

## FROM 'TALKING BOX' TO 'CASSETTE CHURCH'

One day, on one of his translation testing trips, Samuel was very frustrated. He just could not find any audience. Nobody seemed to have the time or the interest to listen to him.

"I will go to my friend Simon," he said to himself. "Even if he has just a few members in his church, they will surely make time to help me."

So he packed his papers together and travelled the long way to the north of Izi where our former helper Simon had been sent by his church as a pastor to a small struggling prayer group.

How amazed Samuel was when he saw the little church hut full of people!

"How is it that there are so many of you?" he asked them in utter amazement.

"Well, since we have a pastor who speaks only Izi to us, who plays Izi cassettes to us, and who reads to us from the 'Izi Bible', we can really understand everything that God wants to tell us!" was the answer.

"But how did you come to hear of this church in the first place?" Samuel wanted to know. It just thrilled him to see whole families present.

"I heard a message from the 'talking box,'" one of the men answered. "In this message there was an old Izi man speaking, and he was telling how he came to



*Samuel visits one of the churches that came into being through the cassette ministry (he is standing at the far right)*

believe in Jesus and how he had brought out all his jujus and burned them. I said to myself: if the Izi gods and the Izi ancestors did not kill that old man, then maybe there is truth in what he says. So I have put my jujus away too and am now following Jesus."

Another man added: "I too heard the preaching in the 'talking box' and just could not forget what I had heard. Then the following Sunday I sent my first wife to church to find out what it was like. The

second Sunday I sent my second and third wife to church. Then I asked them if I should come too. So I came. Later I asked my wives if they would mind if I burned our jujus... This is what we have done and now we are happy children of God!"

Such experiences not only encouraged Samuel on his difficult testing trips, they also spurred him on to produce more cassette messages.

It was now several years since we had recorded the very first message in that tiny room in Zaria. Those very messages were still touching people wherever they were played. Samuel had since recorded several others and from the way people responded, he could clearly see which messages had most impact.

Those were the messages which were relevant to Izi culture, and were still bringing fruit, like the one which the man in Simon's church had heard, with the testimony of old Abraham. They were not messages preached in a vacuum, that could be preached anywhere in the world. No, they were preached right into the heart of an Izi person; no other people in the world would understand their way of reasoning. They were messages rich in Izi illustrations and proverbs, sometimes with a 'live' recording of a story-telling session, after which Samuel would bring an excellent application of the fable.

The Lord had first led us to use cassettes when we were in 'exile', far away from Izi. At that time nobody in Izi had ever heard of such a thing and it was a real wonder to them. Three years later, however, music cassettes could be bought all over Nigeria and they were sold in all the big markets. It was marvellous that just within these three years the Lord taught us about the value of such a cassette ministry.

In the beginning, we had just a handful of cassette players and we were very particular about whom we lent them to: just our own workers and a few trusted pastors. We had no means of duplicating the cassettes, and the sets had to be returned before we could lend them to anyone else.

Later, when friends overseas asked us what we desired as a gift, we mentioned 'a cassette player' or 'cassettes', and our stock increased. But still we had more and more people coming to us begging for a player. At that time we heard of an organization 'Bible Translations on Tape', and with their help and support we were able to build up a lending library of about 50 players for Izi alone!

Many came to us and implored us to let them buy one of these players. We did not feel free, however, to sell them. Why should the rich have this privilege and then brag to their neighbors about the wonderful talking box? Couldn't they afford a trip to Enugu and buy themselves a tape recorder in the big town? We wanted to be sure that the few we had would be used to the full and given to people who wouldn't shrink back from travelling into remote areas. We made them sign a paper, however, with lending conditions, of which the two most important were:

- 1) that the player and cassettes belonged to the "Abakaliki Translation Project" and could be recalled at any time;
- 2) that they promised to bring a broken player back to us for repair, and not give it to anybody else to handle.



In actual fact it did not always work out that way... The players were being used too far away to be recalled. They would only be returned when something went wrong and they stopped playing - and often a 'box' was spoiled beyond redemption as someone had tried to repair it and had done more harm than good.

In later years, when the idea of players and cassettes was more widespread through commercial sales, we started to ask for a monthly rent for the players, and the cassettes were even sold. It did not come close to covering our costs, of course, but we then had a greater guarantee that they were indeed used and not just lying around because people thought the batteries cost too much to make good use of the player!

As we looked back later, we were so thankful for the way the Lord had taught us some very important principles, and the way He taught us was by our very own limitations.

First, He taught us - because Paul had so little time - that we should not become too involved ourselves. From the very beginning, Paul had stressed that the cassette work should be the work of our national helpers, mainly Samuel. Others of our team made attempts, too, and later on John caught on and eventually took over. They were the ones who should be responsible for the content of the cassettes and also for the distribution - Paul would just let them use his equipment.

One day a church leader who worked in the far north of Izi stopped by at our translation center.

