

Six Ways Family Elders Teach and Children Learn Spiritual Beliefs

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Abstract

This article introduces the findings of how family elders in rural communities in Kalimantan, Indonesia, teach their spiritual beliefs to successive generations from a study by Wood (2017). This study was motivated by a desire to identify more effective methods for teaching Christian beliefs within the context of the local church in rural Kalimantan. Although my study focused on only one community, I believe that the lessons I learned can benefit both rural and urban ministries around the world. I also believe that these lessons can inform the ways we design Scripture-engagement activities.

Introduction

During my study, I discovered that children in a particular community in rural Kalimantan learn and family elders prefer to teach spiritual beliefs using six very interrelated and overlapping methods. These methods are guided by five major values which I call *guiding values*. Throughout my study, I have intentionally used the term *family elders* instead of parents or grandparents because the participants used a term that can be ambiguous. The term sometimes referred to parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, or even an older sibling.

I hope that this article, and the dissertation on which it is based, will enable mission representatives and church leaders to design curriculum and teaching events that more effectively enable family elders to understand and teach biblical spiritual beliefs to their families.

Three General Methods

Family elders, regardless of their age, religious background, or level of education, learn primarily through three general methods (see Figure 1). Family elders also expect that their children and grandchildren will learn through these same three methods. I call these *general methods* because they are used for practical lessons as well as spiritual ones. Girls use these methods when they learn to do housework; boys use these methods when they learn how to work with wood; and both genders use these methods to learn about the spirits, their relationships to

one another, and how to behave during a traditional ritual or church service. These three methods overlap and depend on one another.

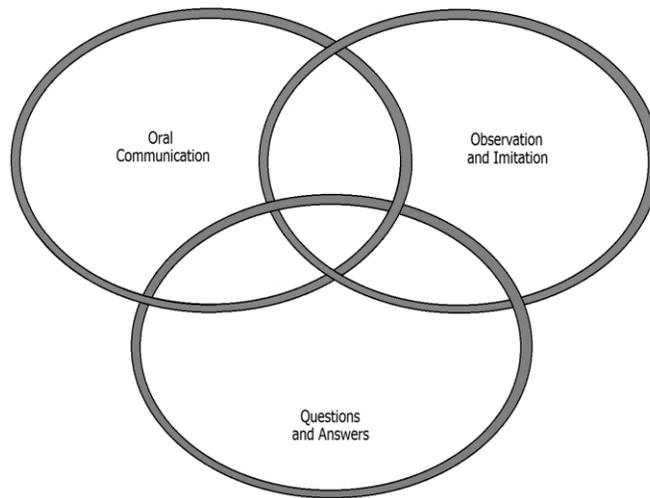


Figure 1. Three general methods for learning and teaching.

Oral Communication

Traditional knowledge is spoken and heard, not written. Although this knowledge is eventually memorized, nobody deliberately sets out to memorize or practice telling a story. Memorization occurs naturally as experiences are repeated. RAB said, “It was not written and we didn’t take notes. Information was only passed from mouth to mouth, from stories to folktales, and the personal testimonies of our elders. These were quoted whether they be culture or beliefs.”

Oral communication can take various forms, including folktales, poems, proverbs, or short directions for performing certain tasks.

Observation and Imitation

Family elders do not force learners to memorize abstract material. They seldom lecture about a topic that they are not doing. Everything is put into practice immediately. For example, family elders teach farming skills by taking children to the fields. I observed that very small children, who were not yet able to work, were allowed to play while their elders worked; but whenever the child showed an interest, they were encouraged to imitate their elders. As the children grew, more participation was expected. Family elders demonstrated what they wanted children to learn and expected the children to imitate immediately.

ABP described how he learned to catch fish and game: “I wanted to imitate the way my father attracted fish. He made bait. I thought, ‘Oh so this is the way.’ He attracted birds the same way, with homemade bait. Yes, I imitated my father because unless children watch their elders, they

don't know how to make a fish trap or a trap for larger animals. So now that I have a family, I can trap game and fish. I can find good fortune.”

GBP described how he teaches his son how to work with food. “For elementary aged children like my son, I teach him differently than he is taught in school. For instance, how to make toys. First, I make one for him. But after I have done it twice, he is not dependent on me anymore. He can make his own toy. He can even teach his friends.”

Learning by observation is dependent on the visibility of role models. DIN's and KIN's elders praised individuals who did something well and urged their children to imitate these role models. DIN said, “The short answer is: we were told to imitate good examples. ‘Look at this, this, and this. Imitate that person's example.’ But for bad characteristics, they said, ‘Don't imitate that.’”

