the story was told. We used pictures as unfortunately these had already been introduced to some of the leaders and were now expected to be used. The color pictures came from the set "Telling the Story..."¹ jointly produced by New Tribes Mission of the Philippines and the Philippine Baptist Missions. Pictures were displayed on a line so that a progression of stories could be demonstrated.

It was realized that some of the participants had only limited literacy and one or two were for all practical purposes illiterate. They had a Bengali Bible and all teaching was interpreted into Bengali. Bengali is widely spoken as a market language but deeply religious terminology is not widely known. Many of the questions which arose related to these terms which were new to the participants. After each story there was time given for questions related to the story and any discussion about issues raised in the stories. Answers were deliberately kept simple and as much as possible were related back to stories which had already been taught.

After each tea or meal break, and sometimes more often, a summary review was given from the beginning stories, and then later either of selected stories from the beginning, or of the sto-

ries belonging to the cluster of stories which had just been taught. Then we moved on. Interest was high and attention good. The pictures appeared to greatly help in the review times as I walked from picture to picture reviewing the stories. Additionally, I intentionally dramatized some of the stories by playing off my interpreter and by gesturing or pointing to something in the picture as I told the story.

There were several different interpreters who helped during these initial training sessions. Among another tribal group my interpreter insisted on pontificating and preaching so that the continuity of the story narratives was mainly lost. The main problem among the Koch was one interpreter who truncated what I said, apparently summarizing stories, and eliminating many proper names. To combat this I had to repeat the names often in the telling of the story and where the Bengali differed significantly from English to say the name as a Bengali would to be sure the listeners heard the name associated with the story.

Apparently comprehension was fairly good as the practice stories revealed though we had a few choice humorous moments with some of the stories. One would not be appropriate to retell in this article but it was one man's version of why Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden. It had to do with common waste elimination practices encountered in typical villages. His closing comment was, "God said to Adam and Eve, 'Because of what you have done you must get out of the Garden, so get out, get out! And from now on I'm going to make you wear clothes!'"

Native Storyers

Among the best storyers to come out of the training was one non-Koch evangelist who worked in the Koch area and who had already begun using Bible stories following the introductory sessions when some of the materials were first presented. The other man is

Koch. He began to use Bible storying after the first training camp and has since attended several more of the camps. He has had some Bible school level training and so already had a good grasp of the basic Bible story. I have visited sessions of both men to see them at work and the effect of the stories upon the people.

An interesting thing happened during the session at which Barnard, the non-Koch was teaching. We had arrived at the village which was not in the typical forested area. He chose a place on the shady side of the open area and installed a string for hanging his pictures. He had already been storying there several sessions so was well known by the people. Most of the men were away in the fields that day harvesting rice. Barnard began talking with the people and engaging them in a lively dialogue. First he reviewed earlier stories and then began his new story. I had positioned myself in an inconspicuous place behind the group.

Nearby there was an old woman husking rice with a little foot operated device and a hole in the smooth dirt floor. She was apparently paying no attention at all to what was happening. This is where I was wrong. During the dialogue time she was thump-thumping away in a steady rhythm. But as Barnard read a portion of the story and then began to weave it together, the thumping slowed as the woman was straining to hear. It slowed more and more, stopping at last as the woman began to sort of duckwalk her way off the raised floor and around the group seated on mats, right up to the very front where she placed herself at Barnard's feet. She sat there spellbound for the rest of the story and the discussion time afterward. Later as I was leaving the village there was a man with his buffalo treading out the grain. We stopped to greet him. He commented, "We are not Christians yet, but we are going to be someday."

I would have to admit that while we have trained, or at least exposed, over 70 of the Koch leaders and lay workers to Bible storying, it has not greatly increased the rate of church planting. I suspect there are other factors at work as we have received a good reception with little or no resistance or hostility.

It was among these people that we realized that we had to deal with God's sovereignty over the spirit world early in the stories. We will continue to refresh the stories of the group. Many of those in the later sessions had been in earlier training sessions. They helped to model better stories among the new participants and they often answered the questions which arose during the story times.

It was during the second training session that I was impressed by a young lady from a nearby village. It clearly illustrated the prime reason for keeping the Bible story intact as a story, something that illiterate tribal women can handle quite well and share with other women and with their own children. This young woman named Shika sat for the five days hearing the Bible stories taught seven hours a day. In the evenings the group retold the stories for practice. This young woman's two stories were in many respects better than those told by some pastors in the group. She made no notes and had no Bible as she was illiterate. At the end of the week as she was leaving she announced, "I am going back to my village now and I will tell my people all the stories I've heard this week."

