

# Scripture Relevance Dramas

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Scripture Relevance Drama is a tool for facilitating use of translated Scripture and developing minority languages. Indigenous authors and vocal actors dramatize local life situations as contexts for characters telling topical Bible stories. Other plays explore community development and health issues, such as how to avoid malaria, the benefit of immunizations, or the need to cover local wells to protect young children from falling into them.

The Lunaba\* (p. 31) Drama Team takes their culture's artistic tradition to a wider audience through their weekly half-hour radio drama program. The Lunaba Drama Team is also continuing to give live performances. The framework presented in this paper may be used for developing Scripture Relevance Dramas and/or Community Development Relevance Dramas in local languages with or without the radio distribution strand.

## Melding Indigenous Drama with Topical Bible Storying

The Lunaba radio drama team, made up of three indigenous scriptwriters and a dozen actors and actresses, produces a weekly half-hour radio drama showing the relevance of Scripture to daily life events. Their Scripture Relevance Drama series began on one radio station in 1999, and came to be heard on over 50 local FM radio stations in three West African countries by 2003.

Lunaba voice actors play different characters each week. In each play, events are dramatized leading up to an issue or difficulty. Some plays are more dramatic, while others are more comedic. A friend or neighbor then says something like, "You aren't the first person to experience this difficulty. I was in a similar situation, and a story from God's Word really helped me. May I tell you a story from God's Word about someone who had a similar experience to yours?" The person agrees. The story teller sometimes summarizes his or her own experience, and always shares a Bible story. The listeners ask questions and the story teller gives background information necessary for accurate understanding of the Bible story. As the friends dialogue, they discuss the application that results for them in their culture from an understanding of this Bible story. After the characters hear the Bible story, another scene resolves the story line.

If the issue is related to community development, a problem is shown occurring, and a character presents an alternative solution to try to the problem. The result is then shown occurring.

## Exploring Existing Functions of Lunaba Dramas

For a given genre to communicate Scripture well, it is helpful to understand how that genre is already being used in

a given culture. Traditionally, Lunaba drama is performed to entertain and to instruct during community gatherings, festival competitions, and celebrations.

My first experience of Lunaba drama was at a Christmas Eve church service that lasted all night long. The celebration was full of singing, folk dancing, and drama. The crowd was too large to enter the church building, so the festivities were held outdoors. What surprised me most about the first play I saw was the subject: a comedy about bribery. I had been expecting, given the context on Christmas Eve, a nativity play. This play was not attempting to recreate any Bible story. I was fairly mystified by the story line, even when my friends tried to explain it to me.

As I began to know Lunaba culture better, I started to understand some of the functions drama serves. Whatever Lunaba people value, their comedies make fun of the opposite behavior to maintain social cohesion. Lunaba theater generally intends to instruct, entertain, and correct all at the same time. I began thinking about different possibilities of drama for promoting use of the Lunaba New Testament translation that had been dedicated a few years before. The theater group I met at this church became the seed for a larger multi-denominational radio theater group with whom I began working.

The father of one of our scriptwriters passed away. A friend and I went to the family home to give our condolences. I was surprised when the deceased's grand-daughter began acting the role of her grandfather. Lunaba people do not perform drama during the funeral itself, but they do perform improvisational drama for the crowd later on in the days when everyone who knows the family of the deceased comes by to greet them. The event ran as follows:

The men were all seated solemnly outside the house. Lunaba houses usually consist of rooms lining a rectangle which all have doors opening up on the central courtyard. My friend and I were taken in the courtyard with the rest of the women. There were perhaps fifty women sitting around in the courtyard at the time we visited. The deceased has a granddaughter who looks to be about eighteen. This granddaughter went into her grandfather's room and came back out into the courtyard wearing one of his robes and his cap, leaning heavily upon his staff in one hand and his wooden crutch in the other hand. She walked around the courtyard as if with great labor, very slowly and hunched over. I had to ask my friend what was happening. My friend explained to me, "She's imitating her grandfather."

The granddaughter called out, "Son, where is that little cell phone of yours? I want to use it! Son, come and eat! If you don't come and eat, I'm going to give your portion to your nephew in your place, do you hear me?"

