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## Audio Dramas for Scripture Engagement: A participatory oral approach

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*“Our dramas have not only been able to reflect the complexity of life and the consequences of sinful attitudes and behaviour, but also the power of God at work and the attitudes and readiness to help that Christians can and should be displaying.”*

The topic of this article finds its roots in my childhood. I grew up in a family of missionaries in rural Cameroon and I was exposed to Bible translation and literacy from my earliest years. Most of my friends, uncles and aunts were Cameroonians, and I often found myself stuck between two cultures which I found hard to harmonise. On the one hand I became familiar with the individualistic, analysis and knowledge oriented culture of my parents. On the other hand many folks I loved were far more community and relationship oriented, and as such learned and made decisions on the basis of what others said and who they loved and trusted.

One of the ways in which this clash of cultures manifested itself around me was that for as many years as I could look back, mother tongue literacy activities seemed to come to a halt whenever either funding, technical support or regular personal encouragement stopped. Most missionaries seemed to think that local Christians were suffering from severe literacy deprivation, while the majority of literate people I knew tended to make very little use of books, at best displaying them to mark their identity.

Perhaps because of this, I later returned to the Mambila community in Cameroon as a literacy and Scripture Engagement facilitator, in the hope of making literacy more appreciated, more widely used for accessing useful information. However, these years of service only strengthened the notion in me that being literate in one's own language only had sentimental value to a large percentage of the population, and did not seem to fill a real need. Of course the reasons for this are complex, and literacy is indeed a very important aspect of community development. However, when I compared the interest of the local community in mother tongue literacy with their interest in mother tongue audio-visual products, the difference was startling. The more I reflected on the impact of the Mambila Faith Comes By Hearing project and a dramatized audio version I produced of the Kande story, the more I realized that audio-visual media not only spoke to a much larger percentage of the community but also had the power to significantly raise their interest in written materials. Once these recordings were being listened to, New Testament sales and the sales of the Kande story books increased significantly.

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So far, surely, I have said nothing new. Many of you have had the same experiences as me, and there seems to be an increasing awareness that oral communication forms are as important today as ever and should not be side-lined by literacy-based scripture engagement efforts. Mobile phones and radio have become an integral part of life in the remotest places in Africa, and this offers new or ongoing possibilities for making God's word accessible in engaging ways. Faith Comes By Hearing's ministry and the new App Builder tools developed by SIL are examples of this which have transformed the publication process, and more importantly, the impact of translated scriptures. However, I would still like to caution us to think more deeply about the issues at hand. Could it be that we are forgetting one important aspect of oral communication in our desire to get the Word 'out there'?

Scripture engagement is all about dialogue, about interactivity. Not surprisingly we emphasize the importance of participatory communication processes in the context of Bible studies or listening groups. And we promote participation when it comes to establishing the translation style a particular language community aims for. When it comes to literacy, methods such as making big books from

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local materials or mother tongue writing workshops are used to release the creativity and expression of local participants and to address local issues in a relevant way. In addition, even stories that have been crafted by outsiders, such as the Kande story, are used to reflect local realities and promote local discussion. However, when creating audio products, more often than not, we follow rigid, standardized production processes which seldom allow for much creative, participatory input from the target audience. In fact, audio-visual productions generally depend on a 'script', meaning a very controlled and detailed way of ensuring no changes are made during the production process. There are of course good reasons for this. In the case of audio scriptures or scripture apps, it is vital that the original text be written down by trained translators and checked by a translation consultant, and that all recordings perfectly match this original text.

One might argue that voice-acting for scripture recording, especially of dramatized scriptures, does allow for creative participation. This argument is of course valid, and I myself hold very dear memories of a Scripture recording session with a group of men in northern Cameroon who composed a powerful melody and rhythm for Miriam’s celebration song after the crossing of the Jordan River. But such input into the audio production process is limited to the final form of a predefined product. To build on my earlier question, aren’t we missing a vital aspect of communication if we do not aim for more local participation and ownership with regards to audio-visual media? What processes do we use to promote the participation of target audiences in creating, not just shaping, audio-visual content? More importantly, how can we connect the creative expression, faith, knowledge and call to Christian witness we find among rural, illiterate communities with communication technology? How do we enable rural communities to create their own audio-visual products, so that their understanding of the local needs, both practical and spiritual, can be addressed using local languages? Wouldn’t answers to these questions allow many more people to be involved sharing in the Christian faith in new ways, be it via mobile phones or radio stations?