What is Storying?

I coined this term in 1990 to better express what I and others among our Southern Baptist colleagues were finding to be the best approach in typical tribal and deep rural areas. Why "storying" and not "storytelling?" There are several reasons: (1) Storytelling has a strong association as an activity only for children and therefore being overlooked as a culturally preferred learning

method for oral communicators. (2) It was felt that a new term was needed to better describe the narrative method that was emerging for telling the Bible as story. This was to differentiate between the methodology of Chronological Bible teaching which usually does not attempt to preserve the component teaching as stories in contrast to a deliberate attempt to preserve the component teaching as stories for oral communicators. This is done with appropriate review/preview teaching activities before the story and dialogue following the story where possible. With some hostile target audiences the communicator will often be allowed only to tell the stories and to answer any questions with recall of previous stories or telling of new ones (similar to Jesus' example in Mk. 4:33-34). (3) Further, since some of the pre-Bible and implied Bible stories did not have well-defined storylines, or a story found basically in one Scripture text, the information could be put into a story format and told as a story.

For example, the various themes as How our Bible came to be; The Living God; God Created the Spirit World, etc., not have a typical story plot but were to be told in narrative format as stories. So it was felt that "storying" was a term that could be used to express the use of these narrative accounts that did not have all the typical components of a story, i.e. setting, characters, plot, resolution, etc. (4) Also there was a desire to make a distinction between storytelling of all kinds of stories in the village setting as opposed to communicating God's Word in the familiar and highly accepted oral culture format. So "storying" in chronological Bible storying was coined to express this method. Bible "storying" has since gained wide acceptance among Southern Baptists and the approximate 2,000 who have attended Baptist sponsored training sessions.

The Southern Baptist Mission in the

Philippines was just entering tribal work in the early 1980s when New Tribes Mission (NTM) missionary Trevor McIlwain had taught about his use of chronological teaching of the Bible among the Palawano people. Then Dell and Sue Schultze, also of NTM, adapted the chronological teaching approach to fit the culture of the Ilongot tribal people. Others in the Philippines, as well as nearby Papua New Guinea, also made this adaptation toward use of stories. Several models of chronological teaching were then circulating, including the basically non-story chronological teaching model and a model which preserved the story intact while teaching inductively in dialogue before and after the story. The advantages and disadvantages of these models were not widely understood by early users. Many of the chronological Bible teachers in the Baptist Mission were simply using materials which were then available in the Cebuano language of the area.

Beginning in 1988, I was asked to help teach the methodology among other Asian countries and to teach how to use the chronological teaching materials from the Schultzes' *God and Man*,² a 54-story set developed by Bryan and Diane Thomas,³ also of NTM missionaries, and a set of 105 teaching pictures jointly developed by NTM of the Philippines and the Philippine Baptist Mission.

The first attempts were two training sessions in Indonesia which produced little result and several failures by those who attempted to follow the model. Later that year, a visit to the former Tribal Evangelism, Agriculture and Community Health (TEACH) training project in the Philippines, demonstrated the value of teaching Bible stories to tribals. Graduates of various tribal groups after nine months of intensive training could immediately begin telling Bible stories chronologically until told to stop. Aggressive training was done by Johani

Gauran⁴ who taught both the panorama overview of redemption as well as the component stories needed to evangelize tribals, begin their discipleship and plant a church. He had followed much of the strategy of McIlwain in the use of phases which represented chronological groups of stories with their limited objectives.

By this time I had read Weber's *The Communication of the Gospel to Illiterates*⁵ which told of the illiterates' use of stories to communicate his thoughts. Further reading of an extract of Warneck's *The Living Christ and Dying Heathenism*⁶ chronicled the use of Bible stories in Sumatra in the 1800s and pointed to the power of stories to communicate to tribals about the living God.