The granddaughter sang prayers, then stomped around the courtyard laboriously as before, but this time she got a little stick, pounded it on the ground until it was frayed, and dipped it in water. "What is she doing?" I whispered. "That's a stick people chew on like a toothbrush. He [sic] pounds it on the ground and dips it in water to make it softer, because you know old people don't have very good teeth." The granddaughter was now stomping out of the courtyard.

"Where are you going, Grandpa?" one of the mourners asked the grand-daughter. She fired back using her grandfather's gruff voice, "Can't an old man go to the bathroom in peace anymore?" Everyone laughed. I was surprised people were laughing at such a serious occasion. I whispered to my friend, "Is this common at funerals?" "Yes, all the time," she answered. "You can't just grieve all the time. This helps people lighten up by remembering the person."

The women in the courtyard were laughing, recognizing typical things the old man used to do and say. It seems to me like a very nice way of remembering the deceased, kind of like we give a eulogy.

Anyone in the crowd may become an actor by interacting with the person imitating the deceased. This indicates to me that improvisational drama is a part of life for the Lunaba, much more than drama forms a regular part of my own western culture.

Some years later the town elders sent a delegation to the Lunaba Drama Team asking them to represent the town at a regional theater competition, with about fifteen groups competing from other towns. The town elders even offered to pay the team's way to the city for the competition. They won first prize at the regional competition, and one member of the team won best actor, so they were sent to the national competition. They did not win there, but they enjoyed the opportunity of competing nationally. Two years later, they competed again and won their region again, and went on to take second place in the national artistic competition.

The presence of drama at key life events, community celebrations, and national competition indicates that it is a valued communicational channel in this culture.

## **Rationales for Creating Scripture Relevance Dramas**

### *Demonstrating the Relevance of Scripture to Culture*

Bible passages to be narrated by a character are chosen thematically based on principles relevant to the local culture's felt needs. Because the cultures of the Bible and the cultures of peoples for whom Scriptures are translated are vastly different, receptor audiences do not necessarily find applications of Scripture for their own lives. In *The Bible Translation*

*Strategy*, Wayne Dye identifies factors which enhance or deter response to Scripture in translation programs. He concludes from studying fifteen translation programs that “people respond to the Gospel in proportion to their conviction that God and His Word are relevant to the concerns of daily life.” Dye writes that a translator or a local believer can help bring this conviction to someone by applying the Good News in everyday encounters to maximize personal relevance. This concept is foundational to the creation of Scripture Relevance Dramas: we seek to bridge barriers between the audience’s world and the world of the Bible by relating unfamiliar biblical content to felt needs and interests of the audience and show applications of scriptural principles to local cultures today.

### *Improving the Community’s Well-Being*

There are many misconceptions among the Lunaba people about health issues such as how AIDS or malaria is transmitted. Relevance drama allows informational content to be communicated in a context that shows possible responses to the information. Local drama is a way of vicarious learning without the audience having to go through the experience themselves.

### *Providing Background Knowledge*

We each have background knowledge we refer to when interpreting another person. Harriet Hill’s PhD research in Côte d’Ivoire indicates that for the Adiokrou people, knowing the background of a passage makes more difference to comprehension than depth of reading ability. For example, knowing that Palestinians had amulets and feared witchcraft helped the Adiokrou grasp the applicability to their own lives of Scriptural passages dealing with similar subjects.

The Lunaba drama team takes into account their audience’s background knowledge. The characters hearing the Bible story ask the questions the average listener is likely to ask. The story teller helps the audience’s background knowledge approach the assumptions of the first audience of Scripture more closely with this background information provided by the story teller. The story teller does not, however, include all the background information possible to tell about a passage, but only the pieces the team thinks will be meaningful to their audience.

### *Oral Scripture for Non-Readers*

Recorded drama provides access to translated Scripture for non-readers. Less than 1% of the Lunaba audience is functionally literate in their mother tongue; approximately 15% are literate or semi-literate in other languages. Relating biblical stories to indigenous dramas fits in well with the audience’s oral communication style. Drama is enjoyed culturally for instruction and entertainment.

