COGNITION AND COMMUNICATION WITHIN THE ORAL MAJORITY

At present, most of the Majority World cannot or will not read.[1] There are over "Four billion oral communicators [in] the world: people who can't, don't, or won't take in new information or communicate by literate means. Oral communicators are found in every cultural group in the world and they constitute approximately two-thirds of the world's population."[2] Furthermore, many people in oral cultures do not have a strong desire to learn to read.[3] In light of these circumstances, strategies should be developed which will allow oral learners to better understand and communicate the gospel. This paper will argue that the cognition and

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[1]It should be noted that there is no single accepted definition for "literacy." One might think that literate people may be simply defined as "those that can read." However, there is a great difference between someone who can only write their name and someone who can sound out words. There is a great difference between this person and someone who can read a newspaper, or between a newspaper reader and someone who can read a graduate-level textbook. Various attempts have been made to clarify the definition. The following articles provide a starting point for further research: D.H. Bendor-Samuel, s.v. "Literacy: Applied Linguistic Aspects"; M. Cole, and A. Nicolopoulou. s.v. "Literacy: Intellectual Consequences"; S. B. Heath, s.v. "Literacy: An Overview," all of which may be found in *The International Encyclopedia of Linguistics,* vol. 2. Obviously, one's definition of literacy greatly affects statistics concerning literacy. However one defines literacy, it is quite clear that many people in the world cannot read the Bible well enough to derive significant spiritual nourishment from its pages. See "Statistics: Languages, Literacy Rates, and Bible Translation," Wycliffe, http://www.wycliffe.org/About/Statistics/aboutLiteracy.aspx (accessed November 20, 2006); *CIA World Factbook*, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2103.htm (accessed January 12, 2008); UNESCO Institute for Statistics, "Literacy Statistics," http://www.uis.unesco.org/en/stats/statistics/literacy2000.htm (accessed January 12, 2008).

[2]ION/LCWE. *Making Disciples of Oral Learners* (Pattya, Thailand: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 2005), 3. The Lausanne Committee's definition includes what Walter Ong would call "primary" and "secondary" oral peoples, resulting in a rather large estimate: four million. Ong defined primary oral people groups as those peoples who have *no* written language, while secondary oral people are people that live in a literate society but either cannot or do not want to read. These two groups have somewhat similar, but certainly not the same, patterns of thought. This distinction was proposed by Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* (Methuen & Co. Ltd., 182; repr., London: Routledge: 2002), 3, 11, 133-135 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

[3]ION/LCWE, *Making Disciples of Oral Learners*, 6. Introducing literacy into an oral culture can create an identity crisis, in which the oral society feels it will forsake its cultural heritage if it learns to read. See Wallace Chafe and Deborah Tannen, "The Relation between Written and Spoken Language." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 16 (1987), 392-394; Herbert V. Klem, *Oral Communication of the Scripture: Insights from African Oral Art* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1982), 94-109.

communication patterns of primary oral peoples often differ from that of literate peoples such that older communication strategies should be modified in order to better reach oral peoples. It will seek to defend this argument by demonstrating that oral peoples need to remember well in order to survive, and thus tend to prefer concrete, memorable forms of language in comparison to more abstract speech.

The Divide between Oral and Literate Cultures

New missionaries, particularly those from a more monocultural background such as that of America, often fail to understand the extent of the differences that exist between them and their host culture. They believe that if they are able to translate their American sermons into another language, they have contextualized their message sufficiently. Missionaries with more experience know otherwise. Good contextualization involves a much deeper understanding of the process of communication. Language itself cannot be easily extracted from the culture as a whole, rather it is "molded by the culture of which it is a part."[4] Thus, more experienced missionaries know that good linguistic communication will always involve a penetrating knowledge of their host culture.

Indeed, there is a degree of reciprocity that exists between language and communication patterns on the one hand, and culture on the other. There is a sense in which culture creates linguistic patterns, since culture is the basis for the common sets of categories and distinctions which are used to organize and communicate common perceptions. However, language is also the storehouse for culture. It is the means by which the values, beliefs, and practices of the culture are communicated from one generation to the next, and through which the worldview of a culture is debated and modified within each generation.[5] The effective missionary, then, must be a student of both language and culture.

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[4]Paul Hiebert, *Cultural Anthropology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 121.

[5]Myron W. Lustig and Jolene Koester, *Intercultural Competence: Intercultural Communication across Cultures*, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2003), 43.

The introduction of writing into a culture has a tendency to change both the culture and the patterns of communication within that culture. It is a sort of linguistic "technology" that has remarkable consequences. An oral society is only able to exchange information via face-to-face encounters at a particular time and place. Writing removes many barriers to communication. Letters may be sent to different places, and voices from the past may yet speak today. Writing may even be used to rapidly reach those far out of earshot and precipitate significant cultural change, as in the Protestant Reformation. Understanding the nature and depth of the changes that literacy brings about may help literate missionaries, particularly those serving the Majority World, to contextualize their communication more effectively in oral cultures.[6]

Yet, writing is more than just a technology that allows communication to reach past face-to-face encounters. It affects culture more deeply, because it affects the ways in which the people within a culture think and communicate. In order to understand why this is the case, it is helpful to think about how communication in an oral society is different than our own.

