

Was Jesus a Zairian?

*Using the heart language on tape makes "Jesus talk" meaningful and receptor oriented.
It is received with positive response and greater receptivity to the Gospel.*

by Paul D. Dyer

“Amazing! Simply amazing!” said my Zairian friend as he listened attentively to the words coming from the small cassette recorder.

I asked him what he found so amazing. He answered, “It’s that Jesus was a Zairian.” I said, “No, not really.” “Well,” he said, “Then He must have been a Tanzanian.” “No, He was not a Tanzanian either.” “A Ugandan or a Kenyan then?”

“Why do you say that He must have been a Zairian, a Tanzanian, a Ugandan, or a Kenyan?” I asked. “Well, if Jesus was not a Zairian, nor a Tanzanian, nor a Ugandan, nor a Kenyan, then why is He speaking Swahili?” My friend was listening to Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount from a cassette in Swahili.

Soon several of the station workers gathered around the tape player to listen to the words of this Swahili-speaking Jesus. I took several pictures of them as they listened, laughed, and talked about what Jesus was saying to them. I thought to myself, “What a fantastic way to communicate the Gospel.” If people who can read still appreciate, enjoy, and avidly listen to the tapes, how much more would the non-readers benefit from this method of communication?

I had been working in the pastoral training programs of our church in Central Africa for over fifteen years. There were more than 800 pastors and catechists (lay pastors) in the church and many of them had completed, were enrolled in, or were hoping to be enrolled in one of the training programs. All of the programs included courses in evangelism but, at that time (1988), all of them were literacy-limited. The

ability to read was a prerequisite for admittance into a training program. However, as I traveled and worked in the rural mountainous areas of eastern Zaire, I became increasingly aware that these literacy-dependent programs were “missing the mark.” Many of the lay pastors and evangelists were non-readers. A century of literacy programs carried out by the government, and religious organizations had not significantly increased the functional literacy rate among the majority of the population.

Literacy Definition

Different agencies and writers have different definitions of literacy. Sometimes literacy is defined as the ability to read government documents or to answer questions about them. Another definition of literacy is based on completion of the third grade of primary school. Obviously, the literacy rate of a given population varies according to the standard of literacy used. However, for the purpose of Christian discipleship, literacy would have to mean the ability to read and comprehend a fairly advanced and complicated book (the Bible). With this qualification in mind and considering the literacy estimates for Zaire, it became evident that “functional literacy” rates were low and that the potential for Christian maturation by literacy-based methods alone was limited. It meant that only one (or at best two) out of every ten Zairians could actually read and comprehend the Bible or other Christian literature.

A second major problem that came to light was that the Bembe people were unable to read their own tribal language. No literature existed in the Bembe

language, so it had remained a spoken rather than a written language. Therefore, even after the entire Bible had finally been translated into the Bembe language and had been made available in printed form, the people had to be taught to read it.

The Political Reality

Also, the politics of Africa in general, and of Zaire in particular, make the future of mission work there very uncertain. A shift in the government’s policies or a change of government could eliminate many literacy-based programs. In other countries where Free Methodist missionaries have worked diligently on Bible translation and literacy projects, (preparing and distributing Christian literature), the possession of a Bible or a piece of religious printed material is now illegal and punishable by death or imprisonment, and the Christians have only the ideas and concepts which they have been able to retain in their hearts and minds to sustain them spiritually (Klem 1982, 34, Dyer, 1994, 26). Therefore, in Zaire, the HEAR (Hosanna Evangelism Aid Research) project, and the other oral communication projects, were conceived and implemented to encourage the use of oral communication methods to transmit and retain the Gospel story.

The first segment of the HEAR project was to be a pilot program involving fifty of the more than five hundred Free Methodist churches in Zaire. We hired a full-time director for the program and worked with the district superintendents to name each district’s directors.

The district directors, superintendents, and the consultant (me), were to

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form the central HEAR distribution and management committee. This committee contacted eligible churches, screened them, and selected churches to include in the program.

Following the selection of a local church, that congregation would form a HEAR committee composed of a chairman (the pastor), a director (to arrange the “hearings”), a manager (responsible for the equipment), and a counselor (an elder of the church). Each local church would have to agree to have at least two “listening sessions” per week and each session would be followed by a discussion time with pre-arranged questions to be answered. Monthly reports were to be made regarding attendance and the proficiency of the answers of the attendees. It was the responsibility of each church to supply the building, the cassette players, and the batteries with which to operate the players. In return, Hosanna would supply each church with the entire Bible on cassettes and ORCOMP, (the Oral Research Communication Methods Program), would pay the general director and take care of the logistics of importing and transporting the general director and the cassettes.

This program was conceived in 1989. However, it didn’t get underway until well into 1990. By that time, both the economy and the political situation in Zaire had deteriorated. The postal system had ceased to function and we had to use either a Kenyan address and charter Missionary Aviation Fellowship to fly the mail in once a week, or use a Burundi or Rwandan address and regularly make expensive and time-consuming mail trips to these countries. Whichever method we chose, we knew we could expect extensive hassles at the borders with the immigration and customs officials.

