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Abstract

USING CEREMONIES TO DISCIPLE ORAL LEARNERS AMONG THE TRIBAL PEOPLE IN BANGLADESH

Despite the remote, isolated location of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), the tribal inhabitants of this corner of Bangladesh are beginning to embrace Christianity. Western discipling methods dependent on literacy have limited effectiveness with these tribals who are largely oral people. If Christianity is to become indigenous in this region, ministry including disciple-making must be contextualized. From their former religious practices it is evident that CHT tribal ceremonies are both indigenous to the culture as well as appropriate for oral learners.

This dissertation, is a case study of using a ceremony as a discipling event. Following bibliographic surveys of literature on orality, ceremony, and discipleship, I made field observations in the CHT and conducted interviews with tribal people in Bangladesh. Having this information, a local hermeneutical community was formed to construct, implement, and evaluate a discipling event. Sixty participants from different tribal areas representing various tribal groups participated in and gave their impressions of the discipling event.

In the initial part of the field research, ceremonies were observed and religious leaders were interviewed. The ceremonies observed included
Buddhist ceremonies from the Chakma tribe, Hindu *pujas* (worship) from the Tripura tribe, and animist rituals from the Mru tribe. From these observations and interviews three main characteristics of oral learning emerged. First, we found that symbols enhance and deepen the understanding of and emotional connection to the event. Second, listening to, memorizing, and chanting mantras internalize particular teachings. Third, drama adds an enjoyable and participatory element and reinforces the learning.

With this information from the village ceremonies and leaders, the Hermeneutical Community began to plan the discipling event. This group also considered the spiritual condition of the tribal Christian community, and chose appropriate biblical teaching. A five-part event was constructed including dramatizations of biblical stories, memorizing a Christian mantra, and a symbolic candle-lighting commitment service. The entire event was guided by the Hermeneutical Community, but every participant was very involved and participated in each aspect of the event.

Two such discipling events took place with 30 participants each time. The participants were divided into focus groups of ten people, and the focus groups were interviewed before and after the event. Both strengths and weaknesses of the event were identified by the focus groups. Over-all both
the participants and the Hermeneutical Community found that Christianized symbols, scriptural mantras, and biblical drama all giving Christian teaching were an appropriate form of discipling for oral, tribal people.

If discipling is to be effective for the oral masses of the world’s population, it will look very different from the literate, Western discipleship programs we usually find. Oral people learn much of their religious teaching through symbols, mantras, drama, and ceremonies. We can use these same forms, infuse them with Christian teaching, and create discipling ceremonies. The use of such ceremonies has been found to be an appropriate discipling method for oral learners.
Dissertation Approval Sheet

This dissertation, entitled

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Written by

Roy C. McIntyre

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Missiology

has been read and approved by the undersigned members of

the faculty of the E. Stanley Jones School

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Date: April, 2005
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AMONG THE TRIBAL PEOPLE IN BANGLADESH

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Submitted to the Faculty of the
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Asbury Theological Seminary

by
Roy C. McIntyre

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Missiology

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Chapter 1

An Introduction to Ceremonies as a Means of Making Disciples

I felt out of place and a little embarrassed wearing the black faculty cap and gown and sitting among the professors at the graduation ceremony of the College of Christian Theology of Bangladesh (CCTB) in November, 2000. After all, I had only taught for two weeks – just half of the Youth Ministry course earlier in the year. And, Youth Ministry was only one of the elective courses in the year-long residential Bachelor of Theology (BTh) curriculum. However, Mrs. Malita Das, the Academic Dean, had insisted that I participate in the ceremony alongside the regular residential faculty.

I am much more comfortable working with our rural, tribal pastors in eastern Bangladesh than in the CCTB setting. Reaching and training tribals has been my focus for almost 10 years. This was the first year, however, that any of the tribals from the Chittagong Hill Tracts (see Appendix A – Map of Bangladesh with Chittagong Hill Tracts) were to receive their Bachelor of Theology degrees. So, I agreed to teach part of the Youth Ministry course, and included the use of ceremonies as a discipling tool. These discipling ideas came from Mathias Zahniser’s book *Symbol and...*
Ceremony: Making Disciples Across Cultures. So, in one of my sessions we enacted a “Crucified with Christ’ Ceremony” based on Donald Joy’s Toward Freedom and Responsibility (Joy 1992). In this ceremony students were symbolically crucified with Christ by being tied to crosses, symbolizing their death to their childhood and old, sinful life (Joy 1992). The students seemed to like the ideas of teaching discipleship through symbolic and ceremonial forms. I was unaware of the actual impact the ceremony had on them at that time. However, I would find out soon enough.

As I tried to keep the cap balanced on my head, I observed that the CCTB graduation was like most others. There was excitement in the air, and a sense of accomplishment. Then, toward the end of the graduation program, an elected student representative, Chinmoy Debnath, gave a speech on behalf of the graduates. I first met Chinmoy when he took my Youth Ministry class earlier that year. Chinmoy, a tribal from Mymensingh, was well-loved by his classmates and teachers. At one point, as Chinmoy gave his speech recounting the hopes and aspirations of the students, he exclaimed, “... and when Mr. Roy tied us to the cross in the Youth Ministry class, we all made a new commitment to follow Christ more faithfully.” I was overwhelmed that out of the year of theological training the only class
or teaching mentioned was this simple ceremony of being crucified with Christ.

It was at that point that I began to see the power and impact that ceremonies can have on people. Of all the months of teaching and theological training, a simple ceremony – used only as an example of what could be done with youth in their areas – stood out in the mind of Chinmoy as a spiritual marker for deepening his commitment to Christ. This also seemed to suggest that ceremonies could be used as a tool to disciple people. Since the majority of the tribal people have little Western education, perhaps this could be a more appropriate way of discipling them.

**Experiences in Discipling**

When I first arrived in Bangladesh in 1994, the Bangladesh Baptist Mission (BBM) asked my wife, Jenna, and me to do something about discipling the growing number of Christian youth in Bangladesh. The focus of the BBM had been evangelism and church planting. At that point a generation of the first converts’ children, who had grown up in Christian homes, were now youth in the churches. Their background, educational level, and spiritual needs were quite different from that of their parents and elders in the churches. Being right out of language school with little
understanding of the culture, we began trying to disciple these youth with translated Western materials. We had limited success. Then, we moved to using Chronological Bible Storying in a discipling format.

In using Chronological Bible Storying we made the first inroads into a form of discipling more culturally appropriate to the tribal context. We saw a dramatic, positive change in how this was received by the tribal youth. Rather than simply regurgitating the memorized Western teachings, with the stories we saw the young believers internalize them and retell them in their own indigenous style. This began an interest in discovering more contextual forms of discipling. Following our first term, I began to study and look into cross-cultural discipling at Asbury Theological Seminary.

In our second term in Bangladesh, with ideas from Mathias Zahniser’s class at Asbury Theological Seminary, Cross-Cultural Discipling, we began to use various ceremonies as a vehicle for discipling. It seemed that an adaptation of the above mentioned “Crucified with Christ’ Ceremony,” and a Christmas “reenactment” ceremony were well-received. In November of 2003, we followed the model of a ceremony based on the “Shin-Byu” Buddhist ceremony.

The Shin-Byu is the Buddhist initiation rite. It is during this ceremony that Buddhist boys are initiated into manhood, and begin their
obligatory period of service as a Buddhist monk. This service normally lasts from a few days to a few weeks, but sometimes leads to a lifelong commitment to Buddhist monkhood (Spiro 1970:234-247). During the initial ceremony, the initiates progress through the various stages of the life of Gautama Buddha beginning with his renunciation of his princely origin and progressing to his life as an ascetic (Zahniser 1997:109). In our adaptation of this ceremony, we relived stages of the life of Christ rather than the life of Buddha. This adaptation is based on chapter eight of Mathias Zahniser’s book Symbol and Ceremony: Making Disciples Across Cultures (1997:108-123).

I assigned leaders and participants – youth from the district churches – from six different areas to guide us through this “Life of Christ” ceremony. I then took part as a participant observer while groups from each area led us through the six stages. The stages included the birth of Christ, Jesus teaching in the temple as a child, the baptism and temptation of Jesus, the miracle of Jesus calming the sea, the last supper, and the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. In each phase we were led to re-enact each of these events. Following each re-enactment a leader gave biblical teaching on the particular topic. The ceremony culminated in an adaptation of Donald Joy’s “Toward Freedom and Responsibility,” in which participants promised to
leave their childish ways behind and live as committed, Christian adults.

We all left the ceremony with a new awareness of uniqueness and beauty of Christ's life, and a desire to serve him more faithfully. In Chapter 4, I will refer to some evidence that I found to support this deeper commitment by the participants. These experiences have led me to the pursuit of this study.

Definition of Terms

Before any further discussion, I would like to define a few basic terms used in this study.

Orality

Orality refers to the mindset of a person or society that relies on the spoken, non-written word as their basis of communication and reality. Walter Ong, in distinguishing orality from literacy, states that, "Oral expression can exist and mostly has existed without any writing at all..." (1982:8). The difference between oral-based and text-based mentality reaches far deeper than what meets the eye. Many of the characteristics we think of as representative of traditional societies at a deeper level are expressions of orality. The concrete connection with the environment, corporate participation in the life of the community, and major focus on the
present are all characteristics present in oral societies (1982: 32, 42, 46, 136).

**Ceremony**

A ceremony is a dramatic event in which ritual, signs, and symbols are utilized to impress a teaching or confer a rite on those participating. Applying this to the area of discipling, Zahniser states, "In rites of passage [or ceremonies], initiates experience the powerful congruence of truth and life that also defines the nature and function of discipling" (1997: 97). When I write of using “Christian ceremonies” as a means of discipling, I am not referring to Christian weddings, funerals, or other ceremonies which are already in place in some Christian societies. Instead, I wish to help the local community in creating ceremonies for the purpose of infusing Christian teaching into the lives of the participants. Existing ceremonies such as funerals and weddings also are great opportunities for Christian discipling, but I am proposing the intentional creation of a discipling ceremony. I believe that participating in such a ceremony will resonate with the nature of oral and traditional people making it a valuable way of learning Christian truths.
Disciple

A disciple refers to one who is in a committed relationship with a teacher and is in the learning process of attaining his/her qualities and knowledge. In our case the teacher is Christ, and, as his disciples, we are in a process of growing into his likeness which includes sharing this knowledge and process with those around us. “...A ‘disciple’ of Jesus, designated by the Greek term mathetes, was one who adhered to his master, and the type of adherence was determined by the master himself” (Wilkins 1995:42).

Wilkins also states that the term disciple was used “at the time of Jesus to designate a follower who was vitally committed to a teacher/leader and/or movement” (1995:125).

In another work, Following the Master, Wilkins reveals how complex the term disciple has become today with definitions ranging from simply a Christian convert to one called to vocational ministry. From this range of definitions and considering the original idea above, I have employed the following definition for the purposes of this study: “In the specific sense, a disciple of Jesus is one who has come to Jesus for eternal life, has claimed Jesus as Savior and God, and has embarked upon the life of following Jesus” (Wilkins 1992:40). While I am steering away from very Western, literate discipleship program definitions, it must be understood that the above
"embarking on a life of following Jesus" should involve being taught "to obey everything [Jesus has] commanded..." (Matthew 28:20).

**Indigenous Disciple Making**

The focus of this dissertation is the process of making disciples. The imperative in Matthew 28:19, *matheteusate*, refers to being or becoming a disciple. It has been translated "make disciples" (Matthew 28:19). Added to this is our desire to make disciples in a way that is indigenous to the local culture. There are many aspects to this discipling process.

Part of this study is to find the most appropriate way to teach, learn by example, and mentor in the discipling process focusing especially on oral cultures. Contextual forms must be used in order for the teaching to be palatable to the local believer and effective in context. So, existing cultural forms in which teaching is internalized by the indigenous people have been examined. We then determined what was adaptable to our disciple making process. This adds an element that we do not normally consider an aspect of discipling. Therefore this process of becoming such a disciple is what I will refer to as "indigenous disciple making."

More defining will take place as I review the literature on these three topics of orality, ceremony, and discipling, but these definitions lay the foundation for beginning the study.
Statement of the Research Problem

This background led me to have a desire to move forward and find better techniques to train and equip local Christian leaders of the Chakma, Tripura, Mru (or Murong) and other tribes of Bangladesh to reach and disciple their own people for Christ. (More information about these groups will be given in Chapter 2.) In our evangelizing and discipling, we have missed the majority of our tribal people who are oral learners. I believe we can find better, more culturally appropriate ways to evangelize, disciple, and to build up Christian leadership among these people in Bangladesh. Therefore, this research begins to explore how incorporating oral forms of learning might produce a more culturally appropriate Christian discipling program. We have sought to construct a Christian ceremony that incorporates some of the indigenous features of character formation in oral cultures so as to give evidence of Christian formation.

In Chapter 5, I will relate why I feel that evangelism and discipleship should not be separated, and are part of a whole process. This study, however, focuses on discipling because evangelism has been carried out with a fairly successful degree of indigeneity. Evangelism is by and large in the hands of the tribals themselves. Discipleship, however, has been neglected, and when it has been done has not been done well nor
indigenously. Each of the sub-problems covers a different aspect of moving us toward more indigenous discipleship.

Sub-problems

The following are the sub-problems of this study. The first sub-problem was to discover and observe symbolic and ceremonial structures and forms, such as religious ceremonies or rites of passage used currently by oral tribal communities. The second sub-problem was to discover how adherents learn from these ceremonies, and how the ceremonies are used to socialize the people. The third sub-problem was to facilitate a local hermeneutical community in designing discipleship that would incorporate functional equivalents of symbols, aspects of festivals, and/or other forms of ceremonial learning from an oral background for the purpose of Christian discipling. The fourth sub-problem was to determine how well the discipling event worked in moving toward our goal of indigenous discipleship.
Research Questions and Data Collected

How was I to discover or help to create such a discipling event? Prior to the field research a broad bibliographic study on orality was done. (This is described in Chapter 3 on orality.) Following this, I had to understand the ritualistic and ceremonial context of our tribal people in Bangladesh. So, the first research question was: What are some of the symbolic and ceremonial structures used by the tribal people in Bangladesh? These people are a Tibeto-Mongolian ethnic minority in Bangladesh. Likewise they are Hindu, Buddhist, Animist (and now some Christian) religious minorities in a dominantly Islamic nation. These differences seem to be far overshadowed by their cultural and geopolitical unity. Having said that, I attempted to discover the basic cultural components including religious ceremonies as well as other particular customs unique to each of three major groups with which I work.

Over my ten years in Bangladesh I have observed many tribal ceremonies which provided a good foundation for this study. In my specific field research for this study, I was able to observe firsthand as well as receive descriptions of the following ceremonies. I observed five Hindu ceremonies and received in-depth descriptions of several others. These included three observations of Durga puja, one of Loki puja and one of Kali
puja. (Puja refers to the worship of a particular Hindu god.) I observed six Buddhist ceremonies and received in-depth descriptions of several others. These included Buddha Purnima, Probarona Purnima, Chiboi Dan (the gifting of new monks' robes), Sam Pru, and the New Year Festival. I observed two Animist ceremonies and received in-depth descriptions of these and other rites. One ceremony was a modern-day improvisation of the main Mru cow sacrificing ceremony; the other was a personal ritual for protection from an evil spirit. This lays a foundation for the tribal context. From these studies, a few major themes and ceremonial structures have emerged which characterize the tribes and help us in finding ways to disciple them properly.

The majority of each of these people groups is oral. Therefore, I have collected data and investigated how these oral people learn. The second research question was: What are the means of character formation characteristically employed and how are ceremonies used to socialize the people in this context? To assume that certain material is unattainable for oral learners is a common misconception. Oral people learn and remember large amounts of information. “Human beings in primary oral cultures, those untouched by writing in any form, learn a great deal and possess and
practice great wisdom, but they do not ‘study’” (Ong 1982:9). Trades, for example, are passed on with great accuracy.

They learn by apprenticeship – hunting with experienced hunters, for example – by discipleship, which is a kind of apprenticeship, by listening, by repeating what they hear, by mastering proverbs..., by participation in a kind of corporate retrospection – not by study in the strict sense. (1982:9)

Tribal histories and genealogies are preserved from generation to generation. The foundations and intricacies of their religious beliefs are also maintained.

In addition to researching the bibliography on orality, I interviewed many religious leaders as well as adherents to discover how adherents have learned and been socialized by their ceremonies. Interviewing leaders from the different areas, tribes, and religions was very helpful and revealing. I also interviewed Christian leaders – both “traditional” (second generation and beyond) as well as those from recent Hindu, Buddhist, and Animist backgrounds. (See Appendix B for survey.) Some of these interviews related to the ceremonies I observed and mentioned above, but they covered more than this. The Religious Leader Survey (Appendix B) basically sought information on how oral tribals learn their religious principles.

In Chittagong, Kagrachuri and Rangamati four Hindu leaders were interviewed directly. In addition approximately 12 Hindu participants were
interviewed in the focus group format. In Bondarbon, Kagrachuri, Chittagong and Rangamati eight Buddhist leaders were interviewed directly. In addition, 12 Buddhist participants were interviewed in the focus group format. In Bondarbon, Chittagong and Banshkali three Animist were interviewed along with six participants in the focus group format. In Kagrachuri, Rangamati, Bondarbon, and Chittagong eight Christian leaders were interviewed individually and 50 others (20 pastors in Rangamati and 30 in Kagrachuri) were interviewed in the focus group format. These interviews provided valuable information on the way religious principles are taught in oral societies. These findings along with the findings from the ceremonies observed will be presented in Chapter 3.

The third research question was: Could an event be constructed as part of discipleship and leadership training that incorporates features of oral culture character formation so as to give evidence of Christian formation? In addition to the literature on this subject, which is limited, I searched for practical examples. Zahniser states, “Discipling will require instruction, experiences, symbols, and ceremonies… and it will turn out more like a series of initiations than like a series of lessons” (1997:62). This seems to be true of the direction we are moving in using ceremonies for discipling.
A hermeneutical community representing different insights was formed for construction, direction, and evaluation of the discipling event. The size of the hermeneutical community ranged from eight to 12 members. Though we did maintain a good degree of consistency in the membership of the group, not all the members were able to make every one of the different meetings. Different members of the hermeneutical community were involved in the observation of the religious ceremonies and religious leader interviews mentioned above. In selecting the members of the hermeneutical community, I tried to get a good variety from the three Chakma, Tripura, and Mru tribes as well as a few Bengalis who have worked with and know the tribals well. Also, new as well as more mature believers, and oral as well as those who work with and understand the oral community were selected. An effort was made to include women in the hermeneutical community, however usually only one or two were present. (In the focus groups women were well represented.) The insights from the religious ceremonies and religious leader interviews helped lay a foundation and directly led to many of the symbolic and ritual forms utilized in the constructed ceremony.

The hermeneutical community had several meetings to discuss the spiritual needs of the tribal Christian community and construct a discipling
event which incorporated some of the indigenous characteristics observed in the three areas of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Following these preparations we enacted the ceremony with around 30 tribal participants divided into the following three focus groups: Kagrachuri Chakmas, Rangamati Chakmas, and a mixed tribal group from the Srimongal, Shylet area. Focus group interviews were conducted before (see Appendix C), and after (see Appendix D) the event as well as an evaluation from the Hermeneutical Community (see Appendix E). This process was repeated after some alterations to the ceremony with the following three focus groups: Kagrachuri Kok Barok Tripuras, Bondarbon Oshai Tripuras and Mrus, and a mixed tribal group (which included a few Hindu background Bengalis) from the Feni area. All of this information was recorded and completed the event construction and performance phase of the research. The findings from this section are found in Chapter 4, “Master the Ceremonies.”

The next area of study was to evaluate the event. The fourth research question was: How well did the discipling event work in achieving our goal of indigenous, Christian discipleship formation in this context? Did the discipling event employ recognizable forms that seem to fit into the cultural context? Was the event faithful to the biblical principles we were trying to teach? Did the participants “catch” these teachings? From the experience,
what kind of consensus is there for using such a method of discipling to lay a foundation in the life of a new believer? By-and-large, this evaluation was made by a hermeneutical community and ceremony participants.

The Post-Ceremony focus group interviews provided the first insights into the analysis of the constructed event. Following these three focus group interviews for each of the two constructed events the Hermeneutical Community also did evaluations. Following this evaluation of the first event some slight alterations were made. Then following the second event a final evaluation was made by the Hermeneutical Community. Finally, from all of the above data, I made my analysis of the findings. These findings are found in Chapter 5 on discipling.

Methodology

In general I followed an adaptation of the “exploratory case study” model as my methodology for this study. I will clarify and delineate this into two major sections. The first way of collecting data was through library research. In particular, I first surveyed the information available on orality. I studied the oral educational and training methods described in the literature covering orality. The next area of library research was on the concept of discipleship. General definitions, descriptions of what discipleship should
entail as well as discipleship and leadership training programs were examined. Then I moved to the area of ceremonies and festivals in traditional cultures. In addition to a general study on this topic, I looked at how ceremonies are used as an educational tool. I also did some limited study on specific Hindu, Buddhist, and Animist ceremonies and rituals as part of this study. Finally I looked at various creative ideas in the literature on Christian symbols, ceremonies and festivals. These were the major areas of library research. As mentioned above, the results and findings of the research will be reported in the “Findings” section of Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

The next way I collected the needed data was through field research. The crux of the case study field research was the formation and observation of a Christian ceremony. According to Clifford Geertz, “the culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong” (1971:29). This is what I sought to do in using a case study as my field research in Bangladesh. This case study framework was similar to the work of Herbert Klem (1982) in Oral Communication of the Scripture: Insights from African Oral Art. Klem’s experiment “was part of an effort to imitate the policies of Jesus Christ by using the indigenous culture systems to communicate and teach the word of God” (1982:167).
Where Klem's study experimented using Yoruba folk music, this study looked at teaching through a Christianized ceremony. Klem's work was more of a comparative study with before and after surveys comparing the traditional teaching methods with teaching through folk music. Because we made a greater shift to experiential learning through a ceremony, I used a focus group I called the "Hermeneutical Community," both for the development of the experimental ceremony as well as evaluating the results (see Appendix F).

Analysis and Evaluation

Having collected this data, I then had the task of analyzing it. This study was based on qualitative methods. Aspects of the surveys can be analyzed by statistical analysis, but the bulk of data is analyzed through "content analysis." Content analysis is a form of "observation... which focuses on the characteristics of the communication messages. The purpose is to learn something about the content and those who produced the messages" (Rubin, et al. 1990:182). This type of analysis fit very well with the observation and interview type of research I did. The data I collected was evaluated as to the "underlying attitudes, biases or repeating themes" (1990:182), and analyses were drawn from these. Through this I identified
particular principles and concepts, I noted the times these ideas were repeated in the data, and I drew conclusions as to emerging patterns and themes.

Following the analysis was the evaluation and interpretation of the data. From the data collected it was determined whether there are oral forms of education which can be adapted to our situation. I have also determined whether there are aspects of former Hindu and/or Buddhist ceremonies for which we can find "dynamic equivalents" to use in our Christian teaching. Then, I sought to determine how the participants responded to the trial ceremony. According to themes that emerged from interviews with the hermeneutical community and ceremony participants, I made an overall analysis as to whether the project has shown that such an approach could successfully improve discipleship in our context. Finally, I evaluated whether incorporation of Christianized symbols, festivals, and other forms of ceremonial learning would produce a more culturally appropriate form of discipleship in the tribal context of Bangladesh.

**Theoretical Framework**

A large part of this study is based on the theories of liminality in Mathias Zahniser’s book, *Symbol and Ceremony: Making Disciples across*
Cultures. Zahniser draws on Arnold van Gennep’s theories as well as Victor Turner’s ideas of liminality, “anti-structure,” and “communitas” from his “rite of passage” theories. Turner defines communitas as the “communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders” (1969:96). Liminality refers to the phase in which participants “are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (1969:95). The basic idea is that participants in the event are separated from their old status and enter a phase of liminality in which all are on a common level and experience the bonding of communitas. The change and difficult conditions of this liminal phase offer fertile ground for new teaching and adapting concepts before reintegration into society in a new status (Zahniser 1997:92). This process of liminality “results in the bonding to meaning so important in Christian discipling” (1997:97). These ideas of liminality and communitas were present in the constructed ceremonies, and I believe provided an intensive period of learning for the participants.

Catherine Stonehouse’s ideas of moral development seem to apply to this situation also. She notes,

Periods of disequilibration are the price that must be paid for moral development. In these times of unrest the outcome of a young person’s search may depend heavily on whether or not
there is a friend standing by: one who has made the search and is ready to support, guide, and care. (1980:82)

This leads us naturally to what we think of as traditional discipleship. Of course, a study centering on discipleship must include a theological and biblical evaluation of the teaching principles of Jesus. A look at the historical concept of those who followed and learned from the Lord Jesus will be crucial. "...The disciples function in Matthew’s gospel as an example, both positively and negatively, of what it means to be a disciple...[and of how to] ...equip the disciples in the making of disciples" (Wilkins 1995:222). These issues of discipleship are discussed in Chapter 5.

Having this biblical basis leads to another central theory to this study which is Paul Hiebert’s “critical contextualization.” While I do not specifically follow each of the steps of critical contextualization outlined in Hiebert’s article, the spirit and intention of this theory is present in my research. In his article on contextualization Hiebert refers to Charles Kraft’s (1979:271ff.) ideas of “dynamic equivalence” from his book Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective. Kraft states that

...it is crucial that each new generation and culture experience the process of producing in its own cultural forms an appropriate church vehicle for the transmission of God’s meanings. We may thus speak of and recommend ‘dynamically equivalent churchness.’ Such a new use of previously existing
cultural forms plus the necessary borrowing and internal development of new forms brings about change in the culture. (1979:315)

Both contextualization and dynamic equivalence ideas fit well here as our desire is to maintain the biblical truth and standards and yet present them in a contextualized way which is palatable for the local person. Hiebert maintains that:

Having led the people to analyze their old customs in light of biblical teaching, the pastor or missionary must help them to arrange the practices they have chosen into a new ritual that expresses the Christian meaning of the event. Such a ritual will be Christian, for it explicitly seeks to express biblical teaching. It will also be contextual, for the church has created it, using forms the people understand within their own culture. (1987:110)

In designing Christian ceremonies that are grounded within the culture, the goal is “to develop contextualized expressions of the Gospel so that the Gospel itself will be understood in ways the universal church has neither experienced nor understood before, thus expanding our understanding of the kingdom of God” (Whiteman 1997:4). The idea of contextualization obviously has strong implications and is a central part of the theoretical framework for this study.

Critical contextualization will be important in any cross-cultural study. I contend, however, that it is even more crucial to this study of cross-
cultural discipling and leadership development. Lingenfelter brings all of these issues together very coherently.

The idea of contextualization is to frame the gospel message in language and communication forms appropriate and meaningful to the local culture, and to focus the message upon crucial issues in the lives of the people. The contextualized indigenous church is built upon culturally appropriate methods of evangelism; the process of discipling draws upon methods of instruction that are familiar and part of local traditions of learning. The structural and political aspects of leadership are adapted from patterns inherent in national cultures rather than imported from denominational organizations in the home countries of missionaries. (1992:15)

Another important aspect of the theoretical framework is J. Waskom Pickett’s theory of group conversion. Currently, most evangelism, discipling, and other Christian methods in general are individual-based as they originate from the West. In corporate cultures individualistic decisions are not the most appropriate, as found by Pickett in Christ’s Way to India’s Heart. “Only a rebel would strike out without consultation and without companions [in societies which] think corporately” (1938:10). People think and come to decisions (even in terms of a member’s marital difficulties) as a group. Likewise, decisions for Christ and subsequent discipling in such societies should be done in groups. “Peoples become Christian as a wave of decision for Christ sweeps through the group mind, involving many individual decisions but being far more than their sum” (1938:12).
Bradshaw takes this idea even further, "...God's covenant is with communities, not individuals... One person cannot experience *shalom* in spite of, or at the expense of, the community" (1993:153). The idea of a corporate discipling event is based in part on this theory.

Hand in hand with the corporate theories are theories of orality. I am basing my study on a model presented by Herbert Klem with many of the theories coming from Walter Ong. Klem was "contending that what is missing from modern mission strategy are presentations of the Gospel and Bible content that are styled to suit the oral media of the masses..." (1982:93). Our discipleship and leadership-training program presently has by-passed 80% of our people as the Theological Education by Extension (TEE) and pastoral seminars are in highly literate formats. We need a program parallel to the current TEE program which reaches oral people.

In the former religions of traditional people, rituals, festivals, ceremonies and rites of passage have been used to teach the religion to the oral people. Oral people also learn and remember through apprenticeship on-the-job training. For all of us, practical exercises are much easier to commit to memory than intellectual concepts. This is even more important for oral learners. In order to learn and remember such concepts "somatic" and/or hand activity is most useful to oral learners. Oral people "learn by
apprenticeship – hunting with experienced hunters, for example – by discipleship, which is a kind of apprenticeship…, by participation in a kind of corporate retrospection – not by study in the strict sense” (Ong 1982:6). I believe using a ceremony as a discipling tool fits in with the orality theories. As Ong states, “In an oral culture, the verbalized learning takes place quite normally in an atmosphere of celebration or play. As events, words are more celebrations and less tools than in literate cultures” (1982:30).

With this introduction, I am ready to move to the study itself. In Chapter 2, I will describe the cultural context of the tribal people in Bangladesh. This will include a section describing each of the three tribes: Chakma, Tripura and Mru. Also I will point out what unifies the tribals and common emerging themes among them. Chapter 3 will cover the subject of orality including a review of the literature, how orality is being addressed by the Christian community in Bangladesh presently, and findings from the research. In Chapter 4, I will first review the literature on ceremonies (symbols, ritual, and festivals). Then I will discuss ceremonies and festivals in the context of Bangladesh, and finally share the findings of using ceremonies to disciple believers. Chapter 5 will cover the topic of discipling with a review of the literature and definitions emerging from that. Then I will look at universal patterns of discipling and findings in our context of
using ceremonies for oral learners among the tribals in Bangladesh. Overall conclusions of ceremonies as a discipling tool and resulting missiological implications will conclude the study in Chapter 6.

