

HARON MATWETWE

Principles and Strategies for Reaching and Discipling Nomads: A Case Study of the Pokot of East Africa

Introduction

Reaching and discipling believers from a nomadic background is a continual challenge in the mission world. Research indicates that the majority of itinerant people such as pastoralists are still unreached or are the least reached and are generally unresponsive to Christian influences (Hunter 2000:9-13; The Joshua Project). Although missionaries, who mostly hail from settled backgrounds, find the migration in search of pastures and water for animals to be a challenge and thus a barrier for fruitful witness and discipleship, unfamiliarity with the nomads' culture and worldview is considered a major contributor to ineffective witness among nomads.

The missionaries' inadvertent ignorance of nomad culture and worldview is largely based on trends in modern mission work. It is widely known that two-thirds of the world's population, which includes nomadic people, communicate primarily through oral methods such as stories, songs, proverbs, sayings, drama, dances, and riddles, yet ninety percent of Christian workers among this vast population are from literary backgrounds. These workers rely on communication styles, which emphasize reading, writing, and abstract presentation of the gospel—approaches that they are accustomed to, yet such approaches are foreign to nomads (Johnson and Musser 2012:100). To address this existing dichotomy is a profound necessity in order to achieve success. Any approach should include studying the cultural context of nomadic groups, developing culturally appropriate strategies for sharing the gospel, and also facilitating a more meaningful, sustainable, and vibrant ministry by discipling new believers from nomadic backgrounds to become mature Christians who are able to reach others.

This article is based on qualitative research I conducted in 2014 to collect data that enabled me to better understand the Pokot culture and worldview. Since the community shares most cultural values and practices with other nomads, principles for witnessing and discipling are applicable for other groups as well.

Socio-Cultural Context of the Pokot

The Pokot are part of a larger group of pastoralists, the Kalenjin, who speak a similar language, *ki nandi*. They are settled in West Pokot and Baringo Counties of Kenya, and Amudat District of Uganda (Obika and Bibangambah 2013:141-144). Other members can be found in urban centers where they do menial jobs to supplement the family income. The West Pokot County government estimates that there are 640,000 Pokots in the county, while those of Baringo County total 150,000. The number of those living along the Kenya-Uganda border and in urban centers, but who occasionally reunite with their families and are still attached to Pokot culture is largely unknown. Demographic sources such as the Joshua Project estimate that there are over 726,000 members of the group in Kenya alone (2016).

Culturally, the Pokot are related to groups such as the Karamojong, the Turkana, and the Masaai from whom they are also believed to have descended (Lamphear 2005:1127-1135). Through close association and interaction, these groups share similar traditional customs and practices such as rites of passage and the belief in ancestral spirits, which are manifest in every stage of life (Bollig 1990:71-79). Even though external influences and pressure from Western education and modern technology threaten traditional customs and practices, the Pokot have managed to maintain a relatively conservative cultural identity that is characterized by traditional celebrations and rituals. Life transitions and occasions of planting, harvesting, war, tragedy, or traditional religious practices are often accompanied with songs, dances, and chanting.

Like most pastoral communities in the region, the Pokot communicate primarily through proverbs, stories, songs, riddles, and dances. Information is stored, relayed, or shared through oral means. This also includes oral instruction and teaching of cultural values such as humility, obedience, respect, sharing, kindness, and generosity.

Proverbs

Paul Hiebert is clear that proverbs are useful in maintaining cultural values and identity of a community (2008:105-122). This is apparent

among the Pokot whereby proverbs are used to illustrate or convey important lessons. Clan elders apply proverbs extensively to rebuke, shame, and discourage bad behaviors, or to warn young people from straying away from moral paths. They are also skillfully quoted publicly during the elders' council (*kokwo*) as a sign of eloquence and oratory when deliberating and settling disputes.

Stories

Apart from providing historical information, stories communicate important lessons for daily living. They admonish young people to be imaginative, careful, sensible, and morally upright. Most of the stories are narrated around the family circle, in the field during celebrations and rituals of rites of passage, or when tending animals. The elders are usually the primary storytellers. They use illustrations from nature to capture the attention and imagination of their listeners.

Songs

Song and dance is an important feature of Pokot culture. Religious celebrations and ceremonies are marked by songs and dances, which also reveal the expressive nature of the people. Most ceremonies and rituals are never completed unless accompanied by songs and dances. Like proverbs and stories, songs convey lessons and instructions for daily living as well as petitioning divine beings for protection, providence, and leadership. It is noted, for example, that among the Borana of Northern Kenya, every aspect of their culture is captured in song and handed down from one generation to the next. Children are also educated and enculturated through music (The Borana of Ethiopia and Kenya 2005).