### **Rationale for the Radio Distribution Channel**

Local arts such as dramas, stories, chants, songs, dances, and poetry hold one form of prestige. Modern media like radio, television, and video hold another form of prestige. When portraying foreign forms of expression, mass media

may reduce the sustainability of traditional arts; but braided together with indigenous arts, modern media help local arts become more popular and flourish.

In the space of one year, the village where the Lunaba drama team lives went from having only one phone in town, to having cell phones, to having television and an internet café, although it still does not have running water. FM radio stations cover the region. Some families broadcast radio programs loud enough for whole neighborhoods to hear. Only a few people have televisions, but many people are clustered around them in the evenings. The same sorts of transformations are being repeated across the developing world. A lack of local language programming favors language shift to languages of wider communication, as mass media become more prominent in a society. Production of programming in minor-



ity languages and minority art forms is a powerful form of language-based development to help local communities transmit their heritage to the next generation.

The Lunaba actors love performing in their community, and they distribute some programs via cassettes sold from their office, at radio stations and at markets; but their major distribution avenue is radio. Distribution via radio allows them to perform for wider audiences.

Their plays develop both interesting action and interesting characters. The narrator’s introduction and first scene provide an attractive beginning to a story which will make people wonder what will happen and want to hear more, rather than telling everything that will happen so the audience does not need to listen further. Although a second or two of silence is well placed at times, program pacing maintains the audience’s attention. Actors need to react frequently to each other even if with small responses, because unlike live theater, only their voice keeps them “on stage” in the listeners’ minds.

### **Drawbacks of Recorded Drama**

**Competition for audience attention:** Often there are a lot of other distractions in the listeners’ environment. Audio can easily become background noise whose message is not heard, unless the audience is interested in a program. In live drama, the audience is less likely to be distracted by other activities in the environment.

**Set length:** The team signs up for half hour weekly slots. Plays that take half an hour on air take an hour to an hour and a half when performed live. It is up to the sound editor to cut long pauses out of performances. Needing to present a polished recording means the need for a computer and a sound editing program.

**Media “Hardening”:** As opposed to live traditional theater, recorded radio theater lacks direct, immediate audience feedback for the performers, and this results in what J. Nathan Corbitt called “hardening” of an otherwise “softer” media:

By hard media I refer to those media that are most concrete in their format and presentation. Soft media are those forms that allow for dialogue and flexibility during creation and use. We could say that the hardest media are the most inflexible and the softest are the most flexible. Hard media, as in computer language, would require hardware, technology, certain media literacy or knowledge of the medium by the participants, and allows for no change in presentation once the medium has been cast. The softest media require no hardware, no literacy, allow for dialogue, and can be adapted to each local situation even during presentation. The hardest media are books and films, while the softest media are conversation (dialogue), storytelling, music, and drama (in the improvisational state). The point that I would like to make is that if we are to effectively communicate across cultures, then we must soften the use of media to allow for the greatest participation of the community.

How do we respond to this difficulty and “soften” hard media? In traditional Lunaba dramatic performances, the performers react to the listeners’ feedback to improve their communication. Radio theater is a harder media than live theater, and in compensation, characters’ questions and discussion of the Bible story allow the listeners’ probable questions to be answered.

In multi-part stories, i.e., stories spanning several broadcasts, characters retell what has gone before. Part way through some plays, one of the characters will summarize to another character what has happened so far, saying “Did you hear...?” This repetition makes these radio drama programs more like traditional oral narratives.

## Indigenous Scriptwriter Development

Indigenous Lunaba drama is improvised within a general story line. Of course, Scripture cannot be improvised, so for the Lunaba scriptwriters’ vision to be fulfilled, some meshing of the worlds of improvisational drama and written Scripture needed to take place.

### Mentoring Writers

The woman who helped me learn the Lunaba language happened to be involved with a drama group, and she became the first of our team’s script writers. In many ways we

mentored each other. My language learning turned into script development as we discussed story lines together and she dictated actors’ lines to me to type; then she learned how to type, and later some of the actors also started typing and creating stories.

Indigenous scriptwriting is key to perceived relevance of the message. When I presented a script draft to my Lunaba friend, which I thought I had made culturally appropriate, she read it and said, “Oh, this is good. Now I’ll make it African.” I thought I *had* made it African.