The Importance of the Study

There are masses of people and majority population segments which will have difficulty receiving the gospel and being discipled in the literate methods which we have traditionally used. If we truly wish to see a society transformed by the gospel, we must present it in forms that are indigenous and comfortable to them. Likewise if people are discipled in attractive ways within their cultural forms and context, I believe the resulting faith will be vibrant and attractive to those around them. Sadly much of the mission work in oral societies has been based on written methods. As Herbert Klem says, “If a denomination in a predominantly oral society depends primarily upon written materials for most of its Bible study and teaching ministry, then at the heart of its ministry such a denomination is not indigenous” (1982:180).

It is clear that ceremonies, rituals, and festivals are an educating media which is near the heart of most oral societies. Therefore, if Christian “dynamic equivalence” can be created and used for purposes of discipling, I
believe a more attractive and indigenous form of Christianity would be the result. This study has tested and observed the use of an indigenous hermeneutical community to create such a ceremony and enact it with local participants. I contend that this study has great missiological implications for the Christian community.

Notes

1 The College of Christian Theology of Bangladesh offers a Bachelor of Theology degree which after several years of preliminary correspondence courses, culminates in a one year residential program at the CCTB campus in Savar, Bangladesh. This seems to fit the needs of most Christian ministers in Bangladesh who cannot afford to leave their fields of ministry for four years, but manage the one year residential program.

2 The term “tribal” sounds outdated and at times awkward, but I have yet to find a more appropriate term to describe this particular group of people in their unique setting. This is also the term that they have chosen to describe themselves – upojati in Bengali. The reason I am using the broad term “tribal” instead of the names of individual people groups, such as Chakma, Tripura, and Mru has to do with their unique situation. “The tribal people are a distinctive socio-cultural group of people. They are very different from the non-tribal people, in their culture, world view, religion, language, food, behavior, etc.” (Ponraj 1996:27). The tribals in southeast Bangladesh are a Tibeto-Mongolian ethnic minority in Bangladesh. Likewise they are Hindu, Buddhist, Animist (and now some Christian) religious minorities. Like most ethnic and religious minorities they have faced discrimination and even persecution at the hands of the dominant Bengali Muslim population. In the work of discipling and bringing the groups into the body of Christ, I have found it difficult and undesirable to separate them along their ethnic lines. The groups do differ religiously, linguistically and ethnically. However, I feel that their unique situation gives them more commonality than divisions.
The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is the region in the southeast corner of Bangladesh where the majority of the tribal people reside. It is made up of the three districts: Kagrachuri (in the north), Rangamati (in the center), and Bondarbon (in the south). “The CHT with an area of 5,089 square miles is located between 21.25’ and 23.45’north latitude, and between 91.45’ and 92.50’ east longitude” (Rafi 2001:3). The British occupied the Chittagong Hill Tracts in 1860 and made it a part of British India. They named it 'Chittagong Hill Tracts' (Parvatya Chattagram). The British saw the Hill Tracts as an extension of the Chittagong district. (Banglapedia 2004:Chittagong Hill Tracts)

In some contexts, such as Sri Lanka, the Shin Byu ceremony is reserved for those who are making a lifelong commitment to monkhood. In our context, as in Thailand and Myanmar, the Shin Byu is for those making a lifetime commitment as well as those going for their shorter obligatory service. (I am indebted to Terry Muck of Asbury Theological Seminary for this information.) In actuality, I have found that in the Chittagong Hill Tracts for the last 25 years the Shin Byu (or “Sam Pru” as they call it in local dialect) has been reduced to some readings by Buddhist leaders rather than an actual ceremony.

All biblical references are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version.
Chapter 2

The Cultural Context of Tribal People in Bangladesh

They can be found deep in the jungles, along steep, mountain slopes and at the river’s edge. They are all but lost and forgotten to those living in the busy, crowded cities of Bangladesh. More than 30 different tribal groups live in the hills sandwiched between southeast Bangladesh and northeast India. The Chittagong Hill Tracts is the home of these tribal people... Language, dress, location, and physical characteristics distinguish the individual tribes, but they all live simple lives. Few from the outside world know of their existence.

Their homes, like their lifestyles, are built around that which is available from the jungle. The houses are made of mud, bamboo, and thatch... Everyday life centers around their village, their extended family and the spirit world. They strive to live at peace and harmony with nature as well as other people. The tribals’ submissive, non-confrontational personality has often left them victimized by the dominant Bengali people who live in the low-lands and in the cities. Many Bengalis saw the tribals native homeland as an opportunity for growth and pushed the native residents aside... In the eyes of the world as well as in the hearts and minds of the tribals, they are lost and forgotten... (Ryan 2004:1)

Here I will give some information about the context of the people with whom I am working. Tribal people of South Asia are unique to the region as they are totally different from the majority Indo-European (or Aryan), Indian people groups of the subcontinent. Historically tribals fall into four groups:
"First, the Negritos, (Negroids), second, the Proto-Australoids, third, the Mongoloids, and fourth, the Dravidians" (Ponraj 1996:27). Ponraj uses outdated terminology here, but delineates the tribal groupings well. These four groups are the true indigenous people of India who were conquered by the Aryan invaders (now the majority Indo-European people) in the second century B.C.... “The tribal people are a distinctive socio-cultural group of people. They are very different from the non-tribal people, in their culture, world view, religion, language, food, behavior, etc.” (Ponraj 1996:20).

There are tribal groups all over the subcontinent, but I have worked mainly with those in Northeast India, Bangladesh and some parts of Myanmar (formerly Burma). This is an incredibly interesting corner of the Indian subcontinent and the world as it is precisely in this region that South Asia and Southeast Asia meet. The Indo-European and Sino-Tibetan peoples are vastly different in terms of language, ethnicity, religion and cultural identity. “There was a striking difference in culture between the plains people of Caucasoid race (speaking an Indo-European language) and the hill people of Mongoloid race (speaking Sino-Tibetan languages)” (Brauns and Loffler 1990: 26). Again here Brauns and Loffler are using outdated terms to distinguish these people groups, but have captured the contrasting identities of these people. This creates a very interesting climate
in which clashes and differing interests of the various groups are quite common.

**The Region of the Chittagong Hill Tracts**

I am narrowing my study further to the unique region of southeast Bangladesh called the Chittagong Hill Tracts. (See Map of Bangladesh with Chittagong Hill Tracts – Appendix A.) The term “Chittagong Hill Tracts” seems to have originated during the colonial period of British rule. It refers to the hilly region in the southeast of Bangladesh.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) – 5,093 sq. miles in extent of 10% of Bangladesh— is a unique territory with mountains and beautiful landscapes. While most of the country is flat and a few feet above sea level, the CHT in Southeast is completely different in physical features, landscapes, agricultural practices and soil conditions from the rest of Bangladesh. Plough cultivation, which is a common feature in the plains is seen only in the plain patches in the mountain valleys. The terrace farming, a common agricultural practice in the mountains is also not seen in the CHT hills, the highest of which is close to 4000 feet. (Roy, et al. 2000:1)

The history of the people of the CHT is long and varied and dates back to antiquity. Most historians agree that the ancestors of the Sino-Tibetan tribals were the original inhabitants of the CHT. Up to the year 1666 the CHT and Chittagong plains were fought over and ruled by the Arakanese (the people group of western Myanmar and Marma of the CHT)
and Tripura (a people group in northeast India and Tripura of the CHT). In 1666 the Mughal empire reached and conquered the CHT as it had the whole of Bengal and left its indelible mark of Islam. The Mughals controlled the CHT until 1760 when it came under the auspices of the East Indian Company and a hundred years later under British rule. (Banglapedia 2004)

While Tripura and Arakanese (including Marma) far outnumber the Chakma (when including the present day India and Burma), in the CHT region of Bangladesh alone, the Chakma have the largest population. This is particularly true in the heart of the CHT, the Rangamati region, where they dominate as the majority. The Marma, however, are dominant in the southern region (now Bondarbon District) and are very strong in the northern region (now Kagrachuri District). Because of this, prior to Bengali domination, Arakanese language became the trade language of the CHT. For this reason also the Mong (actually Marma – Mong is a Marma surname) became the "king" of Kagrachuri, the Chakma became the king of Rangamati, and the Bohmong (also Marma) became chief of Bondarbon. This is particularly interesting in Kagrachuri where Tripuras, Chakma, and Marma all have significant populations, yet a Marma holds the chiefdom.
There are around 30 distinctive tribal groups in Bangladesh, and the majority of them reside in the Kagrachuri, Rangamati, and Bondarbon Districts which make up the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

When the British took control of the plains in the mid-eighteenth century..., and when they annexed the Chittagong hills a century later, they made the Chakma chief responsible for tax collection in the central region of the new possession. Two other chiefs were made responsible for the southern part (the Bohmong chief) and the northern part (the Mong chief). (Banglapedia 2004)

The recognition given by the British carried these chiefdoms into modern times.

Three chiefs of the Chittagong hills were recognized by the British as administrators under the colonial state. Henceforth they were known as the ‘tribal chiefs’ of the Mong, Chakma and Bohmong circles, or simply as the Mong, Chakma, and Bohmong chiefs. (van Schendel et al. 2000:35)

The kings or chiefs remain in each of the districts today. Although they are recognized by the government and hold great respect by the tribal people, there are elected District Commissioners who carry the actual political power governmentally.

It was during the British period that the term “Chittagong Hill Tracts” and the region as a distinct unit came into being. Before, under the Tripura or Arakanese kingdoms, it was part of a large kingdom which stretched from the hills of eastern India or western Burma to the Bay of Bengal. The
British rule over all of India including the CHT came to an end with partition in 1947. At that time basically India was created where there were Hindu majorities and East and West Pakistan were created where there were Muslim majorities. There were many exceptions to this rule for various reasons. Partition around the provinces of the Punjab and Bengal were particularly difficult. "The central problem left unresolved by Mountbatten’s June 3 partition plan was where the boundary lines dividing the provinces of Bengal and the Punjab were to fall" (Collins and Lapierre 1975:211). A barrister from Britain, Sir Cyril Radcliffe, who knew little about the Subcontinent, performed the difficult task of drawing the lines of partition. Some of the decisions made and boundary lines drawn created problems which have continued to exist to today. One of these problem areas was the CHT, which had a very small Muslim population, and yet became part of Pakistan. Most of the tribals were dismayed to become citizens of Muslim-majority Pakistan as opposed to India or Burma. Many along with tribals in northeast India wished to form their own independent state.

The following text, although politicized and one-sided, reflects the sentiments of most of the tribal inhabitants of the CHT at the time.

Despite 98.5% of the population of the CHT were Jummas [or tribals] and thus non Muslims, the Pakistan leadership
conspired and the Boundary Commission of Great Britain ceded the CHT to East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in violation of the principles of partition and against the wishes of the Jumma people. The Jummas vehemently protested against the decision, but to no avail. On 15 August, 1947 the Chakma youths under the leadership of Sneha Kumar Chakma hoisted tricolor Indian flag at Rangamati, capital of the CHT and in the southern CHT at Bandarban the Marmas who have cultural similarity with Burma hoisted Burmese flag. Six days later the Indian flag at Rangamati was lowered by the Pakistani Army at gun point. (Background of Jummas & CHT 2004:1)

Needless-to-say this was not a positive beginning for tribals under the new nation of Pakistan. Neither did it endear them to the new Muslim majority government who had fought hard to secure their Islamic state.

Later in 1971 when Bangladesh broke away from West Pakistan, the tribals – particularly the Chakma king, Tridiv Roy – sided with the Pakistanis. In this transformation of East Pakistan to Bangladesh, the tribals were viewed as traitors who sided with the Pakistani enemy. “The hill tracts people suffered from the wrath of the people from the plains because Chakma King Raja Tridib (sic.) Roy took the side of Pakistan during Bangladesh’s War of Liberation in 1971” (Khan 2004:1). It seemed that these minority people groups were always on the wrong side of the border and siding with the wrong political group. Of course, what they really wanted was political and religious freedom and ethnic autonomy.
Like most ethnic and religious minorities they have faced discrimination and even persecution at the hands of the dominant Bengali Muslim population. They were pushed off and cheated out of their land – at times by government-sanctioned settlement programs (Roy, et al. 2000:16). The presence of the Bengali settlers has created a critical situation in a region where mere survival is often a difficult struggle.

...The immigrant Bangalis (sic.) live in the main towns and market areas, being themselves not active agriculturalists, but rather additional consumers of local resources. The indigenous population, then, has had to tighten its belt even tighter in order to feed themselves and their ‘uninvited guests.’ (Brauns and Loffler 1990:241)

In the late 1970s this led to the formation of an inter-tribal guerrilla warfare force called the “Santibahini” (peace fighters). These years of political turmoil have had a great impact on the traditional culture, religion, and lifestyle of all the different tribal groups. To a degree a whole generation has lost much of their familiarity with many of their cultural traditions and religious teaching and rituals. Though a peace treaty was signed with the government of Bangladesh in 1997, all of these issues continue to unite each of the small tribes.
History of Christian People Movements in the Area

Before we begin to look at each of the three tribes specifically, something must be said about the history of people movements in the surrounding areas of northeast India and Myanmar. South Asia has seen a few “mass movements” to Christ. These are cases in which God’s Spirit moved in a powerful way, rather than being the goal of a mission strategy. Such movements among low caste Hindus and tribals are not new to the Indian subcontinent. There have been many “mass movements” to Christ among various low caste and tribal people groups in this area over the last two hundred years.

Of course, when God’s Spirit begins to move there will always be opposition. In South Asia this has also been the case. From the time of Gandhi, independent India has generally stood against conversions. Gandhi “was irrevocably opposed to what he called proselytism, the attempt to lead a man to change his religion; if a man has been born a Hindu, that is God’s will for him, and to change the religion in which you have been born is an act of treason both to God and to your country” (Neill 1948:142). Gandhi wrote:

I believe that there is no such thing as conversion from one faith to another... It is a conviction daily growing upon me that the great and rich Christian missions will render true service to
India, if they can persuade themselves to confine their activities to humanitarian service without the ulterior motive of converting India or at least her unsophisticated villagers to Christianity. (Gandhi 1949:74)

Gandhi and India, however, have had to recognize the legitimate Christian minority, and even mission activities. Later Gandhi wrote,

Conversion must not mean denationalization. Conversion should mean a definite giving up of the evil of the old, adoption of all the good of the new and a scrupulous avoidance of everything evil in the new. Conversion, therefore, should mean a life of greater dedication to one’s own country, greater surrender to God, greater self-purification. (Kuriakose 1982:332)

In the following I will look at a few examples of Christian people movements in the areas surrounding the tribal area of Bangladesh. The examples cited are all people groups closely related to tribals in Bangladesh. The first group is the Karen of Myanmar, who although officially in Southeast Asia – not South Asia – are very close geographically and culturally to the tribals in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The other groups, Garos, Khasis, Nagas, and Mizos are all tribal groups in Bangladesh and/or northeast India.

Karen

The Karen people of Burma were never the focus of Adoniram Judson’s efforts as the Buddhist Burmese were, however the people movement took place among the Karen. Adoniram Judson went to Burma to
convert the “cultured Buddhist Burmese” (McGavran 1955:69). He worked on the side, however, with a former criminal Ko Tha Byu, a Karen low-caste “backward” animists. He became a Christian and followed Judson who spoke to Burmese while Ko Tha Byu spoke to the Karen in each area.

Judson’s results were modest, but where a converted national went to his own people with vision and passion, the results were much greater. Judson “never considered the Karen converts more than a side issue” (1955:70). God’s Spirit, however, moved among the Karen and whole villages came to Christ. Today there are thousands of Karen Christians, who now are educated and have a great influence in Burma. The Burmese who Judson labored to reach yielded typical results of relatively small numbers of converts – approximately 20,000 in the 1950s.

Garos

Garos were the first tribal group targeted by Christians in what is now Bangladesh. Garos had a history of being head-hunters and along with many of the other tribes were overlooked in favor of the “more civilized” yet less responsive Indo-European races. “Christian gospel came to them while they were deeply engrossed with a life full of bloodshed and fear. Christianity brought love instead of hatred, peace instead of turmoil and fellowship instead of segregation and division” (Hrangkhuma 1998:179-180). So,
though the Garos seemed less likely to receive the gospel, they embraced it much more than the other people groups around them. “Even a quick overview of the history of the spread of Christianity shows that religious traditions that seem farthest from Christianity, namely the primal or the tribal religious traditions, have proved to be the closest” (1998:179-191).

In the mid 1800s the first Garos were reached after British officers opened a school for twelve Garo boys in Goalpara. “Omed Watre Momin and Ramkhe Watre Momin were among the twelve who were destined to be the ‘spiritual force’ that set the Garos into a people’s movement” (Hrangkhuma 1998:179-161). Later, the Australians also began to work with the Garos and God’s Spirit of conviction moved mightily among the people. Whole villages came to Christ, and today Garos claim to be 99% Christian, about half being Catholic and half Baptist. The Baptist group eventually formed their own Garo Baptist Convention.

Khasis

“A look at the history of the Church in the Khasi Hills...will make us realize that at the root of every such movement there are charismatic and dynamic personalities who are able to supply a vision to their peoples.” (Hrangkhuma 1998:228). The Khasi are another tribal group who have responded en mass to the gospel. “Christianity, introduced to the Khasi
people from the first part of the 19th century has grown so fast that today, it can rightly be called *The Khasi... Religion*” (Hrangkhuma 1998:231).

The Welsh Presbyterian missionaries brought with them waves of revival which led to mass movements among the Khasis in the early 1900s and again in the 1950s. “We have seen that mass movement among the Khasi has reference to their spiritual search for reality and found its relevance in the means provided by Christianity and does not seem to have been prompted by material gains” (Hrangkhuma 1998:247).

**Nagas and Mizos**

Similar results were found among the Nagas and Mizos in northeast India. “The American Baptist missionaries were the first to work among the Nagas. They reached Assam in 1836” (Hrangkhuma 1998:248). Nagas were also fierce head-hunting warriors, however for 83 years Baptist missionaries labored among them. “From this small and difficult beginning the church in Nagaland has grown tremendously. The Nagaland Baptist Church Council, now have 307,848 baptized members in 1259 churches” (Hrangkhuma 1998:250-251).

Christianity was introduced to the remote and isolated hills of Mizoram by William Williams, a Welsh Presbyterian missionary, in 1891 and J. H. Lorrain and F. W. Savidge, British Baptist missionaries in 1894
In less than 60 years, it can be safely said that 99% of the entire Mizo population had become Christian. "According to the 1991 census, there are 5,91,342' (sic.) Christians in Mizoram out of the total population of 6,89,756 (sic.), that is 85.73%... All the [other] Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists are non-Mizo" (Hrangkhuma 1998:265).

I have never been to a place outside the West where Christianity seems so indigenous to the people. This is particularly interesting as many of the neighboring church regions in northeast India have totally Western church forms. "...The revivals in Mizoram were distinctive to the Zo people, not 'copies' of 'imported' revivalism. They must therefore be understood on the basis of the specific cultural context" (Kipgen 1996:250).

The revivals that swept Mizoram in the early 1900s had little to do with the missionaries, though they prayed for them vigorously. Rather, the Holy Spirit met the Mizos directly at their point of greatest spiritual need.

A genuinely indigenous Church can come about only when at the popular level there is a real encounter between the Christian faith and the people's cultural traditions. In order for this to happen the Christian people must be freed from whatever constraints – financial or theological – that have been imposed. (Kipgen 1996:319)

In addition to freedom from financial and theological constraints, the less social change one encounters in coming to Christ the better. This has
been true throughout Christian history and began in the days of the early Church.

The early “Church grew within Judaism. For at least a decade the Jews who were becoming Christians were not conscious at all of joining a non-Jewish religion. Had they dreamed that this was a possibility many of them would never have become Christians... It shows that peoples become Christian fastest when least change of race or clan is involved. When it is felt that ‘we are moving with our people and those who have not come now will come later’, then the Church grows most vigorously. (McGavran 1955:22-23)

“The People Movement among the Jews spread rapidly among relatives... This bond of relationship was the bridge over which the faith passed” (1955:21). It happened spontaneously and only later were missionaries sent. “This too should be, and usually is, the role played by missions serving People Movements today. They follow fires which light “of themselves”” (1955:21). Though we have yet to see a full-blown people movement in the CHT, for the work in the last 25 years in Bangladesh, this has also been true. Missionaries and nationals have followed responsive family lines.

This may be seen as exclusively focusing on a particular group to the exclusion of another less responsive group. In fact most church growth and people movements begin exclusively within a particular racial or social group.
People Movements do not mean Churches permanently divided by caste-consciousness. They start keenly conscious of their racial heritage. They must start that way. In peoples without Christ, full of natural pride and caste-consciousness, how else could they start? But, as Christ rules in the hearts of His Churches, racial divisions are destroyed and peoples are unified. “For He is our peace, who made both one and broke down the middle wall of partition.” (McGavran 1955:37)

Though many would disagree with McGavran and show evidence that the early church quickly became multicultural, it does seem that people are most often reached initially within their own tribe or caste. This has also been the case with the people groups we have worked with in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

The Tribal Groups Under Study

Now let us move to the specific groups with which this study takes place. Of the 30 tribal groupings in Bangladesh, the majority of these reside in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in southeast part of the country. “The largest of these groups [in the CHT] are the Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Mru and Taungchengya” (van Schendel 2000:1). In my study I will focus on three of these tribes: the Chakma, the Tripura and the Mru (or Murong as they are referred to by Bengalis). I have chosen these three for two reasons. First, I feel that the three tribes represent the diversity of all of the tribals of
Bangladesh. For the most part the Chakma are Buddhist, the Tripura are Hindu, and the Mru are Animist. The second reason I have chosen these particular groups is that I am involved in ongoing work with each of these tribes.

In identifying them separately, however, the perception could be given that each is unique and exclusive, requiring a separate strategy. We have not found this to be the case in Baptist work with the tribals over the past 25 years. Rather, the groups seem to be intermeshed together for ethnic, geographic, and political reasons. While the tribes are distinct, their differences seem to fade away in comparison to the stark clashes they have with the dominant Bengali population. This is most striking and dramatic with the majority Bengali Muslims (who make up 89.7% of the population), but is also true for the Bengali Hindus (who make up 9.2% of the population) (Rahman 2003:67).\(^2\) The political conflict the tribals have had with the dominant Bengali population accentuates these differences.

The geographic separation from the rest of Bangladesh is another factor unifying the tribals and separating them from the rest of the population. Intermarriage among the tribes is more and more common whereas a tribal-Bengali relationship remains unaccepted by most tribals.

*Paharis* [hill people] have both sociocultural similarities and differences among themselves. On one hand they have retained
traditional beliefs and practices, but on the other they have given up some of these and have adopted and adapted practices originating from outside their societies. (Rafi 2001:19)

For these reasons, in this study I will examine and acknowledge the diversity among the tribals, but work with them as an entire group of people with a common identity. Let us now look at each of the groups under study.

Chakma

The Chakma are the largest tribe in Bangladesh numbering around 500,000. The majority of the Chakma people are located in Bangladesh with some numbers spilling over into India and Myanmar.

On the one hand, with regard to many cultural characteristics, the Chakma are quite similar to their northern neighbors, the Tippera. On the other hand, many things indicate that they could have had something to do with the Sak (or chak), a small group living in the far south of the Hill Tracts, whose closest linguistic relatives are found in central Burma. (Brauns and Loffler 1990:27)

Like most tribals the Chakma traditionally practiced shifting slash and burn cultivation. The Chakma are Buddhists and the majority of them are found in the Rangamati and Kagrachuri District, with less in the Bondarbon District of the CHT. Though the Buddhist identity is very strong, there are a number of other influences at work among the Chakma. First of all, underneath the formal religions of all tribals are strong animistic practices which have carried over. Spirits of rivers, trees, stones and other objects
continue to be worshipped, and animistic sacrifices are still given. There is also an influence of Hinduism among the Chakmas.

Hinduism was actively encouraged among the Chakmas by Raj Dharm Baksh Kan and his wife Kalindi Rani, in the later half of the 19th Century. They observed Hindu festivals, kept a Brahman priest and claimed to be lineal representatives of the Kshatriya caste. After the death of the Raja a famous prophet of Buddhism, Phoonyee, visited the Rani. She is believed to have renounced her Hindu practices and proclaimed her loyalty to Buddhism. (McNee 1975:20)

The Bengali Hindu names that most Chakmas have reveal this influence whereas the Marmas have maintained their Buddhist Marma names.

Abdus Sattar even believes that there was a time when Chakmas were Muslims. "The Maghs believe that the Chakmas have descended from the Mughals" ([ca. 1971]: 274). While there is little doubt that there has been some intermarriage between tribals and Bengalis (both Hindu and Muslim), Sattar feels that for Chakmas it was deeper than this. "...The Chakmas seem to have abandoned themselves entirely to the Muslim tradition in thoughts, words and deeds. This is a unique feature and cannot be explained away as a political expediency" ([ca. 1971]:275). I am, however, more inclined to believe the latter and feel that this came out of Sattar’s bias as I have found no other authors on the tribals nor the Chakmas themselves maintain this view.
But, it was not just these brief encounters with Islam and Hinduism that set the Chakmas apart from other tribals. Of all the groups, the Chakmas have sought to enter the world of the Bengalis more than any other tribal group. This is most evident in their desires for political power.

During the colonial period, the Chakma chiefs presented themselves publicly as Indian princes. They took the South Asian nobleman as their role model, stressed a myth of North Indian origin, became considerably Hinduised and established marriage links with prominent families of Bengal. For them, to be a raja was to be seen as members of the Bengal aristocracy. (van Schendel et al. 2000:38)

One can hardly blame these efforts to adapt and yet maintain their cultural identity as it was their only hopes for survival in the subcontinent world. Sadly, it seemed that as history progressed the more the Chakmas strove to identify with the dominant group, the more they were taken advantage of and abused by them.

Further evidence of this is the Chakma language itself. Of all the tribal languages it is the most "corrupted" by Bengali. In fact some linguists consider it a dialect of Bengali. The Ethnologue classifies Chakma as "Indo-European, Indo-Iranian, Indo-Aryan, Eastern zone Bengali-Assamese" (Ethnologue report for Bangladesh 2003:2) rather than as "Sino-Tibetan" as most other tribal languages. Many dispute this claiming that Chakma descended from Sino-Tibetan as well. Nevertheless, Chakmas themselves
claim that if one learns the *Chittagonian* dialect of Bengali, one is halfway there in learning Chakma. Again Sattar, a seemingly biased Bengali, claimed that “their language is nothing but an admixture of Bengali, Arakanese and other dialective words of the tribal people living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts” ([ca. 1971]:309).

As mentioned above, it was the Chakmas more than any other tribe, and their kings in particular, who sought to deal with the non-tribal political leaders over the years. This became very evident during the Pakistani period. In hopes of achieving benefits for his people the Chakma King Tridiv Roy was very cooperative with Ayub Khan the president of Pakistan. During this period, the construction of the Kaptai dam was promised to bring development to the people of the hill tracts. While the dam became a showpiece of development for the Pakistani government, it had disastrous consequences for the tribals and Chakmas in particular. “The Kaptai dam created an upstream reservoir of 650 square kilometers, flooding some 40 percent of the most productive valley land of the Chittagong Hill Tracts” (van Schendel et al. 2000:203-204).

Most of those displaced were Chakmas from the Rangamati district. Even further humiliating for the Chakma king was the fact that the town of Rangamati and his royal palace were also destroyed.
The Pakistan government had decided to go ahead with the Kaptai hydroelectric project which created a large lake. Neither the chiefs nor the population of the Chittagong hills were asked for their opinion about this intervention in their lives... The Chakma chief was not even able to save his own house, let alone his town, from the effects of ‘development.’ The rajbari was left to crumble in the rising waters of the Kaptai reservoir. (van Schendel et al. 2000:75)

Such seems to have been the political relationships of the tribals and those who ruled over them.

Through the work of British Baptists, a relatively small number of Chakmas were first converted to Christianity, and a number of Chakma churches established over 100 years ago (van Schendel, et al. 2000:167). Christianity, however, has yet to take hold among the Chakma tribe at large. More recently the Association of Baptists for World Evangelism (ABWE) saw the beginnings of some work among the Chakmas in the 1970s. “During mid-1975, a prince of the royal family was treated at Malumghat Christian Memorial Hospital, and while there, he along with his mother, made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ” (McNee 1975:21). The conversion of this prince was hoped to be the beginnings of a Chakma movement, but as with the British Baptists, the great beginnings petered out and only a few churches and believers remain.

The Bangladesh Baptist Mission (BBM) first began to see a new interest from the Chakma in 1993. Since that time about 100 churches have
been planted. This seems to be the most significant movement among Chakmas. We still wait to see, however, a people movement among the entire tribe as in the case of other tribes mentioned above.

Two smaller groups closely related to the Chakmas ethnically and religiously are the Tangchunga and the Marma.

While the history of the Chakma still poses many unsolved questions, there can be little doubt about the origin of the Marma. Their name for themselves is already suggestive of their connection to Arakan and Burma: “Marma,” like “Burma,” can be traced back to the old designation “Mranma,” which the Burmese used for themselves. In older sources the Marma are referred to as “Mogh” (also written “Magh”), a pejorative term still used today by Bangalis (sic). (Brauns and Loffler 1990:28)

For our purposes we will look at the Chakma knowing that many of their traits are also representative of the smaller tribes of similar background.

Though the volatile situation of the last 30 years has reduced the new generation’s knowledge of religion and traditions, Chakmas still strongly identify themselves as Buddhists. While it was not surprising that their Tripura neighbors would leave Hinduism, which does not even allow for the Brahman priestly caste within the Tripura tribe, the Chakmas have been tied to Buddhism for centuries. Yet there still seem to be bridges that are opening them up to the gospel. “Gozen” is the closest concept to a supreme being over other gods that the Chakmas have. Though Buddhists have no
concept of creation, the Chakma tradition has some startling similarities to the Biblical creation. “...In primordial time there dwelt in space nothing but Gozen, the supreme god...Below him there was nothing but water...” (Rahman 1986:103). Later in the creation narrative, “...Gozen created man out of mud... Then Gozen infused his clay with wind, so giving it life... [Later], he took some dirt from his navel. From this he created the image of woman” (Rahman 1986:104). We have found that Chakmas have responded to the gospel when we begin with the creation story. They seemed relieved to finally have the full creation picture.