How does this living picture of God arise in the mind of the heathen? What kind of preaching must the missionary employ to set God's might and majesty before the dulled eyes of the heathen? It will not be done by intellectual instruction; the missionary will get no audience for learned lectures about God. Life is not begotten by enlightenment; it passes from person to person, from God to man, by living contact. The sole function of preaching is to mediate a personal acquaintance with God. That is done by depicting the deeds of the living God before the eyes of the heathen. Persons are made known by their acts. Mission preaching proclaims the deeds of God; it explains nothing at first, expounds nothing; it simply narrates what God has done. The heathen thereby gets to know God. He does not ask who God is, but what He does and can do.⁷

Jacob Loewen's "Bible Stories: Message and Matrix"⁸ presents a case study from among the Choco Indians of Panama and the experience of a New Tribes Missionary, F. Glenn Prunty. Because of his own limitations in the Choco language, he used the translation of the story series suggested for the Panama area. One hearing of this "story" convinced an extended family group of the relevance of the message. On a succeeding visit Mr. Prunty found them

ready “to give God the hand and to begin walking on God’s road.” It is an excellent case study with story selection criteria and the list of stories used with those people.

Among those accounts which are “storied” are 1) God’s Word to Us (how the Bible came to be written), 2) The Living God (introducing the characteristics of God), 3) The Creation of the Spirit World (dealing with creation of angels and Satan’s fall to introduce evil spirits and God’s sovereignty over them) and 4) later teaching from the Epistles where the stories become less defined and more implied. Most of the Old Testament and Gospels, however, are well-defined stories. Additionally, it was found that many of the main stories used required bridging stories to connect one story to the next or to provide some point of introduction which would make the main story more poignant.

As far as preserving the story format for teaching, one has only to enter a village where the people are hostile to traditional Christian teaching and try teaching traditionally by exposition to see what happens. So the strategy that evolved for use among other potentially hostile audiences was only to tell the stories and as much as possible to answer any questions with another story. In practice, as a trust level develops and a community spirit is fostered by the storying sessions, it may be possible to include teaching activities that in the beginning would not have been allowed.

Among the Tipura and Chakma

Chronological Bible storying has also been used for over six years among the Tripura living in the hills on the eastern side of Bangladesh. I must be sketchy with details here as it is a sensitive area where foreigners are not allowed to go. After some initial response among Tripura leaders an opening was secured for expanding the relationship. This occurred about the same time that Bible storying was being intro-

duced in the country.

Earliest training was of Bengali community development workers who regularly entered the area and taught. Soon a group of Tripura leaders were able to come out for a week of training following the same regimen as that of the Koch. The stories were well-received. Several training sessions followed involving more and more of the leadership. Then some of the Chakmas from further south also joined the training and have carried Bible storying back to their people. We had no real way of evaluating what was happening on the inside except for verbal reports of use and response. However, on one occasion there was opportunity to visit a small mud and thatch church just inside the hilly area.

We visited at night, driving as close as we could and then walking back into the area. A young man of about 18 years of age was storying to the people that night. He struggled with the story but at last finished. He had displayed a picture of Adam and Eve as he told this story. Later I asked where he had learned to tell the Bible story. He said that a pastor had taught him. That pastor had been in an earlier training session I conducted. So the stories were being passed on to others.

At another time, when we reached the stories of the arrest, trial, suffering and death of Jesus, a delegation of four tribal men arrived. They patiently listened to the stories until we had finished with the ascension story and some comment about our need to accept what God has done for us in Jesus. One of the men spoke up saying that this was the Jesus they believed in but that someone had only told them a little bit about Jesus and then left. So they were asking for someone to come to their village of 600 families to tell the stories. It too was in an area where foreigners could not enter.

We have had a problem where the Tripuras and Chakmas come for the

same session because of significant worldview differences. While the Tripuras are basically animists with some tinge of Hindu elements, the Chakmas have a distinctive Buddhist-animist worldview. There are generic elements in both worldviews but it would be better to deal with each group separately in the future.

Among the Fulani and the Kui

Chronological Bible storying has been used among the Fulani people of West Africa and with Berbers of North Africa who are nomadic. Because contact time may be limited it is often necessary either to use what is called “fast-tracking” (telling the redemption story in a panorama from beginning to end in one session or in a limited time frame without stopping for discussion), or to use story clusters (groups of related stories like the creation stories, the Abraham stories, Moses stories, or Jesus stories, etc.) to shorten the time frame. This is assuming the missionary is not prepared to maintain a longer time frame by camping among the people. Those working with nomadic peoples who migrate through an area periodically as they look for grass and water for their animals can story in a camp meeting style suited to the relatively short time they are in the area. The storyer must be prepared to story all night as the people do when telling their stories. Plan to spend special time with those in the group who are interested to hear more and who can continue to recite the stories as they travel on with the group.