Scriptwriters empathize with their listeners by thinking of one family listening to their play around their radio. Writers shape a script appropriate for their target audience. They initially wanted to create some stories about subjects like tithing, which they realized would be of little interest to their wider audience. They soon came to think more clearly about how to communicate not just with the church audience whom they were used to performing for, but with the broader radio public.

The chapters in a pre-publication copy of *Translating the Bible into Action* by Margaret Hill and Harriet Hill on “Identifying Relevant Issues” and “Preparing for Good News Encounters” were particularly useful for mentoring beginning scriptwriters. These chapters were not written with scriptwriters in mind, but provide a tool for writers to 1) discern important cultural questions, issues, and problems; 2) develop scenarios where these issues can be brought to light and dramatized; and 3) find responses that are both culturally appropriate and Scriptural.

### Selecting Bible Passages and Themes

The authors work with each other in developing story lines and choosing Bible passages to go along with their chosen themes. Sometimes during rehearsals the actors also come up with new ideas for the writers to work on for future scripts.

At any given time, writers select two or three questions or issues that are most interesting to them for the moment (perhaps something to do with sorcery, or children lacking respect for elders, or illness). They talk together about possible story lines that might be dramatized to bring up that issue. They then look for biblical passages related to each theme and decide the most important one(s) to relate. If the issue is related to community development, research linking with local experts is needed to provide the most accurate health or development information possible rather than the writers’ own understanding of the issue.

### Components of Scripture Relevance Dramas

Each story includes these elements:

**An introduction:** A narrator greets the audience and introduces the subject of today’s play. Greetings are very important culturally and help develop a relationship between the narrator and the audience. Local instrumental music plays behind the narrator to distinguish between the narrator and the characters in scenes. Music is recorded separately and pasted behind the narrator at a low enough volume to hear the



narrator clearly. Maintaining the same general style of introductory music helps with program identification, although the sound editors use different pieces of music to go along with different emotions they think appropriate to different subjects.

**Scenes where characters experience a problem or difficulty:** Writers decide on a theme for each of their scripts. Through several scenes, a typical problem is developed from daily life. The events touch felt needs or interests of the audience. Some stories are humorous, and others touching.

Writers have actors change the characters they play most weeks, so the series is not like a continuing soap opera, although some stories continue over more than one program. At the beginning of a continued story, a character recounts to a newly-arriving character what has happened to this point, or the narrator tells what has happened until now.

#### **Storied Scripture:**

After the problem is developed, one character asks permission to tell the others a Bible story. The Bible story shows a possible answer to the difficulty. It is usually an older man who tells the Bible story to a family, because older men are most respected culturally. Sometimes a younger man tells a Bible story to younger men or a woman tells a Bible story to other women. Women tell stories more likely to be important to the lives of women. The characters listening react and interact with the storyteller. The actors try not to let a character accept too readily what they expect their audience would not accept too readily. Drama usually shows action bringing about a change in the life of a main character; that change is believable when the character wrestles with the decision.

**An application:** A concluding scene resolves the story line and shows how having heard the Bible story makes a difference in the life of at least one character. The drama team finds it tempting to let the narrator say something immediately after the Bible story to the effect of, “and then they all lived happily ever after.” This begs the question of how the Scripture’s application really works out in this culture. The team has found it more challenging, but more powerful, to show some change in the life or behavior of a character who has heard a Bible story, even if the change is small. The character change is more believable if it is shown or testified to by another character rather than told by the character who changes.

**A conclusion:** The narrator tells what happens to the characters after that, sometimes bringing out a “moral to the

story.” If the main character fails to apply what he or she has heard, the narrator generally comments on that. He or she tells listeners when to listen again, and says goodbye. Sometimes the whole cast says goodbye in unison. Culturally appropriate leave-takings develop a relationship between the listening audience and the cast.

#### **Optionally, a song related to the theme of the story:**

If there is time, a program ends with a related Scripture song. During an ethnomusicology workshop, a dozen new Lunaba Scripture songs were composed and recorded. One of these finishes some plays; other times an actor knows a song whose theme is perfect to go with a play, and the group makes time for it at the end of the program. Sometimes a character sings a song during a play if a person would do so in real life; they do not have musicals, however.