Tripura

The second group I will study are the Tripura people. The majority of the Tripura people live in the state of Tripura, India where they go by the term “Deb Barma” or other such titles. “The bulk of the population of Tripura also seems to belong to the Bodo Group. But there are altogether nineteen different tribes in Tripura [state, India]...” (Fuchs 1973:202).

The Tipperahs came originally from the Bodo home in Central Asia and are said to have first settled in India... They preferred to call themselves “the children of the Water Goddess” and were therefore known as Tipras. Later on they became known as Tipperahs [and now also Tripuras]. The tradition is that the renowned King of the Lura Dynasty of Delhi married a Bodo princess against his father’s will and was disinherited. He preferred to live in his bride’s hilly home with her relatives and his progeny became the ruling race. (McNee 1975:18)
As mentioned earlier up until the Mogul period (in 1733) the Tripuras and Arakanese vied for power over the CHT and large areas of the Arakan area of Myanmar, Tripura state of India and/or large portions of the Chittagong plains. “The Tipperahs were at the height of their power in the early 1500’s when they captured Chittagong. They were subsequently driven out by the Arakanese and Portuguese” (1975:18).

Traditionally they claimed Hinduism as their religion, and just like the Chakma and all other people in this context, they are heavily influenced by animism. “Although the Tipperahs claim to be Hindu, they have combined Hinduism with their early Animism and are very superstitious” (1975:18). Like many tribals in the Indian subcontinent, though they became Hindus the caste system and many customs never really fit within their tribal culture.

It is unclear exactly when the Tripura adopted Hinduism in place of their former animistic beliefs and even to the present many of the animistic practices continue. Probably the adoption of Hinduism was gradual and now Tripuras claim to be “Kshatriya Hindus.” “Though apparently Hindus, the Tipras demonstrate some major differences with caste-Hindus in respect of Pujas and forms of worship” (Sattar [ca.1971]:234). An example of this will be described in Chapter 4 on ceremonies.
Present in most tribal societies is the "witchdoctor." In Tripura society the witchdoctor goes by the term *Ojha* (also called *Ajhai* or *Achai*). “The *Ajhai* or *Achai* has his usual prominence in the Tipra society. The *Ajhai*, besides being an elderly counselor and leader of men, is also a priest and physician who presides over religious rituals and dispenses herbs, and drugs to the sick” ([ca. 1971]:240). An example of one such *puja* follows.

*Tuibuk Ma* or *Tui Ma Puja*. It is rendered to worship the Mother Ganges or Water. This *Puja* exists among the Tipras from before they became Hindus. The *Puja* is based on the belief that all lives derived from pure water – a widely shared primitive belief which in all probability has led to the sacred custom of sprinkling water during religious functions. Especially among the primitive tribes, water is inseparable from life. The Hill Tribes establish their settlements by the side of water. ([ca. 1971]:240)

This example will later give evidence of how the Christian has and has not dealt with these issues.

The Tripuras’ first contact with Christianity seems to have been in the 1600s. “In the mid 1600’s the King of the Tipperahs invited the Jesuits to begin a mission in his hill kingdom but was really interested in Portuguese support against the Mugals” (1975:18). In the period 1676-1685 the Maharaja Ramdeb Manikya invited Jesuit missionaries to Tripura. “The Raja Showed interest for Christianity and asked for a missionary in 1683 and
accordingly Fr. Ignitius Gomes, S.J. made a visit to Agartala but returned disappointed” (Debbarma 2003:291).

Not until much later in 1909 did Rev. John Tackle from the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society (NZBMS) first send Bengali workers into Tripura. “The effort of the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society ultimately bore fruit when permission to live and work in Tripura was received in the later part of November 1938” (2003:292). It was not until 1922 that the first Tripura, Khua Rai of the Riang or Bru clan was baptized. Later in 1938 Maninindra Debbarma of the largest Kokborok clan was baptized.

Missionaries and the traditional national church have not dealt well with the “middle issues” of spiritism which were present in their old religions and continue underneath the outward forms of Christianity today. An example of how Christian leaders turn a blind eye to these issues comes from the following statement of Sukkendu Debbarma. “The Kokborok speaking Christians have done away with all kind of superstition. In short the belief in numerous evil spirit (sic.) to whose malign influence all the death and suffering were ascribed has been completely abandoned” (2003:293).
Debbarma also claims that "the roles of the Ochai have been taken over by the Pastor or Christian priest" (2003:293). To a degree (hopefully a large degree) I believe this is true. My experience, however, is that many Christians have not found help for many of the issues with which the Ochai dealt. Certainly there are many "bridges" such as the above mentioned Tui Ma Puja through which we can infuse the power of the gospel. I believe the high regard of water in the Tui Ma Puja, for example, has given baptism special meaning for the Tripura. Many other symbols in the pujas, festivals, and ceremonies of Tripuras and other tribals can be utilized by the Christian community.

The total population of the Tripura is around 2 million, and of these there are around 100,000 in Bangladesh. In India a large percentage have become Christian. In 2003 it was estimated that "there are about 70 thousand Christians among the Kokborok speaking people" (2003:292-293). In Bangladesh the Tripuras are now close to 10% Christian. "Apart from the Bawms... the number of converts to Christianity is far greater among the Tipperahs than from any other tribe" (McNee 1975:18)– in the CHT.

The majority of the Tripuras in Bangladesh are located in Kagrachuri adjacent to the Tripera state of India.

The so-called Tippera people live not only in the contemporary Indian state of Tripura, but for quite some time they also
constituted the majority of the population in the northern part of the Hill Tracts bordering on the Tripura state. Only during the last decades have the Tripura been forcibly pushed further and further out of the Hill Tracts by Bangali (sic.) Muslim settlers – not least of all because they profess Hinduism. (Brauns and Loffler 1990:27)

The Tripuras of Kagrachuri are of the Kok Barok clan. A related clan, the Oshai Tripura, reside in the Bondarbon district, and the majority is Christian. The Kok Borok Tripuras were the first of the recent tribal movements towards Christ beginning in the early 1980s. There are currently around 70 Tripura churches, and because of their greater longevity as Christians they have more trained leaders and are more spiritually mature in general. They have been exposed to the old mission practices for a longer time, however, and many of the older Tripera churches have greater issues of dependency than the newer churches.

The conversion of Rona Bikarom in the 1980s, was part of the beginning of a movement with the Tripura tribe. Rona Bikarom is a well-respected political leader within the Tripura tribe. Before the 1980s, new Christians were often forbidden to use the village well, given the silent treatment, or other such ostracism, but this generally did not last long. As the movement has picked up among the Tripuras, and particularly after Rona Bikarom converted, there are only isolated incidents of persecution.
More recently in the year 2000, another Tripura leader named Milon Tripura came to Christ in the Matiranga area of Kagrachuri district. Previously there was one small church in the area. At the church founding ceremony, the young newly-converted church leader confided in me and asked for prayer. His father said he would give the church 6 months, and then he would lead the villagers to stop the church and force all members to return to Hinduism. Many isolated young congregations and new believers receive similar threats. During this period, however, in the same area, Milon Tripura, (the above mentioned leader) came to Christ. Through his influence we saw 12 churches planted in the Matiranga area in one year. There has been very little persecution and the earlier opposition has become strangely quiet.

In September 2003 Sushil Tripura attended an Acts 29 Training in Kolkata, India. Though Sushil had been a church planter for several years, in this seminar he gained a vision for reaching his entire Tripura tribe in Bangladesh. The following is taken from his “Endvision” from his “Master Plan for Tripura”:

Our endvision is to reach (sic.) Gospel to 600 Tripura villages in Chittagong Hill Tracts... Every church will become [a] reproducing church... The existing churches and new churches will be taught by various methods (different kind of ministries) for their spiritual growth... Every one church will reach (sic.) Gospel to every 12 villages... So, if we share [the] Gospel
among Tripura community using [the] above mentioned method, surely [we] could reach... every person. One day the community will change their faith by the life of Jesus Christ and they will be known as Christian community as Mizoram people. The expecting day is not so far. The tribe of Tripura will keep [their] relationship with the living God. (Tripura 2003:3)

In the year following the training, Sushil and Rajamoni Chakma, who also took the training, baptized a record number of 97 Chakmas and Tripuras. They seem to have gained a vision of discipleship and church planting with the goal of reaching their entire tribe.

**Mru**

The final group I will study are the Mru. The Mru are the most remote and the majority of them are Animists. Eliade writes, “every primitive society possesses a consistent body of mythical traditions, a ‘conception of the world’” (1965:x). The Mru have a fascinating body of traditions which will give insights into their worldview. “The Mru love beauty. They take great pride in producing beautiful embroidery on hand woven skirts. The men weave baskets which are both beautiful and functional” (Ebersole 1995:5).

The Mru’s simplicity of life and unfamiliarity with the dominant Bengali (or any outside) culture has also left them most open to exploitation. Only the remoteness of their villages has allowed them some protection from
an onslaught of unwelcome advances. Seemingly less significant in the overall scheme of things, the fact that the Mru continue to wear very little clothing illustrates the exploitation they have faced. Traditionally all tribal men wore loin cloths and tribal women wore short skirts. With the exception of the Mru and a few other remote tribes, men have adapted the lungi (long skirt wrap) or pants, and women now wear blouses and weave full length tribal skirts. (A tribal woman who more deeply identifies with the Bengali culture may wear a *sari*, the traditional South Asian woman’s dress, but this is rare.) Of course, in Muslim society modesty is strictly enforced, and particularly women are to be completely covered. This is yet another example of how these two cultures clash.

Both Western and Bengali visitors have been fascinated by various aspects of the Mru culture, not the least of which is the scant clothing of the Mru people. This has led to the above mentioned exploitation. The following account illustrates this well.

Karim exhibited the ethnocentric behaviour (sic.) that made the Mru fear Bengali visitors. For him the Mru village was obviously a place which he judged by his own standards; where women went around bare-breasted, they could not be anything but loose. Hence the code of decency by which he lived at home was not operative and he could indulge in what were sins under that code (watch scantily dressed dancing women, have them photographed as sex objects, drink alcohol and perhaps engage in some extramarital sex) without fear of retribution. (Van Schendel et al. 2000:113)
In recent years the Mru have been so victimized by photographers, that I decided not to take even the most innocent picture of fully dressed acquaintances so as to not be identified with the “exploiting outsiders.” (For this reason only audio recordings were made in Mru villages during my field research.)

The Mru population numbers around 80,000 and most are found deep in the jungles of the Bondarbon District.

The Mru people live in the Chittagong Hills on both sides of the border between Bangladesh and Arakan state in Myanmar... The population is divided evenly between Myanmar and Bangladesh. According to their legends they migrated to the Chittagong hills from Arakan state several hundred years ago. (Ebersole 1995:1)

There are three major clans among the Mru, and each was traditionally distinguished by where the men wore the “bun” of their gathered long hair – on the top, front, or back. “In Bangladesh the Mru live in isolated villages high in the hills. Their economy is based on jum cultivation, which is often disparagingly referred to as “slash and burn” agriculture” (1995:3). Because they are so remote they are the least educated with only a few speaking the national language of Bengali and even fewer who are literate.
The fact that most of the Mru have remained animists whereas most other tribal groups have adopted Buddhism or Hinduism makes the Mru representative of what characterized most tribals earlier. Hiebert’s description of “traditional religionists” fits the Mru well.

Many tribal religionists see the world as alive. Not only humans, but also animals, plants and even rocks, sand and water are thought to have personalities, wills and life forces. Theirs is a relational, not a deterministic world. (1982:42-43)

All of these factors make the Mru seem simple, untainted by the Western world, and vulnerable – characteristics common to the background of all tribal people.

While outside observers have determined that the Mru exhibit more Animistic religious aspects, many Mru claim to be Buddhists.

The Mru have traditionally considered themselves to be Buddhist. The only recognizable Buddhist teaching is that of the possibility of reincarnation... They believe in Thurai, the Creator God, but they know of no way to approach him. Their religious practices consist almost entirely of sacrifices and rituals to pacify the spirits. (Ebersole 1995:6)

Further evidence in support of the Mru being Animist as opposed to Buddhist has to do with their loose priestly class structure.

There is no class of religious priests. Any family head can lead a religious ceremony. If he wishes for help he may request it from someone acknowledged as a religious expert (sra). Anyone may function in this capacity; they simply learn the required rituals. (1995:1)
There is also no concept of the Buddhist nirvana in traditional Mru religion. "The Murangs (sic.) always think in earthly terms and the concept of hereafter has no place in their scheme. According to them, death is the ultimate end and nothing exists after that" (Sattar [ca. 1971]:219).

I will go into the accompanying ceremony in Chapter 4, but a central aspect of the Mru tradition has to do with their story of the cow. "Like many ethnic groups of Southeast Asia they had a “Lost Book” legend…"

(Ebersole 1995:6). The following is the lost book legend of the Mru:

The Creator once summoned all groups of people in heaven to meet Him in a great rendezvous. Each group was to take its own books containing the blueprints of its religion. One by one every group of people turned up with its scripture. But no one representing the Murangs (sic.) appeared there, for they did not have any book.

The Creator waited for a long time and then sent down a scripture to the Roaja or a Chief of the Murangs through a cow. The whole text of the scripture was written on a banana leaf. On the way the cow felt hungry and unable to control greed he ate up the banana leaf. Hence no book of God ever reached the Murangs.

The story does not end here. The Murangs, deprived of a divine book, discovered that they had many dissimilarities with the other peoples and they went to the Creator to get an explanation for this discrepancy. The Creator then told them the whole story. When it thus became clear that it was all due to the cow’s wickedness, he angrily ordered, ‘You punish the cow by killing it’.
From here the Murangs have acquired the custom of Kumlang which consists of ceremonious killing of a cow. (Sattar [ca.1971]: 219)

The Kumlang custom will be described in Chapter 4.

Various Christian groups have begun work recently with the Mru and presently there are a total of about 15 to 20 churches. “In 1974, 150 Mrus were converted. By mid 1975 this number had grown to 250. At the same time Mru villages south of the Matamuri River were contacted and 95 families have professed faith in Jesus Christ” (McNee 1975:17-18). Mizo Baptists have recently sent a missionary to Bangladesh with the hopes of seeing fruit with this tribe very close to their own background.

A very interesting phenomenon occurred in the last 20 years in which a Mru person began a new religious movement which is a mixture of Christianity, Buddhism, and their former animism. This new religion which has attracted significant numbers is called “Krama.”

The most recent religious development has been the rapid spread of the apocalyptic Krama cult. In the mid 1980’s a young Mru man named Men Le claimed to be God’s representative to the Mru. He said the Mru needed a religion of their own since both Buddhism and Christianity were foreign religions. (Ebersole 1995:7)

Men Le developed his own alphabet and educated many Mru by teaching this “Krama alphabet.”
For the followers of Krama, Men Le is a messianic figure who will bring them a kingdom of their own. After preaching for two or three years Men Le left, saying that he wanted to meditate in the Himalayas. He said he would return in five years, during a time of great difficulty, and bring with him the knowledge which would give the Mru a prosperous kingdom. (Ebersole 1995:7)

Time has elapsed and Men Le has not returned. Though somewhat weakened by this fact, Krama continues to have a major influence among the Mru.

There are many other smaller tribes found in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Most of these, however, have a very similar background to the three tribes I have mentioned here. Again I must reiterate that even though I have described the three tribes separately, for this research project I am looking at the tribal people as an ethnographic unit. Although this seems counterintuitive, for reasons of their geopolitical unity and common ethnic minority status, I will work with them as a group for this project. Below, I will give further support of working with the tribes as a unit as I describe the common emerging themes in detail.

**Emerging Common Themes**

The cultural context of tribal people in Bangladesh is multifaceted and deeply complex. The region of the Chittagong Hill Tracts with its various
cultural and geopolitical issues adds to this complexity. Each tribe is fascinating and unique, and deserves an in-depth study of its own. For the purpose of this study, however, I am looking at the region and tribes as a whole. I would like to present several emerging themes which I believe are common to the tribal people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

**Religion**

I begin with religion because it is the most complex and difficult. How can we find common themes among Buddhists, Hindus and Animists? First, I would say that though they may claim another religion, the tribals of the CHT remain Animists to a major degree. In the CHT it is folk Buddhism and folk Hinduism which is practiced for the most part. Many of the practices of Tripura Hindus and Chakma Buddhists are actually animistic and do not reflect orthodox Hinduism nor Buddhism. In addition to this often times the major world religion which their ancestors at some point converted to does not fit within their cultural context. Chakmas find many of the dietary restrictions of Buddhism difficult to follow. Tripuras have found the complex caste system incompatible with their Tripura society, and even have to “import” Bengali priests of the Brahmin caste. These are certainly good lessons for Christianity as it is introduced. A non-contextual Christianity will likewise not fit comfortably within tribal context.
Another observation in terms of the religious context is that there are many “bridges” between the gospel and tribal culture. These “bridges” are what Richardson would call “redemptive analogies.” “Redemptive analogies, God’s keys to man’s cultures, are the New Testament-approved approach to cross-cultural evangelism” (Richardson 1974:288). As with many of the tribes in this region, the “Lost Book” tradition of the Mru certainly has applications to “the book” we have in our Scriptures. Hindus and Buddhists both have a great deal of respect for holy writings as well, and do not hold to the “corrupted Bible” teaching of their Muslim neighbors. The Chakma belief in the high god Gozen and his breathing breath into a mud image of man has already been mentioned. The creation story from Genesis has particular attraction for Chakmas for this reason. For the Tripura Hindus, a religion in which “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus…” (Galatians 3:28) is more attractive than one in which they feel dependent and inferior to other Hindu-believing peoples.

Finally, a word must be said about the domination of Islam in the context of Bangladesh and in the CHT in particular. Bengalis, both Hindu and Muslim, have had dominion over the region for the last few centuries. Particularly after partition in 1947, however, Islam and those who profess it
have become an ever-growing menace according to the tribal people’s own testimony. One of the clear tactics of the Bengali settlers was to establish a never-to-be-touched-nor-removed mosque upon their entrée to a new village or area. So the mutual distaste for Islam and its adherents is another common religious issue, albeit negative, which strongly unites the tribal people.

Orality

The tribal people function as an oral people at heart. Though many are becoming literate, the illiteracy rate is still around 80% in the CHT. Even among the growing group of educated tribals, I believe there remains a preference for their oral traditions. Chakmas, Tripuras, Mrus and the other tribes are attracted to and understand the different forms of oral media.

Human Rights Issues

I alluded to the human rights abuses of the Bengali Muslims above. The recent history of the CHT strongly confirms this and unites the people. In the 1970s following government-sponsored settlement programs of Bengalis into the CHT, the *Santibahini* was formed to not only resist the unwelcome advanced, but in order to simply survive. “In order to defend the interests of the indigenous population, an armed resistance movement, the Santi Bahini (“fighters for peace”) was formed…” (Brauns and Loffler
1990:241). This brought anything but peace to the region as the Bangladesh military responded with force. The unarmed tribals were those who suffered the most.

...Time and again whole tribal villages tried to flee; for wherever the guerrillas struck, the Bengali army devastated everything in the surrounding villages. They plundered the houses, raped the women, and tortured, mutilated, and killed all the men they could get their hands on. In 1981 alone, 10,000 members of the hill tribes are believed to have been killed. (1990:242)

The above-mentioned period represents one of the heights of human rights abuses, however on varying levels such situations continue in the CHT.

These human rights abuses have united the tribal people in a profound way. In many ways their only hope is for international pressure on the government of Bangladesh.

When internationally pressured to comment on the reported violations of human rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the representatives of the government vacillated between a flat denial of the mere existence of an indigenous tribal population, and a formal pledge to protect[ion] of the lives and interests of these tribal people. (1990:242)

The history of human rights abuses in the CHT is another emerging theme common to all the tribals.

Context of Change

As in most places of the world, issues of modernization, globalization, and advances in information and technology have had a great impact on the
tribal people of Bangladesh. Cultural traditions and the whole tribal lifestyle have been challenged by the rapidly changing context due to outside modern and technological forces. Particularly as I tried to observe traditional ceremonies, I found that much has been lost due to the rapidly changing situation.

The tenuous and sometimes volatile cultural context of the people living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts was mentioned above. The 25 years of political turmoil of these tribal areas, and, to a lesser degree the whole country of Bangladesh, has had a profound effect on the tribal society. Though still intact, aspects of their society, including religious practices and many other social and cultural customs, have been greatly challenged. This along with the bombardment of modern, technological influences has a major impact on our work with the various tribal groups. As Rynkiewich notes, "We need to understand how culture is contingent on regional and global flows, how culture is constructed from materials brought into the present over historic and geographic distances, and how culture is constantly being contested in daily life" (2002:316).

To talk of tribal culture of the CHT today is a slippery subject that one cannot seem to grasp. So, this context of change and fluidity is one of the major emerging themes. The issues of geopolitical instability, technological
impact, and social and cultural change is constantly influencing the life of
the tribals. What tomorrow's culture will look like and which traditions will
survive in what conditions are ongoing questions. This fluid changing
context is another emerging theme.

**Struggle for Survival**

One aspect of life in the CHT which has not changed is that survival is
a difficult challenge. This could be said for most of the people of
Bangladesh who continually rank among the poorest of the world. For the
reasons mentioned above it is even more acute in the CHT. The tribals
traditional slash and burn agricultural system is quickly coming to an end as
the population pressure increases. “Their economy is based on “*jum*”
cultivation, which is often disparagingly referred to as “slash and burn”
agriculture. The method is very well adapted to the unstable composition of
the hills, but is unable to support a large population” (Ebersole 1995:3).

Physical survival is a daily challenge for most Bangladeshis, however for the
tribals as we have seen throughout this chapter, the struggle to survive
defines nearly every aspect of their lives.
Notes

1 In the South Asian numbering system the term “one lac” is used followed by a comma (1,00,000) rather than one hundred thousand (100,000). So this number 5,91,342 (five lac, ninety-one thousand, three hundred forty-two) is 591,342 (five hundred ninety-one thousand, three hundred forty-two).

2 It is interesting to note that the population of Muslims in Bangladesh has grown from 76.9% in 1951 to 89.7% in 2001. This is mainly due to the exodus of Hindus each year from 22% in 1951 (before partition in 1947 the figure was well over 30%) to 9.2% in 2001. Even more interesting is the fact that over the same period the Buddhist population has remained between 0.6% and 0.7%, and the Christian population has remained at 0.3% (Rahman 2003:67). There are many who feel that the government skews all figures in favor of the majority community, so there may be a margin of error due to this.

3 Acts 29 Training is a two to four week training seminar in which participants “receive some practical tools for making disciples and planting churches … [as well as] develop[ing] comprehensive strategies that will serve as road maps for [their] ministries” (Carlton 2003:15). It is based on the training manual, Acts 29 Training: Practical Training in Facilitation Church-Planting Movements among the Neglected Harvest Fields by Bruce Carlton.
Chapter 3

The “Oral Majority”

(Can people become true disciples without literacy?)

The light began to come on in Rajamoni’s eyes as we sat and discussed the future of his Chakma tribe on the old pews of Circular Road Baptist Church in the heart of Kolkata. The three of us had traveled two days from the hills of southeast Bangladesh across the Ganges delta and into India for Acts 29 training. This training led by Bruce Carlton was subtitled “Practical Training In Facilitating Church-Planting Movements Among The Neglected Harvest Fields” (Carlton 2003:1). For two weeks we, along with 40 missionaries and South Asian Christian leaders, had been exploring every avenue of how to be “moving on out beyond [our] comfort zones and into the regions beyond the current stages of development – paying the price for extending the Good News” (Carlton 2003:9).

The particular discussion we were having that evening dealt with some of the very practical aspects of reaching Rajamoni’s Chakma tribe. Rajamoni had shared that his tribe’s population was around 500,000 spread across the border of southeast Bangladesh and northeast India. Though the
British Baptists began work with the Chakmas over 100 years ago, only a handful of small congregations remained and the Chakma tribe was still overwhelming identified as Buddhist. Though there had been a few promising beginnings in the spread of the gospel among the Chakma, these quickly died out and the tribe remained a stronghold against the Christian message. In the last ten years, however, as the later part of a new movement among tribals, nearly 100 churches had been planted. We all agreed that this was the time for the Chakmas to be swept *en masse* into the kingdom as many of their sister tribes in northeast India had been over the last 100 years.

Now there were 5,000 Chakma believers, and we were looking at how to mobilize them to reach their entire tribe. Rajamoni shared that there were around 5,000 Chakma villages and to effectively reach the Chakma tribe we agreed that we would need a congregation reaching out in each of these villages. The discussion naturally led to who would lead such groups and how they would be trained. Rajamoni first felt that it would be best to have a Bachelor of Theology (BTh) graduate leading each of these churches. This created a dilemma that needed some serious thought.

To date in the thirty-year-old movement among tribals we only have three BTh graduates of the College of Christian Theology, Bangladesh (CCTB). These three are of the Tripura tribe which was the first of the tribal
groups to show interest in the gospel from the southeast region. Through years of training and development these three had progressed through the TEE (Theological Education by Extension) program of CCTB and completed enough hours to be admitted into the final yearlong residential program and receive their BTh. The Chakma movement is much newer – only ten years old – and to date no one has reached the BTh level. Rajamoni is currently one of the most highly trained Chakmas having attended one year of Bible school in northeast India. Another crucial issue was that the Chakmas we were reaching were less educated overall. The tribe itself is around 80% oral learners.

If we were to have one BTh trained Chakma pastor for each church this created a serious challenge. We reasoned with Rajamoni that we were currently at “ground zero” in terms of BTh trained Chakmas. While a good number were in CCTB’s TEE program, we all agreed that we would be very ambitious to have an average of five BTh graduates yearly. (The CCTB BTh residential program is only offered every two or three years.) With five BTh graduates each year it did not take long for us to do the math and figure out how long it would be before we had enough leaders for the 5,000 congregations needed to reach the tribe. (This did not even take into consideration the 80% of the tribe who were effectively cut out of the TEE
program because they were oral learners.) The light began to come on for all of us, and we knew the discipleship and leadership challenge before us was immense.

We need to take on the serious challenge of low literacy levels. Before we even reach the issues of orality, however, Peter Chang, an Asian theologian, would challenge that the teaching style and methods of our current TEE program are very Western and linear and, thus, they miss the way our Asian brothers think. The analytical, inductive approach to theological education does not always work for people who think in non-linear ways. As Chang says, “more sensitivity, respect and utilization of this mode of thinking should be cultivated in generating exegesis, theology, homiletics and theological education programs in the future” (1981:123).

The Western form of TEE which is currently in use needs to be transformed to meet the Asian mindset. So, from the beginning we need to revamp our whole approach to theological education and leadership training. In addition to the current TEE program, a comprehensive discipleship and leadership-training program for our “oral majority” needs to be designed.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the majority of the tribal people are oral. Like most organizations and groups, the Christian community has all but ignored this majority of our people by focusing on those who are literate. A
rough estimate would tell us that 80% of the tribal population are “oral people” (see definition of orality, page 5) who give preference to oral forms of communication. Most of these people are either illiterate or have a very low level of literacy. It is natural for literate Christians (or any literate person) to emphasize the written word. “No other religion is so thoroughly word-oriented as ‘Judeo-Christianity’” (Nida 1960:5). The authority of the Scriptures for us as evangelicals only strengthens this tendency. Garrison understood this tension in his question, “How do evangelicals, who are fundamentally a ‘people of the book,’ multiply among people who cannot read and write” (2004:183)?

In the early days of missions among the tribals, literacy was a prerequisite to church membership. Klem points out that two major mission policies resulted from the belief that it was necessary to teach literacy before the people could learn the Word of God. One was the establishment of schools to teach literacy and the other was the requirement of literacy for church membership” (1982:29).

Among the Khasi tribe in northeast India, “…Presbyterians passed a rule that no convert should be admitted into the church without first learning to read…” (Corwin 1980:33). Though presently we do not require one to be educated before becoming a Christian, we have come close to communicating this. Certainly in our youth and leadership training, the need
to read and write has been communicated through the very literate forms of
training used. As Chinchen points out, “It may help to remember that the
story of Christ was communicated orally for at least 20 years before it was
recorded in the gospels” (Chinchen 2004:458).

Because of our tendency to think in “bounded sets” (Hiebert
1983:421) in the West, we have a hard time categorizing a person who does
not or cannot read his/her Bible as a good Christian. Our discipling methods
– even when working with a population whose majority cannot read – reflect
this. I believe a major step was taken when the Chronological Bible
Storying approach was adopted. More will be said about this later, but even
in this oral method those who taught were literate and thus gave preference
to the literate method of teaching. Our emphasis on literate, often Western,
discipling methods has been a barrier to the oral masses becoming intrinsic
members of the Christian community.

**Oral Learning and Discipleship**

The bibliographic data on orality is a growing area of interest.
Anthropologist Jack Goody seems to be one of the first to have delved into
the subject in a comprehensive way. Walter Ong’s work and particularly his
classic book, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*
published in 1982, continues to be the most utilized authority on orality. Only in the last decade, however, has the research on orality begun to impact the missiological community. After covering the literature which defines orality, I will survey how we have missed the principles of orality in missions work in terms of education, communication, and social interaction. Finally, I will look at how orality has worked and continues to work very well without literacy for the majority of the world’s people.

**Defining Orality**

Oral people are those “whose appropriation and engagement with life is oral” (Sample 1994:6). Oral people do not usually learn in training seminars or from training manuals. “An oral culture likewise has nothing corresponding to how-to-do-it manuals for the trades… Trades were learned by apprenticeship…, which means from observation and practice with only minimal verbalized explanation” (Ong 1982:43). Along with this, in teaching more of what we think of as cognitive issues, we need to remember that “taking notes” will not be a way of committing the learning to memory. “…It should be noted that oral memory differs significantly from textual memory in that memory has a high somatic component… Traditional composition has been associated with hand activity… make string figures together with their songs… [or] manipulate beads on strings…” (Ong
1982:67). It would seem that a great deal of creativity needs to be implemented in creating a program of leadership training for oral people.