Presently, missionaries and co-workers use Bible storying in much of the Indian subcontinent region. One significant case study is that of the Kui people in the Khond Hills of Orissa State in India. The Kui are part of the larger group of Khond tribals who already have a thriving evangelical church among them. It is a deep rural area in the mountains with poor soil, poverty and widespread illiteracy. An agricultural

demonstration and teaching project was established to improve farming and the food situation. As part of the curriculum for trainees a Bible storying package adapted from the Philippine *The Witnessing Kit*⁹ was prepared in the Kui language along with a set of 20 colored teaching pictures to emphasize the shed sacrificial blood which related well to their worldview. Those brought in for agricultural training were taught the stories and how to tell them in a village setting with all the typical interruptions.

About this time a radio program was begun which featured agriculture and Bible teaching of which one series of programs featured the Bible stories. To facilitate the use of information from the programs, radio listener group leaders were trained to gather the listener groups and to lead them in discussion after each broadcast. Each group leader was then trained in the use of the story set and given the pictures. Over 225 have received this story training. They have an excellent evangelism and initial discipling tool which along with the radio program and other outreach is producing a new church every five days. Further, since many of these tribal people are only marginally literate and have no resources other than a New Testament in their tribal language, the stories provide an excellent beginning set of sermons for new worship groups. Initial introduction of the Bible stories was done in two week-long training sessions of pastors beginning in 1990. During any follow-up visits in the area to affirm new believers or to preach in one of their churches, I use Bible stories selected for the occasion to continue modeling Bible stories for them. Usually these will be a group of stories (called a cluster) which are related thematically or have the same actors.

Storying Among the Marwari

Storying was taught to Marwari tribal workers in Sindh, Pakistan, in two separate week-long training sessions. This

group is from a Hindu animistic background and has a strong cultural preference for stories and for pictures. In their worship time before beginning the stories they often used a set of pictures to illustrate the stories of Jesus in the songs they were singing. In one of the training sessions after the flood story had been told, the group decided to use that story for one of their practice stories and to dramatize it. As is often done in telling the Bible stories some “shaping” of the story may be needed to simplify it a bit, reducing the use of numbers or of proper names. I had simplified some of the details like the several numbers and left out the part about the birds which Noah sent out. I missed this in their retelling but caught what they were doing in the drama as Noah sent out his birds, first the carnal raven which did not return and then the obedient dove which did return with a leaf in its beak. When I asked Noah about this part of the drama, he replied, “Sir, you did not understand the story! Birds are a very important part of our culture. There are bad omen birds and good omen birds. And a good omen bird that returns with a leaf in our culture tells us that God’s anger had subsided and that now it was safe to come out of the Ark.” Learning from that experience and several more like it with rural women, I have learned to tell the stories and then sit down and ask the listeners to explain the story to me. Many of these people live in Old Testament cultures and they see and understand things in the stories a Western missionary misses.

Evaluations

Stories can fade with time unless periodically refreshed. In oral cultures this is done by retelling them frequently. For tribals it is a good practice to periodically refresh the stories. Bible storying camps would be an ideal way to do this.

Misunderstanding and negative restructuring can be a problem. Misunder-

standing comes from either a faulty hearing where the full story is not heard, the story closely parallels one of their cultural stories and so it bleeds over, or the listeners simply fail to comprehend because of new elements. Patient repetition of stories helps to overcome this as does the work of the Holy Spirit in giving comprehension to the group as the stories progress. In time it is not uncommon for someone in the group to correct the error of another.

Negative restructuring may run the gamut from the humorous to the blasphemous. One missionary storying among Manobo tribals followed an earlier agricultural lesson on the value of earthworms to cultivate the soil to improve fertility. When he told the story of Adam and Eve’s temptation by the snake, some in the group thought that worms were not good as one had caused Adam and Eve to sin. Information overload may result from trying to cover too much at one time. Story clusters are helpful in providing a larger setting for a particular story which may have elements which are stabilized by the related stories. But story clusters can lead to information overload, or as one tribal man in northern Thailand put it, “You are making our heads hurt—slow down!”

One colleague working with a tribal group in East Africa told of the problem among his listeners when they confused the indwelling of the Holy Spirit with their belief in possession of male children by the spirit of the grandfather. So it takes patience and careful preparation of listeners to be sure they are getting from the story what is intended.

