
A Preference for Reading Print Scriptures in Senegal

The implications for Scripture Engagement of research on motivations for local language literacy efforts

Kyria B., 2019

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1) individualized listening to audio recordings of Scripture or
2) listening to someone else reading Scripture aloud.”*

From July to December 2017, I conducted a study on motivations for local language literacy efforts in Senegal. My primary research question was the following: “What are the implications of the motivations—of both adult literacy initiators and participants—for adult literacy projects in Senegal?” I had a number of secondary research questions, including whether motivations differ between Christians and those of other religious affiliations, and between male and female participants.

I included the following four literacy efforts in the study: the Presbyterian Church’s Serer-Sine effort, the Manjaku effort sponsored by SIL and the Manjaku language association, the Evangelical Church’s planned Crioulo effort, and the Wolof effort managed by the Jang du Wees library. For each effort, I conducted ethnographic interviews and focus groups among the initiators (the local agents most responsible for the literacy effort) and the participants (the current, past, or intended learners).

A preference for reading print Scriptures

While not a focus of my research, the attitudes of Senegalese Christian interviewees toward non-print Scriptures were an interesting and unexpected finding. They expressed their attitudes in the context of discussions on local language literacy and the motivations for it. Such attitudes often arose in response to questions I posed regarding the value of the written vs. the spoken and the differences between engaging with Scripture via one vs. the other.

Almost all of the Christians interviewed reported a preference for reading print Scriptures. This preference was in contrast specifically to 1) individualized listening to audio recordings of Scripture or 2) listening to someone else reading Scripture aloud. They reported inconveniences or inadequacies of these latter means of accessing Scripture. **No other non-print means of engaging with Scripture were mentioned in interviewees’ experiences.** In other words, they compared reading Scriptures to listening to an audio recording or to someone else reading but did not compare it to other oral strategies for engaging with Scripture.

The reason I had not expected this finding is that many Senegalese Christians cannot read the Scriptures. Knowing this, I had expected more mixed responses as to the place of reading print Scriptures. In fact, only four interviewees expressed an opinion other than preference for reading Scripture. These few were the only ones who reported a preference for listening, or a view that listening and reading were equally beneficial to spiritual growth, or the notion that Christians could participate in the life of the church in ways that do not require reading.

It should be noted that the research was qualitative in nature. The 32 Christians interviewed were not selected to be a representative sample. I employed a quota followed by convenience sampling strategy to select my research sites in four regions of Senegal. My selection allowed me to study motivations in church-sponsored and community-sponsored literacy efforts which included a mix of both Christian and Muslim and men and women. Within those sites, I employed quota sampling to select interviewees. I interviewed all the local initiators. Among participants, I made sure to interview people of both genders and both religious affiliations when both were represented.

Six churches were represented by the 32 Senegalese Christians interviewed. Five of the interviewees were pastors and another seven held church leadership roles of another sort—worship leaders, pastors-in-training, or interpreters. Seventeen were women, and 15 were men.

It should also be noted that my research was limited to individuals already involved or interested in local language literacy; interviewees were already biased in favor of literacy. They were already convinced that they needed literacy for a variety of reasons. Three of those who expressed a preference for reading Scripture had not yet started learning to read. They had been convinced of their need for literacy by something other than personal experience of any benefits resulting from literacy. It is therefore possible that this bias for literacy is more widespread in Senegalese churches than simply among those Christians I interviewed or those Christians who have participated in a literacy class. Further research would be needed to know if literacy bias is present and how widespread it is.

Inconveniences or inadequacies cited regarding hearing the Scriptures

The expressed preference for reading Scripture was accompanied by a general opinion that **reading** Scripture is necessary for a Christian to mature and to grow spiritually. They also reported ten main inconveniences or inadequacies regarding audio recordings or listening to someone else reading. Some of them are more substantive than others. A complete list follows:

1. One does not remember as well when one hears Scripture rather than read it.
2. One's understanding of Scripture is not as deep when it is heard and not read.
3. Scripture is less lasting or permanent when heard than when written and read.
4. Scripture is less convincing when heard than when written and read.

5. Hearing Scripture and not reading it makes one less autonomous, because someone else is needed to read and one cannot learn from the Scriptures oneself.
6. Sharing Scripture with others via audio recordings is more costly than reading it to them.
7. Audio recordings of Scripture do not allow one to choose particular verses to hear and in general are harder to manipulate than a print Bible.
8. Audio recordings can get lost or broken, while reading lasts forever.
9. Listening to Scripture is more passive than reading.
10. Spoken Scripture is less respected than written and read Scripture.

Two possible interpretations

The attitudes toward these non-print means of accessing Scriptures expressed by Senegalese Christians and church leaders can be interpreted in at least two different ways. I would argue that either interpretation has important implications for the work of Scripture engagement in such a context, and particularly for such work which involves non-print media.

First, **it is possible that Senegalese Christians and church leaders are expressing a real felt need for literacy and this for spiritual reasons.** It may be that the inadequacies and inconveniences which they report regarding listening to audio or read-aloud Scriptures create real limitations to their ability to engage with Scripture. If this is the case, or if one chooses to interpret their attitudes in this way, the felt need may still only be true for those who reported it. Regardless, it may be that some Senegalese Christians engage better with Scripture by reading it than by the oral means mentioned.

- **The implication of this interpretation is that literacy should not be discounted as a valid and even preferred Scripture engagement method for at least some Senegalese Christians.** When local language Scriptures exist and the conditions in a church are right for starting a literacy initiative, partnering organizations should see such an initiative as a potential tool for equipping Christians in their ability to engage with Scripture in transformative ways. Likewise, literacy efforts not affiliated with churches, but which include Christian participants, should be seen by partnering organizations as potential means of equipping Christians to better engage with translated Scriptures.

Second, **it is possible that Senegalese Christians are in need of a more nuanced perception of spiritual growth and the means to that growth.** Their expressed attitudes point to a bias for reading Scripture which may be misplaced. They may benefit from recognizing the significant spiritual growth which can come from hearing Scripture. They may need to grow in their understanding of how those who cannot read Scripture can still be disciplined in the

Christian faith through other means. They may need exposure to other non-print means of accessing Scripture other than the two which they reported, and which are mentioned here.

- **The implication of this interpretation is that non-print media should be accompanied by training which will challenge the reading bias.** Those working to create such Scripture engagement tools should recognize that they may be working against an ingrained bias, whereby their tools are seen as second-best while reading is perceived as the ideal. If church leaders and other opinion leaders do not truly believe that listening is an equally valid way of engaging with Scripture, they may not incorporate listening-based tools into their work or church practice. It would then follow that church members will only see reading of Scripture modeled in church practice and not any listening-based tools. Such obstacles must be addressed in the way non-print means of accessing Scripture are introduced.

Conclusion

The possible interpretations and implications of Senegalese Christians' reported preference for print Scriptures are not limited to these two. Further research and dialogue with Senegalese church leaders is needed to determine which of the above two fits best, or if another interpretation altogether best explains the preference. I would argue there is likely truth in both interpretations. Regardless of how they are interpreted, the expressed attitudes of Senegalese Christians to different ways of accessing Scripture cannot be ignored or dismissed.

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