
Scripture Big Books¹

Promoting Scripture use in difficult environments

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The promotion of literacy and Scripture use among the Badwe'e and Nzime people of southeastern Cameroon is a daunting task. They are located in the forest in tiny hamlets on roads that are not conducive to marketing their produce; hence there is very little money for luxury items such as books. Whenever books are produced, they are rarely sold since there is no way to market or distribute them. There is not even a market town for the Badwe'e people, since they are all subsistence farmers and have no crops to sell. Yet we wanted to circulate written Badwe'e. We especially wanted to promote Scripture however possible.

We had hoped to promote Christian literature during the Sunday school hour of the church, but we discovered that no Sunday schools existed! In every small town, there are enough interested people to manage only a church worship service. Even then that one service begins late on Sunday morning after people have walked substantial distances and after last-minute arrangements have been made.

We did notice that about a half-hour before the worship service, a few people would arrive at the chapels. Most of these were children, but usually there were also some old people and maybe some women. So our idea initially was to try to find some way to use this occasion to present the written Word.

To accomplish this we worked on a series of Scripture shell books that we then reformatted to landscape format. They then could be photocopied onto A3-size cardboard sheets. We then began by taking these to a chapel in Somalomo on Sunday morning where we would set one up and begin reading the Scripture story books to any folks who arrived early. As we read, we pointed to the words as they were pronounced. The illustrations captured the imagination of the children, and afterwards we asked some questions about the story. Some people came to us and said they would like to see these materials in other chapels in the area. We have distributed some of these Scripture Big Books and tripods to folks who seemed to genuinely want to edify the young people of the church with Scripture materials in Badwe'e.

Further work needs to be done so that good questions and discussions can follow the reading of these shell books. A library of books should be located in a central location, but as always,

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distribution will be a tremendous problem since villages are located at great distances from each other, and since roads are hard to negotiate half of the year.

We found that these Scripture Big Books were useful in several different contexts. Whenever they contained actual Scripture texts, they were carefully checked by translation committee reviewers, who made all sorts of suggestions on how to make them more natural. Such attention to detail was rarely made when the Scriptures were just read to them from a manuscript. Some of the suggestions made at this time were helpful and applicable to the whole of the New Testament.

Another use of the books was to take them along on trips, giving people a sample of what the Badwe'e Scriptures would be like. The installation of a tripod in a village, along with some reading materials, draws a crowd and gives an opportunity to those who can already read Badwe'e to show off their skills. It also gave us a chance to find out which villages were interested in reading and spiritual edification.

I would say that although we have found Scripture shell books produced in a large format to be useful, producing them for church and translation committee use is not sustainable over the long-term. Our language committee or translation team could produce the pre-enlarged shell book forms with equipment that they presently have available to them. However, they could not afford to take them to Yaoundé to be enlarged by photocopier; neither would they have the funds to have them printed in quantities of 50 or more.

Was this exercise worth the effort? Probably, since it gives the language committee additional manuscripts to produce in a standard, shell-book format. They already have a stock of two standard Scripture shell books, which were given to them to provide a revolving fund. If they ever sell a substantial amount of those books, they could print one or more of the prepared manuscripts.

I also think that exposing people to written forms of the Bible, even though they never would or could purchase them, has intrinsic value. I have found that one can always find donors for this kind of activity.