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## Encouraging Scripture use among the Amuesha<sup>1</sup>

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*The author reflects on ten factors that contributed to the positive response of the Amuesha people to the translated Scriptures, followed by a summary at the end of the article.*

The Scriptures are being used among the Amuesha because of a number of factors combining and supporting one another. To comment on only one of these factors would seem to emphasize one factor as being more important, or as being the only one relevant to the use of Scripture. For that reason, I choose to consider in this paper a number of factors which appear to have contributed to the acceptance and extensive use of the Scripture among the Amuesha. I believe the greater the number of positive factors, the greater the potential use of Scripture in any language group.

The Amuesha are a group of about 4,500 living in small scattered villages in the eastern foothills of the Andes of Peru, South America. There is some evidence that they have been peasants for a long time, dominated to some extent by the Inca Empire in the past. Large parts of their original territories have been colonized by outsiders for over 100 years. Agriculture and cattle raising are their main occupations. Their language is classified as Pre-Andine Arawakan.

### **The translated Scriptures, a fulfillment of existing Amuesha religious views**

“This is what we have been looking for.” As I heard these words coming from the Amuesha teacher/preacher as he taught the newly translated Scripture to his own people, I sensed this moment as a tremendous breakthrough for the Amuesha people to be able to accept the message of the gospel as the fulfillment of their own view of religion.

Amuesha religion, perhaps since the dominion of the Inca Empire, has had the concept of a supernatural deity called “our father.” To most Amuesha the sun was “our father;” the word *yompor* was the only way to refer to the sun. Upon further questioning, however, others said

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“The sun is not really our father, but is only our father’s crown.” With either belief there was a definite concept of a supreme being. This concept appears to have been superimposed on their own animistic worldview and coexistent with it. It was the worship of “our father” and the people’s desire to please him and communicate with him that motivated their form of worship to the sun.

As the Amuesha teacher/preacher taught from the newly translated Gospel of John on this particular day, he read in John 14:1–6, where Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the father except by me.” After reading this verse, he started reminding his own Amuesha people how many times they had tried to communicate with “our father.” He reminded them how they would try to entice pretty, little birds to come up near to them, thinking they might be bringing a message from “our father.” Or how they would sit up all night chewing the narcotic coca leaf in hopes that, sometime during the night, they might in some way have some communication from “our father,” possibly in the form of a song from him. The teacher repeated the verse, “Jesus said, I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to our father except by me.” Stopping dramatically he said, “This is what we have been looking for.” He meant that Jesus is the way to “our father,” and this was the father communicating to them.

I am sure that not all people were as convinced of the revelation as Pedro Lopez when he taught that day. However, Pedro and other Amuesha believing leaders taught that this translation was indeed “our father’s word.” The Amuesha people found it easy to believe that his message had come to them at last. Many did believe as they listened and as they began to read God’s Word themselves. As they learned more from the Bible, they came to know that “our father” is not the sun, even as many already had said, but that “our father” was the One who had made the sun. We used “our father” or Yompör as the word for God.

## **Motivation to change**

There was already a great desire to change among the Amuesha before hearing about “our father’s” message to them. Their lands had been colonized in some areas for more than 80 years. For years, their proximity to the higher levels of society had already brought them in contact with Western culture. The ridicule they received from being different, from having a different language and culture, and their low social standing, stimulated a desire to change in order to avoid ridicule and be accepted without the stigma of being a native. To be accepted by the dominant culture seemed to be their main drive. The parents felt this could be achieved by their children learning the ways of the outside world and, thus, escaping the prejudice they themselves had known. Even in 1953, when Ruth Mary Wise and I started work among the Amuesha, the parents would often tell us, “We, the older ones, don’t want to learn, but we want our children to learn.” Contrary to an ordinary social structure that has security within itself, and where the older people are considered the leaders, the older people of the disintegrating Amuesha culture seemed to center their hopes on their young people obtaining the know-how of the outside world and passing it on to them. Since bilingual schools were offered them, they readily accepted and moved closer together so the children could study.