In our literate society, we are immersed in information in written form. Our day may begin with answering email and reading the headlines that accompany a news report on television. During the day, we might surf the net, read a memorandum or a brochure or a nutritional label, make a correct turn after seeing a name on an exit ramp, or fill out a form at the bank. If we forget a biblical name or a recipe or the amount of money that someone owes on an account, we can usually just look it up somewhere. Reading is a vital, but often unnoticed, part of life in the Western world.

A member of an oral culture group has nothing like the written word. For him, words are a transient. By the time that he has heard and understood a word that has been spoken to him, it has already passed out of existence, having evaporated into the evanescence of the past.[7]

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[6]Ong claims that the initial introduction of writing in a society is a more culture-bending technological change than the printing press or computers in a sense, because the press and computers only continue the power of the written word: "[Writing] initiated what print and computers only continue, the reduction of dynamic sound to quiescent space, the separation of the word from the living present, where alone spoken words can exist," *Orality and Literacy,* 81.

[7]Ong, *Orality and Literacy,* 32, 70.

Under such conditions, memory becomes paramount. An oral learner can never look anything up; he can only try to remember.[8]

The evanescence of words has a profound affect on oral societies. Modes of communication, teaching methods, and even entire worldviews are set up to accommodate the transient nature of knowledge. Knowledge must be accurately passed down from master to apprentice and from generation to generation. If something is lost along the way, it is lost forever.[9]

Speaking Memorable Words

Any society's survival depends on knowledge being passed down through generations. Given that survival of the tribe is at stake, oral societies have a central principle that governs much of their communication and teaching: *They make their words memorable.* They structure their thought and language so that it will be unforgettable using a variety of communication techniques, such as, "heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antithesis, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulary expressions, in standard thematic settings . . . in proverbs which are constantly heard by everyone so they come to mind readily and which themselves are patterned for retention and ready recall, or in mnemonic form . . . .

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[8]Indeed, oral learners often criticize writing "because it is a medium that is thought to destroy the need for and the exercise of memory." Lynette Hunter, "A Rhetoric of Mass Communication: Collective or Corporate Public Discourse," in *Oral and Written Communication, Written Communication Annual: An International Survey of Research and Theory*, vol. 4. Richard Lee Enos, ed. (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1990), 218.

[9]The extent to which oral forms of communication can accurately transmit information from generation to generation is a very important question for the missionary. If an oral theological message changes significantly each time it is transmitted, then its usefulness for missionary work is questionable. For two opposing viewpoints on the accuracy of oral transmissions, see Jack Goody, *The Interface between the Written and Oral. Studies in Literacy, Family, Culture, and State*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 86-96, 155-156, 168, 172-190, 236 and John Miles Foley, *The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 2, 11, 38 (Goody and Foley believe that oral messages degrade significantly with repeated transmission) and also see Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance, and Social Context*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 134-168 (Finnegan believes that some oral messages do not necessarily degrade significantly with repeated transmission). See also David C. Rubin, *Memory in Oral Traditions: The Cognitive Psychology of Epic, Ballads, and Counting-out Rhymes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Mnemonic needs determine even syntax."[10]

Due to space limitations, an explanation of one of these communication techniques will serve to illustrate the whole. Oral communicators favor epithetic or other formulary expressions. That is, they often use phrasing that a literate communicator might label as "cliché." A soldier would not be referred to simply as a soldier, but as a "brave soldier." An oak would be referred to as a "sturdy oak." The use of stock phrases serves two purposes. It helps the hearer to easily understand the speaker's words, since the hearer is often able to understand the meaning of the stock phrase even if he only catches part of it. Also, it is less forgettable than more original forms of phrasing, since it fits easily into pre-existent categories of memory.

The oral communicator's use of stock phrases provides insight into the cognitive processes of the oral mind. Walter Ong explains, "traditional expressions in oral cultures must not be dismantled: it has been hard work getting them together over the generations, and there is nowhere outside the mind to store them. So soldiers are brave and princesses are beautiful and oaks sturdy forever."[11] It is not that oaks are *said* to be sturdy for rhetorical effect, they actually *are* sturdy. Stock phrases represent the cumulative knowledge and experience of the tribe, and as such their validity is not questioned. Experience has proven that oaks are sturdy.[12]

[10]Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 34.

[11] Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 39.

[12]In fact, there is a limited degree of interdependence between language and the pre-existent categories of thought previously mentioned. For example, the act of creating a stock phrase results in a new interpretive pattern for oral man. Oaks are sturdy, and this is all the tribe has ever known them to be. The event-oriented nature of oral cognition results in man making (in part) the standards by which his world is perceived. The interdependence of language and categories of the mind is related to the subjects of Linguistic Determinism and Linguistic Relativity. Though these subjects are beyond the scope of this paper, the following references would be useful to the reader wishing to investigate this important aspect of oral cognition: Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuiness, trans. Introduction by Bertrand Russell (Annalen der Naturphilosophie, 1921; repr., New York: Routledge Classics, 2004); Edward, Sapir, *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1949); Edward, Sapir*, Selected Writings in Language, Culture, and Personality*. David G. Mandelbaum, ed. With an epilogue by Dell H. Hymes. (Berkley, University of California Press, 1985); Benjamin J. Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. John B. Carroll, ed. (Cambridge, MA: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1984). For opposing viewpoints, see Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1965); Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structure*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2002); and Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* (William Morrow and Company, 1994; repr., New York: HarperCollins,

The world of experience, this world, is closely connected to the thoughts of the mind.