Much of the literature in seeking to define orality compares characteristics of oral society with those of what Ong calls “text-based” societies. “We have two common speech media: ‘Orality’ and ‘Graphology.’ Orality entails the use of the organs of speech and hearing in communicating, while graphology is the use of a writing system. These also can be understood as listening and speaking; reading and writing” (Ansre 1995:65). Fowler takes this idea further using the term “print culture.”

With writing, a culture has a permanent record of its traditions, which can make it more difficult to revise, supplement, or jettison traditions. Paradoxically, however, print culture also develops a hunger for novelty and constant change--one might say a taste for the latest fashion--at the same time that print freezes its words in amber. Print culture develops historical consciousness, an awareness of past, present, and future. (Fowler 2004:8)

We begin to see here the advantages and disadvantages of both text-based and oral cultures. “…When an utterance is put in writing it can be inspected in much greater detail…it can be subjected to a quite different type of scrutiny and critique than is possible with purely verbal communication. Speech is no longer tied to an ‘occasion’; it becomes timeless…” (Goody 1977:44). Leone Modena likened written text to a painting in which the artist could cover up a mistake. In comparison, oral communication is
like sculpture in which a mistake cannot be undone. "An erroneous, or ill-conceived, or poorly worded statement, once uttered, cannot be recalled" (Saperstein 2000:248). This helps us in "understanding the special qualities of the sermon as oral communication in the context of a written culture" (2000:249).

Wilson uses yet another term in describing non-oral society. "By "literary culture" I am not simply referring to literacy, but to the whole literary mindset which affects the way we communicate orally" (1997:177). In another article, Wilson is one of the few who describe oral society in a positive light. "What distinguishes oral societies from literary ones is their refined oral skills and media which enable them to memorize, recall, and transmit various forms of knowledge in particular situations" (1991:155). So, orality is more than just the lack of literacy, it affects a wide range of behaviors, mindsets, and worldviews of the majority of the worlds people who are oral. "They communicate, learn, perceive reality and embrace core beliefs through orally expressed stories, narratives, songs and proverbs - - not through the books, periodicals, outlines and other forms of linear thinking preferred by literate cultures (and churches)" (Bridges 2004:1).

With an idea of the complexity of these issues of orality, let us move on to
the subject of how we have by-and-large “missed it” in relating and ministering to oral people in international missions.

Where Orality has been Missed in Mission Work

The history of modern missions – particularly during the colonial era – is full of examples in which the local context was ignored, and a Westernized, foreign gospel was presented. The result was that many times the gospel was rejected for the “wrong” reasons – that it was foreign and did not fit the local cultural context of the indigenous people. Those who did receive the gospel and become Christian were often Westernized and correspondingly a Western-looking church was established. In recent history many have tried to move away from this pattern and institute principles of contextualization.

Anyone who has worked in a cross-cultural context knows how difficult this process is, and how our natural tendency is to do things the way we have been taught and learned in our “home” context. Issues of orality have certainly not escaped this realm. Most Western missionaries come from a society which emphasizes education and thus is much more literary than oral. “…Coming as we do from a highly literary society, most of us either need to learn such oral skills or hone any that we still possess” (Wilson 1997:177). Avery Willis, who was Vice Present of the International
Mission Board of nearly 5000 missionaries, recognizes this as a barrier.

"Where is the barrier? Is it in them or in us? The difficulty lies with us, the literates. We’ve been handicapped by literacy” (Willis 2004:1).

Jesus is our best example of a witness who matched his cultural context. “He [Jesus] regularly matched physical, social, linguistic, and other contextual factors to the messages he sought to convey. We who seek to imitate Jesus’ example would do well first to study and then to follow his approach” (Kraft 1991:141). This includes using the perfect forms of oral communication matching his context which was oral for the most part. Let us look at three areas of contextualization in oral society: education methods, communication issues, and forms of social interaction.

**Education**

Missionaries who are committed to the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20 are seeking to “make disciples of all nations.” I see two main sub-themes of this. The first is to “baptize” which deals with evangelism. The second is “teaching them to obey everything [Jesus] has commanded.” It is interesting to note that representative in these two sub-themes we also find two dimensions of discipling. First, in baptizing we have the non-verbal, symbolic, and ceremonial aspect of discipling. Then, in teaching we have the verbal, concrete, and informational aspect of discipling. Thus, education
and teaching methods have always been a central part of missions. If our education methods are incomprehensible and do not fit our context then we will fail in this task of teaching.

Kraft maintains that we must be “receptor oriented” in order to be understood.

...God is receptor-oriented, seeking to reach his receptors by entering their frame of reference and by participating in their life, in order to be maximally intelligible to them. He thus employs the most basic principle of effective communication, receptor-orientation, a principle we must learn to imitate.

Unfortunately, a large number of Christian communicators seem to ignore this principle. Too often we who are church leaders demand that would-be receptors learn a new vocabulary in order to understand what we are saying. Thus the majority of adjustment is on their part. (Kraft 1991:16-17)

Using literary forms of education in cultures which are largely oral in effect has demanded that the receptors in our host culture adjust to our way of learning and understanding.

There is a long history of the educated elite not only setting the standards to which others must adapt, but actually using literacy as “an instrument of oppression.”

Illiteracy is grouped with poverty, malnutrition, lack of education, and health care, while literacy is often equated with growth of productivity, child care, and the advance of civilization. (Pattanayak 1991:105)

Wilson takes this even further to whole oral societies.
Oral cultures are usually defined negatively. For example, they are often described in terms of the lack of writing, or as to theirs existence prior to introduction of script, or as those without writing in any form... In this way, the stigma of illiteracy with its implied deficiencies of learning are attributed to oral societies. (1997:177)

Unfortunately, Christians have taken part in this oppression. This “voiced a deep un-Christian resignation; the tendency of the Church and the government was simply to write off the illiterates” (Weber 1957:18).

Christianity is not the only religion guilty of this. Both Hinduism and Buddhism have an elite educated group who alone are given privileged access to the scriptures. In archaic societies such as India, literacy was kept as a monopoly among the elite. Reading the “magical books” was reserved to the elite castes preserving the mysterious and mystical qualities of the religion as well as the status of those in the high castes (Goody 1968:11-12). These gurus maintained their status by passing their knowledge on verbally to the uneducated masses. “In the Hindu tradition, as in Tibetan Buddhism, the word of mouth from the guru was supreme in transmitting knowledge; in the same way the present literate society, the lecture of the teacher supplements the book” (Pattanayak 1991:107).

Islam also has scriptures in Arabic, and it is a worthy goal for any Muslim to learn to read the Qur’an in Arabic. Nevertheless, Islam has accommodated the oral learner as well. “The Muslim scholarly class of
course learn to read Arabic, yet for most Muslims the Qur’an is learned orally and is memorized. One does not have to learn to read to be a good Muslim” (Lenchak 1994:462).

It is modern day Western Christians who have imposed literacy as a prerequisite to being a “good Christian.” Lenchak reminds us, “We must also keep in mind that the Bible (especially Hebrew Scriptures), although a literary work, was written largely to be read aloud. Much of it was meant for public oral recitation, not for private reading. It was composed to be heard” (Lenchak 1994:464). Ironically, today the main use of the Scripture has been reversed for most Christians. “Literary cultures tend to lose this aspect of Scripture as the spoken word, and fail to appreciate its relevance… Only short fragments are publicly read and exegeted week by week in our churches and consequently we miss getting the impact of the Big Story” (Wilson 1997:177). Daily private reading of the Scripture is seen as an essential part of the Christian life for most Western evangelicals. While I certainly do not want to discourage this for those who can read, we need to consider how to teach and disciple those who cannot. “We tend to forget that throughout most of Biblical history, more people were listeners to rather than readers of the Scripture” (Wilson 1997:177). Most Christian discipling methods and programs are based on literate rather than oral methods.
I am afraid we have followed what Freire would describe as oppressive "banking" educational systems in many of our discipleship programs.

Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem solving education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the *submersion* of consciousness; the later strives for the *emergence* of consciousness and *critical intervention* in reality. (Freire 1970:68)

“Oral communicators – illiterates, functional illiterates and semi-literates – are not comfortable with, and cannot easily understand information that comes in the form of outlines, precepts, principles, and steps in a process” (Slack 1995:24-25). Often we are so concerned with "depositing" our knowledge that we reduce the students to "objects" unaware that our methods are missing the hearts of those we want to teach.

It is difficult for us from literary societies to be able to comprehend the gap that exists between our way of thinking and that of an oral person. In so many ways we are bound to the written text and refer to it constantly as our source of authority. If information is not in "black and white" text, we question its authority. This is not the case at all in oral societies.

In an oral-aural culture one can ask about something, but no one can look up anything. As a result, in an oral-aural culture there is no history in our modern sense of the term. The past is indeed present, as to a degree the past always is, but it is present in the speech and social institutions of the people, not in the
more abstract forms in which modern history deals. (Ong 1976:23)

This leads into the importance of and high skill that exists in reference to memory in oral societies. “In an oral culture, memory aids must be devised in order to insure retrieval of its oral depository” (Pineda 1992:153). Since it is not possible to refer to text in aiding memory, the oral person relies on his or her mental memory capacity. “The memory is developed and enhanced by the use of mnemonics. These are memory aids-devices, patterns and structures which function to fix the essential meaning (not necessarily specific words) in the listener’s memory, in a way that facilitates recall” (Wilson 1997:178).

Thus oral communication must contain elements that serve not only as entertaining to the listener, but aid the memory process. “Other memory devices employed were that of repetition; the use of formulaic expressions; stress of concept over exact word agreement; traditional choral and public discourses; paintings/codices; rhythm – dance; song; poetry; and tonal variance and metaphor” (Pineda 1992:153). “This is the way they maintain their own traditions and identity, and decisions are made by searching the memory rather than by reasoning! Ethnic music and poetry skills are also important…” (Phillips 2000:41) Pineda sums this up stating, “Physical movements such as gestures, dancing, and breathing serve as memory aids to
oral thought” (1992:155). These mnemonic devices must be utilized if we are to disciple oral people properly.

Thayer Salisbury did a study on the attractiveness of narrative as opposed to essay form of literature among African students. Salisbury discovered that narrative literature “was more memorable and easier to understand” (Salisbury 2004:91), but educated African students did not feel a great degree of affinity toward the narrative style. This could be because the educated Africans were trying to distance themselves from the narrative style used by uneducated Africans. Nevertheless, narrative for oral populations seems to be a valid way of presenting material.

Steffen maintains that narrative is a media form which can be used where a preaching format will not be acceptable.

Discipleship is providing opportunity for God's authoritative, holistic metanarrative to challenge and to correct rival individual and community narratives. Christian trainers who prepare workers to minister in "resistant blocs" often have privileged modes of communication other than narrative. (Steffen 2000:486)

Storying is only one of many media through which oral people can learn. We must use a variety of media, and as these are linked together the “whole picture” becomes clear to the oral learner. In this way they will learn Christian teaching and theology in forms which they can understand and with which they are familiar. Jay Moon discovered this in using proverbs as
a medium that Africans could readily appreciate. When using proverbs, "The students began to see that theology dealt with issues of their own culture, and it could be expressed in terms and concepts that were highly valued in their culture" (Moon 2004:168).

If we are to be effective in discipling oral people we need to humbly learn how to teach in a way that is appropriate for them.

We talk about contextualization in church planting, but we have ignored the importance of being learners in the educational arena. No matter what teaching role we take in education, we need to understand differing expectations, then look for the underlying cultural values and work toward Jesus’ model of leaders as servants. (Lingenfelter 2001:459)

Hand in hand with education methods are systems of communication.

**Communication**

Communication is central to any mission's strategy in which sharing the gospel is a priority. Communication is intricately wrapped up in the cultural systems of the local context. “What we see at the surface level in the process of communication is what we call cultural forms or symbols” (Kraft 1999:82). Cross-cultural communication is a very complex task as communication symbols are often interpreted in many different ways. “In studying how meaning is arrived at we note that there is divergence, sometimes wide divergence, in the way in which various people interpret the same symbols” (1999:79).
If we do not deliver the message in a way that the receptor can understand it we will not be communicating what we desire to communicate. “The principle is that when receptors perceive a lack of appropriate fit between the code used to communicate a message and the message itself, the incongruity of that lack of fit obtrudes into and radically alters the overall message” (Kraft 1991:112). When the cross-cultural witness communicates a message in literary society terms to an oral person, inevitably the message will not be received properly. “All communication across cultures involves problems of meaning, for words have meaning only within the complex of relationships which exist within a living language” (Lenchak 1994:458).

This is why understanding the worldview and mindset of the people is so important. If we do not understand the thought patterns of the host culture we are destined for miscommunication. “…Different forms of communication cannot be reduced to each other, but represent fundamentally different ways of organizing thought” (Schreiter 1984:270). In addition, in oral societies forms of oral communication are much more than just transferring a mental message. Oral communication is an art form. “Because of the aggregate nature of people in collective societies, oral communication becomes an art skillfully developed over time” (Chinchen 2004:458).
To a great degree Western missionaries have been ineffective because they have not developed an appreciation for the communication skills of oral societies. This goes much deeper than learning the language, which is a major task in itself. Delving into the gestures, proverbs, and the multitude of other forms related to rhetoric will be invaluable in helping us to communicate in ways in which our message can be more readily understood and accepted. Often we have fallen far short of this and assumed that the rejection of a poorly constructed message was due to spiritual forces. "All too often people have attributed rejection of the Christian message to human perversity or Satanic influence, when in many cases it was due to sheer irrelevancy of the communication" (Nida 1960:184).

As we discover the richness of communication forms in oral societies, we will, at the same time, be establishing deeper relationships. In oral societies communication and relationships are interrelated on a significant level. "In a culture where relationships are primary, relationships are also the key to communication. The foundation and goal of relational communication is not merely to pass on truth, but to establish, maintain, and enjoy the fruits of relationships" (Scheer 1995:471). My experience and research in oral societies shows that relationships are key to communication
and communication is key to relationships. Without either of these, one is destined to extreme ineffectiveness in oral societies.

In addition to ineffective communication, the cross-cultural witness will miss out on a "celebration of life" on a deeper relational level than we often experience in the West. "Communication, as a ritual event, occurs in a community's life without any meaning being shared or constructed but simply as part of celebrating life. This cultural view highlights the importance of the interactive characteristics of communication" (Raja 2001:62). Weber understood this nearly 50 years ago. "...In the 'primitive' (sic.) world communication is essentially participation: if you want to communicate something to another person you do so by taking him into the community of those who, together, know or do something" (Weber 1957:48). This leads into the next section on social interaction.

Social Interaction

The above two sections have already alluded to the importance of relationships and social interaction in oral societies. Sample summed it up with the statement, "Oral people think in relationships..." (1994:5). To an oral person, communication is all but impossible without a relationship between the two seeking to communicate. "In a face-to-face society it is
essential to establish a personal basis of friendship and acceptance before communication can become effective” (Nida 1960:110).

Chinchen maintains that one cannot break into the social system without establishing positive relationships. “In oral societies, the community will either work with you or against you depending on the extent to which you have worked your way into the networking system” (Chinchen 2004:460). Of course, in oral societies as in all societies some personalities are more relational than others, however even the reserved learn to communicate on a deep relational level. “In face-to-face societies, the immediacy and warmth of speech, and the social and participatory characteristics of oral communication, are inherently understood, esteemed, and enjoyed” (Wilson 1991:158).

It is in these relationships that we begin to understand the symbols and other intricacies of the culture. “The intrinsic nature of oral communication has a considerable effect upon both the content and the transmission of the cultural repertoire. In the first place, it makes for a directness of relationship between symbol and referent” (Goody 1968:29). Such knowledge will be invaluable in presenting the gospel and discipling in culturally appropriate ways.
When we do not enter nor appreciate the systems of oral society, we make many mistakes and can offend members of our host culture. By using literate forms of discipleship and education, we have limited ourselves to the educated minority. Often times this select educated group excludes the village elders who had less opportunity for education than the younger population. In establishing an oral Bible school, Howat was able to include this vitally important segment of the population. In an “oral tradition” Bible school for non-readers in Ethiopia “non-literate natural leaders within the emerging churches” (1974:448) are being trained. “Thus respected older leaders need not bow out to literate but inexperienced youths” (1974:448).

So, in terms of education, communication and social interaction, a lack of appreciation and understanding of oral societies has had a negative impact on the effectiveness of Western missionaries. Learning and working within the worldview of an oral people will not be an easy task, but the rewards will be great. In our tribal work we have bypassed a large segment of the population in favoring literate methods of evangelism and discipleship. In the next section we will see how oral societies have systems of transferring and storing information as well as passing on important teaching.
Orality Works on its Own

As Herbert Klem notes in his study of oral art in Africa, "...there is without literacy a valid and effective way of spreading knowledge and passing on cultural tradition widely employed in Africa" (1982:8). I have observed that knowledge and cultural traditions are passed on quite effectively in oral cultures without using written texts. Weber describes the importance of coming to understand the world of oral people well.

The more intimately the Western theologian came to know [oral people], the more he was amazed at their powerful imagination, their ability to see: pictures, actions and significant happenings in nature and human life. Many of these illiterates revealed themselves as true artists in observation and communication. (Weber 1957:18-19)

So, a great deal of understanding is needed to enter and learn how to appropriately influence the world of the oral learner.

I have already given evidence for the differences in mindset and thinking patterns between those from literary and oral societies. The linear, chronological, and logically systematic biases of Western education are not appreciated in oral forms of learning. Oral societies are generally cyclical in their concept of time whereas chronology and a linear concept of time develops with the onset of literacy (Gough 1968:75-76).
Where literate societies place their authority on the permanence of the written word, oral societies continue to honor the spoken word.

In the Hindu tradition, as in Tibetan Buddhism, the word of mouth from the guru was supreme in transmitting knowledge; in the same way the present literate society, the lecture of the teacher supplements the book. (Pattanayak 1991:107)

Again even in Islam and Judaism with the unquestioned authority of the written text, in the Islamic *madrasas* and *geonic yeshivas* of tenth-century Baghdad the following was found to be true:

Oral transmission was not only the proper way of doing things; it was also considered more reliable than written transmission, and it is to orally transmitted texts that the Geonim turn when questions arise regarding the proper reading of a particular passage… (Ephrat et al. 2000:115)

In addition to this authoritative spoken word from the guru, priest, imam or religious leader, narrative or storytelling is an important medium in oral societies.

In Mandinka society it has traditionally been the role of the *griot* [professional Senegambian musicians and storytellers] to remember, often by rote, and to pass on such oral data, whether genealogies, traditions of origin, organized accounts of major events in the society’s past, or list of rulers, through song or narration. (Wright 1980:1-2)

As literate societies become more individualistic, impersonal, technology oriented they slowly lose the narrative art of storytelling.

In many ways the modern age is, when you look closely at it, the storyteller’s nightmare. The primacy, which the written, as
opposed to the spoken, word has come to have in the ritual of human communication – at least before the much-too-recent electronic era – has not really been to the artist’s advantage. Language is the storyteller’s wand: but when arrested in print, it turns into a pallid tool: it loses a crucial dimension of its dramatic potential, its magic declines to a gambler’s hoax. (Osofisan 2001:1-2)

Though in a somewhat negative light, Goody also acknowledges the artistry and power of oratory among oral people.

Equally, the more deliberate deception of the orator is perhaps less easy to overcome than the unintentional ambiguities of the writer... By means of rhetoric, through the gift of gab, the ‘tricks’ of the demagogue are able to sway an audience in a more direct way than the written word. What is at issue here is in part the immediaicy of the face-to-face contact, the visual gesture and tones of voice, that marks oral communication. It is the play seen, the symphony heard, rather than the drama read, the score studies. But more than this, the oral form is intrinsically more persuasive because it is less open to criticism (though not, of course, immune from it). (1977:50)

This is not limited to traditional and tribal societies, a large contingent of people in Western society continue to function with a preference for orality. Tomaselli and Shepperson show how these aspects of orality are alive and well in the realm of televangelism.

Televangelistic recovery of oral residues embedded in the collective memory means that the spoken word (of God) is not objectified by these readers/listeners. Televangelists use the expressive techniques of orality to recuperate the suppressed or compartmentalized religious sense of meaning and life into an all-embracing reconnection of subject and object. The socially atomized individual participating in the electronic church experiences an organic reconnection into a spiritual center of
authority that stands above the alienation of everyday life – but not necessarily of material life. (Tomaselli and Shepperson 2002:346)

Weber was aware of the powerful descriptive and narrative qualities in oral people years ago.

When we asked the meaning of a word unknown to us, the illiterate would not give a synonym, or a more or less abstract transcription, but he would ‘paint’ in words, quickly and unfailingly, a picture that illustrated the exact meaning. In describing a person the illiterate would not talk about his character but rather tell significant stories about him. (Weber 1957:18)

In terms of Christian ministry, we are slow to appreciate the oral qualities, and trust that these can be used effectively in discipling and training. “[W]e (particularly Christians from the Protestant tradition) have inherited some basic assumptions about Scripture, and we tend to assume that oral skills and media are incapable of and inappropriate for transmission of Scripture” (Wilson 1997:177). Wilson goes on to say, “…in many oral cultures, song singing interacts with storytelling – a song is imbedded in the story, and sung as appropriate in the midst of the storytelling. In this way, memorization of the narratives, which also often have a didactic function, is facilitated” (Wilson 1997:180). The social networking in oral societies also lends itself to ministry. “In an oral society, the best public relations for a ministry project comes by word of mouth. Those who have experienced the
transforming effects of the ministry are mobile billboards for all to see and hear” (Chinchen 2004:462).

It is time for cross-cultural ministries to acknowledge and work within oral media. “An estimated 4 billion people – about two-thirds of the world’s population – learn through the spoken word rather than the written word. Mission efforts focused on increasing literacy rates and providing written materials simply do not work in any significant way…” (Willis 2004:1).

Jesus gives the best example of ministering within an oral culture. “We can read the gospels with great profit if we see Jesus as a master of oral discourse who addresses those who are masters at listening” (Lenchak 1994:464). Jesus employed oral forms of story, proverbs, and parables which powerfully affected his oral listeners.

Only when we appreciate the social implications of Christ’s communicational policies can we hope to wisely apply His principles and techniques in parts of the world where there are similar competing systems of communication fraught with similar social implications. (Klem 1982:61)

The use of Bible storying has been the first real effort to minister among oral people within a medium which they can understand.

Illiterates among the Aja of Benin are oral learners and most effectively hear the Gospel as narrative. Topical lessons might fill in the gaps of the narrative but stories are not only remembered but also provide the historical backdrop for theological understanding. (Rheenen 2001:4)
For the last ten years storying has been used effectively among the tribals in Bangladesh. I believe this is a beginning, and that there are many other oral media forms which could be used effectively to reach oral people.

Pentecostals have been more effective in employing various oral media forms in ministry.

In Pentecostal churches there is a preference for orality which means a religious style that relies on interpersonal speech, with far less place accorded to study documents, to the academic enterprise, to university training, to rational argument. Instead, personal stories abound in the form of narrative “testimonies” of personal Christian experiences. Musical choruses, passed on orally, function in Pentecostal circles like catechisms do elsewhere. (Spittler 1988:413)

This has been found to be true on an even deeper level among charismatic churches in traditional societies.

Songs and stories, prayer for the sick, pilgrimages, exorcism and glossolalia, in short all the expressions of oral theology, function as a system for passing on theological and social values and information in oral societies in a way that can be likened to a modern computer, because the individual memories can be linked together in such a way that, although no one person actively communicates the whole tradition, in principle everybody has access to the total information. (Hollenweger 1980:68)

To conclude this review of the literature on orality, I quote Hollenweger who aptly describes aspects of oral and literary societies.

In these preliterate, semiliterate, or postliterate cultures the medium of communication is — just as in biblical times — not the definition but the description, not the statement but the
story, not the doctrine but the testimony, not the book but the parable, not a systematic theology but a song, not the treatise but the TV program, not the articulation of concepts but the celebration of banquets. (1980:69)

Already it was mentioned that two thirds of the world today functions orally, and the oral world only seems to be growing. “In some areas the annual population growth is higher than the annual increase in literacy” (Ansre 1995:65). It is time to enter and minister within the culture and media of oral societies. “Our challenge is to adapt our methods to effectively reach the lost, not to force billions of oral learners to become literate before they can understand the gospel” (Bridges 2004:3).

**Orality and the Christian Community in Bangladesh**

The challenge is daunting – to disciple leaders and new believers in order to see a Christian movement which reaches to the ends of the tribes in Bangladesh. In the last 30 years we have seen around 150 churches planted among these people. Most of these have around 30 members and are led by a farmer-pastor who has very limited education and even less theological training. About half of these are involved in some sort of TEE training and/or quarterly training seminars in Chronological Bible Storying as well as
basic issues of church leadership. Very few have had any sort of discipling or mentoring relationships.

We have by-passed the vast majority of our people and leadership potential who are illiterate and live in very remote areas. To reach the boundaries of these tribes a Church Planting Movement needs to take place. “...A Church Planting Movement is a rapid and exponential increase of indigenous churches planting churches within a given people group or population” (Garrison 2000:7). Many of the current church members are oral and the Chronological Bible Storying method had some success in reaching them, first as an evangelistic tool and later for discipleship. We have missed a great leadership potential, however, by neither seeking out nor giving opportunities for oral learners. “In Church Planting Movements the laity are clearly in the driver’s seat. Unpaid, non-professional common men and women are leading the churches” (Garrison 2004:189). Our challenge is to reach, disciple, and train the masses of oral tribals without whom we will not see a Church Planting Movement among the indigenous people of Bangladesh.

How did these oral people learn and consequently teach their former religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Animism? Much of the teaching came through the stories told around the village fires. In addition, the
ceremonies and festivals were times when the people acted out or participated in a ceremony packed with imagery and religious teaching. In participating in such a ceremony the mind of the learner was heightened and through the years the religious teachings became ingrained and a part of the person.

If we are going to reach and teach oral learners we must use similar methods – meaning work within their context – in our Christian teaching. “Contexts, like words, gestures, and the like, both facilitate and restrict the messages they are used to convey, again on the basis of social agreements. As with all other vehicles of communication..., they serve best when they are least noticed” (Kraft 1991:132).

I have already mentioned that the Chronological Bible Storying method has been used effectively with our tribal people. This represents the first major step in reaching the oral masses. Even here, however, the method has by and large been taught by the more educated of the tribes. The tendency to refer back to the written word for reference is naturally strong among people who claim that the Bible is their primary authority under God. This has given the impression that even in an oral medium the leader must be literate. We need to intentionally change this particular methodology and
bring oral storytellers (who are often the best storytellers) to the forefront in these programs of leadership training.

Orality is yet another area in which tribals have been oppressed. “Culture oppression is shame-based, relating to one’s own sense of being. It damages people’s ability to relate to themselves, their families, and other members to the groups to which they belong. It negatively affects their capacity to determine their own gifts and place in the world” (Holst 1998:45). Christian workers need to work sensitively within tribal structures including orality, or we will be lumped in with all the other outsiders who have violated tribal culture. “Tribal and nomadic cultures have a stability that depends on their structure not being violated. This usually means that individuals do not make decisions – the group does, or the chief does. Everyone then obeys” (Terry 1997:172).

In addition to storytelling, oral people learn through religious rituals, ceremonies, and festivals. Hindus in Bangladesh joke that there are 12 months in the year, but 13 “pujas” or Hindu festivals. Though Christians celebrate Christmas and Easter, much more can be done with those festivals as well as creating “dynamic equivalents” for the former religious festivals of the new converts. We must remember, however, the purpose is to train
and impress Christian teaching in a way that can not be done through didactic teaching.

So, though some primary advances have been made by the Christian community through Chronological Bible Storying, we have a long way to go in reaching and discipling the oral people of Bangladesh. The cultural and religious background of the tribal people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts make the use of ceremonies as a discipling tool a possibility with great potential for the emerging Christian community. In the next section we will look at the first findings discovered from observing religious ceremonies and interviewing religious leaders.

The Oral Disciple – Findings from Research

As mentioned in Chapter 2 with the foundation of information gained from library research on orality, I began my field research. The first step in preparation for constructing a ceremony to disciple oral people was to look at how ceremonies and ritual learning were used in their former religious systems. Tribal ceremonies from Hindu, Buddhist, and Animist traditions were observed as well as interviews with the corresponding religious leaders.
Ceremonies Observed

For the sake of clarity in presenting the findings, I will first present the findings from the observed ceremonies and later the findings from the religious leader interviews (although the two went hand in hand in the field research). In the specific field research 13 ceremonies were observed (six were Buddhist, five were Hindu, and two were Animist). The ceremonies took place in each of the three hill districts of Kagrachuri, Rangamati, and Bondarbon as well as a few in Chittagong. Consistent, repeating data was noted and emerging themes were recorded for each ceremony individually and then for all the ceremonies as a whole.

From the observed ceremonies the following observations were made. First, symbols are very important. Lighting candles, ringing bells, burning incense, washing or drinking the holy water, eating the offered foods all bring the worshipper into a deeper level of participation in the ceremony. An excerpt from the Lokki Puja ceremony demonstrates this. “First the altar stone was washed. Then candles were lit before the altar to give light to the goddess, and incense was burned to give a sweet aroma to the goddess. Sacrifices of food and flowers were placed before the brass image” (Tripura 2004:1). By participating in and using these symbols, the worshipper becomes a part of the ceremony rather than just observing it.
Second, chanting memorized mantras internalizes specific teachings. There is power in committing prayers, doctrines, or scripture portions to memory.

The monks stand in lines before the image of Buddha and chant a mantra prior to going out into the town to 'beg' for their daily food. In the mantra they first give respect to the Buddha's wisdom and qualities. They also pray for those who give them food as they are about to go out and 'beg' for the day's provisions. (Bhikkhu 2004:1)

For both oral and text-based peoples this is a very effective way of making a teaching a part of their lives.