As I reflected on this question, recording stories with a Christian message seemed a good way forward because educational stories promised to be easy to develop and record by oral audiences themselves in their mother tongue, and they would fit the oral tradition well of teaching and remembering information through stories. This in turn motivated me to read more about participatory methods in general and participatory message development in particular, as well as educational entertainment. To my greatest surprise, I discovered that radio drama has been used all over the world with incredible effectiveness and over many years. To give a few examples, the UK radio drama *The Archers* for example was designed to teach farmers “how to increase agricultural productivity after World War II” (Sposato and Smith, 2005, p. 55). When a main character appears to die in a barn fire, this episode “was emotionally so engaging to its listeners that its story-line was picked up as a headline in the English tabloids the next day: Grace Dies in Barn Fire”, prompting many shocked listeners to write and call the papers” (ibid, p. 56). In Tanzania, a 1992 radio soap opera with built-in AIDS prevention messages, developed with the help of Popular Communications International, led to “significant differences in condom use” between reached and unreached areas two years later (Rosin, 2006, p. 40). In India people began to bring patients to the hospital instead of to faith healers due to radio drama (Malik and Pavarala, 2007, p. 174). In Lutsaan, India, radio drama created awareness for the social problems caused by dowry gifts, leading some men to take a stand against this practice (Rosin,

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**Radio dramas can transmit educational content in an emotionally engaging way, leading to positive social change**

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2006, pp. 43–44). In Honduras radio drama was used to overcome wrong beliefs about the origin of diarrhoea in children, while avoiding incomprehensible medical terms. According to local beliefs, diarrhoea was caused by a sack of worms in the lower abdomen, giving rise to a short drama with two fictional worm characters talking to each other about the kinds of healthy food which would make them go back into the sack (Sposato and Smith, 2005, pp. 184–185). These examples demonstrate that the

emotional impact and social role modelling of fictional plots and characters is not dependent on visual communication, and that by tapping into the imagination of listeners (MacLoughlin, 2008, p. 115; Wendland, 2005, p. 26), radio dramas can transmit educational content in an emotionally engaging way, leading to positive social change. Also, radio drama promises to be a particularly suitable means of communicating change to rural communities because oral societies tend to rely on narratives to

communicate knowledge (Ong, 2002, p. 138). More specifically, radio drama depends mostly on dialogue to move forward the story-line, fitting into the communication patterns of oral, rural communities which typically rely on interpersonal communication (Wendland, 2005, p. 25) and which tend to be “performance-oriented” (Ong, 2002, p. 173). As Sposato and Smith observed so eloquently, “The oral tradition was to marry well to the radio and enhance it” (2005, p. 9).