Radio is as popular in West Africa now as it was in the West in the 1950's.

#### **Knowing how much to write:**

A half-hour program tends to be about a nine-page single-spaced script. Programs could be composed in other lengths, but the FM stations the Lunaba team works with prefer 28.5 minute programs to fill 30 minute slots, leaving them 90 seconds for a commercial.

#### **Script Checking Process**

##### **Review by fellow script-**

**writers:** The writers comment on each others’ drafts, and revise their scripts according to one another’s suggestions.

**Review by advisors:** Authors also request the advice of trusted and respected advisors, such as pastors or consultants knowledgeable about the issues involved. The team has back-translated some of their plays into a trade language, and emailed them to a translation consultant for verification, especially when a script involved translating Bible verses that had not yet been published.

**Review by actors:** During rehearsals, voice actors further refine scripts by mutually agreeing to changes or improvisations that they note in their script margins.

#### **Reviewers standards:**

1. *Appropriateness.* Reviewers consider social relations, appropriate content, and the use of inoffensive language.

2. *Both biblical accuracy and cultural accuracy.* The resolution scene in particular needs to be believable. At one rehearsal, the play’s theme was the husband-wife relationship. In the original script, the couple heard verses from a friend about how they should love and respect each other.

The narrator said something close to “and they all lived happily ever after.” I said, “I don’t believe the narrator.” The cast agreed the wife needed to apologize to the husband, but couldn’t see how a husband could realistically apologize to a wife. They asked themselves whether biblically, both needed to apologize—whether or not that typically happens. “He might be able to apologize to her if they were alone and no one else heard it,” they decided. The script was accordingly revised during rehearsal.

3. *Interesting action and interesting characters.* Character development and action should be balanced. Plays where character is developed but little action happens, or plays where a lot of action happens but the audience doesn’t get to know the characters, are both less interesting than plays where both character and action are developed.

4. *Non-sectarian and non-political.* Any divisive questions are avoided.

## Forming an Audio Drama Team

### Actor Training Workshop

**Pre-workshop preparation:** An existing church acting group, to which the first script writer belonged, formed the beginning core of the radio drama team. They sent out announcements to other churches inviting them to come to a radio theater training workshop. The pastor signed any interested actor’s registration form to vouch for his or her character and approve his or her participation. About twenty people representing virtually all of the local denominations attended the workshop.

We arranged for two guest speakers: a pastor who introduced the vision for the program, and a local man who worked in a recording studio. We made a small textbook of scenes from our first scripts that would be our working material for our one-day workshop.

Content of the Initial Workshop:

- ♦ Prayer, singing, and introductions were important to begin to bond with one another because this group of people had never worked together before and many did not know each other.
- ♦ Vision for the radio series was presented by a respected pastor.
- ♦ Story lines were presented as examples.
- ♦ The first actors modeled examples of good reading and different sorts of bad reading, such as monotone, hesitating, or too enthusiastic. They asked the other potential actors to verify what was good or bad about each.
- ♦ Coffee break helped participants get to know one another better
- ♦ A local recording studio manager gave advice on how to speak into a microphone.
- ♦ Participants rehearsed example scenes in small groups.

- ♦ Experienced actors modeled varying emotion, pacing, and emphasis for the other participants, who practiced varying emotion, pacing, and emphasis of certain lines.
- ♦ Lunch
- ♦ Improvisational acting based on story situations where two characters have differing goals. The whole group gave feedback on each small group performance.
- ♦ We discussed when we all were available to rehearse and record, and decided to begin meeting two afternoons a week.

### Rehearsals

**Assigning roles:** Typically the author plays the role of narrator in his or her own play, and decides who he or she would like to act in which role. The writers act in each other’s plays. Scriptwriters assign roles requiring more emotions to actors who can portray those emotions well. Initially, they gave larger roles to better readers, but later this became less of a factor as slower readers improved their reading skills during rehearsals. Writers have added or taken out smaller roles based on who wanted to participate, or sometimes asked one person to play two or more smaller roles when there were not enough available actors.