"I must congratulate you for these cassettes and for the way you preach in Izi," he said. "Wherever I go to play this message, even old people throw their jujus away."

Paul was quick to correct the misunderstanding. "I'll pass on your credit to whom it is due. I am not the one behind these cassettes. For Izi, it is Mr Samuel Iyoku. This is our colleagues' work. We facilitate that production."

Paul could hardly believe that anyone could have the idea that he was able to speak Izi without an accent. Izi is not that easy!

But Paul had to train our co-workers to preach on cassettes. They had to get used to speaking into a microphone, and to time themselves with a stopwatch when reading. He had to direct them in their writing, making suggestions and teaching them to omit statements which might offend other denominations. They had to learn how to bring variety into the programs - otherwise people had a hard time keeping their thoughts from wandering. Songs had to alternate with speaking, stretches of music had to be included - using their own instruments, of course - and, if possible, other live recordings had to be added.

Variety was also called for within the whole program. We experimented with a number of things. We recorded detailed teaching instructions for our primer. That was, however, rather a flop, as nobody wanted to spend money on batteries for learning to read, if you could just as well ask a schoolboy to teach you...

We recorded song cassettes. Our 'team choir' just sang every song from the first to the last page of the Izi songbook - three full cassettes! Not only in Izi, but the same choir also sang the Ikwo and Ezaa songbook into the microphone! Those song cassettes were a big boost for every little church and prayer group. Many not only learned the songs by heart, but afterwards, learned to read, just by comparing what they sang to what was written in the songbook!

The preaching cassettes, of course, were the most numerous. There were about twenty sermon titles and they were in constant demand.

We recorded Scripture passages too, but had to intersperse the text with frequent songs and music, as otherwise the concentrated biblical teaching was too heavy for the audience. We were thrilled, however, when Samuel one day reported that an old man in his area had learned the letter of James by heart through the recording.

"I just hope that we won't have to change that letter too much lateron," sighed Paul when he heard this. That was one of the reasons why we waited to put actual Scripture on tape until the texts were finalized. Trial publications on paper would wear out or could be burned, but what had been heard again and again sticks in one's memory for a long time.

For this reason we found the cassettes to be a powerful means of spreading new scriptural terms. Words or idioms which our co-translators had found and then used to express the biblical truths were frequently used in the cassettes so that the

hearers would get familiar with their meaning. The terms were not artificial, but the way they were used was new.

We were always amazed anew to hear stories of how the cassettes were being used by the Lord. They proved to be a tremendous tool in the hands of pastors, evangelists and even ordinary people. The recorded message seemed to have more authority than a pastor's preaching. Samuel had experienced this at our beginnings and it was confirmed again and again. When cassettes were heard, nobody could say 'Oh, this is just a young man, why should we obey what he says' or 'Look at the way he acts'. No, the message was taken at its own value.

There were always more people asking for the loan of cassettes and a player than we could satisfy. Often we had to send people away because we just had not a single cassette left. Looking back, however, we saw that the Lord had a purpose in letting our resources run out: each player, each cassette was a potential church planter! The more they were in circulation, the more groups were likely to want to hear more about the stories of Scripture. For not only have people come to ask us for players, but also to ask us to come or send someone to open a church, and to preach on a regular basis!

This, of course, we did not see as our task. Our team was fully occupied with the demands of the translation. We referred such people to a church in Abakaliki which had an active youth group. However, none of those young people were Izi. Nevertheless, some of them took over one of those little Izi flocks and pastored them faithfully. They communicated through interpretation, of course, but the Izis had received such a taste of the use of their own language through the cassettes, that nothing could divert them anymore from using Izi in the songs and the prayers!



*Samuel preaching to the “ talking box church ” in the old courthouse*

I remember the day when an excited young man came to invite us to visit the village area where he lived. He was not Izi, but Ibo, and a few weeks before we had given a cassette player to him and his friend who was not an Izi either. They were traders among the Izi and just had a burning desire to win their neighbors for the Lord.

"You have to come and see for yourself what great things the Lord has done!

We can hardly believe it ourselves. Be sure to come next Sunday and don't miss it!" the young man told us. What could it be that made him come 40 miles just to invite us to come and see? We were full of curiosity.

Samuel accompanied us, of course, as we drove the following Sunday to the place indicated. It was an old court house near the main road. We could hardly believe our eyes as we approached the building, jammed full of Izi people, about 200 in all. What a surprise! Unbelievable! How could it be? So many people, interested in hearing the gospel just by listening to some cassette tapes?

Samuel had brought the newly translated Gospel of John with him and read all of chapter 9. How they clung to his words as he read and then talked - all in their own language! The Lord opened wide the hearts of many that day.

But this wasn't all. After the service, we were led to another place, just 4 miles further into the bush. There the villagers had built a large shelter from mats and palm fronds as their 'church'. Here too, about 200 people, children of all ages included, sat expectantly as we arrived.