Using a communication tool as effective as educational entertainment is a huge responsibility. In Australia for example, listeners to the agricultural series *Blue Hills* sent baby clothes to two pregnant characters (De Fossard, 1996, p. xvi) and another character who mildly complained about her job “received several genuine letters from listeners offering her a better position” (1996, p. xvi). Similarly, when simple, working class characters in the popular drama *Ven Conmigo* (Come with me) in Mexico were seen picking up free reading materials at the headquarters of the government literacy programme, 12,000 people showed up at the very same building the next day, causing a major traffic jam, perhaps a worthwhile problem when considering that “close to a million new students signed up for literacy classes” (Rosin, 2006, pp. 42–43). The more I became aware of the power of educational entertainment, the more I became interested in finding an oral, participatory radio drama development method to avoid top-down communication. Such a process promised to give more room to the needs and voices of target audiences, but also to transform radio drama into a tool for contextualising the Christian message in a more authentic, more engaging way. As I undertook further research, I did eventually come across some examples of script-based methods which allow for some level of local participation. In Malawi for example, a well-trained team of local radio drama producers uses a combination of oral and written methods for developing dramas on local issues (Wendland, 2005). Similarly, the Lunaba drama team (Lunaba is a pseudonym for a West African language group), with the help of Michelle Petersen, produces Christian radio dramas on local issues by using scripts written by local performers themselves and further edited by peers within the drama team (2010). What both of these approaches have in common is that the resulting dramas are highly appreciated by local listeners as they reflect the experiences and culture of listeners most accurately. In both cases, real-life testimonies and experiences are used as a source of inspiration for story development. However, what both of these cases also have in common is that local input and participation is more or less limited to that of a limited group of persons who undergo some level of training and need to be literate. The radio drama team in Malawi for example did not invite the general public to take part in the production of its dramas because it considered this process as dependant on the experience of the team members. Similarly, Petersen writes about the Lunaba drama team that ‘obtaining a range of ages on the team of voice actors was difficult’, and ‘the few elders who came initially did not continue when they saw their reading skills were inferior to the youth’ (2010, p.27). Such groups of local drama developers can of course find ways to adequately represent the various needs and perspectives of the various members of their community, and I think such initiatives are all too rare and should be encouraged wherever we find them. However, without the direct input of certain age groups of the community and because participation requires long-time commitment, it is possible that some key voices and stories of the community remain unheard. For this reason, encouraged by these very effective, but literacy-dependent methods of local drama production, I continued my search for oral participatory drama development methods. However, I could not find any evidence that such a method had been established.

A new set of questions arose in my mind: Is it possible for rural communities to develop entire radio dramas through oral processes only, without writing a script? Could an oral participatory group process be developed to identify a need, agree on a message, and then develop a radio drama to fit the message? Between 2015 and 2016 I had the opportunity to do more research on this very topic as part of a study programme. Ironically, although studying literacy programme development, I sought a way around literacy for the purpose of participatory content creation. In what follows, I would like to give you some insight into my findings, perhaps encouraging you to experiment with this method yourselves.

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However, before I do that, I believe some clarification is needed with regards to the term 'radio drama' which I have used throughout most of this article. My focus here is not so much on radio, but on how to get communities involved in producing educational audio plays, regardless of whether such plays can be broadcast via radio, shared via mobile phones, or integrated into other communication strategies. For this reason, it may perhaps have



been more helpful to use the term 'audio drama' or 'audio play'. However, I have used the term radio drama in most of this article as this reflects the history and traditional role of audio plays more accurately in the context of development. Also, it is well worth noting that large networks of radios exist today in Africa which are "thirsty for programming content" (Sposato and Smith, 2005, p. 24). In Cameroon alone there are roughly 30 small regional radio stations, many of which are run by Christian missions or churches, and many of whom produce very little local content because its staff do not have the necessary training. In working together with several of them, I have discovered a gold mine of opportunities for Scripture Engagement, not least because such stations are usually listened to by a great variety of language communities, most of whom are incredibly excited to hear programmes in their own mother tongue, never mind being able to take part in them. For this reason, I hope this article not only encourages you to give participatory drama development a try in your ministry, but also to reflect on how to best work together with existing communication platforms. But now back to my research on participatory radio drama.

### **Experimenting with participatory 'oral scripting'**

Choosing action-research as my methodology, I set about experimenting with an oral radio drama development process. As highlighted earlier, my research did not focus on radio, but on how participants and listeners responded to the message and oral development process of participatory drama, regardless of whether the final product was going to be shared by radio broadcast or other

media such as mobile phones. This process was to be fully participatory, that is, allow all participants to give input into every step of the process, from the choice of the theme to the recording of the drama, regardless of whether they were literate or not. To experiment with different factors, I worked with two very different groups of participants in Cameroon. In Ngaoundéré, a town in central Cameroon, I produced a radio drama together with three young men and three young women aged between 19 and 21. The topic they chose was a combination of the issue of indecent women's clothing and the misuse of drugs to 'loosen up' girls. In one day, and without writing down a word, we developed and recorded an entire radio drama. I did not have the time to train the participants in audio editing, but after recording the drama with the group, it only took me one hour to complete the final production by adding some musical background. Interestingly, although the six youth raised a variety of topics to address, these themes actually led us into crafting a very realistic story in which several themes flowed together.

