

UNDERSTANDING AND/OR PARTICIPATION? The goal of making the Bible available in oral context

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No one can be clever and ecstatic at the same time

Sir A Quiller-Couch, quoted by HIE Dhlomo (1939).

Even illiteracy could not render the Bible powerless

David A Shank, commenting on Prophet Harris of West Africa.

1. Introduction

The translation of the Bible into the different South African languages is now almost completed. However, in an IMER report to the Bible Society it was pointed out that there are about 8 million people in South Africa who cannot read at all, while a further 12 million have received formal schooling but are functionally illiterate (cf Crafford 1998:1).

In response to this information, the Bible Society commissioned IMER and the Research Unit for the New Testament at the University of Pretoria to prepare a report on the question: *how can the Bible Society make the Bible available in oral contexts?* The present article is based on the research that was done in preparation of this report. A basic question is how the relation between two diverse goals, *understanding* and *participation*, should be arranged when making the Bible available in oral contexts.

The problem can be formulated as follows:

is the relation between understanding and participation in the communication patterns of oral contexts different from the relation found in the Bible? If so, how should the interaction between understanding and participation be arranged in a Bible translation for oral contexts?

In the search for an answer to this question, attention was given to:

- views from African writers;
- views from literary scholars;
- defining the target audience;
- own fieldwork and
- views of Biblical scholars.

The first three topics will be discussed in this article, while the last two are being addressed in a second article that is still in preparation.

2. 'Participation' in traditional African culture, as described by African scholars

The traditional African communication patterns have been discussed by African writers since as early as 1936, when H I E Dhlomo (1936:232) wrote:

Action! Rhythm! Emotion! Gesture! Imitation! Desires! ... Action, rhythm and the other histrionic qualities are not foreign to the African - neither is drama ... The origin of African drama was a combination of religious or magical ritual, rhythmic dances and the song. These ceremonies were based on what anthropologists call Sympathetic Magic ...

The dances were rhythmic and expressive; the songs emotional and devotional ... Drama and poetry have always been closely associated.

In another article, Dhlomo (1939:89) rejected rhyme as a suitable outward form for the emotional content of African poetry. He quoted Sir A Quiller-Couch who said no one can be clever and ecstatic at the same time. Taking Hebrew poetry and Shakespeare's later works as examples, Dhlomo propagated the use of rhythm as the form best suited to the African genius:

This sense of rhythm is seen even in the movement of tribal people. The element is also well marked in African music and in tribal plastic art. The dances, too, are strongly rhythmical. In fact, one may almost say *the greatest gift of Africa to the artistic world will be - and has been - Rhythm...* (a) form of poetry and rhythmic effect distinctly African... *Rhythm is more than a physical sensation. It is inspired uniformity in motion, giving birth to thought and emotion and vision.* (Dhlomo 1939:90, emphasis added).

A similar statement is made, more recently, by Ibe Nwoga (1976:17,18,21):

My understanding of the issue is related to a distinction between modes of knowing - that *whereas traditional western man has evolved a more detached, analytical mode of understanding of his world, environment and aspects of human functioning, traditional African man retained a more holistic, instinctive mode of understanding* (emphasis added)... I try various expressions to describe this mode - spiritual absorption, instinctive perception of whole meaning, sensitive interaction - but these are words that have their meaning in the language of a cultural mode of perception which is particular and rationalistic. The total of these expressions, however, comes close to what I mean, for which the word *rapport* may be used... (if) the African should be found to have a predominating tendency towards this type of knowledge, then it should be recognised, not indeed as exclusive, but as characteristic.

Commenting on a quotation from the Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka's 'A Dance in the Forests', Nwoga (1976:21) writes:

I think what is excluded here is a specifically analytical understanding. I don't think either that Soyinka is talking about emotional or sensuous response in their western connotation. *Perhaps rapport is the word, the direct interaction between the observed art object and the as yet universalized archetypes of the subject's spirit or soul or imagination or sensitivity or totality of person* (emphasis added).