Havelock explains that "A language of action rather than reflection appears to be a prerequisite

for oral memorization."[13] The oral communicator does not think and speak in terms of ideas and

concepts so much as he does in terms of his (or his tribe's) experiences and relationships. The

experiential nature of his thought will be shown in the oral communicator's preference for

concrete thought patterns, in his methodology of categorization, and in his epistemology and

logic. These aspects of his cognition shed light on a worldview that is oriented towards the

experiential.

Concrete Thought Patterns

The oral learner prefers concrete, this-worldly thought rather than abstract, empyreal

thought.[14] To begin to understand this difference, it is helpful to see that words, for the oral

communicator, are considered to be more "events" than "things." This concept is difficult for

literate Westerners to understand, but a mental experiment may help: Close your eyes for about

30 seconds and think *only* of the word "nevertheless." When you are done, continue reading this

paper . . . . Did you picture the word in your mind? Did you imagine it written in black on a

white background? Perhaps in Times New Roman font? Did you imagine a definition that

might be found in Merriam-Webster?

The oral communicator would do none of this. He could imagine only the *sound* of

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2000).

[13]Eric A. Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 76.

[14]The author is not using "abstract" and "concrete" in exactly the same way that some developmental psychologists would use these terms. An oral community's use of concrete terminology in everyday speech does not imply that they are unable to perform "concrete operations," such as recognizing conservation of mass. The author is saying (in a way that bears *limited* similarities to Vygotsky's cultural historical theory), that a person's cognitive patterning is affected by his culture, particularly by the level of literacy in that culture. See Barbara Rogoff, *The Cultural Nature of Human Development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 236-281; Michael Cole and Sylvia Scribner, *Culture and Thought: A Psychological Introduction* (New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 1974), 30-37.

the word "nevertheless" being pronounced. Perhaps he would think of how the word had been used by his friend yesterday, but he would never think of a dictionary definition. For him, words only exist as events, they never exists apart from concrete situations. Words are not "things" or "objects" so much as they are parts of experience.[15]

The oral communicator, then, will tend to use concrete language that expresses actual events that happen in the world, rather than abstract language about a mental concept. Eric Havelock states that an oral speaker's "syntax must be one that describes action or a passion, but not principles or concepts. To give a simple example, it will never say that honesty is the best policy but that 'the honest man always prospers.'"[16]

In Havelock's example, "honesty" and "policy" are both abstract terms which are avoided by oral peoples. An oral speaker would prefer to use the phrases "honest man" and "always prospers," because these phrases relate to concrete situations that can easily be envisioned by his listener. His listener would know someone who is an "honest man." Likewise, his listener would probably know someone who "always prospers." His listener cannot know "honesty" and "prosperity" in the same way, because these are not things he can see or touch in his everyday life. Often, the oral communicator may speak in more concrete terms than in the phrase "an honest man always prospers." He may rather tell a story to teach about a man whose greatest virtue is that he performs honestly.[17]

Literate people tend to prefer speaking of ideas, while oral people tend to describe things in terms of actual life events. For example, when Julius Nyerere, the president of

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[15] Ong present a similar mental experiment, *Orality and Literacy*, 12.

[16]Eric Havelock, "The Oral-Literate Equation," in *Literacy and Orality*, David R. Olson and Nancy Torrance, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 24.

[17]Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write*, 76. Havelock explains that this tendency is so strong in Greek oral literature that it is difficult to find a phrase like "honesty is the best policy." He writes, "The sense of primary orality survived in the behavior of the Greek tongue itself as it was being written down. [Ancient] Greek drama offers no propositions, beliefs, or programmed doctrines in the style of Dante (still more in Milton) but an expressive dynamism whether in word or thought. It is difficult to find an instance of a conceptual subject attached to a conceptual predicate by the copula 'is' anywhere in the plays. The verb 'to be,' if it is used, still functions primarily in its oral dynamic dimension, signifying presence, power, situational status, and the like," 94.

Tanzania, addressed the United Nations some years ago, he used the following East African proverb concerning the Cold War: "When elephants fight, the grass gets hurt."[18] He could have expressed the same thing more abstractly by saying that Third World countries like Tanzania are made to suffer when national superpowers fight each other. His description, however, was related to a common, real-life situation. As such, it was far more memorable than if he had stated his meaning in terms of a general principle. Oral people prefer memorable phrasing, such as this proverb, not simply because it is more beautiful, but also because it helps to preserve precious knowledge.

Concrete thought may be described of as situational/experiential, while abstract thought may be described as conceptual/principial, but the abstract/concrete distinction may also be viewed from another angle. It can be described in terms of time. The concrete thought of oral peoples often utilizes temporal terms, while the abstract thought of literates often utilizes atemporal terms. In the example given by Havelock above, the literate communicator might refer to "honesty," while the oral communicator would refer to an "honest man." "Honesty," as a quality, is not specifically related to any given time. An "honest man," however, can only exist within time and history.   An honest man is a man that displays the atemporal quality of honesty within the bounds of time.

Oral people prefer to think and communicate in ways that are closely connected to the events of this world. They do not tend to use abstract concepts as much as they use examples from actual situations, and even their proverbs and metaphors refer to common life events. Their communication patterns embrace the temporal and historical rather than the timeless.

