

Oral Storytelling—It's the Baka Way

Inside a tiny bamboo and mud church, a handful of curious Baka villagers sat watching an animated Yves Léonard. He was telling the story—in their language—of how *Komba* (God) made the world.

Pacing vigorously, Yves told the creation story by using a different voice for each character and by mimicking the sounds of familiar forest animals. Soon beads of perspiration began to trickle down his deeply tanned face. Pausing to gauge the reaction of his small audience, he was pleased to see each one smiling. Their laughter and enthusiastic responses helped confirm what he already believed—the Baka's love for stories is the key to reaching their hearts.



(Above) There is no substitute for simple, relaxed interaction with people whom you serve. Yves' adventurous nature is matched by his grasp of this basic tenet of cross-cultural ministry. This lays a foundation for more formal translation (below).

Complex System

Not long after he began his linguistic work among the Baka, Yves became convinced that storytelling would play a key role in effectively communicating the gospel. For decades, the Baka's indifference to literacy had presented a major barrier to Bible translation.

Studying the Baka's complex system of storytelling, Yves took every opportunity to listen to their *likanos*, or traditional tales, and observe the intricate social customs that surrounded their use.

"They use a specific style of communicating that's not part of normal conversation," he says.

Working closely with Baka co-translators, Yves has completed translations of 14 Old Testament stories so far and is now beginning to translate stories from the New Testament. His immediate goal is to teach these stories informally, under the stars after a day's hunting in the rainforest, or during formal, pre-arranged events like the Sunday church meeting.

"We want to stay faithful to the content as it appears in the Bible," says Yves, "while resembling the *likanos* they are so familiar with."

Yves' commitment to teaching the Baka way includes plenty of spontaneity and active participation by the audience, as well as singing, sound effects, repetition and more.

The good responses from his church audience were one indication Yves is on the right track. Another indication are the reactions from his co-translators.



Growing Interest in Orality

Yves Léonard's use of the *likano* style to communicate key Bible stories reflects a larger exploration of oral storytelling by various mission organizations. The Oral Bible Network, a consortium of nine

Yves remembers how excited one of them became after Yves read aloud the story of Joseph, taken from Genesis.

"Do you know you are really speaking *Komba's* Word?" the man exclaimed. "When you speak this way, our people will have no doubt this comes from *Komba* and they will really understand."

Preparing the Way

While Yves is passionate about the place of storytelling in evangelism and discipleship, he is still committed to producing a written translation of the complete Bible in the Baka language. But for now, he's focused on translating selected Bible passages in the *likano* style and making these written translations available to both the Baka and the expatriate missionaries and pastors working among them.

Yves says there is just a handful of Baka believers in Cameroon, but most cannot read or write their own language. And even if written translations of Scripture were available, the Baka would have little motivation to use them. That's because they associate literacy with neighbouring Bantu peoples who look down on them.

"When [the Baka] see written things, deep inside their hearts it 'smells bad'," says Yves. "Written stuff is not local stuff. It never can be.

"The only way [Scripture] can become accepted is if it teaches things that are already accepted within the culture."

Yves is hopeful that by teaching many well-known Bible stories in the *likano* style, he will promote their familiarity and acceptance by the Baka and thus prepare them to receive God's Word in written form.

organizations including Wycliffe and its partner SIL, gives members the opportunity to share information and learn more about this developing strategy. It targets millions of functionally illiterate people worldwide who are living in primarily oral societies.

More on the Web

For more information see:

www.oralbible.com

www.chronologicalbiblestorying.com

www.epicpartnersinternational.com