Nwoga (1976:27) quotes the Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo's reply to an interviewer who asked him why his poetry was so hard to understand:

Well, because what we call, understanding... passes through a process of analysis, if you like, of the intellectual - there is an intellectual effort which one makes before one arrives at what one calls the meaning. *Now I think it is possible to arrive at a response without passing through that process of intellectual analysis, and I think that if a poem can elicit a response, either in physical or emotional terms for an audience the poem has succeeded...* (emphasis added).

Nwoga says that there is strong evidence to suggest that the characteristic mode of African aesthetic perception is non-analytical or non-intellectual, relying essentially on the achievement of rapport with the art object. The moment of epiphanic understanding in which time past, present and future are subsumed... is the peak to which African poetry, traditional and modern, aims (Nwoga 1976:26).

The term epiphanic may be an indication that African aesthetics has a religious dimension.

Dorsinville (1976:70) states that the famous poet from Senegal, Leopold Senghor himself says that the meaning is less dependent on discourse, analysis, linear thought than on breath, rhythm, sensibility.

The well-known South African literary scholar Ezekiel Mphahlele (1964:221) expressed the same basic idea:

It is significant that there is much more creative writing than scholarly prose by Negroes in Africa. Perhaps it is because a poem or short story or a novel is so close to individual experience, and therefore more natural modes of expression than argumentative prose; and further, because intellectual systems and the arguments involved are not natural to Africa.

3. African responses to Western communication patterns

The response of the traditional African culture to the Western one, which was experienced as being different, was not uniform. Efforts to maintain the traditional pattern alternate between resistance to or rejection of the alien intruder, to accommodating and absorbing it in the traditional pattern.

The more accommodating approach can be seen in the following statements by prominent African scholars:

We seem to forget that our neo-African culture, by its very nature, is going to absorb much more of European techniques - a process that should not worry us, really: our writing can only be valid if it interprets contemporary society in a mode of expression that hits on the intellectual, emotional and physical planes of meaning (Mphahlele 1964:231).

And (in response to the disintegrating impact of modern Western culture on the traditional African world):

the widening of the circle... will constitute the only human progress... The reunification of all things in a primary universal construct (Awoonor 1976:167).

Both resistance and accommodation can be seen in Duncan Brown's, discussion of the songs of Isaiah Shembe, a leader of the Nazarite Church, one of the largest of the African Independent/Indigenous/Initiated Churches (AIC's) in South Africa. Shembe was born about 1870 (Mthethwa 1992:242) and worked in Natal between 1911 and 1935 (Brown 1998:120).

Brown interprets Shembe and his oral poetry within its socio-political context. The prophet is depicted as one of the new kinds of Zulu leaders who came to the fore to occupy new societal spaces after the authority of the Zulu monarchy was virtually destroyed in the 19th century. Brown states that Shembe sought to revitalize Zulu society through the maintenance and revival of social customs and mores, many of which were rejected by the mission churches (Brown 1998, pp119, 20).

Shembe tried to restore the traditional identity and the traditional world, by taking the new ways brought by the whites up in the traditional patterns. In Awoonor's terms, Shembe

made the circle bigger in order to achieve the reunification of all things, including also the Biblical message, into the traditional pattern.

Shembe's resistance did not consist of a total rejection of the new. It consisted of an effort to interpret the new within the framework of the old, in this way maintaining and even strengthening the old.

This search for the reunification of all things can be seen in the way that the hymns of Isaiah Shembe and the Church of the Nazarites treat many of the most pressing issues of twentieth-century Zulu history in particular, and modern South African history in general. The hymns deal with pressing issues such as: ownership and occupation of land; economic dispossession; African nationalism and ethnicity; the ideological and educational role of the missionaries; *the suppression of orality by the epistemological and cognitive authority of the Western tradition of print*; and the pattern of psychological subjugation and black resistance (Brown 1998, 124; emphasis added). All of these belong together. Orality cannot be seen in isolation, it forms part of a cultural and political movement. To return to oral forms can be an act of political resistance.