Methodology of Categorization

Categorization in oral cultures is closely related to the oral communicator's preference for concrete thought patterns. Indeed, a literate Westerner would find the categorization of oral

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[18]Joseph Healy and Donald Sybertz, *Towards and African Narrative Theology*, *Faith and Cultures Series* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 36.

peoples quite unusual, since it does not gravitate towards abstract concepts. Rather, oral people

tend to categorize groups of objects according to there usefulness in a concrete situation. In a

famous anthropological experiment, A.R. Luria presented a hammer, a saw, a log, and a hatchet

to oral people in Uzbekistan and Kirgizstan. He asked his participants to categorize the objects.

While a literate Westerner would categorize three of the items as "tools" with the log not fitting

into this category, the answers from the oral people were quite different. They would generally

categorize all of the items together. They would say that one would need the wood for the

hammer, the saw, or the hatchet to be useful.

   When Luria tried to lead his participants to the "right" answer, they refused to listen.

In the exchange that follows, Luria's questions (in bold) are answered by his participants, and he

explains the meaning of their answers (in italics):

> **Which of these things could you call by one word?**
> "How's that? If you call all three of them a 'hammer,' that won't be right either."
> *Rejects use of a general term.*
> **But one fellow picked up three things—the hammer, saw, and hatchet—and said they were alike.**
> "A saw, a hammer, and a hatchet all have to work together. But the log has to be here too!"
> *Reverts to situational [concrete] thinking.*
> **Why do you think he picked these three things and not the log?**
> "Probably he's got a lot of firewood, but if we'll be left without firewood, we won't be able to do anything."
> *Explains selection in strictly personal terms.*
> **True, but a hammer, a saw, and a hatchet are all tools.**
> "Yes, but even if we have tools, we still need wood—otherwise, we can't build anything."
> *Persists in situational thinking despite disclosure of categorical term.*[19]

   The rationale for the categorizations of these oral people can be difficult for a literate

person to understand. The key to understanding their responses is to realize that they do not use

words as symbols to represent *abstract* categories.[20] Rather, they use words to refer to concrete

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[19]A.R. Luria, *Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations*. Martin Lopez-Morillas and Lynn Solotaroff, trans., Michael Cole, ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 56 (emphasis original).

[20]Ibid., 54. There is a deep relationship between words and reality in oral societies. Herbert Klem writes that words are not "abstract makers for ideas," but rather they are, "thought to control matter or the course of events," having the power to enable "one thing to create another." They not only refer to this world, they may also bring about *being* in this world. Klem, *Oral Communication*, 113. Likewise, Ong states that oral people "consider words to have great power . . . . Names do give human beings power over what they name . . . . Written or printed

events and *relationships* in this world. Though they had a word meaning "tool," they did not see fit to categorize the various tools together, and they even said that to do so would be "stupid."[21] It was quite obvious to them that in order to use any of these wood tools, one would need to have wood. They did not consider the similarities of the tools as tools to be significant in comparison to their usefulness in a concrete situation in life, a situation mirroring their daily work experience.

Categorization in oral societies, then, finds the functional or situational relationships among things to be more important than any other similarity. Taxonomical classifications, which are based on the *nature* of objects, are often avoided in everyday speech. Though taxonomic classifications can be understood by oral learners (who, in the example above, knew that three of the items were "tools"), a classification which denotes things as entities is not considered to be significant in comparison to a classification in terms of physical, event-oriented relationships. Once again, oral man's preference for the experiential can be seen. Rather than categorizing objects according to taxonomic categories based on the nature and being of objects, the oral communicator prefers to classify objects according to their perceived functionality in specific situations.

Epistemology and Logic

The categorization schema of oral peoples is distinctively biased towards the events of this world.[22] In much the same way, the epistemic basis for many of their truth statements are

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words can be labels; real, spoken words cannot be," Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 32-33.

[21]Luria, *Cognitive Development*, 54. In a similar experiment, Luria asked his participants to categorize a bird, a rifle, a dagger, and a bullet. Once again, all of these were necessary. His participants explained that you would need a gun with a bullet to shoot the bird, and a knife to cut up the bird after you had killed it. When Luria said that the bird was not a weapon, they agreed, but said that it had to be categorized with the others, or else there would be nothing to shoot. Ibid., 56-57.

[22]Richard Bauman understands all oral performance as being event-oriented, in the sense that oral performances recall events from the past in order to influence events in the present. Stories are used to answer the question "What is going on here?" with an answer derived from "What was going on here?". See *Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative*, Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture 10 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press,1986), 1-10.

also biased towards the events and history of this world. Their epistemic basis for truth is closely

connected to their logical processes.

Luria provides another example, this time from oral people in Uzbekistan, which

illustrates how oral people engage in logical processes which displays their epistemic basis for

truth:

> **In the Far North, where there is snow, all bears are white. Novaya Zemlya is in the Far North, where there is always snow there. What colors are the bears there?**
> "There are different sorts of bears."
> *Failure to infer from syllogism.*
> The syllogism is repeated.
> "I don't know; I've seen a black bear, I've never seen any others . . . Each locality has its own animals: if it's white, they will be white; if it's yellow, they will be yellow."
> *Appeals only to personal, graphical experience.*
> **But what kind of bears are there in Novaya Zemlya?**
> "We always speak only of what we see; we don't talk about what we haven't seen."
> *The same.*
> . . . . **But on the basis of my words—in the North, where there is always snow, the bears are white, can you gather what kind of bears there are in Novaya Zemlya?"**
> If a man were sixty or eighty and had seen a white bear and had told about it, he could be believed, but I've never seen one and hence I can't say. That's my last word. Those who saw can tell, and those who didn't see can't say anything!" (At this point a young Uzbek volunteered, "From your words it means that bears there are white.")
> **Well, which of you is right?**
> "What the cock knows how to do, he does. What I know, I say, and nothing beyond that!"[23]

At first glance, it may seem as though the oral people that Luria interviewed were

avoiding logical reasoning altogether.[24] One could then say that they were pre-logical, or that

they had a different kind of logic than literate Westerners. It is probably better to say that they

do not make use of formal syllogisms as they communicate.