KIN said, “There were many examples of people whom we were told not to imitate. If we were talking about people who were drunk, smoking, polluting the environment, or acting uneducated, my parents would say, ‘Instead of regretting it later, it would be better if you imitate us, not those people.’”

When the clergy do not live in the community and do not participate in everyday life, they are not visible role models. Becoming a role model involves inviting children and their elders to observe how the clergy's family prays over everyday activities. It also involves allowing children and their elders to observe how the clergy respond to daily (and sometimes traumatic) problems.

Learning by observation is also dependent on the learners' interest. SAB saw his elders' examples but did not actively observe until he realized his own need. He said, “I asked, ‘How do you plant the rice?’ My elders said, ‘Watch us. Watch the way we work.’”

SBP had to experience the natural consequences of his misbehavior before he learned. He said, “When I was small, my father said, ‘If you meet a beehive, don't throw rocks at it. That's dangerous. The bees will sting you.’ They said that, but I didn't believe them. I thought I could outrun the bees, so I threw a rock at the hive and tore it a little bit. Soon my entire head was swollen. My face was gone. I went home crying.”

Questions and Answers

Observation leads to questions. Some children are more curious than others. HIN said, “I was a person who always asked questions of my elders. For example, when we were doing a ritual, I asked, ‘Why do we have to do this ritual?’ They would answer, ‘Because we are praying.’ It was like this when I was small.”

SAB's comment earlier is typical of children who do not observe until a problem forces them to ask questions. Many family elders wait for the child to ask questions. However, some elders give more satisfying answers than others.

The most satisfying answers have two parts. Family elders give short answers during the day. HIN's comments above are an example of a short answer. Some family elders also tell a series of stories in the evening.

The short answers did not satisfy SIN. She said, “So if our elders said, ‘Don’t go to the forest to gather bamboo shoots. Don’t gather firewood or bamboo shoots,’ I asked, ‘Why?’ Then they answered, ‘You will get hurt.’ That was my elder’s short answer.”

DIN said, “I said I don’t want this. I don’t know. We’ve already asked, ‘Why is it like this,’ but you haven’t told us the folktale.”

Both short and long answers are important. However, it is difficult for clergy to give two-part answers unless they are available in the evenings when families relax. Even so, they need to tell the Bible stories that provide more satisfying answers.

These three general methods are consistent with claims by Merriam (2007a, b) and Reagan (2009) about parental instruction in traditional communities world-wide. These methods are also consistent with descriptions by Rogoff (2003) of how children learn. I mention the teaching of livelihood skills only to illustrate how these three general methods are used for more than just the teaching of spiritual beliefs.

Three Specific Methods

In addition to the three general methods above, family elders in Bamboo Grove identified three other methods by which they learned their spiritual beliefs (see Figure 2). I call these specific methods because, although they are variations of the general methods above, they are used specifically to transmit spiritual beliefs, rather than livelihood skills. These three specific methods also interact with and enhance one another.



Figure 2. Three specific, interrelated methods for transmitting spiritual beliefs.

Oral Storytelling

Oral storytelling is obviously part of oral communication. It is also the key to interpreting the other two specific methods for transmitting spiritual beliefs. Traditional folktales and Bible stories are told, not read, to children. KIN’s grandfather had access to both oral folklore and a

printed Bible in the national language, but he chose to tell Bible stories rather than to read them to his grandchildren. She said, “Grandpa always told Bible stories. He packaged them in the form of traditional folktales. Grandpa read the Bible and when his grandchildren came, he would tell us a story. And the story was from the Bible. He read during the day and told the story in the evening.”

However, the availability of a story in print limits its appeal. SIN claimed that she paid more attention to traditional folktales than to Bible stories precisely because the folktales did not exist in print. SIN said, “Actually, if I were asked to choose between a Bible story and a traditional folktale, when I was still small, I was more interested in the folktales. Why? I could read the Bible stories myself. But I couldn’t read the folktales and I hadn’t learned them. The folktales don’t exist in books, so I wanted to hear how they turned out.”

SIN’s comments are consistent with claims by Goody (1968a, b) that literacy is a method of storing information that frees memory for other things.

There are four genres of oral storytelling: sacred folktales, instructional folktales, personal testimonies, and living stories. The first two types are consistent with Malinowski’s (2001) description of folklore genres. Sacred folktales are told only during traditional rituals and explain the reasons for the rituals and spiritual rules.