Mthethwa (1992:254,255) says that Shembe's hymns are very controversial in terms of their content. Some were not published, presumably because the editors felt they attacked the white administrators of the country. However, states Mthethwa, their credibility as Hymns should be measured against the views of the insiders, that is, African opinion. One of the functions of music according to the African conception is to lampoon one's enemies. On the whole, therefore, whether the hymns echo the Biblical text, or are downright satires, they reinforce the religious experience of the people.

Orality is important in restoring traditional identity, because cultural forms such as dances, rhythm, movement, intonation, dress, cyclicity, orality, etc create a unified or synaesthetic religious effect, i.e., that people are united again with their cosmos. The use of traditional cultural forms creates a religious effect, and can become part of the political resistance to white or western domination. Such resistance can also reject the authority of the written Bible, as maintained by the missionaries. Such authority requires exclusive obedience to the Bible, and is not easily absorbed into the inclusive African circle, where opposites are accommodated. The resistance to the written word can be seen in a hymn of Shembe (Brown 1998, p124):

They brandished their bibles and testaments in unison
They said it was written 'Thus!'
Breaker-away, let us leave and let us head for own Zululand...

In the seventies, resistance against white domination became much more political and overt. Black Consciousness, with its slogan: Black is beautiful! was popularized. Political activism often included strong resistance to literate forms. The affirmation of African cultural traditions and the desire to avoid white interference and censorship led to a strategy of performance rather than publication. Poets like Siphosiphiso Sepamla and Wally Serote who did publish were regarded with hostility and mistrust in spite of their strong support for Black Consciousness and the struggle against apartheid. Performance included African robes, rhythmic movement, facial expression, gesture, intonation, alternating pace of delivery, pauses, and the hypnotic beating of the drums. It involved a return to the ancestral source, cyclical construction, parallelism and repetition. The repetition can be seen in the following example from 1979, by Ingoapele Madingoane (Brown 1998: pp182-185):

Free my soul
 Let me decide
 Between you and me
 Let me decide
 Between evil and good
 Let me decide
 Between freedom and slavery
 Let me decide
 Whether men
 Should live in happiness or misery.

The oral texts that did appear in print were typographically 'marked' for its oral ontology (Brown 1998:192). A good example, also by Madingoane, is given by Brown (1998:197):

Don't crawl to your future
 You are bound to be brave
 Reach your goal blackman
 Stand up man stand up and
Go man go
Blackman go.

Communication carriers such as a literary or an oral text were seen as culture carriers and used as vehicles for political and religious activism. This tradition includes the well-known protest figures Frantz Fanon of Algeria, Leopold Senghor of Senegal, and Madingoane of South Africa. Brown quotes another literary scholar, Michael Chapman, who wrote in 1984:

Underlying such an approach is the vision of an African anthropomorphic universe wherein all relationships - from God to the ancestral spirits, through man to the animals and plants - are mutually co-existent. It is a universe which evinces beauty-in-harmony; it is (to quote Senghor) 'a dictionary, a web of metaphors, a vast network of signs' and is characterized by the depth and intensity of affective life. *Thus artistic technique, in its attempts to express rhythmic essence, is at the same time felt to be an ethical principle;* the poet, by chanting his poem, gives audible substance to those life forces which, according to African ontology, *are deemed to emanate from God and are Being - for Being is Force, Life is Energy.* As far as the poet is concerned, therefore, the ideal (again to quote Senghor) is 'total art', in which a world of static appearances gives way to one of dynamic realities; *'imitation is superseded by participation, the master-word of Negritude'* (Brown 1998:193-194, emphasis added).