Logic, defined in its most minimalist form as "A cannot be both A and non-A at the

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[23]Luria, *Cognitive Development*, 108-109.

[24]"The false antinomy [made by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl] between logical and prelogical mentality was surmounted . . . . The savage mind is logical in the same sense and the same fashion as ours, though as our own is only when it is applied to knowledge of a universe in which it recognizes physical and semantic properties simultaneously." Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind. The Nature of Human Society Series* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 268. See Lévi-Strauss' *The Savage Mind* (quoted here), for a defense of this statement as well as Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977). The book by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl that Lévi-Strauss refers to is: *Primitive Mentality*, Lilian A. Clare, trans. (New York: Macmillan, 1923).

same time and in the same way," simply cannot be avoided in human life. Every oral learner

knows that poison berries cannot be both poison berries and edible berries at the same time and

in the same way, or else their lack of logic will lead to a lack of life.[25] However, they do not

display this logic using syllogisms such as: "1. Socrates is a man. 2. Men are mortal. Therefore,

Socrates is mortal."

Logic is also demonstrated as an oral society attempts to settle a disagreement between

two parties. A society without writing has methodologies and procedures for dealing with

disagreements between people. These procedures may often involve some form of debate or

questioning of the two parties. Through these procedures, the proper viewpoint on a given issue

may be found. These procedures inevitably involve a degree of logical reasoning of the form "if

A, then B, but not B, therefore not A."[26]

The introduction of text into a society inevitably leads to a more formalized procedure

for dealing with disagreements. This formalization is a result of the nature of writing itself. The

only way to ask a question of a written document is to examine it and re-examine it in an

analytical fashion.[27] Goody explains that the introduction of written documents into a society

requires a greater exactitude in analysis in order to settle contradictions: "Oral man lacked not

logical reasoning but certain tools of intellectual operation that defined the Greek notion of

"logic' . . . . the presence of documents [in literate Greek culture] enabled one to lay side by side

different accounts, emanating from different sources, different times and different places, and so

perceive contradictions which in the oral mode would be virtually impossible to spot."[28]

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[25]Likewise, Ong says that oral people understand causality. "They know very well that if you push hard on a mobile object, the push causes it to move." It is simply erroneous to view them as pre-logical. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 57.

[26]Goody*, The Interface between the Written and the Oral*, 72.

[27]"The construction of the text, which is in any case something other than the transcription of discourse, can lead to its contemplation, to the development of thoughts about thoughts, to a metaphysic that may require its own metalanguage." Jack Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*, Studies in Literacy, Family, Culture, and the State (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 38.

[28]This is nothing more than a negative form of the syllogism "All A are B; C is A; Therefore C is B." Goody, *The Interface between the Written and the Oral*, 220, 278-279.

According to Goody, writing allows documents to be produced. These documents may contradict each other. When they contradict each other, the only way that they can be questioned is through logical, analytical procedures. These logical procedures are recorded, not orally, but in written form like the documents they are used to analyze. Thus, logic, which lay beneath the surface of oral dispute, arose from beneath the surface and became formally recognized.[29]

The oral people that Luria interviewed largely refused to speak in syllogistic terms, though at times they would indicate that they *understood* Luria's syllogism, though it was a foreign form of communication for them. When asked "What do my words suggest?" one man responded, "To go by your words, they should all be white."[30] He understood the logic that lay behind Luria's syllogism, but he did not like Luria's way of finding truth.

Luria's way of finding truth depended on a non-experiential premises. The literate Westerner would have no trouble beginning with a premise, saying "if A is true, then . . ." but the oral person does not desire to proceed in this way. For a premise to be considered valid, it must be experienced. It cannot be an abstract principle disconnected from life events.

In the first example from Luria in this section, a man responded "I don't know; I've seen a black bear, I've never seen any others . . . . We always speak only of what we see; we don't talk about what we haven't seen."[31] Oral people do not like to treat a premise as universal; rather, they prefer to accept premises which they have experienced in life. Even when the terms of the syllogism were understood by the oral participants, they would tend to argue from their personal experience rather than from the premises give by Luria.[32]

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[29] See Goody, *The Interface between the Written and the Oral*, 72-77, 113, 199, 219-221, 226-228, 256, 278-279.

[30] This is essentially the same response that was given by the "Young Uzbek" on page 109. Luria, *Cognitive Development*, 114.

[31] Ibid., 109.

[32] Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 49-57.

The quote at the beginning of this section yields a final insight. The man Luria interviewed said, "If a man were sixty or eighty and had seen a white bear and had told about it, he could be believed." Experience is the necessary basis for truth, but this experience does not necessarily have to be one's own. It may also be the experience of a trusted elder. The reason that oral people trust their elders lies in the nature of the transmission of knowledge in oral societies.