The third finding that emerged from observing the ceremonies was that drama is an appreciated companion to religious festivals and ceremonies. Drama often accompanies festivals or ceremonies in a very effective way. Only Christian leaders mentioned the use of drama as a teaching tool. Even with the Christians, however, it was mentioned that drama had the drawback of being perceived as less holy by some. In the Hindu and Buddhist ceremony observations and interviews with religious leaders, drama was never mentioned or seen as part of the religious ceremony. Lay people interviewed, however, often mentioned the jatra as a very enjoyable part of each festival time.

The term jatra is difficult to define. In the Indian subcontinent context, jatra is a dramatic art form in which a long history is put into song
and drama. *Jatra*, which means “travel” or “trip,” probably comes from the traveling drama groups which usually perform these plays. Often it is the religious history of the festival being observed. For example, during *Durga Puja* there is always an elaborate *jatra* depicting the struggles and events of the life of the goddess, *Durga*. These are not official parts of the actual *puja*, and even seem to be somewhat disdained by the religious hierarchy, but they are the highlight of any particular festival for the common layperson. More will be said about the *jatra* as we look deeper at ceremonies in Chapter 4.

There were many other minor issues of ceremonial learning observed in the religious ceremonies. These three issues of symbols, mantras, and drama, however, emerged as the overwhelming conduits of teaching for oral people observed in the ceremonies. There were other forms of teaching which were inappropriate or ineffective for oral people. Particularly in the Hindu and Buddhist context, the readings from scriptures and lectures were an important part of the ceremony. Obviously these were less helpful for teaching oral people. In the interviews with religious leaders and participants I found the appropriateness of these three forms of oral learning (symbols, mantras, and drama) confirmed. I will now move to the findings from those interviews.
Interviews with Religious Leaders and Adherents

As part of each ceremony observed religious leaders and participants were interviewed. I interviewed 15 religious leaders from Hindu, Buddhist, and Animist contexts in a one-on-one interview format. Approximately 30 adherents were interviewed in focus groups ranging from three to eight people. In addition 50 Christian leaders and adherents were interviewed in two large focus groups of 20 and 30 members each. (The Hermeneutical Community also gave more direct input from Christian leaders.) (See Appendix B for the Religious Leader Survey questions.)

In the interviews I tried to discover some basic patterns of character formation and socialization for oral people. I also looked for emerging themes which might be used in Christian ceremonies. From the religious leader interviews regarding character formation, the following observations were made:

First, people learn within the cultural community of their society. There is no separation between religion and their society in the minds of people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Asking how people learn the religion was at first met with puzzlement. They just naturally learn as part of the society. Buddhism, Hinduism and Animism are intricately wrapped up in who Chakmas, Tripuras, and Mrus are as a people and, in their minds is an
inseparable part of their society. (Tripuras’ identity as Hindus is less strong as, at certain points, it has never fit with their culture as it does with Bengali and other South Asian Indo-European cultures.) When Chandra Moni Mahastobir was asked how he teaches religious principles to his adherents he said, “First one must enter the society. They will learn the five truths of Buddhism. The monks give lectures before the people each morning and afternoon. People should hear this teaching once a week…” (Mahastobir 2004:1). The emphasis was first on entering the society.

The second emerging theme was that people learn first by observation and then by participation. For both children and new converts this was the described way of learning the religion. Family worship at the house shrine and teaching from parents to children takes place in this manner. Kilay Mru, a former Mru Animist religious leader said he learned his religion from his father. The Mru cow-killing ceremony was learned first as young children observed the ceremony and then slowly began to participate in the ceremony. (Mru 2004:1)

The third discovery was the claim that normal teaching in the temple is necessary to become an orthodox believer. (Mru animists would be the exception to this as there are no formal temples, and all teaching takes place in the village with only elders rather than appointed priests.) The priests
admitted that many in their society did not take advantage of the opportunities for more intensive learning, but it was deemed necessary. 

Buddhists hope that each child will spend some time living as monks in the monastery. At each of the festivals there was a lecture, sermon, or teaching time in addition to the ceremonial observances. The teaching tied into and confirmed what was observed in the rituals.

The fourth emerging theme was that memorizing mantras internalizes religious teaching in a profound way. This was part of the temple teaching as well as worship in the homes in each of the religions observed, but was particularly strong in Hinduism and Buddhism. When Dhalonjoy Chakraborti, a Hindu priest from Rangamati, was asked how he gave teaching to tribals who cannot read the Gita, he responded, "We teach them oral mantras and they are asked to memorize them" (Chakraborti 2004:1). There is an internalizing effect in committing prayers, doctrines, or scripture portions to memory. Christians from Kagrachuri remembered when Christianity was first accepted by the Tripuras 25 years ago, they memorized a simple mantra. "Jesus is my Lord. The Bible is my book. Christian is my society" (Kagrachuri Pastors 2004:1).

Finally, in addition to the formal teachings and rituals in festivals, the accompanying jatra (dramatic presentation) performed in conjunction with
the festival is both enjoyable and a learning event. As mentioned above, in
the Hindu and Buddhist ceremony observations and interviews with
religious leaders drama was never mentioned or seen as part of the religious
ceremony. Lay people interviewed, however, often mentioned that through
the *jatra* they learned much of the history and teaching of their religion.
Christians also mentioned that the seldom use of drama mainly at Christmas
was very effective and always remembered. Two Christian pastors also
mentioned using drama to teach deaf believers.

For a summary of the emerging themes from the ceremony
observations and the leaders and participants interviewed see the table
below.

Table 1: Themes from Observations and Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes Emerging from Observations and Interviews</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. People learn in Community.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Observation of ritual and symbols is primary.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Participation through listening, memorizing,</td>
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<tr>
<td>and repeating (chanting) internalizes teaching.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Formal teaching in the temple supplements ritual</td>
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<tr>
<td>learning.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Drama adds variety and reinforces the learning.</td>
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So, from the religious ceremonies observed and interviews with
religious leaders and adherents we have discovered several themes of oral
learning. I believe we have a great opportunity to employ such methods of
oral teaching in the Christian community. Jesus was a great example of one
who utilized teaching methods which were appropriate to his audience many of who were oral learners.

...Jesus consciously broke socially as well as theologically with the traditions of the learned community of His day in order to communicate with the masses in the linguistic and other forms of communication they understood best. He intentionally structured His sayings so that those who lacked special training in the communicational systems of the elite could understand and remember them. Then oral communicators (including scholars) could rapidly spread His word across the land. This recitation of the living Word from memory may have been part of what was in the mind of our greatest teacher when He referred to His teachings. He communicated through life, oral artistry and ritual rather than by writing. He wrote no books yet He said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away” (Matt. 24:35). (Klem 1982:81)

If we are to reach and disciple oral people, we must follow his example. In the next chapter we will move deeper into the use of ceremonies as a form of learning for oral people.

Notes

1 The origin of the term “oral majority,” a play on words from Reverend Jerry Falwell’s conservative Christian political organization, “The Moral Majority Coalition,” is not known. Erich Bridges used the term in his article, “Worldview: 4 Billion People in Oral Majority, Lausanne Forum Participants Told”. Bridges claims that “Four billion people – about two-thirds of the world’s population – are oral learners” (Bridges 2004:1).
One by one the participants passed the flame lighting each individual’s candle until the dark room was filled with light. As this happened they chanted the mantra. The setting could easily have been mistaken for a Buddhist or Hindu temple as the people and elements were very South Asian. In fact it was a Christian ceremony culminating a discipling event. The candlelight symbolized the light of Christ, and the mantra was an adaptation of the Apostle’s Creed. Later in this chapter I will give a description of the entire constructed event.

In Chapter 3, I laid the foundation for this study of ceremonies with the preliminary study revealing some aspects of oral learning received from ceremonies in the tribal villages. Now I will move to a deeper look at aspects and functions of ceremonies. First, I will review the bibliographic data available on ritual and ceremony. This can be broken down into the subjects of symbols, rites of passage, and ritual or ceremonial events. At the end of this section we will discuss related missiological issues. This will
lead into the next section of the bibliographic data which includes examples of ceremonies first from the non-Christian and the Christian community in different places around the world. The final part of the bibliographic data will include a section on drama as an aspect of ceremony and its uses.

Following this review of the literature I will move to looking at festivals and ceremonies in Bangladesh. Here I will also suggest how the Christian community might deal with the existing festivals. Then I will discuss some ceremonies we have used for the purpose of discipling in the Christian community. This includes the Christmas reenactment, the “Crucified with Christ” ceremony, and the “Life of Christ” ceremony based on the Shin Byu Buddhist ceremony. This will lead into the last section covering the findings from the research. In this section I will describe the event constructed by the Hermeneutical Community as a discipling tool.

Symbol, Ritual, and Ceremony

There is a considerable amount of literature in the realm of ceremony, ritual, and symbols. I will first look at some of the general bibliographic data on symbols, rites of passage, and ceremonial and ritual events. In transitioning from theory to the more specific interest of ceremony used for
discipling, I will discuss some missiological issues. Then we will look at examples of ceremonies and drama as they are related to ceremonies.

Symbols

The importance of symbols in this study cannot be over-emphasized. Already in the preliminary findings of Chapter 3, symbols emerged as a crucial element in learning for oral people. In terms of understanding symbols Dillstone reminds us that, “...the symbol is not, like the simple sign, a direct stimulus but rather an indirect reminder or representation” (1955:24). In describing Hindu symbols Jyoti Sahi states that

...we might compare the symbol to the tip of an iceberg. It is what is seen; but there is, below or beyond the concrete image of the symbol, a vast world which it is not possible to see. This unseen is ultimately linked to what we see, in the same way as the roots of a tree which we cannot see are extremely important to the whole organic structure of the tree which we see with our eyes. (1981:183)

Ernest Johnson would agree with the importance of this as symbols “are the first means we have of apprehending things and the symbols, which the unconscious throws up, dominate our ways of acting” (1955:2).

Again from observations mentioned in Chapter 3, I believe the use of symbols in teaching people – particularly in oral societies – is natural. “The intrinsic nature of oral communication has a considerable effect upon both the content and the transmission of the cultural repertoire. In the first place,
it makes for a directness of relationship between symbol and referent” (Goody 1968:29). Weber implies that people in oral cultures are more developed in understanding symbols. “The art of ‘symbolic seeing’... is usually highly developed in ‘primitive’ communities” (1957:53-54).

Zahniser sums up the importance of using symbols in teaching. “Symbols are pointers that participate in the reality they point to. Symbols help make what is taught seem obvious and what is required seem attractive” (1997:127). So, I believe the use of symbols is especially important when we consider the form of teachings with oral people.

When we add the religious element to teaching, symbols become even more important. Clifford Geertz states, “it is a cluster of sacred symbols, woven into some sort of ordered whole, which makes up a religious system” (1973:129). In a Christian sense, “symbols are particularly helpful in making the presence of God discernible, intelligible or accessible” (Bradshaw 1993:77). Klem points out that Jesus also employed symbolic and ritual teaching:

In addition to this use of poetry, Jesus also employed ritual, non-verbal symbolizations of essential Christian truths. He took the existing symbols of water in baptism and the unleavened bread and wine in the Passover meal and infused them with new meaning. As they accompany the preached Word they become vehicles for presenting the Gospel message via sight, taste and touch. (1982:81)
This leads into the importance of understanding existing symbols, if we are to use them properly. "To communicate clearly, we must understand local symbols and find the keys that will enable biblical truths to come alive among our listeners" (Bolyanatz 1988:234).

Communicating our faith will by its nature include a good deal of symbolism. "The communication of the Christian faith involves not only some highly abstract and abstruse symbolism; because of its essentially religious character it is related as well to the most symbolic area of human behavior" (Nida 1960:xiii). We must, therefore, be very clear on what we are communicating through symbols. "In studying how meaning is arrived at we note that there is divergence, sometimes wide divergence, in the way in which various people interpret the same symbols" (Kraft 1999:79). As McKinney points out, "Abstract visual symbols understood in one culture are often misinterpreted in another. Cultural sensitivities and expectations also affect the acceptability of art work" (1984:326). So, the cross-cultural Christian worker will need to be careful not to use symbols incorrectly, but can also greatly enhance the message when using them appropriately.

Missionaries want to do more than avoid using the wrong symbols. When they learn what the symbols of their listeners mean, a whole new world of communication opens to them. Many symbols connote unknown messages to outsiders. If we want to communicate our message more clearly, and with better
results, we will ferret out these less readily observed symbolic meanings. (Bolyanatz 1988:233)

Dillstone’s description of baptism illustrates how it is full of symbolic meaning. “In the traditional ceremony of Christian initiation... the all-important element has been the contact with the water; only by being plunged beneath the water and drawn out again can the initiate be regarded as having passed through the process of rebirth into newness of life” (1955:183). Such Christian ceremonies already full of symbolic meaning when contextualized can become even more powerful.

Milestones of growth in the Christian life could also be marked with some kind of dramatic symbol. We bring some rites, like baptism, but those imposed from the outside often don’t have the same impact as familiar local rites. Local celebrations could include feasts, dances, drama, and formal storytelling. (Bolyanatz 1988:233)

Some of the most powerful symbolic ceremonies in oral cultures have to do with rites of passage.

**Rites of Passage**

Arnold van Gennep proposed the first theories of rites of passage. He observed that rites of passage exist in many different societies, and serve as initiation rites from one phase or status in life to another (1960:3). Van Gennep defined three parts to this transitory period: “rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation” (1960:11). In the separation
phase the initiate or participant is taken out of his former role or status in society. During the transition phase the person is in an interval period in which s/he undergoes difficult conditions and intensive learning preparing them for their new status. Then incorporation brings the newly initiated individual back into the society with a new status.

Victor Turner built upon these theories with particular emphasis on the transition or “liminal” phase. Commonly the initiate is not alone but goes through the whole process with a group. Though the individual members may come from differing levels in their society, they are all on the same level during the marginal period. All of the members are taken out of society, and must submit to the authority together regardless of old status. Also as a group they all undergo severe circumstances and equally face the difficulty of the initiation process. This causes a leveling of status, bonding, and comradeship Turner calls *communitas*. As mentioned earlier, Turner defines *communitas* as the “communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders” (1969:96). Together they achieve conditions for learning the secrets of the society and then are initiated. Finally, they are reintegrated into society in their new status as adults, initiated members, or other new status of the transitional process.
These theories of rites of passage are key to our goal of learning through ceremonies. The rites of passage structure and phases are present in most ceremonies. The whole idea of a heightened period of learning in the liminal phase is also congruent with our teaching desire in using ceremonies for discipling. This is one of the key teachings in Zahniser’s class and theories of Cross Cultural Discipleship. “In rites of passage, initiates experience the powerful congruence of truth and life that also defines the nature and function of discipling” (1997:97).

Our desire is that lives will be transformed by the Holy Spirit. As Turner points out even in a non-Christian ceremony transformation is the goal. “…When a ritual does work, for whatever reason, the exchange of qualities between the semantic poles seems, to my observation, to achieve genuinely cathartic effects, causing in some cases real transformations of character and social relationships” (1974:56). Eliade captures this idea of transformation and new beginnings at an even deeper level.

…Whatever degree of fulfillment it may have brought him, at certain moments every man sees his life as a failure. This vision does not arise from a moral judgment made on his past, but from an obscure feeling that he has missed his vocation; that he has betrayed the best that was in him. In such moments of total crisis, only one hope seems to offer any issue – the hope of beginning life over again… But genuine and definitive conversions are comparatively rare in modern societies. To us, this makes it all the more significant that even nonreligious men sometimes, in the depths of their being, feel the desire for this
kind of spiritual transformation, which, in other cultures, constitutes the very goal of initiation. (1958:135)

Barbour maintains that Jesus’ life has many examples of rites of passage.

According to Abraham's covenant and the Mosaic Law, every Jewish male child was circumcised and given his name on the eighth day after his birth, and so it was with Jesus (Luke 2:21). Also according to the law, Jesus, as the firstborn, was presented to God at the temple by his parents (Luke 2:22-24). A few years later, Jesus was almost bar mitzvah age when he stayed behind in the temple (Luke 2:41-42).... When Jesus was a full-grown man, he continued to follow the law in his public ministry, beginning with his baptism (Matt. 3:15). Then he spent forty days in the wilderness in separation and preparation for his public ministry (Matt. 4:1-11). The final two events of an initiatory nature in the life of Jesus are the Last Supper (Matt. 26:20-29) and his Passion, death, and resurrection (Matt. 27 and 28). (1987:300)

Rites of passage were also used to achieve a high “quality” among adherents in Hellenistic Judaism and the early church.

Traditional societies, Hellenistic Judaism and the post-apostolic church exercised quality control through the monitoring of minimum standards maintained during the transition phase in rites of passage. Candidates during the transition phase lose their former status and so seek new identities and acquire new skills to qualify for new statuses. Few other occasions in life provide a more significant pedagogical opportunity for promoting personal development and spiritual growth. It is the universal method par excellence for maintaining quality control in societies. (Tollefson 1990:305)

Rites of passage are slowly becoming recognized as excellent tools for discipling. Already mentioned was the “Toward Freedom and
Responsibility” rite of passage designed by Donald Joy of Asbury Seminary.

A similar ministry exists in Kenya, Africa where puberty rites are very common. It makes sense that a “dynamic equivalent” for African Christian youth could be created. “Rites Of Passage Experiences (ROPES), is a ministry in Nairobi that contextualizes discipling by constructing rites for church communities” (Karianjahi 2002:1). Karianjahi explains one such initiation rite:

12-13 year olds retreat to an adventure camp with their counselors who instruct them in preparation for teenage years. After various symbolic rituals, their families and church communities hold celebrations to reincorporate them into society to fulfill their new roles. (2002:1)

So, these ideas of rites of passage can be used effectively in the Christian community of any culture for the purpose of discipling. Let us now look at more examples of ceremonies as ritual events.

Ceremonies as Ritual Events

As we found in Chapter 3, oral people learn through religious rituals, ceremonies, and festivals. “There is the rather specialized forms of knowledge..., but it comes largely from participation in ceremonies and in discussions with elders…” (Goody 1982:208). These types of ceremonies infiltrate the lives of oral people. Ritual is an extremely important element
of human society giving clues to what is important in the worldview of the people.

Rituals reveal values at their deepest level... men [sic.] express in ritual what moves them most, and since the form of expression is conventionalized and obligatory, it is the values of the group that are revealed. I see in the study of rituals the key to an understanding of the essential constitution of human societies. (Wilson 1954:241)

Ritual “connects the known world of sensorily [sic] perceptible phenomena with the unknown and invisible realm of the shades. It makes intelligible what is mysterious, and also dangerous” (Turner 1969:15).

From observations of their religious ceremonies, I have seen that the tribal people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts are deeply affected by ritual. They do not compartmentalize the ritualistic and sacred from the ordinary and secular aspects of their everyday lives. Of tribals, Hesselgrave writes:

This tribal world view often (but not always) transcends the secular-sacred distinction which is so much a part of the thinking of the West. It may be at one and the same time sacred and secular. It is preoccupied with gods, spirits, and ghosts, but it is patently anthropocentric (and ethnocentric) in most cases. (1978:149)

“The idea of ‘the sacred’ is at the core of human cultures, encompassing notions of the consecrated and the forbidden... People seem always to have thought not only that objects but also spaces hold or refract sacredness” (Wheeler 1999:29-30). During religious rituals and ceremonies
such as festivals, participants from traditional cultures enter into “sacred
time” and “sacred space.” This is different from their normal current time.
In sacred ceremonies and festivals, the participants symbolically return to
the original event and participate in its original happening again (Eliade
1957:71-72). Far more can be learned through the symbols of these
ceremonies than from a cognitive lesson.

These ideas go hand-in-hand with the basis of oral communication in
such societies. “Language, as such, is of critical importance in village ritual.
Ritual uses words together with manipulation of objects to transmit
messages and achieve effects in the devotee, celebrant or patient” (Tambiah
1969:121). The spoken word along with rituals are events which are fully
engaged in such societies. “In an oral culture, the verbalized learning takes
place quite normally in an atmosphere of celebration or play. As events,
words are more celebrations and less tools than in literate cultures” (Ong
1976:30).

So, if we think of learning in traditional societies as participatory and
experiential activities, then ceremonies would seem to be appealing.
Kendall Folkert understood this from his study of religion, and therefore
proposed that it be much more experiential. In his “tool kit” he suggested
studying calendars, rituals and ceremonies. It is these things which give
meaning to everyday life (1991:25-27). Ceremony and ritual also fit with the communal aspects of traditional and oral societies.

Rituals are inherently communal, while at the same time being imaginative and playful, even when most serious. They become bearers of communitas, which is a spirit of unity and mutual belonging that is frequently experienced in ritual of high energy.... (Driver 1998:164)

Therefore, discipleship and leadership training in such traditional, oral cultures needs to be more than cognitive, head knowledge. As Boal mentions, “religious training of the young in traditional society is through observation and group participation” (1973:40). The participatory and event aspect of such learning also strengthens the retention and recall of the teaching. “If we want something to be really memorable, make an event out of it – an occasion.... Participation assists learning, and in most face-to-face societies, learning is by participation – by observation and apprenticeship” (Wilson 1991:157). Learning and retaining the Christian truths is one of our goals in using ritual for disciple-making. The other goal is to grow in our faith. Oswald maintains that “we observe many faith rituals in our congregations that continually remind us of who we are or whose we are. As we repeat these rituals, they can move us deeper in our spiritual dimension” (1999:6). Unfortunately, missionaries have shied away from ritual learning due to their fears of syncretism.
Missiological Issues

Early missionaries in northeast India, like in most places, brought Christianity not only as a new faith but as a social order to replace as much of the former society as possible. Though it is doubtful that they looked into the local customs very deeply, they found little of redeeming value in the tribal culture. Elwin quotes J. P. Mills, the Honorable Ethnographer to the Government of Assam, who gives this quite telling description of the newly Christianized Naga society:

Among the Nagas ‘the suppression of all ornaments, of dancing, of singing (except hymns), of village feasts and all artistic outlet by the missionaries, is spreading an unspeakable drabness over village life. The abolition of the sacrificial feasts is to do away with the very few occasions on which the awful monotony of village life is broken’. He also tells of the ‘execreable artist productions’ of the Baptist chapels which have had so mischievous an influence on the tribal art, the destruction of the art of wood-carving, the substitution of individualism for tribal loyalty. ‘An Animist puts the village before himself. A Baptist puts himself before the village’. (Elwin 1993:252)

Amazingly enough, in spite of the cultural insensitivity, a Christian movement began among the Nagas and other tribes in northeast India, and today the majority of them are Christian. (See Chapter 2) In many cases, however, the church in northeast India has extremely Western forms. How much more attractive and further along the work would have been if the missionaries had considered aspects of the culture including local rituals.
For tribal Christian scholars there is a fertile field for study and research as well as for production of Christian apologetics in relation to tribal traditional religions. The Church here has not faced the tribal traditional heritage in a sound manner. The missionaries have condemned them as devilish. But Indian nationalism gives tribal religion and culture an honourable [sic.] status. In future the Church cannot brush aside the tribal cultural heritage altogether. She must face the challenge and enter into dialogue with tribal heritage in this area. This means that the Church should rethink her methods and attitudes to her neighbour [sic.] in terms of the teaching of our Lord. Mere denouncing of all old traditional religious customs and practices is not enough. The witness of the Church should involve her in the deeper aspects of the tribal life. The mission of the Church should be expressed in relation to the total situation of the tribal life of the people as they struggle for the more abundant life and seek for its religious and cultural foundations. (Minz 1982:112)

It can be argued that the missionaries had good intentions, and were trying to avoid syncretism in the new Christian community. “In making communication adaptive our fear is that we shall lose the content of the message in the process of adapting it to the receptors” (Nida 1960:184). By ignoring and/or condemning the traditional and ritualistic aspects of the society, however, the missionaries inadvertently encouraged much greater syncretism. We have already discussed how human beings in their nature are ritualistic. We often ignore the superstitious and pagan elements present in our own culture’s Christianity. Nida distinguishes between the “upper- and lower-story” forms of religion.

These idealized or “upper-story” forms of Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism, and Islam show rather
striking differences, but life on the “lower stories” of these religions is amazingly similar. For example, the Muslim in West Africa who hangs a juju around his neck, the Mazatec Indian who carries a jaguar claw in his girdle, the Negro [sic.] who keeps a rabbit’s foot in his pocket, and the Christian who thinks a New Testament in his shirt pocket will automatically protect him from enemy bullets are all living on the same plane of lower-story religious expression. (Nida 1968:21)

If we only deal with the upper-story, we will not answer the questions the local people have in dealing with demons, ghosts, curses, and other middle issues. In describing animistic society, Butler shows how ingrained these middle issues are.

Charms and rituals are performed at birth and death, and virtually every other incident in between: Sickness, marriage, planting, harvesting, traveling, buying, and selling. Charms are tied on a baby’s body at birth, rituals are performed when the placenta is buried, rituals accompany the naming of the child. There are charms and potions to prevent sickness in a child, danger for a traveler, the loss of a spouse’s love..... The charms, spells, and fetishes for manipulating the spirit world are obtained through people variously known as witch doctors, sorcerers, diviners, and medicine men. (Butler 1993:383-384)

As Hiebert says in dealing with local people’s questions about the middle forces, “given no answer, they return to the diviner who gave them definite answers for theses are the problems that loom large in their everyday life” (1982:45). This has happened, and the feared syncretism has crept in and remains under the veneer of “upper-story Christianity.”

Indigenization consists essentially in the full employment of local indigenous forms of communication, methods of
transmission, and communicators, as these means can be prepared and trained. Syncretism, on the other hand, involves an accommodation of content, a synthesis of beliefs, and an amalgamation of world views, in such a way as to provide some common basis for constructing a “new system” or a “new approach. (Nida 1960:185).

Vogt suggests a “middle road” in dealing with these issues which gives a good balance.

Generally, the difference between the secular interpretations and the animistic interpretations is the difference between the cosmic and the earthly…. Secular interpretations of the demonic in the gospel of Mark are inadequate, they ignore both scripture and human experience. Animistic interpretations are also inadequate, they see everything in terms of the demonic. A middle road leading to the middle realm accepts the existence and activity of the demonic while leaving God on the throne a sovereign. (Vogt 1996:6-7)

With this understanding of symbols, rite of passage and ritual, we will now move to a discussion of some examples of ceremonies.

Examples of Ceremonies

Using ceremonies as a medium for teaching spiritual truth is not unique to our situation. Here I will show that what I have done in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, has been done effectively in other places. There is much ritual and ceremony already present in the Christian community. Christians celebrate Christmas and Easter, but much more can be done with those festivals. In addition, Baptists are missing a great teaching opportunity because, for the most part, we do not utilize the “Christian year.” “Using the
church year provides a review of Jesus’ life and opportunities to reflect on its meaning to us today” (Halverson 2002:6). I believe we need to consider using any and all of these tools in our quest to find ways of making Jesus’ teaching real to oral people. Stookey also states, “by observing Christ’s time for the church, year in and year out, we make our pilgrim journey – not as if walking in circles on the same plot of ground, but as if ascending a spiral staircase” (1996:150-151).

In Samoa “White Sunday” was originally introduced by missionaries as Pentecost Sunday in the normal church year. (Later it was moved to October.) In the Samoan context, however, this festival has been reinterpreted in terms of traditional values and meanings” (Roach 1988:173). In addition to the original Christian meanings a Samoan ritual of status reversal has been incorporated into this festival.

...Each year White Sunday marks the day when those in the category “young” exchange places with those in the category “adult” and assume the latter’s privileges and responsibilities... White Sunday, like Pentecost in Christian communities generally, is an important festival on the church calendar in Samoa, but it has meaning as a ritual of reversal only in terms of traditional Samoan values and status categories. (Roach 1988:181)

In South Asia, Neill Mims has found a house dedication ceremony to be very appreciated by Christians there. The ceremony is intertwined with stories from Scripture. These included a short version of Moses and the
Passover, Abraham and the call to sacrifice Isaac, and Jesus as our Passover lamb. Mims recounts the following ceremony:

I then took some grape juice in a bowl and had the long term believer go with me to the door way and told them that to mark this as a house dedicated to Jesu [Jesus], we would use this juice as a symbol of the blood of the lamb. It will mark to all spirits that Jesu is the only God of this place. I took three fingers and dipped it in juice and "painted" the top and down 2/3 of the doorway. I had the Indian leader do the same. (Mims 2004:2)

This was followed by a prayer of dedication. With a little creativity we can introduce ceremonies to the Christian community which I believe will broaden their understanding of the scripture and deepen their commitment as disciples of Christ.

In addition to these somewhat traditional Christian ceremonies, creating “dynamic equivalents” for the former religious festivals of the new converts with appropriate Christian teaching could be used effectively with traditional oral peoples. The Dutch Protestant mission seems to have done this in Sulawesi, Indonesia.

The effectiveness of the Evangelization Group was thus influenced by the relations of authority and dependence created through kinship. These kinship relationships were maintained through a series of exchanges which made the holding of ritual feasts possible. Feasts, in turn, were the means by which political status was asserted. Through the Evangelization Group structure, these traditional feasts were melded to the Presbyterial structure of the mission church. (Schrauwers 2000:9)
In observing Malay Funeral Rites, Conkey confirms this all-important aspect of relational participation in the feast. “The most important usage of these relationships is participation in feasts; and this participation, in turn, periodically reinforces and validates the relationships for other forms of interaction” (Conkey 1992:54).

Missionaries in India – even in the early 1900s – saw the positive aspects of the Indian ashrams. These peaceful settings of communal living and learning seemed congruent with teaching on Christian brotherhood and harmony. They have also served as a setting for interfaith dialogue.

...Christian ashrams in India have been seen as a hopeful kind of institutional indigenization; a truly Indian expression of the Kingdom of God as opposed to the foreign idea of the Church introduced from the West; an honorable Christian association with Gandhian nationalism; a shrewd and cheap vehicle for evangelization; and a setting for Indian spirituality and lacus for inter-faith dialogue... (Taylor 1979:281).