**Range of ages:** Obtaining a variety of ages on the team of voice actors was difficult; most were young or middle-aged. The few elders who came initially did not continue when they saw their reading skills were inferior to the youth. The team sent envoys to elders with special requests to secure their limited participation for certain roles where it was important to have an older person.

**Reading development:** Initially for some of the actors, rehearsals were like advanced literacy classes, as they learned how to read fluently without sounding like they were reading. The method we used to help poorer readers during rehearsals was to ask a good reader to give a line, and then ask the actor to repeat the line with appropriate expression. Only the repetition was recorded, not the prompter. However, this method was gradually phased out, because everyone became able to read fluently and expressively.

**Acting development:** We asked actors to remember to respond to one another more than written in their script, such as with minimal “mm-hm” types of responses that are not worth writing lines for, because only their voice keeps them “on stage” in their listeners’ minds. This involves really listening to one another and responding naturally.

At first, their program was not heard in the city where they lived. When the program was heard on a station they had access to and they started listening to themselves, they began rehearsing more avidly.

Actors do not mark up their scripts with where to breathe or underline which words to emphasize. They did learn what punctuation means, and sometimes chide one another, “You didn’t pause for the comma, do your part over.” But when

actors are listening attentively to one another's characters and when they understand why they are saying what they are saying, they are unlikely to need advice on smaller matters. We ask actors rather to remember where they are going with their character's development, thinking, "What does my character want, and how is he or she going about trying to get it?" If the actor doesn't understand his motivation for saying something, the audience won't, either. They have all gotten progressively better with their acting skills, even those who were already quite good.

The actors sometimes have lively discussions at rehearsals, trying to find the most appropriate ways to show the Bible's applicability to Lunaba life. Applying the Bible to life situations has become so natural to them that sometimes they may be overheard saying to their real-life friends and neighbors, "Your situation reminds me of a story in the Word of God. May I tell you a story?"

### *Improvisations*

To develop improvisational acting skills at rehearsals, we used the general concept of Philip Bernardi's book, *Improvisation Starters: A Collection of 900 Improvisation Situations for the Theater* (Cincinnati, OH: Betterway Books, 1992.) Actors were given a brief scenario in which two characters have conflicting goals. Bernardi's situations are very American, but with a little forethought, we could adapt four to six situations before rehearsal, so that every actor had a chance to improvise a four or five minute scene before going on to rehearse that week's plays.

One of Bernardi's situations, for example, is that two students are working together on a research paper; one wants to make up some footnotes to make the paper more impressive, and one is afraid of getting caught. The target audience has no interest in research papers, but we would change this to something like, "Two seamstresses are working in the tailor's shop. Their boss isn't there. A client pays an apprentice for a dress. She wants to keep the money without telling her boss that the client paid. The other apprentice would never dream of doing that and wants to convince the other woman not to do this." We designated two actresses as the two apprentices. After the scene was played out, the other actors would clap and sometimes give suggestions for improvement. Sometimes actors tried improvisational scenes over different ways. There were times when an improvisation gave a scriptwriter an idea for making a longer play.

Actors continue to make use of their improvisational skills in their work. Now actors stick absolutely to their scripts only when they are sharing Scripture. Often they think of small additions or changes to a script, and after discussing their idea during rehearsal, they add a few key words jotted in a margin to remind them how to change their role, rather than writing out every word. The actors use these skills to help the story sound more natural, interesting, and believable. Often writing that sounds natural in print needs revising as it comes to life in oral forms.

## **Training in Recording and Sound Editing**

**Initial orientation:** Radio is essentially personal communication. When actors were starting out, thinking of their audience as one family with their radio on, rather than thousands or hundreds of thousands of people, helped them feel less nervous. Also, seeing how their mistakes could be edited out of a sound file, and not be present in the final program, was a relief to them. The team always pre-records their performance; they have never gone live on any radio station.

**Team mentoring:** On recording days, the actors listen to one another and decide when retakes are needed. Little by little, all the actors became comfortable with one another and all became coaches for one another. Anyone who has an idea now feels free to say it to anybody else. They continue to critique one another's vocal performances. They call those who have the responsibility of listening without participating in a scene "the ears." The ears silently motion or even verbally stop a scene when they see a need for a retake.