In oral societies, the acquisition of knowledge takes a great deal of time. The stories and collective knowledge of the tribe must be memorized over a period of years. Generally, those who have lived the longest have acquired the most knowledge, and so they are the natural teachers of the group, the ones who pass on the knowledge of the tribesmen who have come before them. They pass on the experiential knowledge of the whole tribe (as accurately as they remember it) and they are considered to be the best authorities concerning what is to be believed, since they represent the collective knowledge of all who have come before them.

Oral men cannot be said to be illogical or prelogical, but his epistemic basis for truth is solidly based on his experiences in this world.[33] They do not tend to use syllogistic logic, since syllogistic logic is a form of analysis that arose after words were made into text, and therefore made into objects to be examined. Their logic operates below the surface of expressed, conscious thought, but it is nonetheless present. As they think and speak about what is true, they refer to things that they or their elders have actually experienced and therefore know to be true, rather than deriving conclusions from abstract principles. Their logic is rooted in the history of the events of this world.

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[33]"While the rationality of the highly educated minority in the civilized world tends to be more objective and systematic, the thinking of aboriginal peoples often appears to be more subjective and less critical. We must not, however, imagine that the thought processes of primitive men are essentially different from our own. Whatever apparent differences exist are primarily in the content of thought, not the process." Eugene A. Nida, *Customs and Cultures: Anthropology for Christian Missions* (Harper and Brothers, 1954; repr., Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1986), 162-163 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

An Experiential Worldview

"The savage mind totalizes," wrote Claude Lévi-Strauss.[34] For the oral communicator, the cognitive world of thought and communication and the world of experience are aggregated into one. The words of oral people do not refer to some world or concept that exists beyond them, but rather they refer to the events of this world.[35] Words are signs that exist in the situational and point back to the situational.

Thus, the worldview of oral peoples is inherently non-analytical. Perhaps an oral person could examine a complex, abstract problem, think about the premises that would allow that problem to be understood and the logical sequences that would yield an answer to that problem. He could, perhaps, formulate a series of syllogisms that would allow for the problem to be thoroughly understood and solved. His answer would likely be as complex as the problem itself. How would he then remember and use his complex answer? Without writing, it would be quite difficult for him to memorize the abstract thought processes that went into his solution.[36]

The oral thinker would rather engage in a form of problem solving that is conversational and communal, and based upon experience. It is quite difficult to talk to oneself for hours on end; a conversation partner is needed in order for complex problems to be solved.[37] As conversation progresses, solutions to problems may found, but they also must be stored for later use by the tribe. They cannot be written or memorized in verbatim form, but they can be immortalized in memorable verbal forms that are closely related to this world.

There are many ways that this can be accomplished. Verbal folk art includes such genres as "folktales, proverbs, riddles, praise songs or shouts, performances, origin narratives and founding charters, legends, poetry, music, myths, dirges, historical accounts, trickster

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[34] Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind,* 245.

[35] They prefer the verb "to do" rather than the verb "to be," Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write*, 107.

[36] Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 34, c.f. Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985), 134-137.

[37] Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 34.

narratives, tall tales, and other stories."[38] These varied forms of oral art have a significant

relationship to one another: All of them represent the collective wisdom of the past, as it has

been experienced by the tribe.

Besides being non-analytical, the worldview of oral people is deeply connected to

history. When oral people solve problems, their conversation must draw upon the only form of

epistemic basis that is readily available, the personal and collective experiences of the tribe.   For

this reason, it has been said that "African time looks backwards rather than forwards."[39]

Likewise, the Quechua in South America say "If you try to see the past and future with your

mind's eye, which can you see? If you can see the past it must be ahead of you; and the future,

which you cannot see, is behind you."[40] The oral mind constantly looks backwards towards the

past, in part because it knows that the answers to its problems may be found in the wisdom of the

tribe passed down from generation to generation.[41] The events of this world provide the answers

for this world.

The oral emphasis on this world appears to cause a difficulty: If oral man's speech and

communication patterns are intimately connected to this world and to experience, how does he

speak and communicate concerning the supernatural, which is not of this world? One would be

hard pressed to find an oral people that are not religious through and through, seeking to appease

the spirits in every aspect of their lives. Religious rituals pervade all of life, involving not only

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[38]Carol V. McKinney, *Globe-Trotting in Sandals: A Field Guide to Cultural Research* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2000), 229; c.f. 229-263 for an description and method of analysis for each of these forms of oral art.

[39]Healey and Sybertz, 211.

[40]A traditional Quechua saying, quoted by Nida, 206.

[41]John S. Mbiti gives an explanation of the concept of time as it related to tribal experience from the traditional African (predominantly oral) perspective: "This time orientation, governed as it is by the two main dimensions of the present and the past, dominates African understanding of the individual, the community and the universe. . . . Time has to be experienced in order to make sense or become real. A person experiences time partly in his own individual life, and partly through the society which goes back many generations before his own birth," *African Religions and Philosophy.* (Praeger Publishers, 1969; repr., Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1970), 23; c.f. 19-36.

formal communal gatherings at a holy place, but also everyday activities such as eating, sex, and work.[42] If we are to understand the worldview of oral societies at all, we must understand how they speak and communicate concerning the supernatural.