Riddles

Riddles are mostly shared by storytellers with children to sharpen their thinking and imagination. Children use riddles among themselves when looking after animals or playing at home. Even with the introduction of Western education in the community, riddles are still useful educational tools for imparting Pokot values to younger people and in keeping their culture intact (Chesaina and Swinimer 1994:47).

State of Christianity in Pokot

Christianity was first introduced to the Pokot in the early 1930s by the

Anglican Church (Anglican Church of Kenya 2009). Since then, various Christian groups have been involved in evangelistic activities using development projects and public preaching as the main witnessing approaches. Adventist work began in the early 1980s using health, education, and preaching to reach the Pokot. So far, the church has managed to build a few schools and a clinic to meet the needs of the people. The involvement of Global Mission Pioneers and relief activities has also contributed to ministry work among the Pokot.

In spite of many years of existence in the region, Christian growth in most churches is still minimal. The majority of the Pokot people still practice traditional religious beliefs and in some areas churches are non-existent. Currently there are a few Adventist churches in urban centers; however, some of the congregations lack adequate pastoral care. The survival and strength of these few existing congregations depend on appropriate discipling, mobilizing, and equipping believers to reach their fellow nomads. One priority for the Adventist Church is the need to identify the challenges involved with discipling believers from an oral background.

Challenges for Discipling Nomads

The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization states that the goal of discipling believers from oral communities involves identifying what new believers need to know and do, and then communicating these truths using appropriate methods (Lausanne Committee 2004:48). This proposition is embedded in the Great Commission mandate (Matt 28:18-20) that calls Christians from all cultural backgrounds to make disciples of all people by sharing the gospel and reproducing the character and life of Christ in their lives. Since modern mission frameworks are rooted in Western theological orientations which emphasize the reading and writing of Christian literature, two major questions arise: (1) how can believers from oral backgrounds be disciplined into mature Christians who are able to witness to others when the gospel presented to them is packaged in Western forms—a written Bible, a permanent house of worship (a church), and a hymnal (Petersen 2011:21), and (2) are oral believers able to share the gospel with others in a culturally appropriate way, and still ensure the message and lives of the disciples remain biblically faithful?

Challenges associated with discipling believers using oral methods undeniably exist. Although discipleship ensures that the gospel message is grounded and remains viable in successive generations, this goal still remains a huge task in oral contexts because Christian expressions are still largely suitable for literate and settled peoples. Even when the very best efforts are used in employing oral strategies, the challenge still looms.

Most missiologists and church planters agree that oral approaches such as the Chronological Bible Storying may be useful during the initial stages of witnessing, but they do not guarantee sustained discipleship among the successive second and third generations, or for leadership development in the church (Lausanne Committee 2004:40). In spite of these challenges, selected cross-cultural principles for sharing the gospel attest to the fact that oral communicators can hear, can respond, and can reproduce the gospel in the same way literary communicators do. These principles include appropriate methods for sharing the biblical story: Christ's method of discipleship, incarnational ministry and communication, respect for societal structures, authentic Christian living, and communication through stories. Applying these principles helps ensure that discipleship is biblical and also culturally appropriate in spite of the existing challenges found among ministry to nomads.

Appropriate Methods for Sharing the Biblical Story

Tom Steffen argues in favor of communicating the gospel through stories since seventy-five percent of the Bible is in a narrative form, fifteen percent is poetry, while ten percent is thought organized (2009:441). Even though other biblical scholars such as Robert Plummer lower the percentage to sixty percent, stories still dominate the Old and the New Testament (Plummer 2010:191). Extensive historical information in narrative format can be found in books such as Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Ezra, Nehemiah, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts. The other significant portion is poetry, which encompasses songs, proverbs, and lamentations.

This assessment of Scripture affirms fundamental facts about biblical narratives. First, Bible stories indicate that in spite of a modern theological emphasis on the ten percent of literalism of Scripture, God has in the past communicated and revealed himself more through narratives than through abstract thoughts. Second, presenting biblical teachings in story format is in line with God's revelation. Third, oral communicators can study and understand Scripture since it resonates better with their cultural communication styles. And fourth, oral communicators can be disciplined to follow Christ and become his messengers proving that orality is not a barrier to knowing God or telling others about him, but is a relevant strategy that is both biblical and culturally appropriate.