The first question to be considered comes from these views, expressed by African and literary scholars. It can be formulated as follows: How must the Bible be translated in an oral context, if there is the distinct possibility that the oral communication form would communicate a specific cultural identity and a non-Biblical religious orientation? Or should we agree with people like William Carey, famous missionary of the 19th century, who maintained that a certain degree of development, such as the ability to read and write, is essential to support a vital Christian life (Meijer 2000:20)? Is the medium the message?

4. Case study: Prophet Harris

In David A Shank's excellent study of Prophet Harris, the Black Elijah of West Africa, the concept participation is used again. Could we say that this traditional African religious

orientation is here subordinated to the Biblical faith and that the Biblical faith is expressed in an authentic way in the traditional African cultural forms?

Shank's comprehensive study analyses the thought of William Wade Harris, the Glebo (Liberian) loyalist whose prophetic mission from 1910-1929 moved tens of thousands of West Africans out of traditional religion into the stream of Christianity and modernisation... (cover).

It was said of Harris: He lives in a supernatural world in which the people, the ideas, the affirmations... are more real than those which he sees and hears materially (Shank 1994: 150).

In his early life Harris was a Methodist lay preacher. He acquired a good knowledge of the Bible. In 1910 he had a trance in which he claimed that the archangel Gabriel visited him. The appearance happened whilst he was in prison for insurrection against the colonial powers. In this period he wanted to return to his traditional religion. He felt: The Western 'god' and Western 'civilization' were not enough; not even simple justice had been achieved (Shank 1994: 106). But this visitation by the archangel led to a second conversion. He was told to burn the fetishes of traditional religion and to become a prophet of the reign of Jesus Christ. The visitation sparked off a movement in the midst of precipitating factors such as social disintegration, catastrophes, economic deprivation, political oppression, culture clash etcetera. His inspiration was provided by the Bible, and particularly Daniel and the book of Revelation... under the guidance of the Angel Gabriel, who was his major interpreter of Scripture (Shank 1994: 157, 158).

It is clear that Harris struggled with the same issues that Shembe did. But the outcome, it seems, was different.

Shank (1994:170-171) points out three levels of Scriptural usage by Harris: the analogical, that he learned from the missionaries; the fulfilment of types; and participation. Shank interprets participation with reference to Levi-Bruhl and Vincent Mulago. It is a dimension of the so-called pre-logical way of being: Harris, through 'vital participation', had been 'grafted in' to the 'holy root' of Israel's life and faith to such an extent as to 'partake of the root and fatness of the olive tree'. In his traditional faith Harris was involved with or participated in the lives of his ancestors, the living-dead; that was replaced by participating spiritually in the life of the people of God...with Moses, with Elijah, with the Archangel Gabriel, and supremely with Jesus Christ.

Harris used the Bible in two ways: as source of power, in a ritual way, and as source of knowledge and understanding of God. Shank (1994: 212-216) describes it as follows:

When Harris wanted to communicate his power and authority he gave his Bible. This was the case even when the recipients were known to be illiterate... Even illiteracy could not render the Bible powerless...

Nevertheless, illiteracy was to be overcome... In (a) message (of Harris) it was written:

Read the Bible; it is the Word of God... Search out the light in the Bible. Learn your letters that you may be able to read the Bible; it will be your guide...

...ultimately his message was a different message from that of the missionaries; he attributed to the Bible a power - which he had experienced as he moved from illiteracy into literacy - which the missionary had not experienced in his individualistic and desacralized society where one was normally literate... The Bible had the power to 'turn on' the voice of God; it was a different kind of potency than that of his missionary mentors. The powerful book was a part of Harris' message.

Harris, it seems, worked within this field of tension between the two ways in which the Bible can be used. This field of tension was described by J Goody (1977) as 'the interface between the written and the oral'. This is perhaps a better description of the context of the target audience of a possible Bible text than the term 'illiterate'. The interface between the oral and the written is also the field of tension between Christian faith, traditional African religion and modern secularism.