**Immediate group approval of how each scene came across:** The whole team listens to the scene played back the same day they record it, and immediately record any needed changes before going on to the next scene. We discovered retakes are best done immediately, because those done another day do not necessarily match the vocal quality of what was recorded in other lines, since vocal quality of a performer can vary from day to day.

**Turning a visual-vocal medium into a vocal-only medium:** Even though the radio audience can not see actors' movements or expressions, putting their body into their acting does come out in actors' voices. The constraint of staying near a microphone puts some limits on their bodily expression, but they can move their hands freely. Vocal expression is the only tool the listener has for visualizing a scene. Listeners do visualize what they are hearing; for example, a listener retelling the story to a friend who had missed the program put in the visual markers such as, "And then he was sitting here like this and he went like this..." The audiences create their own visual images based on verbal clues. Rather than a narrator saying, "The hill was steep," the story is stronger if the actor acts like the hill he is going up is steep and perhaps comments on that fact.

### *Learning to Record*

The actors started helping me set up our recording equipment after watching me. After sitting beside me watching me record, the writers decided they were ready to try recording for themselves. I gave them some verbal explanation to complement their observations, but observation seemed to be their preferred learning style.

### *Learning to Sound Edit Their Programs*

The writers learned sound editing in our office by watching me sound edit. They currently use the free downloaded sound editing program Audacity. The authors each sound edit the recordings of the plays each wrote. The sound editor removes actors' mistakes, leaving in only the final retakes, and



adds music and sound effects; the actors need not be present for this, but should listen back when the sound editor thinks he is done. They suggest any further changes to the sound editing before the program is copied and distributed.

Some simple sound effects are produced as they record. When they need a sound effect from their environment, the authors go out and look for it using a small portable recorder



and paste it into the performance later. They don't put in many sound effects, but they find that some sound effects help listeners feel more involved in the programs. Local music is added to transition between scenes as the narrator says a few sentences of transition. Other cultures might find music enough transition without any narration.

### *Distribution*

The sound editors back up their finished programs in two media in two locations. They copy them and mail them to radio stations, keeping track of which station needs which program by what date. This was easier initially but got more complicated as more stations broadcast the programs, so good record keeping became essential. Each station needs a mailing of thirteen programs to fill a quarter of the year. If we did not complete 13 plays in a quarter to fill the next quarter, stations played repeats until they received another delivery of programs. Programs are also copied for individuals on request.

## **Example Stories**

### *Ingratitude*

A rich businessman welcomes a needy stranger and lets him live with his family. Another needy stranger arrives, then another. He lets them stay with him. He cares for them, but they don't help him or his family out. He is so hospitable that he eventually welcomes 10 strangers in need. He then loses his business. He can no longer help them. Rather than returning the favor now that their landlord is in need, the guests

insult him. Most of them do not return the help he has given them, although two of them help him out and show themselves to be true friends.

The businessman's friend comes to visit him and asks him why he appears sad. The businessman recounts how he has lost his business, and furthermore, how he is frustrated that eight of his guests have proven unfaithful friends. His friend tells the businessman that even the Lord Jesus experienced others' ingratitude. He asks his friend's permission to tell the story of how Jesus healed the ten lepers. Nine of them were not thankful (Luke 17:11-19). The former businessman appreciates his friend's empathy and decides to continue to do good as he is able. This story ends with a song: "Ten lepers were healed, ten lepers were cleansed; only one came back to say thank you. Have you thanked God for what He has done for you?"

### *Sibling Rivalry*

A father favors his youngest son. The older brothers are jealous and mistreat their younger brother, whose mother is a younger wife than their mother. The younger brother's friend consoles him, telling him he is not the first person to have this difficulty with his brothers. He says he has two cassettes about the prophet Joseph which they listen to together, forming a play within a play, as the "cassette story" is dramatized. The audience hears the cassette being put in and the on-button pushed. It takes four half-hour programs to tell the full story of Joseph, each "book ended" with scenes from the family's life; the older brothers listen, too, recognize the similarity, and apologize to their little brother. The brothers make peace with one another and begin sharing the things they had fought over.