Perry has found two different examples of contextualization of two different Hindu ceremonies in Nepal. One was “‘contextualized participation’ in a cultural form/event... (Bhai Tika)...; [the other was] ‘alternative participation’ in a parallel event...(Tij Braka)... Either may be valid and even enhance the relevance of the gospel within a particular culture” (1990:182). In the case of Bhai Tika Christian meaning was infused into the already existing Hindu ceremony of brother and sister devotion.
The worship of the brother or sister was replaced with Christian devotion as other aspects of the ceremony were found to have values consistent with Christian teaching. A completely alternate ceremony to the Tij Braka ceremony, however, was created.

Rather than being "robbed" of participation in a traditional festival, for these Christian women Tij has been transformed and infused with a new spirit. In this case, Nepali Christians, rather than seeking to contextualize Tij by participation of Christians alongside of their Hindu neighbors, developed a completely alternative festival for Christian women – at the same time, using some of the same forms (i.e., feasting, fasting, worship, prayer, celebration, fancy dress) and following some of the same themes. (1990:179)

Perry admits that this is a sensitive process, in which we must guard against syncretism prayerfully. The benefits of contextualization, however, out-weigh the dangers of syncretism. "The Nepali church will go a long way toward rapprochement with Nepali society as a whole the more they can find ways to contextualize their faith erasing the Western face of Christianity in the eyes of Nepali society, and replacing it with a Nepali face" (1990:182).

Mentioned earlier, another example of this is the transformation of the "Shin-Byu" Buddhist rite into a Christian ceremony as suggested by Mathias Zahnisner in his book, Symbol and Ceremony. Instead of reliving the various phases of the life of Buddha, it becomes a pilgrimage through many of the
events of the life of Christ (1997:108ff.). Reliving Christ’s birth, life, passion, death and resurrection has been highly effective in teaching Christian principles.

Glenday has made a study of the Acholi birth ceremonies and how they can be adapted to a Christian context. Following the birth of a child there are many rituals which are followed including seclusion of the mother and child, burying the placenta and umbilical cord, presenting the child to the father’s family, etc… Glenday has found Christian equivalents to each phase. An example is given below:

Water, a symbol used universally, is one with which the Acholi should be able to associate. The notion of the descent into the baptismal waters, as a participation in the death of Christ leading to a share in his resurrection, might be referred to the Acholi custom of burying the child's placenta and umbilical cord. Just as their burial was a symbol of the infant's death to the former life in the mother's womb, so the descent of the baby into the baptismal water means a death to a life of sin and a birth to life in God's family, the church. (1980:174)

In studying Catholic ritual, Michael Joncas “discovered that what we perceive as Christian creativity in worship actually consists in adopting, adapting or rejecting those other religious traditions” (2003:49). As we adopt new symbols in a new Christian context, they will serve as “sacraments [which] announce the status or calling of individuals while recognizing that it may take some time for their self-identity and status to
match each other” (Holm 1994:6). We must, however, remember the purpose is to train and impress Christian teaching in a way that cannot be done through didactic teaching.

Our motives and purpose must be clear. The desire is to achieve indigenization which allows the gospel to transform the local community by the Holy Spirit.

The sharper focus of good indigenization serves to heighten both the positive points of contact and the confrontation between Gospel and culture. It does the latter by bearing down on key issues of incompatibility and by side-stepping irrelevant and diversionary confrontations on non-essentials; it thus leads, in the emerging Christian community, to transformation. (Taber 1978:55)

Zahniser captures this idea of “good indigenization” as led by the Holy Spirit. “By taking the process seriously, Christian cross-cultural disciplers can assist the Holy Spirit in making truth about the Ultimate God relevant to the intimate issues of the lives entrusted to their care” (1997:92).

Drama

Drama has emerged as an issue in this study which also needs to be addressed. In the interviews – particularly with the adherents in the religious ceremonies – I found that the drama which accompanies festivals is appreciated and important. This unofficial aspect of the religious festivals is often the highlight through which more seems to be learned than in the
temple rituals. Also, as will be observed later, the Hermeneutical Community decided that drama would be an element of the constructed ceremony.

Drama is an inherent part of any ritual or ceremony. "In some cultures there is no real difference between ritual and drama... They share many of the same features: stylized action, special times, set-aside places, the use of costume and dialogue, role-playing, audiences, and so on" (Grimes 1995:163). This could be said of the Christian tradition as well.

The mass was developed in the Christian church as a drama. It is the summing up in symbolic form of the salvation story. It was developed by and presented to a people whose life was ritually oriented. For such people the eucharist was a drama, the unfolding of a story whose symbolic form was a penetrating insight communicated through ritual. For such people the great and vital forces of life are conceived as a world drama, a gripping story in which man was caught up as a participant. (Reyburn 1963:155)

Here again, the tribal people I am working with are such "ritually oriented" people. The principles of participatory learning so important in oral cultures apply with drama. "The highest degree of participation is usually achieved if communication takes the form of dramatization. For this very reason drama has always been used in the missionary proclamation among illiterates" (Weber 1957:57). In discussing ritual communication Reyburn explains the significance of drama.
Drama is not only a telescoping of significant events to be remembered, but is also the vehicle by means of which a people can steer themselves psychologically into motion and harmony with these concepts and events. Drama like a proverb summarizes a great thought or event. Where drama is a vital part of a people's way of life they conceive themselves as the participants in life and not its spectators. Into the cosmic as well as the routine of life they project themselves as a vital element. (Reyburn 1963:155)

As mentioned in the findings of Chapter 3, the jatra (dramatic presentation accompanying festivals) is a popular avenue in which South Asians learn through drama. This way of learning seems to be common in oral cultures. “In many oral cultures, song singing interacts with story telling – a song is imbedded in the story, and sung as appropriate in the midst of the story telling. In this way, memorization of the narratives, which also often have a didactic function, is facilitated” (Wilson 1997:180). This is a good description of what is termed “jatra” in our context.

The jatra originates in Hindu culture and was later adopted into tribal culture. “The transformation of the Keslapur jatra from a tribal gathering devoted to the traditional worship of Gond deities to a great fair attended by thousands of non-tribals reflects the submergence of Gond culture in the ocean of Hindu practices” (von Furer-Haimendorf 1982:177). Traditionally the Christian church rejected jatra as pagan.

Church discipline includes punishment for dancing in Akhra [dancing ground in a tribal village] and Jatra, or for association
and participation in the tribal dances. A Christian participating in tribal dance and festivals is liable to excommunication, depending on how strict the Church Committees are. (Thomas and Taylor 1965:182)

More recently, however, some in the Christian community have seen the benefits of contextualizing the *jatra* for Christian purposes. In the following context *jatra* has a slightly broader meaning, but the elements of dramatic present are still present.

The Church has made considerable use of the characteristically Indian practice of the *jatra* (religious fair) to gather the scattered Christians of the pastorate. It has been an effective means of creating a corporate sense of belonging to the wider Christian fellowship and has provided a valuable occasion for Christian preaching and teaching... The main program of the *jatra* takes place on the first night. The open yard in front of the church hall is decorated with coloured [sic.] paper and mango leaves, and in the centre a big wooden cross is fixed in the ground. When the thanksgiving service begins, the members of the Women’s Fellowship dressed in their best saris carry little oil lamps in their hands and, singing appropriate lyrics, go round the cross and illumine it. (Luke and Carman 1968:185-86)

In recent years in Orissa, India a traveling Christian *jatra* group was formed. They began to perform all night dramatic presentations of key stories from the Old and New Testament based on the Chronological Bible Storying program used in their area. Even in this fiercely Hindu area the unashamedly Christian presentation was well received as the people love the
art form. The actors slowly became famous and performed the story of the Bible to thousands each night. (Fox 2000:1)

I conclude this section with a quote from Weber which seems to capture the importance of drama in the traditional and oral context.

In the Christian missionary encounter the dialogic and dramatic element is particularly strong because the message which is to be communicated has in itself a dialogic and dramatic character. For this message is the account of the great drama, the story of salvation which includes everything and everybody: all events and conversations are integrated into the great drama as scenes and fragments of dialogue and all men participate in this drama whether they wish to, and know about it or not.

The missionary encounter with illiterates in particular has a dramatic character, for illiterates experience everything dramatically; their classifying and integrating view of life allows them to see everything that happens within a great framework. The group dynamics which are at work among them make them participate in everything that is communicated. And the tendency to think in concrete terms, ever present with them, gives to communication and its content both pictorial and symbolic form and also dramatic shape. (Weber 1957:97-98)

With this foundation of the bibliographic data let us now turn to ceremonies in the tribal context of Bangladesh.

**Festivals and Ceremonies in Bangladesh**

South Asia is a land of festivals and ceremonies. In Bangladesh the educational system is almost pushed to year round school as they try to give
holiday breaks to Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and even Christmas for the small Christian minority. I will make mention of some of the major festivals here and then propose some ideas for the Christian community’s response to the various festivals.

Festivals

Though there are almost no tribals who are Muslim, I will mention the two major Islamic festivals because the majority Muslim community has a great impact on all who live in Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, as in other Islamic countries, there are two main Islamic festivals or “eids”: Eid-ul-fitr (or Rozar eid – fasting eid) and Eid-ul-azha (or Korbani eid – sacrificing eid). Eid-ul-fitr follows the month of Ramadan, the month of fasting in which Mohammed received the revelation of the Koran. Throughout the month Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset, at which time the fast is broken in a festive fashion with the iftar snack. Elements of liminality and communitas are evident here as all levels of society fast, thus creating a sense of camaraderie and Muslim brother-sisterhood. As the month of Ramadan comes to an end Eid-ul-fitr is celebrated by special prayers in the mosque and a feast which follows. During this time Muslims exchange gifts, similar to Christians at Christmas, and dress in their holy fashion.
The second festival, *Eid-ul-azha*, comes 40 days after *Eid-ul-fitr*. In *Eid-ul-azha* a bull or goat is sacrificed to commemorate the ram that was that Abraham sacrificed in Ishmael’s place. Though this is a happy time for Muslims, it is abhorrent for Hindus since their “sacred cow” is sacrificed and the streets literally run with blood. Though many Christians will eat during the *Eid-ul-azha* festival with Muslim friends, Hindus and new Christians from a Hindu background (many of whom still abstain from eating beef) do not participate.

As mentioned before there is a different Hindu festival at least every month of the year. Here I will mention the main festival of Bengal, *Durga Puja*, and *Holi* as these two are predominant in the tribal areas. The largest Hindu festival for the Tripuras is *Durga Puja*. There are ten specific parts or days of the festival, the last two, parts nine and ten, are what most think of as the actual *puja*.

On the ninth day a special *puja* to a virgin goddess is given followed by a goat sacrifice. With a special knife called a *khondo* the goat’s head must be severed with one blow. One person holds the hind legs while another pulls the head, stretching the neck as much as possible in order to help ensure a full, clean cut. If the head is severed completely, then Durga is satisfied with the *puja* and the worshipper can expect good health,
prosperity, and luck for the coming year. If, however, so much as one strand of skin remains between the head and body of the goat, then Bhagabon is not satisfied with the sacrifice and with the puja. The worshipper is then required to live without a blessing for the next year. The following year this worshipper will be required to sacrifice two goats rather than one. Again each goat must be decapitated with one blow.

On the tenth day of the puja, after a final worship the clay image of Durga is carried, brought by cart, or driven to the nearest pond or other body of water and thrown in. The worshippers do not have to throw the image away, but if they do not a goat sacrifice is required for each day as long as the statue remains. (Tripura 2004:1-2)

The Hindu festival Holi celebrates the destruction of evil and is a festive and colorful occasion (Invest in India 1998:1). During the day of the festival, colored water and/or powder are thrown upon each other and general merriment occurs. Both rich and poor, males and females, old and young become colored in this way, and for a time all social strata are suspended. New clothing is given to the women of the family, particularly to the daughter-in-law. The festival includes a “rite of reversal” suspending the social structure by letting the daughters-in-laws of even the lowest castes beat the ankles of their older brothers and masters. These actions symbolize
the liberation from status. (Turner 1969:185) The night continues with bonfires, symbolizing the destruction of evil demons. “Fire is the symbol of yajna in which all our bodily desires and propensities are offered in the pure and blazing flame of spiritual enlightenment lit within our hearts” (Holi 1998:1).

There are several Buddhist festivals or purnimas, but for the tribals the main Buddha Purnima in May and the Buddhist New Year seem to be the most important and are celebrated with most vigor. (Buddhist leaders, however, stress that none of the purnimas are higher than others.) Like all the purnimas, Buddha Purnima is celebrated first by worship accompanied by lighting candles and burning incense before the image of Buddha in the local temple. Buddhists leaders stressed that they do not worship the statue of Buddha, but only remember and honor his qualities. Bringing gifts, offering sacrifices and receiving Buddhist teaching in the temple follows the worship. (Bhikku 2004:3) On the last nights of each of these festivals they light hot air lanterns which rise up into the sky. The significance of this is that Buddha had long hair originally. He was so wise that when he cut his hair it floated up to heaven. In the same way they light the hot air lanterns which float up in the night sky. (Mahastobir 2004:2)
Buddhist and Hindu New Year coincide with “Bengali New Year” which the government is trying to promote as a secular holiday. (Conservative Muslims still see it more as a Hindu festival.) In the tribal areas it takes on a different flavor similar to the water festival in Thailand and Myanmar. As in all religious festivals, there is regular morning worship in the temple. On the New Year holiday, however, the teaching stresses rules for living a good daily life as one looks to the new year. This seems to promote “turning over a new leaf” similar to Western New Year resolutions. The temple worship is followed by three-day fair including tribal dances, wrestling, “water throwing,” and evening jatra dramas.

Animists, including the Mru, celebrate the above New Year, but the main festival is Kumlang. This cow sacrificing ceremony is a “feast of merit” (Brauns and Loffler 1990:229), which is given at any time by a host who has been blessed or needs a blessing. The cow to be sacrificed is tied to the “sacrificial post” within a bamboo corral or cage-type structure on the first day. Later in the day the males of the host’s family begins playing the ceremonial mouth organ while the women dance around the sacrificial structure. The merriment goes on through most of the night and in the morning the cow is tortured and spat upon before being speared through the
ribs. The tongue is then cut out and nailed to the ceremonial post. (Brauns and Loffler 1990:235)

In Chapter 2, the interpretation of this ceremony was given in detail. The cow is tortured by orders of the Creator because it ate the blueprints for religion given to the Mru on a banana leaf. “Then the cow ascended the mountain with the scroll for the Mru in its mouth. As midday neared, however, it grew hot, the cow became hungry and thirsty and moved its tongue around in its mouth; and before long it had swallowed the scroll” (Brauns and Loffler 1990:235-236). Thus the ceremony ends with the cow’s tongue being nailed to a post. Due to the disintegrating economy of the Mru, the actual cow sacrifice has become rare in the last fifty years. The festivities, however, including playing the traditional mouth organ and dancing without an actual sacrifice still happen on special occasions.

**Christian Response**

Much more could be said about each of these ceremonies, but the purpose of this study is to discern whether any of the ceremonies can be re-channeled for use in the Christian context. It is here that I begin to tread on dangerous ground. There are risks of being misunderstood by both the Christian and non-Christian community when we look at engaging other religious ceremonies at some level. Perry understood the tension we face.
"Rejection of all cultural forms associated with Hinduism [or other religious systems] may undercut positive values actually compatible with a Christian worldview, whereas uncritical acceptance may lead to syncretism" (1990:177). Could not a new Christian be accused of compromising his or her faith by still participating at some level of their former religion? Will they not be tempted to return and participate fully in the religious ceremony from which they have been freed?

Indirectly related, Paul’s writing on “food sacrificed to idols” comes into play here. In 1 Corinthians 8:4, Paul affirms “an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one.” Just as “no food is unclean in itself” (Romans 14:14), cultural forms in and of themselves are not evil. With regard to new believers we are admonished to “[b]e careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak” (1 Corinthians 8:9). This is taken even further in 1 Corinthians 10:21, where we are told that we “cannot have part in both the Lord’s table and the table of demons.”

So, we need to be very careful in the use of cultural forms taken from other religions. There will be some forms which due to their pagan connotation will not be useable in a Christian context. While “everything is permissible... not everything is beneficial” (1 Corinthians 10:23). My
premise, however, is that there are redeemable forms in every culture which can be Christianized and used for God's glory to draw people to himself. In this delicate venture, with Paul we must commit to "not seeking [our] own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved" (1 Corinthians 10:33).

I am convinced that overt, intentional Christian contextualization – albeit possibly misunderstood – is preferable to covert syncretism common in non-contextual forms of Christianity. "In fact, where there is no indigenization of the message, syncretism is usually greatest for without indigenization there is no meaningful confrontation of religious systems and no intelligent 'Yes' or 'No' to the claims of Jesus Christ" (Nida 1960:185). Rather than ignoring the old religious systems, they must be delicately engaged, and, where applicable, aspects contextualized. My stance is that the benefits of a contextualized and indigenous form of Christianity outweigh the dangers of being misunderstood. It is dangerous ground, but I am convinced that it is also holy ground.

Above I mentioned that Perry has proposed two Christian responses to such festivals: "contextual participation" in the actual event or "alternative participation in a parallel event" (1990:182). Here I will suggest responses the Christian community could give to the above ceremonies. Some of the
ideas in this section come from a paper I wrote with Cleton Vaughan “The Christian Festivals: A Cross-cultural Discipleship Tool for Tribals in Bangladesh” (McIntyre and Vaughan 1998).

The Muslim festivals are mentioned here not because the tribals come out of that background, but because they have been dominated by this community and need to give a Christian response during these holiday times. During Ramadan and *Eid-ul-fitr* Christians can focus on the Biblical teaching of self denial based on Luke 9:23.

Christians can be encouraged to fast the lunch meal along with their Muslim brothers. They would also be encouraged to save the money or food normally used at lunch time and to give this money or food to the poor during the *iftar*—the breaking of the fast. Also during the lunch hour, in churches or homes there would be a special prayer time focusing on Muslims and on praying specifically that Muslims would have dreams and visions which would lead them to Christ. (This is the way many Muslims have come to Christ, and it happens most often during Ramadan.) Christians could also sponsor their own *iftar* parties in different homes each evening to which their Muslim friends could be invited. A short devotional focusing on the theme of denying self and taking up the cross and following Jesus (Luke 9:23) would be followed by praise and prayer. (McIntyre and Vaughan 1998:12)

The *Eid-ul-fitr* holidays following Ramadan provide the perfect time for an intensive seminar or retreat in which the principles of self-sacrifice could be taught through appropriate ceremonial learning.
The focus during the next Muslim festival of *Eid-ul-azha* would shift from self-sacrifice to the sacrifice Christ made for us. While the above suggestions for *Eid-ul-fitr* contain both contextual and alternative participation responses, for *Eid-ul-azha* I am suggesting an alternative response. This is not because I feel that there is a problem in participating in the *Eid-ul-azha* feasts with Muslims, which I do every year, but because the holiday provides an excellent alternative discipling opportunity.

With the focus on Abraham and his sacrifice, we suggest a ‘pilgrimage of faith to Mount Moriah.’ This would be a rite of passage in which youth—particularly fathers and their children—would leave their villages and go on a three day hike to a remote setting. Fathers would symbolically offer their youths to God. The youth would symbolically die to childhood, the old life, and to works and be given a new life because of Christ’s (not the ram’s) sacrifice. This would be similar to the ‘Toward Freedom and Responsibility’ rite of passage designed by Donald M. Joy of Asbury Theological Seminary. (Joy 1992:1) As young men and women are bound by their fathers and laid on the altar, the youth would sense the same faith of Abraham in their fathers and the hopelessness of their existence apart from God. The Festival of Christian Sacrifice could focus on the power of the blood of Christ and end with the observance of the Lord’s Supper. Upon arriving back home, the entire Church community would be there to celebrate their arrival. A festival would begin as the new young leaders explain the purpose of Christ being the sacrifice for the people. A large feast would be held with a cross sitting in the midst of the people to remind them of the true sacrifice. (McIntyre and Vaughan 1998:15-16)

I have found it difficult to find redeeming elements to the *Durga Puja* (the goddess of destruction) festival. Already this is a time for alternative
participation for many in the Christian community. A week long intensive
Student Bible Training Institute is offered for high school and college
students by the Bangladesh Baptist Fellowship. Of course, this excludes the
oral community so alternatives are needed for the tribals in general. During
Durga Puja the long holiday again offers the opportunity for intensive
teaching, and in contrast to the goddess of destruction, I propose focusing on
our God of creation.

The merry-making elements of the Holi Hindu festival and Buddha
Purnima can allow contextualized participation, and I suggest a focus on
“Christ the Victor” during these times.

The festival would emphasize the power of Christ to defeat all
evil. It would focus on the power of the Holy Spirit who
resides in each baptized believer. For the festival itself, stories
would be told of Jesus and the disciples casting out demons and
evil spirits. The festival comes in the spring, and our lives as
new creatures is another motif which fits quite well. There is a
great need for people in Bangladesh to be freed from the power
of evil spirits. The Festival of Christ the Victor would provide
a great opportunity to teach that we can be free and cleansed
from evil spirits by the power of Christ’s blood. Instead of just
drenching each other with water and colors as is the Hindu
tradition, the focus could be on spiritual cleansing and blessing.
This would be the time for house dedications (cleansing from
evil spirits) and a time of celebration of Christ being ruler over
all. (McIntyre and Vaughan 1998:12-13)

The house dedication ceremony described above and similar rituals would fit
nicely during these festivals.
Because Bengali New Year is a holiday truly celebrated by most everyone in Bangladesh, it is an opportunity of Christians to show Christ’s love and comradeship with their fellow-Bangladeshis.

The New Year is a very non-offensive holiday that Hindus, Christians, and even Muslims continue to celebrate. It is the one holiday which is clearly born out of Hinduism but is seen as totally Bengali. Thus Bengalis whether they are Hindu, Christian, or the Muslim majority have no problem celebrating it. Since this is the one and only holiday (other than governmental, secular-political holidays) that brings all Bengalis together, Christians should take full advantage of this. Discipling programs that emphasize God’s love for Bengal, and His desire that they know Him should be emphasized. Joining in and enhancing the programs that celebrate the rich Bengali culture should be encouraged. Incidentally, such occasions are rare times in which the Tripuras and other tribal minorities are invited to perform their dances, music, or dramas in larger Bangladesh communities. (McIntyre and Vaughan 1998:14)

In a similar way the Mru music and dance which was formerly associated with the cow sacrificing ceremony can be (and already has been) brought into other celebrations to affirm their culture. The mouth organ music and accompanying dance was performed in a Mru village where we had a day of teaching for new believers. The above suggestions offer contextualized and alternative participation to the festivals of Bangladesh.

Ceremonies Designed for Disciple-making

Here I will report on ceremonies which were created for discipling before turning to the findings from the constructed ceremony in the field
research. Already mentioned was the “Crucified with Christ” ceremony based on Donald Joy’s ceremony in *Toward Freedom and Responsibility*. This has been used as a “graduating ceremony” upon completion of 18 months of Chronological Bible Storying training as well as the culmination of the “Life of Christ” seminar which will be mentioned later. In this ceremony participants are led through and repeat various Scriptures based on confession of sin (1 John 1:9), leaving childish way (1 Corinthians 13:11), and being crucified with Christ (2 Timothy 2:11-13). During the ceremony participants are tied with ropes to crosses – symbolizing their death with Christ. They are laid down and covered with a sheet – symbolizing burial – their death to the old ways and childhood. Finally, they stand again and are affirmed by the community – symbolizing rising to a new life. As described in the introduction of Chapter 1, this ceremony becomes ingrained into the minds of the participants, and they have a new personal connection with the cross.

Many churches have a Christmas drama portraying the birth of Christ. To gain greater participation, we have encouraged a Christmas reenactment. In this ceremony participants are told ahead of time to come dressed in white to be an angel or in farming clothes to be shepherds. There are several
people staged as Joseph, Mary (and baby Jesus), head angel, head shepherd, inn keeper and narrator. The event takes place in the following manner:

The church would have the townspeople and the children meet at the church building at a certain hour in the anticipation of seeing the true Christmas story. Only the narrator would meet the people at the church with one large candle lit. Once everyone has arrived, the narrator would begin the story. Then the narrator would lead the children and the townspeople to a certain section of town, and would tell them to watch closely, as he believes he hears Mary and Joseph approaching. The people would watch Mary and Joseph go by but would not follow them to the stable. The people would instead go to the Inn for a light refreshment. Then the narrator would tell the people the time had come for the Savior to be born. The narrator would then lead the people to a nearby field and watch as the shepherds interact with the angels. The people would then follow the shepherds back to the town and to the inn. They would listen and watch as the head shepherd meets with the innkeeper. Finally, the narrator and the people would follow the shepherds to the barn. At this point, the angels would already be singing a lovely melody of praise to God. The family of Jesus would be relaxing and adoring the new beloved baby Jesus. The narrator would then ask the children and the townspeople to join in singing with the angels in praise to the Lord and Savior. At the end of the night the Innkeeper and his family would bring food to the barn for all to eat in fellowship of the birth of Christ. (McIntyre and Vaughan 1998:18-19)

This reenactment has had a powerful effect on the participants. Particularly the children feel as though they have been to Bethlehem in Middle-eastern Judea at the time of Christ and seen the Christ-child. The Christmas story is never experienced in quite the same way again.
As mentioned above in November 2003, we created a “Life of Christ” ceremony based on the principles of the Shin Byu Buddhist ceremony. Around 70 youth and their leaders were involved in this ceremony. The ceremony was divided into six parts and youth from six different areas were assigned to direct one of each of the sections. The first session focused on the birth of Christ (Luke 2:1-20) and was led by the youth from the Feni area. This was held the first evening and was very similar to the Christmas reenactment mentioned above. In the second section the Chakma youth from Rangamati lead a reenactment of “Jesus lost in Jerusalem” (Luke 2:41-52) on the following morning. Later that morning the youth from Bondarbon led in a session on “Jesus’ Baptism and Temptation in the Wilderness” (Luke 3:21-22; 4:1-13). The afternoon session led by the Kagachuri Tripuras focused on Jesus’ miraculous powers with the stories of Jesus calming the sea and delivering the demon-possessed man (Luke 8:22-39). Later that afternoon the Kagachuri Chakmas led us in Jesus washing the disciples feet and the Last Supper (John 13:1-17; Luke 22:14-22). Finally the event was culminated by the Shylet youth leading us in the Crucified with Christ ceremony mentioned above.

As an aside to my field research, I was able to interview nine young men who participated in that event in November 2004 – a year later. (I used
the same interview questions as in the post-ceremony focus groups. See Appendix D.) All of the youth had a fairly astounding memory of the meeting. It was interesting that each member first remembered and recited the part of the event in which his group led. Comment such as being encouraged in evangelism, love for fellow disciples, and forsaking of sinful ways showed growth in areas not specifically addressed in the seminar. There was a definite sense that *communitas* emerged in the group. The interviewees also saw the teaching they gained in this seminar as practical whereas other meetings gave theoretical teaching. The following is my summation of the interviews:

> It is amazing that after one year each part of the ceremony was remembered and brought up in our discussion. Many can not remember last Sunday’s teaching. The ceremony obviously had a profound influence in their Christian lives. The emboldening of their witness and faith also seems clear by the experiences shared. There was a deep spiritual significance evidenced by the dreams and visions which followed the ceremony time. It seems that it was a ceremony through which they received long-lasting teaching which led to a deeper commitment of their Christian faith. (Special Interview 2004:5)

This is the beginning of evidence that ceremonies can be used in an effective way for discipling. In the next section I will build on this with the findings of the constructed event for this dissertation’s research.
Constructed Event for Discipling – Findings from Research

There are two major aspects which separate the above “Life of Christ” ceremony from the constructed event of my field research. First, the above event included youth with more education than the general population. Therefore, it was not a good test case for the oral population which we are trying to reach. Second, the ideas and design of the event came from outside, and therefore it was less indigenous.

Even though the Shin Byu concept is somewhat familiar to the Buddhists in our group, I, an outsider, suggested the corresponding phases of the ceremony based on Chapter 8 of Zahniser’s book Symbol and Ceremony. As Shawyer points out, “It is unlikely that an expatriate missionary will understand the hearts of national believers sufficiently to devise new forms which will not be foreign. Thus it is for the national believers to devise indigenous Christian forms of worship” (Shawyer 2002:331-332). For this reason a hermeneutical community of local believers was formed to construct, guide, and evaluate the discipling ceremony. (A description of this process is found in Chapter 1.) The following describes the work of the Hermeneutical Community in planning the meeting.
Planning of the Hermeneutical Community

The following is a list of the members and a brief description of the Hermeneutical Community:

Panta Chakma (male) from Betchuri village, Kagrachuri has been a Christian for two years.

Kakul Chandra Tripura (male) from Pach Mile village, Kagrachuri was baptized three weeks ago.

Suna Boron Chakma (male) from Chatarchora village Kagrachuri has been a Christian for two months.

Pamola Tripura (female) from Pach Mile village, Kagrachuri was baptized three weeks ago.

Sushil Jiban Tripura (male) from Kagrachuri but works in Bondarbon district has been a Christian for 11 years.

Ujal Gazi (male) (Bengali) form Magura works with tribals in Shylet area and has been a Christian for 21 years.

Dirbadhon Chakma (male) from Rangamati has been a Christian for 14 years.

Rajamoni Chakma (male) from Kagrachuri has been a Christian for nine years.

Probir Tripura (male) from Kagrachuri has been a Christian for 11 years.
Pawsing Mru (male) from Bordar Bazar, Bondarbon has been a Christian two years.