Christ's Method

Concerning Christ's discipling method, Ellen White admonishes

Christian workers throughout all generations that “Christ’s method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Savior mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence” (1942:143). Christ’s method involves a personal touch with people in all spheres of life—emotionally, physically, and spiritually. He managed to achieve this by purposely associating and relating with people, by listening to their stories and experiences, and then ministering to their needs. Through developing strong relationships with his audience, Christ won people’s hearts and bade them to follow him. These followers were not only excited to talk about him wherever they went, but they were also willing to die for him.

His approach also involved the use of familiar communication methods. He employed parables, sayings, proverbs, and stories to unfold the mysteries of the kingdom of God. His audiences were often challenged to examine their lives through the stories they heard and most of them gave their lives to God. The Savior’s method is captured in the words of Steffen who writes,

Jesus never wrote a book on systematic theology yet He taught theology wherever He went. As a holistic thinker, Jesus often used parabolic stories to tease audiences into reflecting on new ways of thinking about life. As Jesus’s listeners wrestled with new concepts introduced through parables, they were challenged to examine traditions, form new images of God, and transform their behavior. Stories pushed the people to encounter God and change. . . . Jesus’ stories, packed with theology, caused reason, imagination, and emotions to collide, demanding a change of allegiance. (2005:443-44)

Christ’s method which incorporates the development and strengthening of personal relationships is imperative among nomads as well. Missionaries should aspire to capitalize on the high relational and communal lifestyle of oral communities to develop enduring bonds between the missionary and the people in order to create a positive atmosphere for witnessing and discipleship.

Incarnational Ministry and Communication

Incarnation as an ideal motif for mission is fundamental for two major reasons: (1) it challenges missionaries to identify with the environment of the respondent community by entering into the culture of the people, learning how they think and make decisions in order to aid the process of communicating the gospel in ways that can be understood; and (2) it ensures that the message is translated into the cultural context of the

target group by using communication methods, symbols, and objects that are familiar to the local people (Van Rheen 1996:32). In communication, the hallmark of the incarnation approach ensures that through critical contextualization, missionaries discover from the community suitable objects and symbols to present biblical teachings rather than imposing unfamiliar illustrations from an outside community. For the Pokot and other pastoralists, this requires missionaries to intentionally use and apply in their sermons and teaching cultural proverbs, stories, songs, and riddles from the community that are not antagonistic with the Scriptures. This approach is likely to advance a positive response towards the Christian message from a people who are fundamentally suspicious of outside influences and fearful that outsiders will destroy their culture and belief systems.

Incarnated communication also includes the use of the local people's language. Charles Kraft indicates that people generally get excited when they first hear God speaking in and through their language (1994:121). The Pentecost experience (Acts 2) when the apostles spoke the languages of the visitors to Jerusalem is just one example of many instances which affirm that God desires to speak through people's languages so that transformation can take place at a deeper level (Pierson 2009:23).

Respect for Societal Structures

Christian witnesses should be mindful and respectful of social structures. Oral communicators are generally respectful of social structures emanating from life-long experiences. Among the Pokot, elderly people are highly regarded for their wisdom and judgment, which is for the well-being of the whole society. They are recognized for their knowledge of community history and understanding of values. Years of experience qualify the elders to be teachers, counselors, judges, and guides. They uphold moral standards and prescribe the way for living. On the other hand, young people are expected to listen and follow instructions that are offered by the elders. It is unusual for young people to speak in a gathering composed of older people unless they are asked to do so.

Lack of recognizing people's social structures can be harmful to witnessing and discipleship. Most tribal groups such as the Pokot hold a view that Christianity is a religion of women and children. Elderly men of authority are sidelined and generally uninterested in committing their lives to Christ. These unintended consequences could be corrected if missionaries became more attentive to the social structures by recognizing the authority of the elders and respecting them as the spokespersons of the community. In the church, elderly nomads should be identified and

prepared for leadership positions as much as possible, while grooming younger people for leadership where allowed. They should be trained to teach, guide, and counsel younger members since that would be in agreement with the expectations of the society.

Authentic Christian Life

During my research among the Pokot, I inquired from the elders why most Pokot people are generally reluctant to accept Christianity. Without hesitation, Lemokel, one of the village elders responded, "Why should we go to a Christian church? We have a better life than most of the Christians we see around here. When we have disputes in the village, we slaughter a goat, share a meal with the parties involved and hold a conversation, then the dispute is over. But Christians do not forgive or forget. They harbor hatred. They walk around the village filled with animosity in their hearts." The elder mentioned that he knew of some church members who did not talk to each other yet they always attended church services.