My second research cycle took place in Songkolong, a very rural setting near the Nigerian border. This session resulted in a radio drama on the issue of agro-pastoral conflict, and it offered the possibility of investigating the impact of radio drama when shared via mobile phones as opposed to radio broadcast. The participants were a very mixed group, made up of women and men ranging from 21 to 71 years. Most of them had very little schooling, some were illiterate, and almost all were farmers. All group discussions for identifying and prioritizing local needs and developing the message and story took place in the local mother tongue Mambila. Although this process was slowed down by the need to translate all communications into French, we were able to complete the entire drama in two days, without writing down a word. Although not one of the research participants of either group had previously been exposed to radio drama, the youth in Ngaoundéré understood the concept when I compared it to TV soap operas. And to my great relief both groups understood the concept very quickly when I played a sample to them.



So how did we go about developing the story and proceed towards acting it out? Generally, I saw it as my role to guide the communication process so that the ideas and testimonies of everyone could shape the process, and others in the group naturally joined in to facilitate group discussions. Choosing the main topic was the hardest part, and required that folks gave reasons for either insisting on their preference or gave reasons for why they wanted to go with someone else's idea. Once we had the topic, defining the message was easy, and everyone gave personal testimonies which underlined the importance of various elements of the message. In terms of developing the storyline, it turned out that identifying the different characters needed to transmit the message quickly led to assigning these needed roles to the participants. This in turn boosted the creativity of each person as they were

beginning to imagine how they would react in the story. Once we had decided where the story begins and what happens in the beginning (we called this scene one), the participants usually preferred acting it out and recording it right away, before moving to the second scene or before even knowing how many scenes were needed. In the beginning, the actors remained seated when voice-acting, but we soon realized that if they stood up for acting out their roles, their language became even more natural and heartfelt. Only three takes were needed to record part one in one go, using a small portable recorder. After each take, the participants immediately commented on what was good and suggested improvements such as phrases or individual words or sound effects that needed to be added or left out to make sure listeners understand the story. In fact, even while the actors played their roles, various participants would whisper lines into their ears to help them. In both research sessions it was motivating to see the joy and excitement of the participants as they were able to share their personal experiences, views and creative ideas in the process of developing the story and while acting out their roles. There was a lot of laughter and a very strong sense of wanting to really get their message across to resolve a problem they felt strongly about.

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This brings me to the impact of participatory radio drama. Not only participants, but also listeners clearly identified with the characters and message of our dramas. Each drama was presented to a test audience in order to assess how well they understood the drama and to record any further input and reactions. In addition, I conducted follow-up interviews with each of the participants several weeks after our production had gone public to see how local people had reacted to them. Possibly the most frequent response of listeners was that they highly appreciated the



relevance of our dramas. André for example, of the older participants, summarized the reactions of listeners as follows: “What they really liked was that films [by this he meant radio dramas] don’t take one side only. It talked to both the farmer and the cattle raiser. ... There was appreciation, especially from the side of the cattle herders who heard that there are also farmers who support them”. Madeleine, a middle-aged woman observed that listening to the play led to a debate between cattle raisers and farmers in which, although most participants were farmers, “there were people who took the side of the cattle raiser and others who took the side of the farmers”, ultimately leading to mutual agreement that “one cannot build a field on the path of cows” and that “if it happens that someone wants to make a field on a cow path, they have to at all cost make a fence”. And to give one more example, Assan observed that “many were proud because this radio play really raised one of the problems which bother the village”, and local youth in Songkolong told Geraldine that they liked the

theme of the play because agro-pastoral conflict and bribery were the reason why they could not continue going to school.