In this field of tension, it is not yet clear which of the contending forces would emerge as the strongest one. Literacy is on the decline on the African continent (cf: African Ministers' Report, p7), but there are many reports that the churches are growing fast. A Bible text should be able to play the required role in this field of tension.

The goal, then, is not simply to provide an oral text to an illiterate audience. The goal is to provide a text that would function in a dynamic way within the field of tension between the written and the oral, between participation and understanding, between the magical and the cognitive, in order to start make it possible for the audience to hear the Bible as living word of God, by starting with them where they are.

This goal requires a clearer definition of the target audience.

5. Target audience

The target audience for this investigation was initially described as the 8 million non-readers plus the 12 million who were functionally non-readers. One way to reach the target audience, it was decided, was through the African Independent/Indigenous/ Initiated Churches (AIC's).

The choice of the AIC's as target audience for this project depended on our assumptions about:

- Their growing importance; and
- Their relation to oral culture.

These assumptions will now be motivated briefly.

The assumption about the growing importance of the AIC's is substantiated by the following statistics: According to Oosthuizen et al (1994:ix) the AIC's had an estimated 36% of all African Christians in South Africa under their wings in 1991 (up from 12% /14% in 1950 and 27% in 1980). Some experts put the present membership of healing churches as high as 55% (Bate, 1995, cover page). The churches of the Book, on the other hand, are down from 75%/80% of all African Christians in South Africa in 1950, to 52% in 1980 and 41% in 1991 (Oosthuizen et al 1994:ix).

The second assumption was that a significant number of the non-reading population belong to the AIC's and that the AIC's largely make use of the communication patterns of oral cultures, while the communication patterns of the written word play a central role in 'mainline' churches.

This assumption may not be completely correct. Oral forms of song and dance are making increasing inroads into the liturgy and church practice of the 'mainline' churches in all culture groups in South Africa, including many Afrikaans congregations in the reformed tradition. This phenomenon was not investigated in this project, but it does have an impact on the definition of the target audience.

At the same time, it is important to emphasise that the AIC's, on the other hand, do not have purely oral communication patterns. In many, if not most, of these churches there are members present who are literate and who can read from the Bible during the church service.

In churches over the whole spectrum one can detect the place and role of both oral and literary communication forms. A purely oral culture hardly exists in South Africa. Even oral communication has been affected by the presence of the literate.

We must conclude, then, that both patterns are found in both types of churches, and that the differences between them are not absolute, but rather one of emphasis and how the two patterns are combined and used to form the different characteristic styles.

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The results of literary studies shed further light on the target audience. The renewed recognition of oral communication in projects to make the Bible available, must be seen against the background of an international literary re-appraisal of oral literature (cf Okpewho 1992:xi, 17,362; Opland 1983; Brown 1998, etc). The neglect of oral literature in the past is attributed to the political oppression of black societies and the belief that the written word is superior to the oral, or the modern to the primitive (Brown 1998: 1,6, etc). The renewed interest in oral literature has to do with the discovery of the vital role played by oral art forms in urban social life (Okpewho 1992,4; Brown 1994,4) as well as in political protest and the struggle against white domination (Brown 1998:165-212). The renewed interest in orality is also stimulated by a worldwide realisation that modern Western culture is not the norm for all other cultures, or the final destination of the trajectory of non-Western cultures.

At the end of the investigation, the target audience was redefined. The definition now includes reference to the interface between the oral and the written (Goody) and the spectrum of oral contexts from, on the one extreme, the (non-existent) purely African traditional context to the new oral context of the electronic media (that fell outside the scope of this project).

6. Conclusion

In a subsequent article, it is planned, attention will be given to the interaction between the oral and the literate in the Biblical text, and to the way that some aspects of the oral pattern (literary and political), emerged when the existing literate text was presented in an oral form to specific audiences. These observations would, it is hoped, provide some guidance for the way in which the Bible could be presented in an oral context.

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