The chronological approach is ideal in that it approximates the tribals mental time marker filing system. Storying through the Bible chronologically gives him a filing system into which later stories may be dropped by referring to the events mentioned in the earlier stories. It is helpful to stress these time markers when telling the stories. The

Bible writers have used many in their stories like the ages of Abraham when certain events happened, or Isaiah's "In the year that King Uzziah died..." (6:1, NIV).

Tribal and nomadic cultures have a stability that depends on their structure not being violated. This usually means that individuals do not make decisions—the group does, or the chief does. Everyone then obeys. Change may come slowly even after hearing the stories. One caution is not to press for decisions too soon. The stories may need time to be with the people until a crisis event occurs and the stories are validated or somehow meet a need. So it demands much patience to first get the stories into their hearing. Then wait for the Spirit to bring fruit.

A couple working among Taureg Berbers had been telling the Old Testament stories. When a couple decided to get married they asked the missionaries to tell Bible stories at the wedding. Any tribal event that I am asked to attend I offer to tell one or more Bible stories as part of the event to get God's Word into their everyday culture.

Among the Khonds of Orissa, India, the group was fascinated by the creation stories, the flood and the tower of Babel stories. After the tower of Babel story one of them asked, "Are you telling us that Noah was our grandfather? Is he your grandfather, too?" to which I had answered, "Yes." "That's wonderful news," he exclaimed, "If Noah is our grandfather, and if he is your grandfather, then that means we are brothers!" This tribal man was in an area that is being pressed to become a scheduled tribe in the Hindu caste system.

I cannot end without mentioning the use of Bible teaching pictures which some use with their stories among tribals.^{10, 11} A picture may be worth a thousand words in Western culture but it can raise a thousand questions in tribal cultures. I can vouch for the fact that

they see everything in the pictures and do not necessarily see the major theme or point the picture is illustrating. Visual literacy, or lack of it, is often a factor.

For instance, the color of skin in the pictures can send strong signals. I have a set of pictures of the stories of Jesus from West Africa. All in the stories are black and the scenes, houses and activities of the people are all African village. The pictures are not without their problems. Jesus is depicted in a red robe in most pictures which is fine for those following traditional African religion. But for Muslims it disqualifies Jesus. He should have been in green! In another brilliantly colored set of biblical wall posters I sometimes use with tribal people, Adam and Eve are being confronted by a contextualized snake, an obvious cobra with its hood flared. One man said after the story, "This is not good, you are saying that one of our gods that we worship caused this problem."

Drama is usually safer with these folks and they love it. I would suggest to anyone using stories with tribals to take the time to let them re-enact the stories. It will save the cost of a set of pictures and will leave something with them they not only enjoy doing but which vividly paints the biblical picture they need to remember.

One of the greatest advantages of chronological Bible storying is the sense of community it fosters as it brings the storyer and tribal listeners together. It may mean having to hear their stories in order for one to have the right to tell your story. The storying approach puts faith in the Living Word to penetrate the tribal heart and change lives—and so learn to trust its inherent power.

One last thought. A colleague of mine has mentioned a strategy regarding sending the Word among all the peoples of the earth—especially among that large segment that have their own

book and prophet. He said, "A Bible story can go anywhere a camel can go. Let's tell the Bible stories to those people who ride camels and see where they take it around the world."

End Notes

1. Gabuco, Caloy, "Telling the Story...", Church Strengthening Ministry, Manila.
2. Schultze, Dell and Sue, *God and Man*, Church Strengthening Ministry, Manila.
3. Thomas, Bryan and Diane, translated and edited by Jeff Palmer, *Chronological Storytelling: Telling the Bible Story*, Church Strengthening Ministry, Manila.
4. Gabuco, op. cit.
5. Weber, Hans Rudi, *The Communication of the Gospel to Illiterates*, SCM.
6. Warneck, Johannes, *The Living Christ and Dying Heathenism*, Baker.
7. Warneck, op. cit.
8. Loewen, Jacob, *Culture and Human Values*, William Carey Library.
9. Gauran, Johani, *The Witnessing Kit*, Church Strengthening Ministry, Manila.
10. *Life of Jesus Mafa*, Vie de Jesus Mafa, Versailles.
11. Biblical Wall Posters, National Biblical Catechetical and Liturgical Centre, Bangalore.

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