Although this motivation for change was not directed toward acceptance of the Scriptures, the felt need for schools opened the way for literacy and, consequently, the reading of the translated Scripture. The bilingual school system fit nicely into this felt need for change. The people were not sold as much on the bilingual part of it as they were on the fact that it would bring reading, writing, and arithmetic, the know-how of the outside world and, hopefully, acceptance by the outside world. Schools were started, year by year, in all the villages where a sufficient number of students existed. The schools were also open to adults; a good number of them studied, especially those who wanted to be able to read “our father’s word” for themselves.

### **Bilingual teachers as gospel messengers**

Some of the bilingual teachers first believed the Scriptures as they worked with the translator in the teacher training courses. Some also served as the first co-translators. As more books were translated year by year, the newly translated Scriptures were used during devotional times with the translator during the Teacher Training Course at the Yarinacocha Center. Thus, the bilingual teachers became those most knowledgeable of the Scripture. As believers themselves, they shared the newly translated books with their own people and became the first messengers of the gospel in the various villages as schools were started. The bilingual teachers have always been held in high esteem by their own village where they taught. Their prestige was above that of any of the former leaders since they had the know-how of the outside world. The teachers started informal group meetings and the people listened.

### **Indigenous Bible school teacher and students as messengers**

In 1960, an indigenous Bible school was started, with one of the older bilingual teachers teaching during his three months of vacation. Another of the bilingual teachers took responsibility to recruit both younger and older men from all the areas. Though he lived on the fringes of Amuesha territory, “Don Valerio” was highly esteemed as an Amuesha knowledgeable in Scripture and the outside world. He used Amuesha Scriptures and emphasized the importance of understanding and then teaching “our Father’s Word” to one’s own people. Don Valerio encouraged people to witness but there was no obligation to teach their own people later. Many of his students later led their own parents to believe and helped in teaching the Word in their own village. The Scripture quickly became used in all the areas of the tribe from which the various students had come. Groups of believers sprang up in the villages. The bilingual teachers themselves each took a vacation time to study in the Amuesha Bible School. Some of them cooperated in conducting Bible conferences in their own areas so that all the people who wanted could study nearer home, including older people and other non-readers. Those who came to these regional conferences carried the Word back to their home areas. At present [1984], regional and local study groups seem to have replaced the need for one central Bible school.

## **Co-translators as gospel messengers**

Co-translators also took part in these study groups. The two main ones also had a tremendous personal ministry. While the expatriate translator was on furlough one year, Gaspar Lopez, the older one, spent his time evangelizing a village that had not yet believed. Rather than calling meetings, which he knew the people of that area would not want, he spent time living in the home of each of the families in the village, staying as long as needed. As he lived, there he read portions of Scripture. Slowly he led them to believe and instructed them in Christian living. Then he would move on to another family and do the same thing over again. In this way, over a period of months, he led almost the whole village to believe. Later, at their request, he went back for another period of time to further disciple them in the Word.

## **Need of indigenous leaders**

In each of these cases, the messengers of the people were fellow tribespeople: the bilingual teachers, the teacher, and students from the Amuesha Bible School, and the co-translators. We as expatriate translators, since the very early days, had chosen not to preach or teach the people directly, although they requested that we do so early in the work, because they said we “knew more of our Father’s Word.” I felt that if we started, this would stifle the Indian leaders’ initiative and undermine their confidence. It was true that we could perhaps have taught more of the Word more quickly. I believe that refraining from this and greatly encouraging the Indian leaders to do so, developed their own initiative, their own confidence in themselves, and the people’s confidence in them. Furthermore, it actually developed their own abilities.

It is not in the scope of this paper to list all the factors encouraging indigenous leaders, but simply to state the reality of the close relationship of indigenous vernacular-speaking leaders to the acceptance and effective use of the Scripture. I add “effective” because I have observed the use of the Scripture in Spanish with Amuesha-speaking people. Although it seems at first to be effective, because it fulfills their felt need for progress in Spanish, with time it seems to be only a formality or ritual and does not result in a relevant interaction with the message in their lives. I believe, from my experience with the Amuesha and the Amarakaeri, that the maximum effective use of the Scriptures is best accomplished by the use of the indigenous vernacular-speaking leaders, not by outsiders, including the expatriate translator. The translator has his place in instructing, encouraging, and counseling local leaders behind the scenes, but the leaders become the speakers to the people.