During the audience testing we got the same kinds of responses. Baurou, a middle-aged man said: “I appreciate this because ... it’s one of the plagues which really ... undermines our society”. And Anne exclaimed: “Me too, I appreciate this because it’s very good! It’s what we live! Here in the villages, in our region. In fact, not long ago in my field, I happened to find a cattle herd which had destroyed my sweet potato”. She went on, as many others did, to share her story of agro-pastoral conflict. These reactions were particularly encouraging as the drama about agro-cultural conflict could not be broadcast over radio, but only shared via mobile phones and played in the marketplace. In fact, it soon became clear that local cow owners and cow herders had been reached effectively as several independent individuals came in person to talk to the drama participants to ask them to take out certain parts of the story because they did not want to be associated with the way the antagonist (a cattle owner) in the story had behaved.

Such reactions showed the effectiveness of participatory radio drama as listeners deeply identified with the story and message of our productions. In addition, these testimonies show how important it is to represent an issue from the perspective of all key stakeholders. For this reason I must admit that I was slightly nervous about the fact that no cattle owners or herders were participating when developing the drama on agro-pastoral conflict.



However, to my great relief it turned out they did get good representation through the characters in the drama. Several participants testified after the production process that playing the drama had helped them see things from a different perspective and understand others better. André, a farmer, said “it will help people because it will help farmers know their mistakes” because “we make poor choices with regards to where to put our fields”. Marthe observed: “Now, even if I have a field and the cows graze in it, I will get angry, but if I haven’t made a fence, I will only get angry to a certain level, not more than that. I need to admit to myself that there is also a little bit of my fault in it, so that I don’t only blame the herder for everything!” Along the same lines, Assan observed that “it helps to understand the position of another person. In case I am aware that I have destroyed the field of someone else with my cows, I will then at least understand him, if he complains”. To give an example of the drama on indecent clothing and drugs, here is how Abel felt about the role he played as a womanizer: “Me, as a boy, I would have locked myself up in my corner, telling myself that I did well. Well, that the one who drugged the girl did well. But actually, I had not placed myself in the shoes of the girl. But now, by listening to this play, I realized ‘Oh, so she feels like that?’ So she is not free and it bothers her.” Let me conclude my findings with one more example, recorded here as a transcript of a telephone conversation I had with Assan on December 10<sup>th</sup> 2015:

**I don't have any specific questions to ask right now, but were some people able to listen to our play? If yes, what were their reactions, both positive and negative?** Yes, I tried to distribute it and I also received some reactions. As far as positive reactions are concerned, many were proud because this radio play really raised one of the problems which bother the village. And they talked about this problem and they thought it was good to do this to give some advice to the cattle raisers and also to the farmers. They thought it was good to emphasise these kinds of problems. And recently there was this guy who came to see me about..., it was a herder. He asked me whether I was among the actors who created this play, because he..., he had remembered my name. And he came to ask me and he was really very proud, because.... And he said it's something which really helped him, that he exchanged his biggest problems, him and his boss. (*laughs happily*) He said that it (this play) really changed the attitude of his boss (the cattle owner) towards him a lot. His boss, when he heard this, he asked him 'Well, are you sure that you don't have any problems?' And when his boss asked him this, he profited to tell him about the problems he had. (*laughs happily*) And..., really, this is what happened!

**And did you know him, or did he just try to find out who you are?** No, we knew each other. Since it's a guy with whom I went to school with from the eleventh to the fourteenth school year.

**And how did his boss hear the play?** I told you that they would put it on loudspeakers at the market. There are even times when they put it on every evening.

**So this is not in the bar of André but in the market in the town centre?** I'm talking about the cabins of the distributors, where people charge their phones.

**Wow, what a story!** Yes, really!

Much more could be said about the process of participatory radio drama development and its impact and challenges, but let me conclude by saying that overall I was very satisfied with the outcome of my two research sessions. The overwhelmingly positive reactions and impact among participants and listeners, as well as the fact that all participants quickly understood and contributed towards the process convinced me that this method is very useful for creating audio content with local communities. It is a method which proved to be rewarding and fulfilling for the participants, and several of them asked that we continue to make new drama together. However, many listeners who had only heard the final result also showed great interest in the process, and many complained that they should have also been invited, or asked that we hold another session so they could also express their views and act out a role. Such requests went on for months after the research cycles.