J.H. Bavinck says that every society must decide what is the reality behind reality: "We are living in an imaginary world of which we do not see the substance. Behind the curtain of this phenomenal world there must be an invisible counterpart, a world of spiritual beings— demons or gods or whatever they may be. This strange belief is also very fundamental to man's religious intuitions . . . . The idea that there is a *Supreme Power* to which he himself is related is apparently something of which he can never rid himself. It is the relationship of *I and the Supreme Power*."[43]

Oral cultures often answer the question concerning the relationship between "I and the Supreme Power" by combining the natural and supernatural realms into one. The world of spiritual beings is one and the same world in which people live. John Taylor states that in an African context "no distinction can be made between sacred and secular, between natural and supernatural, for Nature, Man and the Unseen are inseparably involved in one another in a total community."[44] This aspect of worldview is markedly different than that found in many Western worldviews, in which the supernatural is segregated out as an entirely different realm or dismissed entirely as non-existent. Oral societies believe that there are "beings and forces that cannot be directly perceived but are thought to exist *on this earth*."[45]

The oral mind totalizes, and a part of this process is the combining of the natural and

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[42]Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Inc., 1987), 170-171 specifically, though the entire book supports this point.

[43]J.H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque: A Study of the Relationship Between the Christian Faith and Other Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 33.

[44]John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision* (London, SCM, 1963), 64.

[45]Paul G. Hiebert, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," in *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 193.

the supernatural into one world. Thus, the oral man sees the supernatural as being a part of his, and his tribe's, experiences in the world, since the supernatural enters into relationships with men and into the events of this world.

Since the supernatural is a part of the human situation, speaking of the supernatural does not require abstract categories. The supernatural is a part of history. An oral communicator prefers to speak of the supernatural using the same forms of oral art that are commonly used in his society.

Towards Oral Contextualization Strategies

Oral forms of communication and thinking differ somewhat from literate forms of communication and thinking. This conceptual divide between the oral and literate should be considered when the literate missionary is seeking to contextualize his message for an oral culture.

Many missionaries today are attempting to present their message in a contextualized fashion by the use of chronological Bible storying. Missions agencies such as the International Mission Board use selections from narrative portions of Scripture to give their oral hearers an understanding of the gospel and the Christian life. These selections are picked in such a way as to emphasize the overall message of the Bible and also to meet the specific needs of the missionary's host people. Often, missionaries are told to keep these narratives true to scripture. The International Mission Board's training manual for chronological Bible storying says, "Dynamic translation guidelines developed by the United Bible Society and by Summer Institute of Linguistics are usually acceptable when developing the story for telling. . . . Tell it in a way in which your hearers understand it, but not in a way that changes the essence of and elements of the story."[46] Thus, chronological Bible storying is using a compilation of biblical narratives to convey the message of the Bible to oral peoples.[47]

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[46]Armstrong, Hayward, ed. *Tell the Story: A Primer on Chronological Bible Storying* (Rockville, VA: International Centre for Excellence in Leadership, 2003), 77.

To be sure, narratives are an essential form of communication in many oral societies. Narratives are inherently memorable and concrete/situational, and as such they fulfill many of the needs for oral communication. They reify abstract truth by placing it within historical situations in this world.

Chronological Bible storying is amenable to many of the concrete thought patterns of oral people. Many Western presentations of the gospel depend upon abstract categories to explain the gospel. They talk about God's plan for one's life, how sin hinders that plan, how Jesus' atonement makes the plan possible yet again, and how one should respond to Jesus' plan. Yet, God's plan, sin, atonement, and quite possibly even human response may seem rather abstract and therefore difficult to grasp for an oral learner. Biblical narratives often deal with these same concepts, yet these concepts are couched within real-world situations. God's wonderful plan for man (Gen 1:28) was hampered by sin (Gen 3:6). Nonetheless, God promised to provide man with a way of salvation from his sin (Gen 3:15). The covering for sin that was to come was foreshadowed vividly in the OT sacrificial system (Gen 22:1-17) and found its fulfillment in the final sacrifice of Jesus Christ (Matt 27:32-66). The Bible tells us about people who responded to this grand story, presenting them as an example we should emulate (Acts 16:28-34). The Bible presents its hearer with concrete examples of abstract concepts, and chronological Bible storying often takes full advantage of this reification.

Biblical narratives provide oral people with a comprehensible epistemic basis. Oral peoples do not argue from non-experiential premises to logical conclusions. Their logic, though operative, remains largely below the surface of conscious thought. They will only accept as true that which they have experienced or which trusted elders have told them to be true, since the elders hold the knowledge of the tribe.

Eugene Nida explains that "there are evidences of belief in a high god in many parts of

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[47]Not all missionaries strictly adhere to dynamic-equivalent principles as they engage in chronological Bible storying. Some may add elements to the story, so as to explain the story. If the missionary is adding elements to the text, he is effectively exegeting and "preaching" upon the text as he tells the story. This approach is troublesome, since the oral hearer is unable to distinguish between the inerrant Word of God and the (sometimes errant) words of the missionary.

Africa as well as in numerous other areas of the world, but generally he is so remote from the people as to be relatively useless."[48] Since the high god is far away, people are left without any revelation from him, and so they rely solely on the collective knowledge of the tribe in order to survive.

The Bible offers a more significant word than the elders of the tribe can provide. The God who they thought was far away has come near. He has revealed himself through his word, which is said to be "God-breathed," perfectly representing his very thoughts (2 Tim 3:16, 17). Furthermore, it has been revealed to trusted elders in God's tribe many years ago (Heb 1:1, 2). As such, the Bible should be deemed as true and trustworthy. It provides an epistemic basis that is more solid than any they have ever experienced.