### *One Sacrifice*

A family performs a chicken sacrifice for a sick family member, but the person still dies. Their teenage son begins to question the value of these sacrifices. The family discusses the importance of sacrifice. The teenage son talks to a Christian friend, who explains Jesus' sacrifice is the only sacrifice necessary to make peace with God. He explains from Hebrews how Jesus' sacrifice has made other sacrifices unnecessary. The young man prays to receive Christ. The community accuses him of going against their traditions. The village sorcerer puts a spell on him to kill him, but nothing adverse happens to him. The townspeople are surprised and talk amongst themselves about how Jesus is more powerful than the village sorcerer.

### *The Greedy Man*

An old rich man is very greedy. He has two wives and five children. Because of his greed, he doesn't trust anyone. He doesn't even like to spend money on his own wives and children's needs. Rather, he hides his vast wealth in holes in the ground and guards them anxiously. His friends talk about



him behind his back, decrying how he won't even spend money on himself for his own enjoyment. His family is suffering. They complain behind his back how he doesn't meet their needs. He visits a friend who tells him the story of the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21). He comes home and asks forgiveness from his wives and gives them the money they need for food. They are very surprised at his sudden generosity and ask what has brought about this change. He tells them what he has learned. His children talk on the road about how their father has changed. The narrator ends with Hebrews 13:5: "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'"

## Listener Response

The Scripture Relevance Radio Drama series began airing on one station for eight dollars for a half an hour, with a potential listening audience of a million people. This station told us that the plays are their most popular program, and that other language groups were calling the station asking if radio theater programs could not be created in their languages as well.

Listeners have remarked to the actors, "Where do you get all this wisdom from?" "Your teaching is good. We like your stories." "No one can interrupt our friend when she is listening to your program. She doesn't want to miss a word." "I made peace with my rival wife after I listened to the story about the unforgiving servant." "Can you make me a cassette copy? I need to give it to a friend."

Over the course of a few years, more than fifty stations began airing the recorded programs the Lunaba drama team copy and mail to them. Some of these stations' managers have come to the team asking for programs; the team has gone to other stations and gotten to know their managers. The drama team is now carrying on program production on its own.

## Lessons Learned

### Using a culture's preferred communicational styles:

The idea of Scripture Relevance Drama is not only to communicate a message, but to communicate a respect for Lunaba culture. The medium may not actually be the message, but it is a huge part of the message. Lunaba theater communicates the new message of the Bible in a familiar dramatic container. A literacy hurdle is crossed, since listeners do not have to learn to read to have access to Scripture. Lunaba radio drama uses one of the culture's preferred communicational modes and art forms to present the Word of God in ways the audience can readily understand and access.

### Relevance theories are not just in regard to literates:

Characters' discussion of the Bible stories allows listeners to have their background knowledge supplemented and their probable questions answered, thus integrating Scripture with their worldview and "softening" the otherwise hard media. The resolution of the story shows how Scripture can make an impact on Lunaba life, helping overcome the barrier of Scripture's perceived irrelevance.

**This model calls for adaptation more than translation:** Listeners sometimes call radio stations requesting radio drama like the Lunaba have in their minority languages, too. The Lunaba team passed along their skills to one other language group who make their own program now. They get requests from other minority language development teams for their scripts to translate. They believe authors from other cultures would be better advised to create their own scripts around their own culture's issues and interests, and bring to life their own ideas of how Scripture can be told within the context of their culture, rather than directly translate Lunaba scripts. A few other language groups have begun their own drama teams.

## Questions for further study

- How can we expand the ethnomusicological model of facilitating the creation of indigenous hymnodies to other art forms? How can we further artistic means of communication by gifted artists of all kinds in their target language communities?
- How can we find out what is considered art in a culture and what their aesthetic standards of excellence are?
- Can we apply the Scripture Relevance Drama framework to other art forms? Could local poets, chanters, and singers bring up cultural issues and biblical responses? In what variety of ways can Scripture translations be communicated?
- Could recorded drama rely significantly on improvisational theater composed around scenarios or general story lines, rather than using scripts?
- Could chronological storying and thematic storying approaches be combined so as to tell key Bible stories in chronological order in the context of thematic dramas to introduce each Bible story?

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\*Lunaba is a pseudonym for a West African language group.