Family elders use instructional folktales, personal testimonies, and living stories to explain why their children must abide by certain rules. SIN described how her elders used instructional folktales to teach her how to treat her family, and what would happen to her if she did not behave. She said, “What is the name of this story? *Darul Lacak agan Dayakng Kumang* [The Single Man and the Orphan Maiden] was its name. He was cruel to his siblings and was always cheating people. We learned that in our lives, not only from this story but from others as well, that maybe many of the things in those stories actually happened.”

These uses of oral storytelling are consistent with claims by Merriam (2007a, 2007b) and Reagan (2009) about parental instruction in traditional communities around the world, and with claims by Hiebert (2008) about tribal and peasant communities.

Rituals

Human beings use rituals to communicate with supernatural beings. Church rituals facilitate communication with God, whereas traditional rituals facilitate communication with other spirits. Learning from rituals depends on observation and imitation. GBP described the educational importance of traditional rituals. GBP said, “My parents introduced me to their beliefs through various rituals that we called *tolak-balik* [rejecting bad omens] rituals.”

The effectiveness of rituals as a method for teaching specific spiritual beliefs depends on the use of sacred folktales during traditional rituals (or Bible stories during church rituals). Sacred folktales and Bible stories explain the origin and purpose of the rituals as well as the procedures for conducting the rituals.

Family elders also used personal testimonies to explain the practical necessity of the rituals. SAB shared one such testimony, “My wife was pregnant again. I loved her, watched her, prayed for her, and made offerings to the ancestor spirits above and the nature spirits below. Then I

prepared for a healing ritual. I repaired the chicken pen because I was afraid the chickens would cause this baby to die [as had its elder sibling]. I sought out the knowledge of my elders. We just wanted to be safe.”

When family elders do not understand the Bible stories that explain the biblical purpose of church rituals, they tend to assume that church rituals have the same purpose that traditional rituals have. In the community that I studied, traditional rituals were believed to motivate the spirits to act on behalf of humans. Therefore, the clergy will need to explain the difference between traditional and church rituals. The most satisfying explanation is probably the telling of Bible stories that explain the origin and meaning of the church rituals. However, telling the Bible stories does not guarantee that family elders will listen, because traditional sacred folktales are believed to call the spirits. It is also believed that these spirits will cause harm if the folktales are told outside of the ritual context. Therefore, the clergy will need to explain the differences between the supposed power of traditional sacred folktales and the power of Bible stories.

Rules

Rule-keeping protects individuals and communities from catastrophes. There are several kinds of rules. Spiritual rules govern social relationships with spiritual beings, and moral rules govern social relationships between humans. Both types of rules are prescribed in the Bible. Spiritual rules are related to rituals. They are also prescribed in the sacred folktales (or by Bible stories). RIN described several spiritual rules connected to the rice fields. She said, “There are many spiritual rules connected to the rice fields. [For example,] when you enter a field, you cannot bring rattan baskets.”

Learning from spiritual rules involves both observation and imitation, and questions and answers. SIN’s earlier comment about children asking questions referred to questions about spiritual rules.

Spiritualized rules are blamed on imaginary spirits and imply that natural catastrophes are caused by spiritual beings. For example, elders may say, “Don’t swim in the river today, there is a ghost down there who will attack you,” when in fact, the elders don’t want to take the time to supervise the child at the river. Spiritualized rules are explained by instructional folktales and personal testimonies.

DIN’s elders told her an instructional folktale so that she would stay in the house while they went to work in their fields. She said, “As children, we always wanted to know. So my father told us the folktale of *Hantu Sundai Sandukng* [The Ghost of the Sandukng River]. He said, ‘The ghost’s eyes only want to bite us; but he only has two very wide teeth. His back is two yards wide, so he can’t come through that door; he has to knock it down.’ So we were afraid to go outside. So then our elders said, ‘You kids must stay in the house. We’re afraid of what will happen if you see the ghost outside.’ In reality there was no ghost, but my sister and I kept the door closed while our elders went to their fields. They didn’t worry about us because we were so afraid the ghost from the Sandukng River would bite us that we obeyed and stayed safe. But in reality, our parents were only lying to us; there was no ghost. This is how I’ve recently started thinking about it.”

DIN's comment illustrates how rules are explained by both instructional folktales (or Bible stories) and personal testimonies. Her comments also illustrate how Christian elders can teach traditional spiritual beliefs by accident by using traditional folktales to control behavior. Many elders choose traditional folktales because they do not have a large enough repertoire of Bible stories and either don't know how to apply the Bible stories they do know to everyday problems, or believe that Bible stories are sacred and therefore cannot be used like instructional folktales.

It is difficult for the clergy to tell Bible stories in both ritual and everyday contexts, to explain both church rituals and Christian moral standards, unless they tell Bible stories during routine pastoral visits to their neighbor's homes and fields.