"This is only the second Sunday that we have had a church," we were told. "Joseph, the trader, always came into our compounds round about here and played the cassette player. Many said: 'This message is good. But we want a church where we can be taught all this.' So we built this church."

They had already gone to the town church and asked for an evangelist to come and minister to them. Two of that youth group were here for the second Sunday now. One of those young men said:



*the new cassette church - we asked the people to stand outside the courthouse for a picture*

"In our church we were always afraid to preach the gospel to the Izi people. We thought we would be killed. But these cassette players have made it easy..."

We were thrilled. We had been able to witness two of the 'Cassette Churches'. People had started to call these groups 'Cassette Churches', because they had come into being without a pastor, without an evangelist, without the help of any

denomination, just by hearing the Word read and preached on a cassette.

'Cassette Churches' sprang up in other places - we did not even know where they all were. We were glad that this active, Bible-believing church in Abakaliki took these groups on. We were not so happy, however, that the evangelists sent there were not Izis. Shouldn't we rather wait with further loans of cassette players until there were more young Izi people willing to go to Bible Schools and come back ready to take over the young churches? But how would the young Izis hear the call to Bible School until they were first evangelized themselves? It was a vicious circle. We could only pray and press on with the translation.

What further rejoiced our hearts was, that through this cassette ministry, we were able to help more than one denomination to increase their membership. The already-mentioned Ibo pastor who had remained sceptical towards our translation work because he feared that the translation would split the church, wrote us a very appreciative letter when he saw that through the cassette ministry, his own denomination increased and his fears were ungrounded.

As the Ikwo area had a Christian witness from different denominations for decades already, the cassette players were given to elders of various churches rather than to individuals. Our co-translator Thomas gives us his own report:

"Moses Uzim, my brother, who was chosen as the leader of the cassette evangelism, took it upon himself to do the first direct outdoor work with it. He said that he used it all alone for the first week in the most populated area of the village and that the result was very encouraging - people started streaming into the church the following Sunday... Soon more people desired to help and they decided to go out in groups. Church attendance grew steadily in that area.

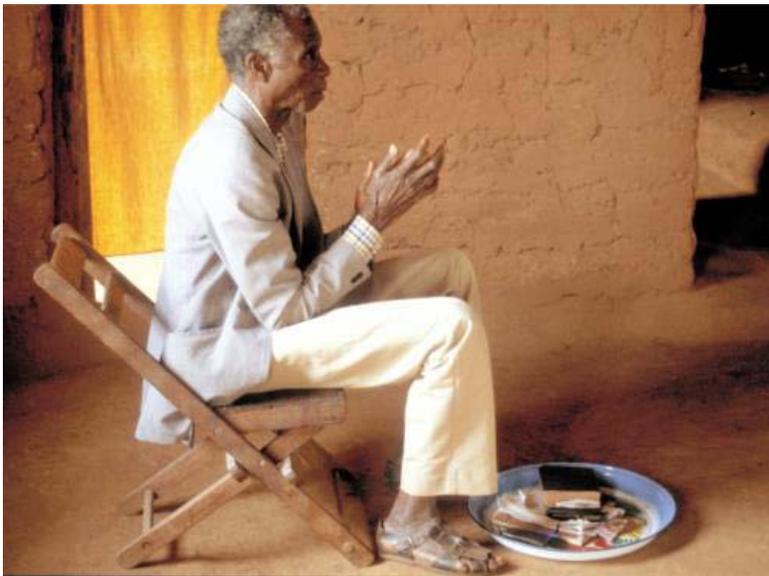
Yes, those cassettes were a wonderful tool in the hands of a dedicated Christian and an active and caring church. Their use, however, put a heavy responsibility on those who received the new believers. If these were further taught and cared for, yes, then the church would grow. If not, then more harm may have been done than good.



So these experiences provided new incentives for all our workers to press on with the translation - THE book from which the believers indeed could be taught or could teach themselves. God used the cassettes to prepare the way - to create a hunger for more of His Word.

In one of the Izi 'Cassette Churches', this testimony was recorded:

"We Izi people have been pagans. Often we have cut each other with knives. But when the cassettes came we heard the truth. We heard that God loves sinners, that he loves people who cut each other with knives, that he loves people who make jujus. Myself, I prayed to a juju called Nggele Ukwé and sacrificed chickens to it every day. But one day cassettes were brought into my home and they talked and talked and talked. Then I said: yes, this is really true. So I destroyed all my jujus.



*Old Izi man thanking God for bringing him the Word of God*

If these cassettes had not come, I would not be a child of God today. For the Izi people do not believe anything that is not said in their own language. If you speak to them in English, they don't believe it. If you speak to them in Ibo, they don't believe it. But when the cassettes came and spoke to them in their own language, all who heard have believed...

"That is what I say: May God who reminded these people that the Izis will be lost, that they cut each other with knives, that they worship jujus, may God who reminded these

people that they need to hear God's Word in their own language, may God who reminded them to put the Izi language into a talking box, may He give them a long life..."