Tusher Biswas (male) (Bengali) from Golgalganj works with tribals in the Feni area and has been a Christian for 30 years. (Hermeneutical Community 2004:1)

In the first meetings of the Hermeneutical Community we discussed what was observed and learned from the ceremonies attended in the villages as well as observations from the religious leader interviews. In addition, the members of the Hermeneutical Community shared their own experiences growing up as Buddhists, Hindus, and Animists. After this I started a dialog saying that we had earlier discussed constructing the event. I said, “Now that we have had a few days to think about this, let us pull all these thoughts together and plan the discipling event.” Pawsing Mru said if we had a sharing evangelistic program and used pictures, the Mru people could best understand. He also said if an evangelist lived in the village with them they would learn best. We all agreed with these principles and discussed the importance of a long term incarnational witness, but for our purposes, we discussed what would be most effective for the event we were trying to construct. (Hermeneutical Planning 2004:5)
Another discussion of the difficulties of language and the impatience of waiting for translation went on for a time. Regarding language and culture differences, I shared that my professors at Asbury Seminary were concerned that having the different languages and cultures together would be difficult and had asked why I did not just focus on one tribe. Then I said, "Were my professors right? Should we divide the groups into different languages?" There was a long discussion which is part of an ongoing dialog about these issues of the tribal Christian community. Everyone seemed to agree with Tushar Biswas that it is better to have the cultures separated for linguistic purposes, but common culture and the benefit gained from looking to older Christians for advancement makes meeting with different cultures together more desirable. (Hermeneutical Planning 2004:6)

Ujal Gazi said, "Though we have the different cultures and languages if we embrace each and have each tribe’s culture and music represented in some way, then there will not be a problem. Especially if each participant has a role to play in the event, then they will feel a part and the issues that divide the group will be minimized." The consensus was that language is a problem occasionally, but this is just the nature of our work, of the CHT, and of the multiethnic, multi-linguistic church in general. For the purposes of
this project it was decided that it is better to keep the groups together.

(Hermeneutical Planning 2004:6)

They discussed the importance of music for the Mru and all tribal people. The Mru as well as other tribals enjoy simply watching people in the bazaar. They also love to see movies in the towns as they have no such entertainment in their villages. This led to a discussion of the jatra and how all tribals love the drama art form and that anything dramatic will be greatly appreciated by the people. Pawsing Mru agreed that he and his people like to watch movies and dramas. Tusher Biswas said he remembered the Hindu Ramayani jatra from his childhood. He used to go with Hindu friends and stay all night long for seven nights. Tusher said, “I had to sleep during the days, and my mother was angry at me but we loved it so much. Village people are very excited about this drama and music and will sit for hours to watch and listen to it” (Hermeneutical Planning 2004:7).

Probir Tripura added, “Yes, we have the Tripura Mohabarot, Hindu dramatic songs in which Hindu priests read the holy scriptures and the story is put to drama and music)” (Hermeneutical Planning 2004:7). Then Probir gave an example of how this music and art form happened. It was very familiar to everyone there. Then others added that at Christmas time there is a Christian group, Kirton Dol (“caroling group”), in Dhaka that travels and
performs the same sort of musical drama about the birth of Christ. People of
the Subcontinent love and are very attracted to such music. It is a very
traditional art form which touches people deeply and to which they are very
attracted.

Three important themes seemed to come out of these observations,
interviews and discussions. First, symbols are very important in religious
rituals and help to heighten learning. Panta Chakma and Suna Baron
Chakma claimed that they do not remember the teaching they learned from
the Buddhist temples, but the symbols of Buddhism are still very real in their
minds. (Hermeneutical Community 2004:3)

Second, memorizing mantras, or verses from scriptures deepens and
internalizes learning. “In tribal religious rites and ceremonies, short
mantras, traditional mythical stories and sacrifices of animals, fowls, birds,
etc., are prominent. Prayer as such is rare in tribal religious ceremonies”
(Thomas and Taylor 1965:144). When they were teenagers, Dirbadhon
Chakma served in the temple as a monk for five days and Rajamoni Chakma
for seven days. They remembered that whether one could read or not, all of
the monks memorized the mantras. This teaching remained in their
memories. (Hermeneutical Community 2004:4)
Third, drama is an informal aspect of festivals in which the lay people actually learn more because it is a very enjoyable practice. Ujal Gazi said, “When people participate they will learn more than if they just watch a drama or film. Hindus learn dramatic songs in which 30 – 40 stories are presented. This is a very effective way to teach oral, traditional people” (Hermeneutical Community 2004:5). Lectures or formal teaching was also associated with ritual particularly in Hindu and Buddhist rituals. The Hermeneutical Community did not refer to lectures much directly, but it became an understood part of ceremonies for necessary explanation and teaching.

When it came to the actual planning of the event, there was discussion of what the actual teaching would be. This came together quite naturally and there seemed to be a common sense of where the tribal people were spiritually and what teaching was needed. Sushil Tripura said, “Many of our people are still not strong in their faith. Some even still give puja in the old festivals. We need to present the existence of God and his power over the others gods – his almighty attributes.” Probir Tripura said, “Many of the people coming are new believers, so the teaching must be clear and simple. They are still faced with the fear of and temptation to give puja to Hindu gods. They also fear evil spirits. So, yes, we need to give teaching that God
is almighty and that we have the power over evil spirits” (Hermeneutical Planning 2004:8).

I then asked which Bible teaching or story would best present this teaching. Immediately several said the teaching of Elijah would be best. I bit my tongue as I really felt that ‘Paul casting the spirit out of the demon possessed slave girl’ (Acts 16:16:24) would have addressed this well. This teaching also dealt with persecution that early Christians faced. As I listened to the discussion of the Hermeneutical Community, however, I saw that they were more in touch with which teaching would meet the spiritual needs of their people, and submitted to their wisdom. (Hermeneutical Planning 2004:9). Similar discussions in combination with the above discussions, observations, and interviews led to the following conclusions and planning of the event:

First, it is necessary to present the existence of God. While I never have felt that such an apologetic as used with American university students was necessary in South Asia, the Hermeneutical Community brought up a slightly different approach. Dirbadhon Chakma claimed that teaching on the existence of the one, true Creator is a common need among all tribals. It was decided that the story of creation presented this most appropriately (Hermeneutical Planning 2004:3). Prior to the creation account in Genesis,
it was necessary to give teaching on the creation of the spirit world including the origins of Satan.

Second, it was necessary to present that God was almighty and had power far greater than Satan and other gods. Sushil Tripura convinced the group that the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel would present this teaching best (Hermeneutical Planning 2004:3). (This story was not part of our original 30 stories in the Chronological Bible Storying set, but several times over the years, I had received hints that it should have been included.)

The third necessary teaching is that Jesus is God. Jesus is more than another incarnation. Rather, he is God in the flesh. The miraculous conception and birth of Christ must clearly be presented. In addition to this, Probir Tripura felt that one of the miracles of Jesus must present his almighty power over evil as well. Through this, the teaching of Jesus being the only way should come through (Hermeneutical Planning 2004:4).

Fourth, there is need for relating the Biblical teaching to practical every day life. Sushil Tripura claimed, “Deep theological issues do not help the tribal people deal with issues such as alcoholism. We need to give ‘new life’ teaching which includes examples of how life has changed” (Hermeneutical Community 2004:5). So, it was decided that there needed to
be a "new life" teaching showing the change in one’s life after becoming a Christian. This would be presented in the form of a present-day drama showing the change in a tribal person’s life after becoming a Christian.

In addition to and in the midst of these teachings, we would also have the opportunity to memorize and recite a Christian mantra. This would be based on the chanting of mantras learned in traditional Buddhist, Hindu and Animistic rituals. Probir Tripura and Rajamoni Chakma suggested that a simple version of the Apostle’s Creed would be memorized (Hermeneutical Planning 2004:3). The goal was that each person would have memorized the mantra by the end of the ceremony.

Finally, to culminate the ceremony there would need to be an opportunity for commitment. From this teaching there should be the desire to go out and serve God. A ritual of commitment should give the participants a concrete way of enacting their decisions. This ceremony should employ symbols common to the background of the people and yet Christianized and thus enhancing the Christian teaching.

During most of the discussions I tried to observe, giving occasional guidance in bringing the group back to the project at hand or directing the discussion to a general consensus. Here, however, I tried to sensitively suggest the use of the above-mentioned “Crucified with Christ” rite as a
ceremony of commitment. Probir Tripura disagreed, and said that with such a new group people would laugh in the ceremony and that it would not be appropriate. “That ceremony is better for a group which has grown together – like the Storying groups,” Probir said (Hermeneutical Planning 2004:9). Again the Hermeneutical Community agreed showing their knowledge of those who would participate. It was decided that a simple candle lighting ceremony of commitment would culminate the event. The candle lighting would also employ a familiar symbol observed in the village religious ceremonies.

So it was decided that the event would consist of five sessions with teaching from the following topics:

The Story of Creation/Existence of God.

The Story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal/ God is Almighty.

The Story of the Birth of Christ/Jesus is God.

A present day drama of changed life/Our lives can be changes.

Candle Lighting Commitment Service to go out and serve God in these ways.

(Hermeneutical Planning 2004:3-4)

This concluded the planning phase of the field research.
The Constructed Event

We then enacted the event with the first group of 30 participants including Kagrachuri Chakmas, Rangamati Chakmas, Shylet Tea Garden and Meithei tribals. Following this, the event was enacted by a second group of 30 participants including Kagrachuri Tripuras, Mru and Tripuras from Bondarbon, and different tribals from Feni. The following is a description of the event. The two events were so similar that in order to avoid repetition I am including only the first event with additions of interest from the second event.

The “New Life Ceremony” took place at the Dishari Christian Camp (run by Association of Baptists for World Evangelism – ABWE) in Banskali, Chittagong District, Bangladesh. The first event was held from November 1 through 3, 2004. The second event was held from November 9 through 11, 2004.

8:00am Session # 1 Creation/ Existence of God – (led by Dirbadhon Chakma, Rangamati District Fellowship leader)

The session began with prayer led by Dirbadhon invoking the presence of the Holy Spirit on the teaching and the participants. This was followed by singing the chorus Tomar Proshangsha (“I Praise You”) and
Jesur Namete ("In the Name of Jesus"). Ujal Gazi then gave an overview of the different aspect of the ceremony event. This ended the preliminary part of the ceremony.

Dirbadhon, then, led in telling the biblical story of the creation. First he held up two plants and showed that they were different. Then he held up two identical hymnals, showing that they were the same. He led a short discussion of how these were the same and different. Finally he said that it depended upon the creator. The creator made the things either the same or different. From this introduction he went into the creation story. It is noted that this story-telling or lecture is similar to festivals in the Buddhist temples which include a lecture as part of the ceremony.

Often the members, particularly those who had been Christians longer, would join in helping Dirbadhon tell the story. Before getting to the creation of humans, Dirbadhon interjected teaching on how God created the spirit world. This included the origin of angels and Satan. Then he went into the creation of humans and the story of Adam and Eve.

At the end of the story he asked, "Do you believe this story from God’s word? Can we create these things: water, sunshine, air, flowers?" Later he brought out the chorus books again. Man made those but God created the materials. Follow this he retold the story using pictures. At the
end of this telling he drew out the characteristics of God which are present in the story. From this story he showed that we learned that God is almighty, all-knowing and loving.

Then Dirbadhon asked some questions from the story. First he asked, “What was the name of the tree that God forbade them from eating?” They answered, “It was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” Then he asked, “If there was a creator, how did people begin worshipping idols?” They answered, “There is a bit of truth in this in that people are trying to worship a greater being, but they do not know the true Creator.” Dirbadhon gave an example of a Chakma puja given during a flood to appease the spirits causing the suffering. He related this to their daily lives and how he shared with a Buddhist on the bus on the way to the meeting.

The second group had a dramatization of both the creation of the spirit world and the story of Adam and Eve. In between these two the six days of creation were told in storying fashion. This gave some variety to the long creation narrative. Then, the leader in the second group explained that they were all shy to perform in the drama and at first did not want to take part. The leader gave them encouragement, however, and told them that by performing this drama the Bible story would remain with them in their memory for a long time and so they agreed. Even though they did not have
much education and had very little time to prepare they did the drama for
God’s glory.

This ended the teaching and another chorus was sung. At this interval
in the ceremony memorizing a Christian mantra took place. The mantra was
a simplified version of the Apostle’s Creed. The participants were asked to
memorize the creed in their mother tongue. At various intervals in the
program we would practice the mantra, and during the final part of the
ceremony we would all recite it together in the different languages. The first
words of the mantra, “I believe God is the creator of heaven and earth…” fit
well with the creation story. Following this several participants were given
an opportunity to retell the creation story as they could remember it.

It was noted that during the storytelling times, the participants, both
old and new Christians, sat fascinated with each of the events even though
many had heard the story several times before. Finally, Dirbadhon repeated
the story a third time in Chakma for better understanding among that group.
One weakness noted was that the more educated leaders still seemed to be
leading the meeting even though the planning was evenly distributed among
literate and oral learners. The vast majority of the participants were
completely oral or had a low literacy level. So, the leadership of the
program seemed imbalanced. In the second event this was addressed and there was more of a balance in the leadership of the event.

10:30am – Session # 2 – The Story of Elijah – God is Almighty – (led by the Shylet Group)

The Shylet Focus Group acted out the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Participants seemed to enjoy and get deeply involved in the dramatization. Following the drama, the leader of the Shylet group retold and explained the story in greater detail. He gave some symbolic interpretations such as the 12 stones used to build the altar representing the 12 tribes of Israel. Through this dramatization part of the ceremony God showed his almighty power.

Even when participants affirmed that they understood, the story was repeated in the various tribal mother tongues. Again, the participants naturally, without prompting, helped retell the story. At the end of the reenactment, the leader asked if this teaching or Sunday preaching was more likely to remain in their minds. Very enthusiastically they answered that they can not read the Bible, but when the story is dramatized, it will not easily be forgotten. Then they asked a Chakma to come and retell the story – just as they had after the creation story telling. There was a dramatic
difference in the way the story was told. Without hesitation a young Chakma man jumped up and with enthusiasm, ease and comfort, he retold the story. He seemed very sure of the events of the story. When the previous creation story was retold the participant was less enthusiastic, and the less sure of the actual events. It was clear that though the storytelling format of the creation was understood, the drama of the Elijah story was comprehended and remembered at a deeper level. The participatory and dramatic teaching was received better than the storying by this oral group.

Then one of the actual actors of the dramatization (a very new Meithei believer) retold the story. Though he was less detailed about the story, he related it directly to his life. He told that he came from a Hindu background just two months prior. He said, “I used to pray to idols as a Hindu. Now as a Christian I believe that idol worship and worshipping God cannot go together. He related the story directly to his life as a new Christian from a Hindu background, demonstrating the power of the story in his life.

This session ended with the song Jisur namete (“In the name of Jesus”) again. The words, “in the name of Jesus we have power over Satan” seemed to take on new meaning for the participants. This was followed again by practicing the Apostle’s Creed in the mother languages.
words of the Apostle’s Creed concerning God’s almighty power seemed to have been confirmed by the previous dramatization of Elijah’s life.

In the second event, an interesting happening took place following the same dramatization. The leader retold the story and it was translated into Tripura. Following this one woman who was in the drama told what she learned from the drama. Then one of those watching with great animation told what he learned from each aspect of the drama. The leader also related the story to the creation of the spirit world from the earlier morning session. Then with no prompting one of the participants came forward and explained that before he used to worship the god, *Lokki*. He said, “we believed that by worshipping *Lokki* we would get better crops and that *Lokki* would bless us. But no matter how much we worshiped her we did not get good crops. So, should we worship *Lokki*? No, she does not give anything. She is nothing. Today through the drama we learned that there is one Creator and we must worship him alone.”

3:00pm – Session #3 - The Birth of Christ and Jesus’ Miracle of casting out a demon – led by the Kagrachuri Chakma Group.

The Kagrachuri Chakma group reenacted the birth of Christ followed by Jesus casting out an evil spirit after his disciples failed. Following the
dramatization Rajamoni Chakma gave teaching and retold the stories. The main point was that Jesus is God's son – God in the flesh. This is confirmed by the virgin birth. Another point is that we need to have faith. Rajamoni also shared that though we cannot always preach in areas, through drama we can share the gospel. We also saw that Jesus is almighty as demonstrated in his power to cast out demons.

Following this teaching one of the new believers recounted the story in his own words. Again they affirmed that they learn more from reenactment than from preaching. Following this the participants broke into language groups to practice memorizing the Apostle’s Creed.

In the second event, some interesting teaching was added to the end of the event bringing continuity to all of the sessions. The leader said there is some important teaching in the stories. First, Jesus birth was by the power of the Holy Spirit. Second, Jesus was born into a poor situation, and because of this Jesus can identify with us, the poor people. He did not come as a rich man, but rather as a poor man... Then in the second story the demons were afraid of Jesus. Demons are afraid of Jesus and his powerful name. In every miracle we see that Jesus had the power of God in him. Jesus was not a normal man he actually came from heaven.
In the creation story again we saw that God created the angels and Lucifer became bad and became Satan. Then in this story again we see that God has all power over Satan and the demons. The demons in the man had great fear of Jesus. God has not changed from creation to Elijah to Jesus miracles, He is still Almighty. We have learned and confirmed that God is all-powerful over Satan and the demons.

5:15pm. – Session # 4 – Changed Life Drama - Led by Hermeneutical Community group and various participants from each of the different areas.

The life of a Hindu Tripura before and after coming to Christ was presented to the group. Before coming to Christ the Tripura man was involved in bad politics and his wife has a thriving business making local wine. Through the influence of a political leader who had recently become a Christian, the Tripura man also followed Christ. Immediately following his conversion, he lost the election which would have insured him a job. He also had to convince his wife that as Christians, they could not continue the wine business. They faced many hardships including selling many of their crops, and were also tempted to participate in Hindu pujas. They patiently remained faithful, however, and in the end the Tripura believer became an itinerate evangelist. The drama was based on the life of Nahush Tripura.
Although the hermeneutical community was most enthusiastic about this portion of the ceremony, by my observation the participants were less enthusiastic about it. Everyone seemed to enjoy and understand easily the contents of the drama. There was little need for explaining the drama as it was performed in the local dialect and all of the events were very familiar. Perhaps it was too common and too close to home, but it was the one portion of the ceremony that received the least attention in the post-ceremony focus group interviews.

The second event had a different life story – that of Bikash Tripura. This story did not include the political aspects that the first did, but was otherwise very similar. The drama was also received with less enthusiasm by the second group.

8:30am (3 November, 2004) – Session # 5 – Commitment Service – led by Hermeneutical Community leaders.

The service began with choruses such as Poriborton Nuton Jonmer Pore (“There’s been a Great Change Since I’ve been Born Again”). This was followed by prayer. The leader then explained that this program was different from other meetings in which they had participated. “We did not just sit and listen, but rather everyone took part in the program,” he said. He
then asked what the session’s teaching was. One participant responded that they did not remember all, but he did remember the basic parts of the Creation. The leader helped recount the creation story. He then asked what the second part was. They remembered the story of Elijah better and one participant was able to recount it very well. Then he asked what the third session was, the previous day after lunch. Again they quickly remembered the story of the Jesus birth and the miracle of casting out the demon from the possessed boy. He then went on to ask what the fourth session was which took place the previous evening. The participants responded that this session was about the Tripura man whose life was changed.

The leader then led a discussion about Jesus and the disciples and how at the end Jesus prayed for his disciples and for us as well. As Jesus disciples had duties, so also we have duties and responsibilities. It is our responsibility to share the gospel. This is not just the duty of the evangelist or pastor. It is the responsibility of every believer.

Then he explained the passage of Matthew 5:14-16. He explained that we are all to be lights for Jesus. He gave many examples of how we are to be lights in a dark world. He then shared from the passage of Matthew 28:18-20 in which Jesus gave us the responsibility to make disciples of all tribes. He explained that Jesus promised to stay with us to the end. At this
point the teaching was repeated in local languages and the participants joined in giving the teaching confirming that they had understood. Finally he related Acts 4:18-20, the story of Peter and John facing persecution after healing the lame man in the temple. Peter and John were given the orders to no longer preach God’s word. The responded that they needed to obey God rather than men.

At this point the leader asked how many wanted to promise that they would share their faith before men. Beginning with a few eventually most everyone stood to make a promise to be faithful and obedient to God’s commands. Then the leader led in a ceremony of commitment. The group stood in a large circle and each was given a candle. The light of Jesus was lit and passed from one person to another until all the candles were lit. At that point a prayer of commitment was given. Finally each language group recited the Apostle’s Creed in each language. This concluded the ceremony, and afterward there was the laying on of hands and prayer for the sick and various problems that participants faced.

The second event held the commitment service on the previous evening which was more effective for the candle lighting service. They also asked for testimonies as part of the commitment service. The following are some of the responses to the event: One man came forward and said that he
was happy for the teaching he received, and he wants to live more committed to Christ with his family. Another young man wants to be more faithful to take his family to church. Another man had a vision from the Lord that he needs to be more faithful to God as a church member. He wants to be more faithful to the vision of the Lord. One woman was very thankful for the dramas and wanted to tell her church members about it. One pastor came forward and told of the problems of his church due to their poverty, but now he wants to depend on God to help him to be regular in worship. One woman said she had been a Christian from childhood, but did not always live right. Lately she has had some opportunities to go to women’s meetings. Tonight she promises to take this teaching and share it with the younger women in her village. Another woman said she never imaged that at her age she could travel far and receive such good teaching. She feels that she has seen God in this meeting. She sees that he created her and everything around her and this has strengthened her faith. This was followed by the candle lighting service.

This comprises a brief description of our attempts to construct a Christian ceremony that incorporated indigenous features of oral learning for the tribals of Bangladesh. A mantra from the Apostles Creed was memorized similar to the mantras recited in former Buddhist, Hindu and
Animist ceremonies. Drama was used similar to the *jatra* which accompanies festivals in South Asia. Symbolic teaching was used as in the candle lighting ceremony of the commitment service. Above all, the event was designed and carried out by a hermeneutical community of tribal believers from the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The question now is, does this constitute a culturally appropriate Christian discipleship program? In the next chapter, I will discuss the subject of discipling and findings from the evaluations and analyses of this event.
Chapter 5

Discipling Among Tribals in Bangladesh

"Many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip"

The air was fresh and almost brisk as I walked out of the hillside guesthouse early Sunday morning in Lunglei. This was quite different from the sweltering smog-filled air of Chittagong and Kolkata which I had left just days earlier. What I was about to observe was also vastly different from anything I had seen in the Indian sub-continent. As we drove down the winding mountain road to the church I had been invited to speak at, the streets were filled with people and yet all markets and businesses were closed. With Bibles in hand, families walked toward the various Christian churches that dominated the landscape.

As we arrived and entered the large church structure, I saw that the worship, too, was different from what I had experienced before in South Asia. Rather than the translated American hymns which were common in many churches in Asia, I found vibrant, indigenous music, sharing, and worship all unique to Mizo culture.¹ How could this state of Mizoram, India be such a vibrant pocket of Christianity in the midst of South Asia – one of

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the most unreachted corners of the globe? How could Mizoram be just across the border from the Bangladesh tribal areas where we had seen churches planted, but where the impact of Christianity on the society was far less? I mused, “What are we missing in our work with such a similar culture and similar situation literally bordering one another? Had something been done right in Mizoram, but wrong in Bangladesh?” These questions have led me to have a burning desire to discover what could bring an indigenous Christian movement among tribals in Bangladesh.

Jesus said, “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden.” (Matthew 5:14) For years I have had a vision of the light of Christ spreading over the hills of eastern Bangladesh dispelling the dark shadows until all the tribes reflect the light of Christ. And yet, how do we get there? Why is the gospel not catching on? How can we come to a point like in Mizoram where God is glorified throughout the whole society? Later in the same passage Jesus said, “In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16) According to this passage the way to bring glory and praise to God the Father is to “let your light shine before men.” Avery Dulles claims that this was true of the first disciples.

Together with Jesus, the disciples constituted a contrast society, symbolically representing the new and renewed Israel...
community of the disciples, with its exceptional style of life, was intended to attract attention, like a city set upon a mountaintop or a lantern in a dark place. It had a mission to remind the rest of the people of the transcendent value of the Kingdom of God, to which the disciples bore witness. (Dulles 1987:209)

When new believers become grounded in Christian discipleship, their lives should shine with good deeds, naturally drawing others into a relationship with the Father which glorifies and brings praise to him. So, rather than ineffective evangelism methods, the problem seems to be discipleship. Seemingly, our own Christian population has not been discipled to the point that their lives have been transformed and shine before men with good deeds. This is a barrier to others being attracted to the gospel. So, the life-transformation that should have taken place, does not seem to be evident in the practice of our every day lives.

In this chapter I will focus on the last major topic of this dissertation, that of discipling. First, as I review the literature pertaining to this topic, I will focus on what discipling should be and then look at both good and bad examples. Taking it a step deeper, I will look at principles which are not applicable to our context and then those which do apply. Then I will discuss the state of discipleship in Bangladesh including barriers and movements in the right direction. Finally, I give the findings from the research of discipling through ceremony for oral learners.
Toward More Contextual Discipling

I have defined disciple and “indigenous discipling” – more in line with our context – in Chapter 1. Here I will look at the biblical basis of and deepen our understanding and definition of discipling. This will give us an idea of what discipling should be before moving on to examples.

Biblical Basis and Definition of Discipling

To obtain criteria for Christian discipling, we need to have a biblical basis for it. In Matthew 28:19 we have the biblical imperative to “go and make disciples.” This is followed up in verse 20 with two functions implicit in making disciples: “baptizing” and “teaching.” These two functions which imply evangelism and education of Christian lifestyle take us a long way in understanding the concept of discipling (Stonehouse 2004:1). Larry Richards follows these two ideas of evangelism and teaching, maintaining that they are the two goals of Christian education or discipleship. The first goal is to bring people to spiritual life based on John 10:10. As Richards states,

Human beings who have been born into this world, have grown and developed according to the natural laws governing the physical universe, are presented in Scripture as dead to the supernatural life, and in need of being made alive... by God's personal act of intervention through the gospel. (1975:13)
From Romans 8:29, Richards goes on to point out that the second goal of the discipling is to provide the spiritual formation that will bring us to “the likeness of his Son” (1975:21).

In addition to bringing disciples to spiritual maturity, discipling must also “equip the saints” for ministry as specified in Ephesians 4:11-12. Christ’s life and purpose, outlined in Luke 4:18, defines this further as “to preach good news to the poor..., to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, [and] to release the oppressed...” Discipling should equip the saints to make an impact on this world for God’s kingdom purposes. In this we will attain our goal, expressed in Colossians 1:28 to “present everyone mature in Christ” (Stonehouse 2004:1).

Discipleship will require the sacrifice of one’s own will, and “taking up one’s cross daily” (Luke 9:23). “Jesus uses three vivid phrases to describe the road less traveled [of disciplship]: deny yourself, take up your cross, and lose your life for my sake” (Ogden 1998:28). This requires an “abiding in Christ” and allowing his life to flow through us (John 15:5). In John 8:31 Jesus claims that to be his disciples, we must “hold to his teaching.” Our discipleship will be evidenced by our love for our fellow Christians (John 13:34-35) and our spiritual fruit (John 15:8). (Willis 1984:3).
So, the criteria for discipleship are that first one finds faith in Christ. This means moving from death and those practices associated with the "deadness" of the former life. Abundant, spiritual life will characterize the disciple. In addition, the disciple will grow and become familiar with all of the teachings of Jesus. The disciple will be equipped for a ministry which brings Christ’s kingdom to impact the world around him. In all these things the disciple will be presented mature in Christ. “The disciple is one who, intent upon becoming Christlike and so dwelling in his ‘faith and practice,’ systematically and progressively rearranges his affairs to that end” (Willard 1988:261).

McGavran says that we must see this process in two steps. First, it is discipling which he defines as “the removal of distracting divisive sinful gods and spirits and ideas from the corporate life of the people and putting Christ at the centre on the Throne” (1955:14). The next step is “teaching them all things.” In this stage they come to a deeper understanding of who Christ is and how to live the Christian lifestyle.

In leading peoples to become Christian, the Church must aim to win individuals in their corporate life. The steady goal must be the Christianization of the entire fabric which is the people, or large enough parts of it that the social life of the individual is not destroyed. (1955:16)

Hendricks calls this process transformation.
Transformation simply refers to change in character and actions... Conversion is the first step in being transformed. Transformation continues as the believer becomes more Christlike. This spiritual growth, of course, does not happen automatically... In short, Christian transformation means you allow God to form you into the person He knows you should be. (Hendricks 1981:5)

With this understanding of transformation, Barna’s ideas on discipling apply here.

It is about the intentional training of people who voluntarily submit to the lordship of Christ and who want to become imitators of Him in every thought, word, and deed. On the basis of teaching, training, experiences, relationships, and accountability, a disciple becomes transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ. (2001:17-18)

The bottom line of discipleship, then, is following and becoming like Christ. “...The disciple or apprentice of Jesus, as recognized by the New Testament, is one who has firmly decided to learn from him how to lead his or her life, whatever that may be, as Jesus himself would do it” (Willard 1998:291). Bonhoeffer said that “[d]iscipleship means adherence to Christ, and, because Christ is the object of that adherence, it must take the form of discipleship” (1959:63). Ogden takes the definition further to include equipping to reproduce disciples. “Discipling is an intentional relationship in which we walk alongside other disciples in order to encourage, equip and challenge one another in love to grow toward maturity in Christ. This
includes equipping the disciple to teach others as well” (1998:17). This brings us to an important aspect of discipling, that of mentoring.

**Mentoring**

The idea of mentoring is implicit in discipling which occurs in the relationship between a more mature Christian and the newer disciple. “Life transference occurs when a person shares wisdom, knowledge, experience and maturity with another” (Coppedge 1989:61). The apprenticeship principles already present in the tribal culture will provide the contextual basis upon which such Christian discipling/mentoring concepts could be applied. Timothy O’Connel says, “...the nature of this relationship and the role of the mentor are consistent: he or she is a person who introduces the protégé into adult life, ‘show him or her the ropes,’ and perhaps actually facilitates entrance into the adult world through sponsorship, introductions, and referrals” (1998:89).

Jesus is the best example of this type of discipling. “When Jesus walked among humankind there was a certain simplicity to being his disciple. Primarily it meant to go with him, in an attitude of study, obedience, and imitation. There were no correspondence courses” (Willard 1988:260). Coleman states that this type of discipling inevitably results in the multiplication of disciples. “For as learners mature in the character of
Jesus, they inevitably become involved in His ministry of discipleship; and as their disciples repeat the process, through multiplication the nations will come to know Him whom to know aright is life everlasting” (1989:9).