Guiding Values

It should be noted that spiritual beliefs, moral values, and the methods by which they are taught, are changing. In many traditional communities, traditional and Christian beliefs compete for the loyalty of each individual and each family. Most families hold a mixture of traditional and Christian beliefs.

Both traditional and Christian beliefs are being challenged by several recent, secular developments which include *travel*, *education*, and *electronic media* like televisions and cell phones. These three developments expose traditional families to other communities with other



Figure 3. Although the transmission of spiritual beliefs is being challenged by four secular developments, it is also being protected by the five guiding values.

beliefs and other rules. In addition, *cultural tourism* is divorcing traditional sacred folktales from the ritual context and traditional rituals from their spiritual context. Although this divorce does not produce the expected catastrophes, it does expose children to observe and perform ritual activities in the context of school competitions. For these reasons, the effects of cultural tourism on the learning of spiritual beliefs remains to be seen. Both the retention and replacement of spiritual beliefs are driven by the community's guiding values.

While describing how they teach and learn spiritual beliefs, the participants of my study repeatedly referred to five major values that guide both the teaching and learning of spiritual beliefs and the forces of culture change. Only (1973) and Hiebert (2008) both cited Morris Opler's theory from 1945 when they called these values *cultural themes*. They claimed that every community has its own unique set of cultural themes. I referred to these values as *guiding values*, because they affect the ability of family elders and clergy to transmit Christian spiritual beliefs.

In rural Kalimantan, the five guiding values were: *mysticism* (or supernaturalism), *family*, *seniority* (i.e. that age and experience are ascribed greater status), *harmony*, and *economic survival*. Each of these values is supported by the Bible so far as they focus on the worship of and obedience to God rather than the worship of ancestor or nature spirits. Like the six teaching methods that I described earlier, these five guiding values are interrelated. For example, seniors are members of the family and are believed to become spirits after they die. Economic survival is also believed to depend on harmony with both family and the spirits.

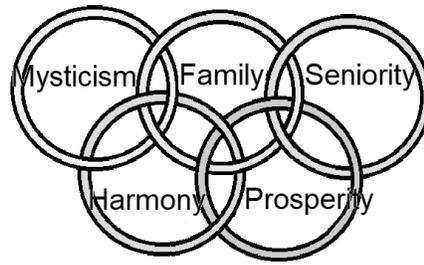


Figure 4. Five Guiding Values that influence the transmission of spiritual beliefs.

Summary

In this article, I have described six methods by which family elders teach and children learn spiritual beliefs. The acquisition of spiritual beliefs, as well as livelihood skills, depends on three general methods: observation and imitation, questions and answers, and other forms of oral communication. In addition, the acquisition of spiritual beliefs also depends on three specific methods: rituals, rules, and oral storytelling. The specific methods are applications of the general methods. All six methods are overlapping, interrelated, and mutually enhancing. No one method is effective without the others. The transition from one set of beliefs to another (e.g. from traditional beliefs to Christian or secular beliefs) is also guided by five cultural themes or guiding values.

I believe that the teaching of new (i.e. Christian) beliefs will be more effective if the clergy equip family elders to use all six teaching methods that I describe in this article. I also believe that the teaching of new (i.e. Christian) beliefs will be more effective if the clergy work with rather than against the community's guiding values. These theories are based on the ideas of Lingenfelter (1992) and Lingenfelter and Lingenfelter (2003).

If children learn their spiritual beliefs by observing rituals, then church rituals (as well as rituals conducted by Christian families at home) need to be as eye catching and transparent as possible. By *eye catching*, I mean that church rituals must attract attention, participation, and questions. By *transparent*, I mean that the biblical meaning of the rituals must be explicitly stated and not left to be reinterpreted. This meaning can be explained with Bible stories, personal testimonies, proverbs, songs, or other forms of oral communication.

If children learn their spiritual beliefs by obeying rules, then both the clergy and family elders need to strictly enforce rules that are consistent with biblical theology. These rules can be

explained with Bible stories, personal testimonies, proverbs, other pithy sayings, and songs. Christian rules should be described as the signs of our covenant relationship with God and our attempt to imitate His image, as well as the results of obedience and the consequences of disobedience.

If children learn first by observing and imitating, and then by asking questions and receiving answers, then both the clergy and family elders must provide consistent, observable, living examples of both participation in church rituals and obedience to Christian rules.

Finally, if children learn their spiritual beliefs through oral stories and informal discussions, then the clergy and family elders need to tell more Bible stories. These stories need to be told every day, and at home as well as during weekly church activities. The clergy and family elders need to learn how to tell Bible stories in captivating ways.

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