## **Adequate readers are a necessity**

For an ongoing effective use of the Scripture, adequate readers in the vernacular language are a necessity. Although oral witnessing, tape recordings, radio, and visual media may have their place in initially encouraging the acceptance of Scripture, they are not permanent media through which the Scripture will continue to be used. They require outside technology and stimulus. Adequate readers are, as it were, a more permanent media. Only a fluent reader can use the Scriptures in dynamically specific effectiveness. There is a profound difference between a struggling, syllable-by-syllable reader and one who reads the Scripture text easily and enjoys

doing so. The struggler will read only a few verses and quit because of the difficulty of reading, where the fluent will continue to read, understanding what he is reading with ease and enjoyment. I emphasize this point because it is easy to think that one who has finished studying the initial reading books that present the syllables can be considered an adequate reader for the Scripture. In most cases, this assumption is not true. The corollary is, of course, that there must be an adequate and ongoing supply of literature in the language.

My most recent experience was with the Amarakaeri just before coming to the States. Various people knew the syllables more or less from the initial primers. They did not, however, have enough fluency in reading to read and understand Scripture. After struggling to read a few verses syllable by syllable, they grew tired and quit. But after a reading campaign of more or less three months, giving them much familiar, easy reading material, they gained fluency. Almost immediately upon gaining this fluency, they asked for the Scripture books that could not hold their interest previously. Simple fluency powerfully affected the use of the Scripture.

## **The message**

The Scriptures were easily accepted by the Amuesha people as a fulfillment of their own existing view of religion; that is, to have some communication with “our father.” Not only was the Scripture accepted as a form of communication with “our father”: the message itself met the felt needs of the Amuesha, which they were already requesting from “our father.” For example, one need was that he would bless their crops, cause them to grow, thus, giving them food. The promises in Scripture to supply believers’ needs was a relevant practical need met. “Yompor ya’natyaya” were the common parting words between fellow Amueshas, meaning “may our father make us hidden (from all misfortune).” The promises of the true “our father” to care for his own, met the need of the Amuesha. To people who felt the rejection of the incoming society and who desperately wanted to be accepted, the message of the Scriptures of “our father” who really loved and accepted them was a message of good news. A message of peace and harmony was in accord with Amuesha disposition. The Amuesha are great pacifists, often at the expense of justice. Anger has always been considered the number one sin to them. A message that condemns anger and seeks peace was very acceptable.

The above aspects of the message had the greatest relevance to the Amuesha. It is interesting to note that the aspect of eternal life of the gospel message did not have much relevancy. Eternal life was presented in early witnessing, but it did not hold sufficient incentive for the Amuesha. Their reasoning seemed to be that life is hard enough as it is and, therefore, they had no great desire to live forever.

## **Personal relevance**

Indigenous leaders among the Amuesha had a great capacity for making the gospel message relevant to the needs of their own people. They understood these needs in a greater way than any outsider. Their illustrations were always taken from their common life experiences with their fellow tribesmen. One who did this to a great extent was Pedro Lopez. He saw the relevance of the Word to his daily experiences and often shared these experiences with his own

people. For example, he often stopped and prayed with the people in a difficult situation, asking God's help and direction. He trusted the promises he found in the Word and, finding the Lord faithful, would often share these experiences later with the people. As he came to know the Word, he was quick to obey it in his own personal relationships.

Many stories could be told to illustrate this in Pedro's life, but I relate only one as an example. I happened to hear Pedro relating this experience, in a very informal way, to his schoolboys whom he customarily invited into his home, one evening a week, just to chat. He was telling them of a recent experience he had had. It concerned neighbors who had stolen two of his valuable sacks of coffee that were ready for sale after much hard work. Without mentioning the name of the neighbors, he said they were seen stealing. He spoke of how he thought to get even with them and perhaps get the coffee back. He followed through on his intentions by walking the 20 kilometers over muddy trails and back again, going to the civil authorities and making formal charges against the neighbors. "But," he continued talking to the boys, "when I got back home I happened to read one of our translated verses that I had never seen before. It was Romans 12:17 and it said to "repay no one evil for evil." He said, "I realized this was what I was doing. So I decided to walk back in again and withdraw the charges." He said, "As I came back, I stopped by the neighbors and told them I knew they had stolen my coffee and what I had done before I realized what our Father's Word said. I asked them to forgive me for seeking to do evil to them to repay them." This family later believed. The majority of the schoolboys who heard these words from their teacher became Christian leaders.