Therefore, we decided to make a trial run with just ten sets of cassettes. We had the first box sent to Burundi. When I got the notice that the box of cas-

ettes was in the post office in Burundi, I made a trip over to get it. Just to make that one trip cost around \$500 and took three days even though Bujumbura, Burundi is only about eighty miles north of Baraka, Zaire. When I got to the post office in Burundi, I had the misfortune to encounter a customs official who demanded \$125 in customs charges. I left the box of cassettes in the post office for a day or so hoping that maybe another customs official would come in. However, that was not the case, and I ended up paying the \$125. Then, when I got to the Zaire border, the customs official there demanded another \$125 and kept one set of the tapes.

I did finally get the tapes down to Baraka and began to arrange for their distribution. The bishop of our church named the director of one of the drama groups as general director of the HEAR project. However, it was at this time that the Zaire army mutinied in Kinshasa and went on a rioting and looting spree and the missionaries were ordered out of Zaire. We evacuated to Burundi, leaving the program in the hands of the HEAR director and the national church.

Program Logistics

Eventually the nine sets of cassettes were distributed and enthusiastically received. However, the churches had difficulty in maintaining the project because of the high cost of the cassette players and the batteries to run them. Individual pastors are now using the cassettes in their homes to conduct Daily Vacation Bible School programs that allow the children to come in to “listen to Jesus talk.”

Previously, another cassette project had been carried out in cooperation with Gospel Recordings of Canada. Gospel Recordings is dedicated to putting Bible portions and stories into the languages of people groups who are without a Bible translation or who are

mostly non-readers, even though there is a Bible in their language.

Zaire is composed of an estimated two hundred ethnic groups, with many sub-groups, and has five official languages: French, Swahili, Kikongo, Kiluba, and Lingala. A liberal estimation of literacy, as of 1986, is 45% (those with a third grade education). In the whole country there are only twenty complete Bible translations, twelve New Testament translations, and 33 portion translations (Johnstone 1987, 454-57). This means that many groups, (if they are evangelized at all), have heard the Bible being read only in a trade language. Many of the women and those who live in remote areas do not speak the trade languages, though there are fewer of these groups now. However, their “heart” languages are their tribal tongues.

In 1976, I made an evangelistic/TEE trip to Kabambare in the Fizi district with some of our Zairian church leaders. The area is very remote and isolated and had little if any missionary visitation during the preceding eighteen years. Our goal was to visit the Free Methodist churches in the area and to assess the possibilities for subsequent evangelistic and TEE safaris. However, when we arrived in the region I came to the realization that we were in contact with many different language groups, many of whom had never had any biblical resources or other witness, as far as we could tell, in their people group. We became extremely concerned about these people. They lived so close to our mission station (in actual miles) and yet were so far from the Lord. They needed to “hear,” notwithstanding their isolation and apparent illiteracy.

Urgent Needs

On that trip we also became aware of the overwhelming medical needs of the people in that area. Any medical treatment (other than home remedies) was at best extremely limited, and in most

places, completely unavailable. In one of the villages we visited on this trip, I was offered ten dollars for one Aspirin.

On Sunday morning I was sitting in my “hut”, getting ready to preach, when a Bible School graduate came into my room with his little daughter. I knew that when he had attended the Bible school he had three children, so I asked him how the other two were. His head dropped to his chest and he began to weep. He said: “Bwana (Sir), they are dead.”

I asked him what had happened. He said, “Oh, Bwana, they just died of the sickness of this village.” He went on to say: “Oh, Bwana we need a dispensary here for my people.” Just then a young boy hobbled by the door on one leg. His other leg had been bitten by a snake and was now gangrenous, a fatal condition without prompt hospital attention.

I sadly offered a prayer for the young pastor and his now smaller family and went off to the church to preach. I had planned to give a basic sermon on the familiar (to us) John 3:16 passage, “For God so loved the world that He sent...” but when I got up to speak and looked down into the eyes of that young pastor and the young snake-bite victim, I could not preach. I sat down and had to let one of the African pastors who had come with me continue with the service while I buried my head in my hands and wept. The need for the love of God to be shown physically and spiritually to those people was so very great.

As a result of this trip, we began discussing the possibility of helping the people of that area develop some kind of health care system. At that time, the medical community was involved in heated dialogue concerning the village health centers. After considerable discussion and debate (and a great deal of

searching for funds), we were able to send a young African nurse to that village to open a health center. Many trips have been made back into that area to carry out medical, evangelistic, and Christian maturation work.

Bembe and Zoba peoples.

Shortly after that initial trip, I contacted Gospel Recordings to inquire

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about the possibility of sending a fact-finding delegation to Zaire. Thus, in the late 70's, Valerie Deguchi, a recorder for Gospel Recordings, came to our area, and we started planning recordings in the Bembe and Zoba languages. The Bembe people are the main group we work with in Zaire and the Zoba people are our nearest neighbors, a primarily Muslim tribe. We began at Nundu, our hospital station, where we asked for interested pastors to help with the recordings. All the work was volunteer. Among the Zoba people, there are few converts, and the Zoba recordings were done by the one and only converted Muslim in the Zoba village.