A genuine Christian life can neither be hidden nor faked. Nomads are keen to observe the lives of those presenting the gospel to them. Attitudes such as those narrated by Lemokel are a barrier to discipleship and witnessing among the nomads who tend to believe in people more than abstract truths presented to them. Like most oral communicators, nomads' model their lives after that of their teachers. This reality challenges Christian witnesses to lead exemplary lives, showing by word and deed what followers of Christ should be. A spirit-led life demonstrated by genuine love, humility, kindness, forgiveness, and mercy has more power to draw people to Christ than lengthy sermons and theological arguments.

Authentic Christian lives should also demonstrate genuine love and care for God and people (Lausanne Committee 2004:33). Attitudes of skepticism and suspicion or outside influences that are common among nomadic people stem from experiences of manipulations, marginalization, and stereotypes from those witnessing to nomads. Attempts to settle nomads or change their way of life through religion, education, and other development projects have often resulted in hatred of foreign influences imposed on the community. Making disciples in such contexts requires developing and maintaining genuine loving relationships without strings attached. Discipleship methods should also allow the nomads to choose how to worship God, what to give as offerings or tithe, when to be baptized, the type of church structure they should have, and how they should sing, among other choices. Genuine love will also be manifest by missionaries living among nomads, staying in their tents, listening to their stories, and praying for them. This will also be grounds for modeling a Christian life to be emulated by believers.

Communicating through Stories

Sharing the Christian message through stories is valuable in many ways. First, oral methods relate to the cultural worldview of oral communicators. Past events narrated over and over have a tremendous influence over the present and the future life of an individual as well as the community. One of the strategies being widely employed and championed by mission organizations such as the International Oral Network (ION) is the Chronological Story-telling Approach. The goal of this approach is to encourage witnessing based on narrating key biblical stories in a chronological order to assist oral communicators who depend on memory to retain what they have learned and to help the people shape their life experiences through the lens of the stories they hear (Poe). This approach also resonates with the oral communicators' understanding of the concept of time, which encompasses past events having present and future effects (Hiebert 2008:115). The chronological telling of biblical stories in such contexts helps to link biblical teachings into one big story rather than isolating the salvation story into disconnected units.

Other benefits of the chronological story-telling includes assisting hearers to understand each individual Bible story in the context of God's Big Story (McIlwain 2009:49). This helps to avoid blending of individual biblical stories or truths with conflicting worldview assumptions that the local people hold based on their own cultural stories and experiences. Second, by fostering a sense of community through uniting the storyteller and the listeners (Terry 1997:6), chronological story-telling helps to connect the missionary and the community as they engage each other in a relational way through dialogue and listening (Moon 2010). Third, chronological story-telling aids not only in worldview construction (Dicks 2012:61, Graham 2009:442-443), but also in its change (Dillon 2012:28-33). By sharing stories of the Fall, the call of Abraham, and the Old Testament sacrificial system and its promises of redemption, a biblically-shaped worldview is constructed (Hesselgrave 2000:145). This also enables new believers to become disciples-makers themselves as they tell others about the Bible (145), and even become "instant evangelists" (Steffen 2009:441).

Oral methods can also be useful in building bridges for sharing the gospel. In the context of Africa, stories have always been privileged places of God's revelation. The proverbs and myths of African people reveal that the Holy Spirit sowed seeds of the Good News in the African cultures long before the African people ever heard of Jesus' words and teachings. Pokot wisdom expressed in proverbs such as, *molupe chi ammony ondeng*—do not burn or prepare two walking sticks at the same time—reveals their understanding of virtuous living and can be connected with the biblical

injunction, one cannot serve two masters (Matt 6:24). By connecting biblical truths to local stories the people can be encouraged to pursue the most important matters of life.

Conclusion

Understanding the nomads' cultural values is fundamental for witnessing and discipling new believers. Missionaries' familiarity with the nomads' oral methods of communication is essential for modeling biblical living, and for developing, and equipping local Christians to be able to witness to others by reproducing biblical faith in their cultural ways. Those working among these groups should seek to employ oral methods such as proverbs, stories, songs, and riddles to communicate the gospel since these strategies are more relevant in oral contexts. Crafting and telling stories in a dynamic, natural manner will allow the hearers to be able to readily remember and then retell the stories to others, thereby ensuring that nomads express Christianity in culturally appropriate ways and are able to reproduce faith in their setting.

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Haron N. Matwetwe is a PhD candidate in Religion with a World Mission and Ministry emphasis at Andrews University. He has served as a teacher, a church pastor, and a licensed practical nurse. He holds undergraduate and graduate degrees in Theology.