Personal testimony by a fellow tribesman has convinced many Amuesha not only that the gospel message is relevant, but also that it is now possible to live it daily. Valerio Pishagua, Indian teacher at the Amuesha Bible School, was another of the leaders among the Amuesha who often shared his personal experiences. One such occasion was when he had first decided to start the Bible School. It was only about a week before the school was to start and the young men were to arrive from all areas of the tribe. Suddenly his only little girl was bitten by a snake and died that day. Later, in telling his students and others about it, he said, "At first I thought we would just have to leave the place." (This is Amuesha custom to leave the place when one dies.) "But then," he said, "I just happened to read one of the verses we had ready for the Bible School, Romans 8:28. "As I read that," he said, "I realized I should not leave but stay and continue with the school as I had planned. I realized that God in His love had permitted this to happen and that He would make it right." The power of such a testimony over against tribal custom and fear of the spirit of the dead convinced many of the Bible School students that they, too, could live according to "our Father's Word."

### **A simplification of the Gospel message can be helpful**

In the early days, a simplification of the message can be very helpful, not only for understanding the essentials of salvation and the Christian life, but for providing new believers with smaller portions of Scripture that can help meet their spiritual needs. At the beginning of the Amuesha Bible School, I felt the need of using not only whole books of Scripture to be studied but also a simplification of the gospel message in terms of key verses for the main aspects of salvation and the Christian life. These need not be printed as such, but can be worked out with the teacher of

the school, who can in turn pass them on to the students. This simplified form of the essentials of the gospel message helped many Amuesha to get a quick, basic understanding on which they built whatever they read from the whole books of Scripture they studied. To expect newly literate people to tackle whole books without some initial help may be too much for them. With this initial help from Scripture portions, the Amuesha were able to later read whole books on their own with real understanding as to how each part fit into the total picture of the gospel message. "Life of Christ" passages and Old Testament stories were also used.

This initial help in understanding the basic gospel concepts is best done by teaching in the vernacular, using the vernacular translation rather than teaching in the national language. In this way, vernacular terms are established which are carried on throughout all the Scripture. The few Amuesha who had initial studies in Spanish-speaking Bible schools were never able to adequately translate Scriptural terms into Amuesha. As a result, they taught mostly in Spanish using the Spanish terms they had learned.

### **Growth of the indigenous church organization encourages permanent use of the Scriptures**

As groups of believers developed among the Amuesha, usually the bilingual teacher, or one who had studied in the Amuesha Bible school, or in some of the regional conferences, or just any believer would encourage the people to come together to sing and hear the Word. As each book of Scripture was translated, it was immediately printed in provisional form and made available to the various groups of believers. We felt that early access to the Scripture was essential to the spiritual growth of the believers. The habit of reading the Scripture was encouraged in every way.

In 1968, the Amuesha Christian leaders chose to unite in a loose affiliation with a national church, and consequently the groups of believers became organized on a local and regional associational level. They are free within their own association to use their own Scripture. In fact, it was for this purpose they were allowed their own regional association. This organization and the mutual help of the Amuesha churches within the association not only assures a greater degree of permanency for the church as an institution, but also encourages the use of the Scripture.

At present, there are ten organized churches in the Amuesha association of churches. They operate quite independently with indigenous leadership on both levels. The Amuesha Scriptures are used in the churches, in special study groups, and individually. About one-third of the total run of New Testaments is now in the hands of the people. This includes a small stock of New Testaments entrusted to key Christian leaders in central locations. They take from the stock to supply requests from their areas.

## Summary

In conclusion, my experience with the Amuesha and the Amarakaeri people has caused me to suggest this summary of factors combining and supporting one another to encourage an extensive use of the Scripture:

1. Fulfillment of existing religion
2. Motivation to change
3. Confidence in those presenting the message
4. Relevance of the gospel message demonstrated by those who believe it
5. A simplification of the gospel message in the early days for easier understanding
6. Biblical instruction in the vernacular rather than the national language
7. Encouragement and use of local leaders rather than outsiders, including the expatriate translator
8. Adequate degree of fluency of readers
9. Availability of translated Scripture even in provisional form from the early days
10. A degree of church organization to give a permanency of opportunity for Scripture use.

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