The biggest challenge I would say in participatory radio drama production is the facilitation process. Leading a group of untrained participants through the radio drama production process requires someone with good interpersonal communication skills. For example, when developing the story on agro-cultural conflict, participants got into a big argument as some folks wanted to use the name of a local cattle owner in the play. Their goal was to shame him for paying bribes to the village chief instead of paying a reimbursement for damaged fields. It did take quite a bit of discussion and diplomacy to get everyone to agree that it was best not to use his name. In other words, participatory radio drama facilitators must be able to listen well and ask good questions so that the group can progress together, while staying firm enough to make sure good decisions are being made and understood by every participant, not an easy task considering the many ideas and passions that need to be harmonized. A second aspect of facilitation is that it is best if the facilitator also receives training in simple audio recording and editing techniques, so that the local participants, who are often computer illiterate, do not need to be trained for this. This makes sure the recordings of each scene can be done during the process of drama development, and then easily edited together according to the decisions made during the group process.

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**Participatory radio drama facilitators must be able to listen well and ask good questions so that the group can progress together**

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### **Applying participatory radio drama to Scripture Engagement**

After completing my research on the method of participatory oral radio drama development, I began to teach this method to different ministry partners for the purpose of Scripture Engagement. As a result, my students and I have facilitated many more participatory radio dramas, most of which took between half a day and a full day to complete, and all of which contained a Christian message. Although each drama is unique, let me share some observations about how we have sought to use participatory radio drama for contextualizing God's word in the lives of participants and target audiences.



I would say that best way to use radio drama for Scripture Engagement is through role modelling. By portraying Christians both as weak human beings, but also as those who look to their faith and the Bible for help, radio dramas demonstrate the relevance of the Bible for daily life in a very authentic and attractive way. For example, to show the importance of an inner obedience to God, one group of students developed a story about a Christian who had a very ill wife, but no money to pay for an operation. One day he stumbles upon some money near a mosque, together with a friend, but decides to look for the rightful owner of the money. His wife on the other hand sees this situation as an answer

to their prayers and wants to prevent her husband from returning the money “because a Muslim would never do that for us”. And to make things worse, the man’s friend secretly visits his ill wife, begging for her help so that he can get his share of the money. Ultimately, this drama raises several issues such as the attitude of Christians towards Muslims, the challenges of remaining obedient in the midst of suffering and of marital conflict and of the question of how to recognize answers to our prayers. The story does not provide clear-cut answers to these questions, but several characters in the story reflect on the biblical teaching in one way or another, either by thinking out loud, or in what they say to others. In addition, in this drama the husband reads out some Bible verses to his wife about how God rewards those who are honest.

Although this is just one example of how participatory radio drama can be used for Scripture engagement, the group process generally makes it surprisingly easy to include a believable and very palpable Christian message in each drama. When the majority of participants are believers, the resulting drama is not only shaped by the real-life experiences of each participant, but also their heart-felt desire to share their hope and faith with others. As a result, our dramas have not only been able to reflect the complexity of life and the consequences of sinful attitudes and behaviour, but also the power of God at work and the attitudes and readiness to help that Christians can and should be displaying.

As mentioned earlier, it is very important to aim for a genuine, authentic representation of Christians, which means that they are often presented as they really are, with their shortcomings and doubts, not just their faith. In other words, by avoiding an overly simplified Christian ‘solution’ to every problem, listeners can more easily identify with the story and are more open to its message. This also means that the message that is heard often differs from person to person, depending on who or what a listener identifies with most in the story. For this reason, participatory radio dramas offer a powerful way to let the Holy Spirit work in the hearts and minds of participants and audiences, as they discover just how tangible the presence and guidance of God can be in their lives.

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Have you made similar experiences with oral, participatory audio-visual content development? Would you or one of your colleagues like to receive training in producing contextualized media content such as radio drama, music videos or short films? If ‘yes’, I’d love to hear from you to see how we can work together.

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