On one of Valerie's next trips, about 1982, we went as far as Kabambare (about 120 miles southwest of Baraka) and did recordings in Bangubangu, Kisonga, Kibuyu, and Kisi-mimbi (at Kayumba). It was there that an illiterate pastor came to us saying that he had received a dream in which someone was bringing a “box that talked” that would help him to tell other people about the “true God.” He had walked for several days to get to Kayumba to find

us. It was also there that we heard about an unevangelized pygmy group, the Mbote, or Twa, but we were unable to contact them on that occasion.

At that time, the Free Methodist work in the area was limited. We stayed in the homes of our church people when possible, or were received by Christians of other communities.

Valerie prepared cassette tapes

after she got home, some with singing in the different languages, and on our next trip we distributed the tapes and hand-wound “Grip” cassette players. We also recorded more tapes in several of the languages that we had already had begun recording before. We stayed with Christians a few miles west of Lulimba.

Twa Pygmies

The first real break-through with the Twa pygmies (called Mbote by their neighbors), came on a trip to the Makungu area when a catechist (church teacher) led us to a small group of pygmies camped within walking distance of the road. This was exciting because most of them had never before heard the Gospel story. An older woman in the group had “heard” the Gospel story on a trip that she had made outside the area. She spoke Swahili and she was able to help us with vocabulary. At the end of the recording session, two of the pygmy translators knelt on the ground and said that they believed in Jesus Christ as Savior. The others, when asked if they would also believe, said, “All children are not born in one day. We will come later.” We never saw the group again and the tapes of that session were somehow lost.

It was sometime after this that one of the Twa who had no previous contact with us walked the day-and-a-half distance from his area to the catechist's house. He said that God had told him in a dream to come to ask the

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catechist for something called a “Kaseti,” which the catechist took to mean a cassette. When the catechist told him about God’s Son dying and bringing salvation to all people, he said, “That is what I came for” and he believed. Soon afterwards, he brought his wife, children and another man and they also believed

On another trip into the Kabambare region, a chief came some seventeen miles to talk to the pastors who were with us. He asked that we send evangelists to his village. The pastors were very solemn after this and later confided that the chief had told them that if they failed to evangelize his tribe, a millstone would be hung around their necks at judgment day. Eventually, tapes of biblical portions were made in over twenty of the languages: Eembe, Kizoba, Bangubangu, Kisonga, Kibuyu, and Kimbote (Twa), among others.

In Conclusion

The Gospel Recordings program represented a good “marriage” between oral methods (tape recordings of the Scripture and Christian songs), and the literature source—the Bible. The recording trips helped to open the whole area of Kabambare and Lulenge to the Gospel message. The cassettes were used to evangelize isolated tribes that otherwise might not have heard. Although the project targeted tribes that did not have the Bible in their language, we also found the cassettes to be effective among the Swahili speaking peoples, both readers as well as non-readers. The children especially seemed always to be fascinated by the recordings and the box that “talked their talk.”

The limitations of the program were mainly due to the isolation of the tribes and the lack of adequate funding for transport. The program’s great weakness was technical as well as economic in that some sort of players

were required to make the tapes usable. We did have hand operated players (Grip players), but they were not very well received as they required a lot of constant work to make them function. We also experimented with solar power players but these tended to break down due to the people’s lack of familiarity with mechanical devices in general and solar technology in particular. Follow-up efforts of the new believers and distribution of the tapes and the players was also problematic because of the extreme isolation of the target tribes.

The oral communication program in Zaire (which emphasized the use of stories, dramas, and songs) did not, therefore, make extensive use of cassette tapes. However, the two cassette tape projects (Gospel Recordings and Hosanna) were significant in the total program and we were able to draw several inferences from this experience.

The conclusion that we reached was that Zairians do respond positively to efforts to use oral-communication methods for evangelism and teaching. In both the cassette projects, there was great receptivity and response to the message. The story of Christ was told and

understood by readers and non-readers alike. It was exciting to watch people’s faces as they listened to the Gospel being presented to them by this media. These projects also demonstrated the effectiveness and great potential that a “mother tongue” cassette ministry has in a mostly non-reading population. The Gospel was consistent and clear and was also protected from syncretism.

References

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Dr. Paul Dyer is currently field director for the mission of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in East Africa. He lives in Nairobi and Kigali.

The Goal in Audio-Communication of the Gospel

In order to complete the goal, many of the languages of the world still need to have Gospel messages recorded, while others need to be updated. Recordings are still needed in some 4,000 to 6,000 unrecorded languages and dialects.

Project “Target 4000”

What will it take to finish the task? Some essential ingredients include a great mobilization of prayer plus the combined efforts of many churches and mission agencies. Teams of recordists will have to be recruited and trained for the task. An ongoing research program is seeking to identify which languages need their own separate recordings.

Gospel Recordings has initiated a project, called “TARGET 4000.” It is intended to be a catalyst that will focus attention, stir up interest, and mobilize forces in order to provide an opportunity for at least 4,000 unreached people groups to hear of Christ in their own languages.

They have developed a recording method that allows the message to be clearly communicated across language barriers. For more information on how you can help call or contact:

Gospel Recording USA

122 Glendale Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90026