Chronological Bible storying, to a degree, emphasizes the Bible's historical nature.[49] Oral people are entrenched in the past. The knowledge that they need to survive comes from the past and has been given to them through the myths and songs and stories of the tribe. These oral art forms recollect the experiences of the past which serve as guidelines for the present.

Though chronological Bible storying may be quite helpful as the missionary seeks to reach oral people, it should not be considered the single, perfect means by which all oral peoples should be evangelized and nurtured. Three reasons why it should not be the only form of oral

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[48]Nida, 142.

[49]Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948; repr., Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), 9 (page citations are to the reprint edition). Admittedly, the selection of narratives for use in chronological Bible storying seldom take advantage of the biblical theological method advocated in Vos' book. Rather, the stories are often chosen based on the abstract categories of systematic theology, see Armstrong, 23. The author, while a staunch advocate of systematic theology, believes that the biblical theological method would provide a better framework for choosing the narratives to use in storying. In addition to Vos' excellent work, he recommends *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), *The Goldsworthy Trilogy: Gospel and Kingdom, Gospel and Wisdom, The Gospel in Revelation* (Cumbria, CA: Paternoster, 2000) and *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991) by Graeme Goldsworthy, *The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006) and *The Message of the New Testament: Promises Kept* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005) by Mark Dever, Alec Motyer, *The Story of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), and Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission,* New Studies in Biblical Theology 11 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001) for some examples of the biblical theological method.

contextualization will be considered here.

First, chronological Bible storying cannot provide its hearers with the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). Chronological Bible storying, as defined by the International Mission Board, uses a selection of Biblical narratives to explain the basic message of the Bible to oral people. It does not make any attempt to explain the portions of the Bible written in other genres, such as epistles, proverbs, apocalyptic, etc. Though the majority of the Bible is written in narrative format, much of it is not.

In the Great Commission, Jesus demands that new disciples be taught "to observe all that I have commanded you." (Matt 28:20). Leon Morris, commenting on this passage says "We should not miss the significance of *all the things*. Jesus is not suggesting that his followers should make a selection from his teachings as it pleases them and neglect the rest. Since the teaching of Jesus is a unified whole, disciples are to observe *all* that this means."[50]

Yet, "all that Jesus has commanded" should not be understood to entail merely what he said during his earthly ministry. Jesus is the Word of God, the entirety of the Scriptures have their origin in him and focus on him (Luke 24:13-32). He is the one that the entire OT pointed towards, and by his fulfillment of the OT he ensures its continued validity with respect to the Christian life.[51] Likewise, there is a sense in which the entire NT is Jesus' word, and should be taught to his disciples (John 14:26; 16:13; 1 Cor 14:37; 1 Thess 4:15; 2 Pet 3:2).[52] If we are to teach all that Jesus has commanded, we must teach from the entire Bible.

Second, chronological Bible storying is not intended to be the only form of communication that the missionary has with his hearers, and so it does not help the missionary to communicate well after the story is over. After the missionary has told the Bible narrative to his

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[50]Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester: Apollos, 1992), 743.

[51]D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary 8, Gaebelein, Frank Ely, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 599.

[52]See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 26-28.

hearers, he must explain that Bible narrative using forms of communication that his oral hearers will understand. The study of cognition and communication in oral cultures will help the missionary to sense when he is losing hearers, and help him to understand how to communicate in terms that are more concrete. It will help him to avoid the excessive use of taxonomic categories. It will help him to rephrase his "being" statements into "doing" statements, replacing such phrases as "honesty is the best policy" with "an honest man always prospers." If the missionary understands how oral communicators think and speak differently than literate communicators, he will be able to adjust his manner of speaking, so that he will be better able to contextualize his message.

Third, chronological Bible storying should be supplemented with other forms of oral teaching. Oral learners use a variety of communications genres as they speak to each other. They are not limited to stories and stories alone; neither should the missionary be limited only to stories as he teaches. Oral people use proverbs, poetry, genealogies, songs, and other such genres as they communicate with one another. The missionary will likely find that his host people use a number of forms of communication that may be found within the pages of the Bible itself.

There is no substitute for being a good observer of culture. Though chronological Bible storying may be quite helpful as the missionary seeks to convey the message of the risen Christ, he will still have to be alert and aware of the differences between his way of communicating and his hearer's way of communicating. There may be oral cultures where certain changes will need to be made in the chronological Bible storying approach, and there may even be cultures where chronological Bible storying, for one reason or another, is not the most effective way of teaching. There is no one missionary method that will work perfectly in all situations, and so the missionary will need to be willing to adapt or even to reject a given methodology if it is not working well.

Conclusion

Paul Hiebert tells his readers, "As Western missionaries we need to realize how deeply

literacy has molded our thinking, producing patterns of thought that seems perfectly natural to us, but which are strange to those in nonliterate societies."[53] Literacy has a profound affect on the societies that it touches, moving those societies from more concrete thought forms to more abstract ones. As the missionary seeks to contextualize his message, he must seek to reify his language, reducing his tendencies to communicate using abstract phrasings and taxonomic categories, and move towards the use of real-life illustrations. Chronological Bible storying may be helpful towards this end, but it is at best one method among many possible methods, and its use should not excuse the missionary from being a student of his host culture. He must still examine the various genres of communication used in his culture, seeking to understand how their styles of communication are different than his own, and how he may better share the message of life.

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[53]Heibert, *Anthropological Insights*, 134.

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