Eims affirms the importance of personal example in discipling. “If we want to see a certain performance or certain attitude develop in those with whom we are working, we must remember the tremendous power of the personal example” (1978:44). Garrison sees this modeling and mentoring as crucial in church planting as well.

CPM [Church Planting Movement] practitioners have learned, *never do anything by yourself; always bring a brother along with you so you can model and mentor as you go*. In every instance the aim is to transfer the driving force of the vision into the hearts and lives of those being reached. (2004:187)

Finding better methods to teach oral people Christian truths is not the complete answer. If we only focus on the teaching material and methods, we will be faced with many character issues in our emerging new leadership. There have already been incidents of moral failure and lack of financial accountability. So part of a new strategy must be one-on-one discipling and mentoring by mature spiritual leaders. Catherine Stonehouse’s *Patterns in Moral Development*, are applicable here.

In matters of faith we really have no choice but to assist and not to force, for faith is not real unless it is a freely chosen commitment… Applying love and justice in our complex, changing world calls for a personal understanding of moral
principles. Only when persons have explored, questioned, and tested the rules do they come to understand the principles behind the rules and make those principles their own. (1980:82)

This focus on spiritual formation of the new leaders will take us forward in preventing such spiritual failures.

Hunter found this type of spiritual guidance in the discipling of the early Celts.

You spent time with your *anamchara*, that is, your ‘soul friend’ – not a superior like a ‘spiritual director,’ but a peer with whom you were vulnerable and accountable; to whom you made confession; from whom you received penance; who both supported and challenged you. (2000:48)

Implicit in this spiritual relationship is the important aspect of accountability. “Accountability seems to be one of the key aspects in growing as a Christian and one of the key aspects that is missing from many people’s lives” (Peace 2003:22).

Part of this focus on spiritual formation can take place in the apprenticeship model. This has already been mentioned as a model to learn through practical hands-on experience. For new church leaders, these spiritual and practical dimensions are critical. Principles from Golden Gate Baptist Seminary’s Supervised Ministry could be applied here. Supervised Ministry is a student internship program with intense evaluation and reflection at several levels of the student’s ministry. The emerging leader or
ministry student has a mentor/supervisor, spiritual advisor, lay consultation committee, and peer group of other young leaders in this program (McCarty 1978: 65-66).

Practical knowledge of ministry leadership as well as spiritual maturity formation should take place in such a program. Discovering spiritual gifts is an important part of such a discipling process.

Therefore, we are not to ask God to give us some capacity we do not possess; rather, we are to discover the gifts he has given us, and minister on the basis of those gifts. He has reserved a specific ministry for each one of us, and we will perform that ministry out of a sense of overflow, not oughtness, when we naturally use our gifts. (Neighbour 1974:10)

This ministry praxis and spiritual formation along with the cognitive oral teaching methods mentioned earlier complete the three important aspects of the "convergence model" from A Well-Furnished Heart. This model includes the three areas of "cognitive (factual knowledge), experiential (skill-based), and affective (reflective intuitive based knowledge or values)" (Flynn, et al. 2002:201). The desire is that each of these three areas will be present in disciple-making. With these discipleship ideals, let us now look at the reality of discipleship.

Actual Discipling

This equipping and teaching falls short in many cases, unfortunately. In this section we will first look at where discipling has fallen short, and then
consider how we might improve in discipling efforts. Luke and Carman describe the lack of discipleship in Indian villages:

Lack of systematic teaching by presbyters and evangelists is a major cause for this persistence of 'pervasive Hinduism' or 'village religion'. What is still more important, however, is that such teaching as there is sets forth a new 'law' which the village Christians are exhorted to follow, without the exhorter having much confidence that they will actually do so. (1968:168)

This is not a phenomenon of the mission field, alone. Barna shows that the American church is not committed to discipleship either.

In a recent nationwide survey we asked people to describe their goals in life. Almost nine out of ten adults described themselves as "Christian." Four out of ten said they were personally committed to Jesus Christ, had confessed their sins, and believed they will go to heaven after they die because of God's grace provided through Jesus' death and resurrection. But not one of the adults we interviewed said that their goal in life was to be a committed follower of Jesus Christ or to make disciples. (2001:7-8)

So, first discipleship has been neglected.

When discipling has been done, often it has not been done well.

Chinchen describes the problem of using Western methods in non-Western contexts.

Unfortunately, some missionaries insist on using evangelism and discipleship methods that, while effective in the West, are impotent in Africa [and other overseas contexts] because they are designed and developed for individualistic societies (e.g., a six-week crash course, door-to-door evangelism, distribution of
tracts, phone evangelism, one-on-one methods, etc.). (2000:474)

These include the many Western discipleship programs. Having a plan for discipleship is important, but often we take it to the extreme.

There seem to be two extremes when it comes to helping another grow in his walk with God. One extreme says the Christian life is primarily relationship, and therefore if you just love someone he will grow and mature. The other extreme says you can’t build without plans, and you must have a set of well-defined training plans for a new Christian. Plans assure direction and continuity. (Raysbrook 1990:28)

The problem we face in discipleship is not so much theological, but rather relating to the culture of those we are trying to reach and disciple. “The greatest barriers to effective discipleship and evangelism are not theological—they are cultural. We do not know how to bridge back effectively to the non-Christian culture” (Aldrich 1981:39). Aldrich, although writing to the American community predominantly, understands the importance of “becoming all things to all people” (1 Corinthians 9:22) in discipleship. “Someone who is effective in evangelism and discipleship always possesses the ability to become. He can become a naturalized citizen of another person’s world, walking in that person’s shoes, seeing life from his or her perspective” (1981:40).

Aldrich goes on to identify four ways we often respond to another’s culture in terms of discipleship.
Christians have developed four basic responses to the secular culture around them, and your effectiveness in discipleship is directly related to which response you choose.

The first response is rejection. The Christian says, "I don't want to have anything to do with secular culture." We see this particularly in the monastic movements which sought withdrawal from the world. Those who respond this way are committed to maintaining a radical Christian difference, and rightly so. But because they have no radical identification with the lost, they cultivate no redemptive relationships.

The immersionists, on the other hand, identify extensively with the lost. But they lose their saltiness and sell themselves short.

The third and most common approach to culture is split adaptation. On Sunday these people are into the Christian culture, maintaining the radical difference. But not on Monday. They say, "Well, you know, if you're going to make it out there you've got to play their game. You've got to cut corners like everybody else. I don't like to be out there doing it, but that's the way the system works."

...Finally we have the correct approach to culture: critical participation. If we are to be effectively involved in marking men and women for Jesus Christ we will always struggle with the tension between being a citizen of heaven and living in this world. For God has not called us out of culture; rather, we are to live within the culture in which he has placed us. We are to be spiritually distinct, but not socially segregated. (1981:40)

This idea of critical participation seems to be the dividing line between good and bad discipling.

Contextualization in Discipling

In this section I will divide the remaining discipleship literature into two categories. First, we have discipling which is based on
Western, individualistic, literate, and quick-resulting methods. The
many discipleship manuals and programs available generally fall into
this category. Then, we have discipling which is based on group or
community relationships, on indigenous principles, applicable to oral
learners, and committed to long-term growth.

Much of the popular literature on discipleship is extremely
individualistic. “Discipleship focuses on the *inner self*, which consists of
our ideas, beliefs, and emotions. Character grows out of our *inner lives*, and
it governs what we *think and feel*. As our *character* is transformed our
behavior is transformed as well” (Willard Interview 1998:27). To
individualism add Western, logical thinking patterns. “Disciplemaking is
the *logical* and caring thing to do with new Christians” (Adsit 1988:23). To
individualistic, Western logic add a literate based program. “The most
important goal of follow-up is to teach the young Christian to *feed himself
from the Word of God*” (Henrichsen 1974:86). (The italics in this paragraph
are mine.) Each of these quotes represent sixty years of discipleship theory
and programs which all emerged during and following World War II.

Rinehart has uncovered this history quite well.

The modern discipleship movement is really the foster child of
World War II. Young, motivated men caught in the life-and-
death atmosphere of the war responded eagerly to the gospel. It
was only natural that their orientation to Christianity was
flavored by the uniformity and discipline of military life. This emphasis served well the need of the hour: to give soldiers the message of the Savior before the war might cost them their lives.

After the war, young veterans brought their vision for discipleship back to campuses, farms, and factories as they exchanged their weapons for books and their equipment for jobs and careers. Many came home with a vision for the spiritual needs of the world and a distaste for Christianity that seemed soft, halfhearted, or undisciplined.

At least three threads run throughout the history of the modern discipleship movement that arose from World War II:
- It was designed to quickly train an individual to walk with Christ and to reach out to others.
- It focused on the basics and the generics of the Christian life.
- Tools, programs, and methods were seen as essential to the process.

Our unconscious thought was, *we could impact masses of people and change the world if we could get everyone to go through this process and pass it on to others.* (Rinehart 1990:8)

With an understanding of these origins of the modern discipleship movement, we begin to understand the required discipline, regimented organization, and very “cut and dried” programs. Even the language is militaristic. “The life of discipleship is a life of discipline… A disciple is a disciplined person” (Henrichsen 1974:17-18). “… A growing Christian has four basic needs. He needs protection, fellowship, food, and training” (Eims 1978:63). The Navigators organization, a direct product of World War II,
had a big influence on the terminology, programs and illustrations of the discipleship movement.

The *Navigators* have described discipleship with an illustration called The Wheel. This simple but effective illustration has been used for more than fifty years to help young Christians get a clear picture of what they are called to do as disciples. Each part of the illustration represents one aspect of the Christian life. (Raysbrook 1991:43-44)

The many discipleship manuals follow the same individualistic, literate based programming. The title of Broger’s program, *Self-Confrontation: A Manual for In-Depth Discipleship*, and its concept of self smacks of individualism. Broger claims that “These biblical principles apply to all of life’s circumstances, in any culture, and in every part of the world regardless of the age in which one lives” (Broger 1994:vii). This is true, but the teaching is presented through the Western eye and culture. The biblical content may be good, but it is not comprehensible to the non-Westerner. In *CrossWalk: A Discipleship Journal*, the aspects of the Quiet Time were preparation, Bible reading and study, reflection and application, prayer, additional reading, and writing (Hughes and Allen 1995:4). Little could be used by an oral person. Even the prayer section was empty pages for journal entries. A similar manual is the *Discipleship Now Manual*. Again the content is good, but based completely on a literary, Western education level. “Since you are reading this manual, you are probably the
key leader for planning and conducting this event” (Hall and Black 1988:11). Little beyond some general principles from Scripture, couched in very Western terms and themes, were applicable to our situation with oral learners in Bangladesh.

Now let us look at what does apply to our situation. The militaristic idea of discipling as a mass producing assembly line will not fit in the South Asian context. “Discipling someone is not a listing of steps to follow. It is not simply the transference of information, but rather imparting of one’s life to another” (Hadidian 1979:57). While many of the Scriptural principles are sound, I question if Jesus would have been comfortable with some of the current discipling methods. In order to consider how Jesus taught his disciples we must look “[t]hrough the eyes of Jesus and... see God and man, heaven and earth, life and death, as he saw them, and to find, if we may, in that vision something which will satisfy the whole man in mind and heart and will” (Manson 1967:5-6).

Manson shows that Jesus’ teaching was indigenous to the society in which he lived and discipled. Manson affirms that Jesus taught in the common vernacular of Aramaic (1967:50), employed the use of Hebrew poetic form (1967:56), but it was the use of the parable which was most striking and powerful in Jesus’ teaching (1976:57). “A parable is a picture
in words of some piece of human experience, actual or imagined... This picture portrays either an ethical type for our admiration or reprobation, or some principle of the rule of God in the world, or it does both things at once” (1967:80). I believe the parables which Jesus used 2000 years ago in both form and content, are much more useful in our context than the Western discipleship manuals of today.

We can also find more applicable to our context from Jesus’ methods of discipling. First, Jesus focused on a few.

The careful, painstaking education of the disciples secured that the Teacher’s influence on the world should be permanent, that His Kingdom should be founded on the rock of deep and indestructible convictions in the minds of a few, not on the shifting sands of superficial evanescent impressions on the minds of the many. (Bruce 1988:13)

The individualistic patterns in the West do not fit the mindset of animistic peoples.

This individualized formulation of the gospel, called conversion theology, presents some biblical truths but does not portray a holistic picture of God’s working in the world... Individualistic thought forms are diametrically opposed to animistic perspectives. While individualists believe they can chart their own courses, animists believe that they are living in an interconnected world. They feel intimately connected to families, some of whom are living and some of whom have already passed on to a spiritual realm. Animists also believe they are connected to the spiritual world. (Rheenen 1991:130-131)
It seems that rather than an individualistic program, Jesus used a relational, community-based discipling model in the form of a small group.

_The discipler's primary vehicle is the small group._ Jesus spent many months establishing his disciples in God’s word, prayer, fellowship, and witnessing. He succeeded so well in this process because he had these men do everything together — in groups. (Hull 1997:128)

In addition to focusing on a few in a relational, group setting, disciple-making was not a quick process.

The time which Jesus invested in these few disciples was so much more by comparison to that given to others that it can only be regarded as a deliberate strategy. He actually spent more time with His disciples than with everybody else in the world put together… (Coleman 1963:42-43)

Later in this chapter, I will discuss the problem of the missionaries in Bangladesh focusing on the quick short term results of conversion, but neglecting the painstaking, long term process of making disciples.

Occasionally missionaries feel that when a peasant is converted his job is finished. Missionaries need to understand that for Christianity to become a complete cultural system, in every area of life, we must encourage a lasting process of discipleship. Conversion is quick and exciting. Discipleship will take time. (Plueddeman 1975:85)

As Coleman states, maturing in Christ is not a quick process. “Maturing in Christ takes time… Disciples must have devoted Christian friends to follow, and this can only be facilitated by being together over a period of time” (Coleman 1987:76).
So, as we consider our South Asian, tribal context, we find some principles which we can apply to the realm of discipleship.

The primary issue (at least in south Asian Hindu contexts, where the vast majority of Hindus live) is that of community identity. While an extreme polarization between Western individualism and Eastern community-consciousness must be avoided, it is certainly true that a Hindu's identity is very much more tied to a social community than is a Westerner's identity. It is a tragedy of Indian Christian history that discipleship to Christ has always (with very few exceptions) been defined and practiced as involving the transfer of community identity from one's birth community to a new community. (Richard 2001:314)

In addition to this very important issue of community-consciousness, there are already in place in South Asia Hindu society indigenous forms of discipling.

In our country, there is also the concept of what is called sat guru. The sat guru is one who himself is perfected and has experienced fully the highest spiritual attainments. Therefore, he is able to help someone who has entered into a diksa or a bond of discipleship with him. The student acknowledges the authority of his guru and is attached to him. The proper term for this student is shishiya. The gugu is able to take the shishiya by the hand and lead him as it were from spiritual darkness into spiritual light. Only a sat guru, one who is perfect, can help a shishiya and liberate him from spiritual bondage. (David 1998:13)

It is interesting to contrast David’s (an Indian’s) idea of discipleship with that of Heinrichsen’s (an American’s) mentioned above. Again Heinrichsen uses the common military disciplinary terms: “The life of
discipleship is a life of discipline... A disciple is a disciplined person” (1974:17-18). Compare this with meek, servant terms: “As disciples, whatever our status in society, everyday we have to function with the attitude of meekness and servanthood. If we are unable to do this, then we are not disciples” (David 1998:46). We find truth in both of these, but the emphasis is obviously culturally conditioned.

In addition to a communal form of humility in seeking to learn from Christ, we see the necessity of a holistic approach in South Asia. “For discipleship to be whole-life, it must move beyond the program orientation of the past. It must be process-oriented, not product-oriented” (Rinehart 1990:9). Richard understands the Hindu mindset well.

A holistic contextual approach to Hindus is the antidote to these inadequate approaches... Cultural (and some religious) symbols with their dynamic meanings must be understood and adopted or adapted appropriately.

But particularly the gospel is only contextual in India when it enters the social structure and is lived out by disciples within existing sociological communities. There is little hope for penetration of the gospel through the thousands of Hindu communities as long as the leaven of a new disciple of Jesus is removed from the lump of the natural Hindu community and placed into another (‘Christian’) community with different cultural norms. (Richard 2001:316)
In addition to the holistic approach, Richard mentions that culturally understood symbols should be used in discipling. This brings us to the study at hand: using symbols and ceremonies in discipling.

Finn has found that an elaborate ritual and rite of passage was used in discipling in the early church. "Unlike predecessors and contemporaries, the catechumenate was a remarkably detailed and extended ritual of initiation, in fact, a striking rite of passage from Roman society to Christian community" (1989:70). This was a process beginning with separation from normal Roman society, three years of oral instruction including various exorcism rituals and teachings, and culminating with an elaborate baptism ceremony initiating the new members into the Christian community. "Given Christian liminality, one should find a flourishing ritual life among early Christians, and, in fact, one does from the very beginning" (1989:71). Finn goes on to say that due to the severe persecution this ritualistic form of discipling was, in part, responsible for the survival of Christianity.

Christian survival in Rome had a good deal to do with the catechumenate. Its rituals accounted in large measure of the social stamina of the city's Christians... The survival of Christianity before Constantine depended heavily on the development of an effective catechumenate, a powerful ritual process. (1989:80)
This rounds out the review of literature. Let us now move from the early church’s use of ritual in discipling to our current context of discipleship in Bangladesh.

**Discipleship and the Christian Community in Bangladesh**

Now we need to look at what all of this means for our context of the tribal people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Before we look at the findings of the constructed ceremony described in the last chapter, we need to look briefly at the history of discipleship. First I will discuss the barriers to fruitful discipleship. Then I will describe movements in discipling which have brought me to the present study.

**The Barriers to Discipleship**

As part of the background, I will list the possible barriers to fruitful discipleship. The first barrier already dealt with is the fact that we have all but ignored the majority of our people by focusing on those who are literate. Around 80% of the tribal population are “oral people” (see definition of orality, page 6) who give preference to oral forms of communication. Our emphasis on literate, often Western, discipling methods has been a barrier to the oral masses becoming intrinsic members of the Christian community.
The second perceived barrier is the dependency created when churches rely on Western funds. Dependency is common within the South Asian society even without the situation created by wealthy foreigners. "...Each low caste man's own landlord are "father and mother" to them, and it is to them they turn in all difficulties. This relieves them of the necessity of thinking ahead and providing for the future, though it exposes them to utter dependency on the higher castes" (Fuchs 1976:46).

In 1957 Southern Baptists (later referred to as Bangladesh Baptist Mission – BBM) were invited to then East Pakistan by Australian Baptists essentially to take over their unproductive Australian Baptist Missionary Society (ABMS) stations. This gave the Australians the opportunity to focus on their work with the more responsive Garo tribe in northern areas. For the first twenty years the Southern Baptist Mission's successes and converts in particular were few and far between. In 1971 Bangladesh was born through a bloody revolution and separation from Pakistan. During the war months thousands –particularly Hindus and other minorities– fled to refugee camps across the border in India. In those camps many Christians ministered to the refugees. After they returned to their new homeland, Bangladesh, there was a new openness to Christianity. In the mid to late 1970s, beginning with the low-caste Bengali Hindus, many came to Christ and new churches were
planted. Later, in the mid 1980s, this movement spread to the non-Bengali, tribal groups.

When God's spirit began to move, it was hard for the missionaries to resist the temptation to "encourage" church growth through Christian generosity. This was accentuated by the fact that Bangladesh was and continues to be one of the poorest countries in the world. Building the newly-planted church buildings, funding Christian children's education, and other forms of assistance became common place. Unfortunately, this has created a relationship of dependency that has been extremely difficult to stop. The dependency is not only financial. It affects the forms of the church as well. Missionaries and local Christians, as Andrew Kirk says, "have all made the mistake of allowing the faith to become identified with a particular passing view of reality" (Kirk 1983:13). The perception that Christians are supported and thus dependent on foreign funds and culture has been another barrier to the non-Christian tribals having respect for Christians and seeing the light of their good deeds.

The third barrier which I believe we face in seeing indigenous discipleship is the reliance on paid national evangelistic staff. Bangladesh, an Islamic state, has never been a place where foreigners have had freedom to be in the forefront of evangelism. Therefore national Christian
evangelists were hired to plant churches. Again, the impoverished situation of the people coupled with a new openness to the gospel in the late 1970s and early 1980s influenced the Baptist Mission to take this approach. One positive outcome of using national evangelists is that the churches are much more indigenous than they would have been had a Western missionary planted them. A situation of dependency upon the evangelist, however, has rendered the laity unequipped and unmotivated for evangelism. Pastors or evangelists who are paid from foreign funds can actually be a hindrance to an indigenous movement. In his booklet, *Church Planting Movements*, David Garrison (2000:43) states that for such a movement to happen "unpaid and non-hierarchical leadership" should be used. The paid evangelist has been a barrier to Christian laymen and laywomen being a witness and light to their non-believing neighbors.

Directly related to the paid evangelist is the resulting laity who are untrained and lack a vision for reaching their own people. Part of the "job security" for the evangelist was to become a professional church planter and keep the lay people and missionaries relying upon him for this service. Likewise the layperson missed the biblical mandates and saw witnessing and forming the new believers into a church as the "evangelist's job." Part of
this is the fact that Christians in many places simply are not attracting non-believers to the church. Howard Snyder describes this well.

Many churches do not share the gospel effectively because their communal experience of the gospel is too weak and tasteless to be worth sharing. It does not excite the believer to the point where he wants to witness, and (as the believer uncomfortably suspects) it is not all that attractive to the unbeliever. But where Christian fellowship demonstrates the gospel, believers come alive and sinners get curious and want to know what the secret is. (1977:125)

As Michael Green points out, in the early church the lay believers attracted others by their lifestyle as they reached out to unbelievers. “Communicating the faith was not regarded as the preserve of the very zealous or of the officially designated evangelists. Evangelism was the prerogative and the duty of every Church member” (1970:274). A great deal can be done in helping the tribal laity discover their gifts and crucial position in reaching their remote neighbors for Christ. “The laity, in fact, have special responsibility to penetrate the secular sphere with the spirit of Christ, and to leaven it with the yeast of the gospel…” (Dulles 1987:214). Matthaei believed that this was part of our call as disciples. “Loving God and loving neighbor is our call to Christian discipleship. This combination of personal holiness through works of piety and social holiness through works of mercy provides a basic framework for faith formation in the faith community” (2000:52). An immense, untapped resource lies waiting to be utilized for
God’s purposes in these largely oral lay people. Again, Snyder notes the importance of a discipled laity that reaches out in both evangelism and good works.

Discipling produces workers, ministries and structures which focus on evangelism, justice or both, depending on the Holy Spirit’s choosing. In other words, discipling brings forth effective, Spirit-guided evangelism and social witness, both of which find their justification, focus and goal in the kingdom of God. (1985:83)

The lack of discipleship and training empowered by the Holy Spirit has been a barrier to the masses becoming Christian.

A fourth barrier to discipleship is that the Bangladesh Baptist Fellowship (BBF), does not strongly encourage evangelism and church planting. The BBF is the national convention of over 400 churches organized and administered completely by Bangladeshi nationals. The BBF is a distinct entity from the Bangladesh Baptist Mission (BBM) which is made up of Southern Baptist Missionaries and their national staff members. The three missions: the BBM, Australian Baptist Missionary Society (AMBS), and the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society (NZBMS) all work as partners with the BBF. Most of the churches were planted by the missions and then constituted under the BBF convention.

The fact that the BBF currently does not encourage evangelism and church planting stifles the vibrant discipleship we seek in which evangelism
is an inherent part. George Hunter’s findings with the ancient Celtic Christians are applicable here. In their Christian society, which was very effectively evangelistic, first Celtic inquirers were invited to join the church community. They were involved in the ministry and life of the community and discipling took place. Then later, as they observed, learned and “caught” Christianity, they were converted (2000:53).

The BBF has grown from 16 churches in 1978 to over 400 presently. They accuse the BBM, often with good grounds, of planting the churches and then dumping them on the BBF. Their focus has been on nurturing and strengthening existing churches rather than on starting new ones or reaching those who have not heard the gospel. My perception is that an unnecessary dichotomy – and even a battle – between evangelism and discipleship has consequently been created.

The BBF began as a primarily Bengali Hindu background denomination. Remember that Bengalis are an Indo-European ethnic group whereas most tribals are Tibeto-Mongolian. Initially in the 1970s and early 1980s new churches were planted mainly among low caste Hindus of the same background as the original BBF Christians. Later in the 1980s, however, this spread to the non-Bengali people whose numbers are beginning to surpass the Bengalis (yet Bengalis still hold the key positions
of leadership). The racial and power issues, which are glaring at the Christian community from outside, have plagued the BBF to a far lesser degree and yet indirectly affect discipleship.

Dynamic church growth and evangelism has been the focus of the BBM to the neglect of church nurturing and discipleship. Again, after twenty years of seeing little happen, when the doors to church planting opened the missionaries became totally focused on starting new churches, rather than nurturing established ones. All of these factors have over-burdened the BBF, and the result is that the leadership is more interested in building up existing churches than starting new ones. Pickett would disagree with this desire to slow the church growth process.

Generally speaking, slow growth indicates something wrong with the quality of life of the church. It both reflects and produces churches that lack either the urge to make disciples or the triumphant faith necessary to translate such urge into effective endeavor. (1963:11)

As stated in the beginning, if proper discipling (which includes evangelism) were in place, many of the barriers to people coming into God’s light would be removed.

**Movements in the Right Direction**

To overcome these barriers and see a movement among the tribals to Christ, appropriate discipleship and leadership training will be one of the
key elements. But, what is an appropriate form of discipling new believers and training future leaders? In this section I will look at aspects of the history of discipleship and church growth which corresponds to the above barriers.

In the early days of the BBM, the thrust of the mission work (including that of the ABMS and NZBMS) came in the form of “Reading Rooms.” These were storefront buildings strategically located in towns and cities where “inquirers” could come and read Christian literature, and be counseled by Christians who ran the Reading Rooms. There was no specific target group such as Hindu, Muslim, or tribal background. Obviously in a largely oral country, Reading Rooms overlooked the major population, and tells of the highly literary preference of the mission work.

Results were few and far between. Conversions were made individually in accordance to the Western way of decision-making and pattern of evangelism. Converts whether they were Hindu or Muslim were generally rejected by their former society, and often forced to depend on the mission and/or Christian community for support. Discipling took place in the churches and Reading Rooms, often staffed by converts. The discipling was based completely on Western literate forms. There seems to be very little about the Reading Rooms which was culturally appropriate. The whole
idea and structure clearly followed a Western system and strategy. The outcome and results of the Reading Rooms were correspondingly bleak.

Under the direction of Dr. Cal Guy, professor from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, the BBM and BBF convention implemented a new strategy in the 1970's. A simple, easy-to-read, compilation of the gospels, called "The Man Who Gave His Life" was produced and used in village "Reading Groups." Mission and BBF (national) evangelists began such groups in the various mission areas among low caste Hindus. Often there was only one literate "reader" in the group, so "listening groups" would have probably been a more accurate term. The 16 churches in the Bangladesh Baptist Fellowship in 1978 have grown to over 400 hundred in currently.

This growth has been for the most part among low-caste Hindus. Targeting specific sections of specific people groups with more indigenous methods has born fruit. As McNee has found, "...when missionaries have evangelized within one caste or tribe and allowed the Christian message to flow along caste and tribal lines, then there has been great growth in the Church of Jesus Christ" (1975:25). The Reading Groups were particularly successful where Christians brought the message to their Hindu relatives. Following family lines has been the main system in reaching new areas.
These Reading Groups in many villages formed the nucleus for new churches. When 16 adults had professed faith in Christ, a baptism took place and the new church was formed.

During this same period the College of Christian Theology Bangladesh (CCTB) was founded. With the new church growth beginning, the missions encouraged CCTB to institute a very grass roots level of TEE for the many village pastors and lay leaders who would never be able to attend the CCTB residential program. Though still a very literate program, the TEE courses were written on a third grade reading level which made them useful to more of the population than anything previously used. The TEE courses also gave the village leaders material with which they could disciple their new congregations.

In the late 1980s Chronological Bible Storying was introduced, and soon “Storying Groups” replaced the village “Reading Groups.” In the chronological storying method, a series of thirty to fifty or more stories from the Bible is chosen. After a few lessons laying a foundation of what the Bible is and of the Christian view of the spirit world, one begins with the creation story and works through the stories of the Bible chronologically. In each lesson, the focus is on the attributes of God and also on what one can
learn and use in daily lives. Though initially it was introduced as an evangelistic tool, later it was used effectively for discipling.

In this program, the participants memorize one or two Bible stories in each of the meetings and take them back to their respective areas. In many cases, they have opportunities to preach the stories in a worship service, share them in a youth Bible study, or teach them to children in a “Sunday school” setting. Many of the tribals also share the stories with non-Christian neighbors. So it comes back to being an evangelistic tool in the community as well as a discipling method in their churches.

Village reading groups and later Chronological Bible Storying groups brought evangelistic methods from a literate, Western approach to a more indigenous approach. This newer approach seems to have been more effective in reaching all types of peoples in Bangladesh. There is evidence that this has been a major step in the right direction, but more needs to be done to reach and train the masses of oral people we have missed. In Chapter 4 I mentioned the steps we have taken in using ceremonies for discipling the oral villagers in our tribal areas. Now let us look at the findings of discipling in the form of ceremony for oral learners.
Discipling through Ceremony for Oral Learners – Findings from Research

A description of the constructed event was given in Chapter 4. Following the event each of the six focus groups were interviewed. The findings of these groups are quite revealing and will be given first. Then after each of the two events the Hermeneutical Community made an initial evaluation, and then made an overall evaluation. These will conclude the findings from the research.

Focus Group Findings

The first question posed to the focus groups was, "What teaching did you get from the ceremony?" (See Appendix D for Post-Ceremony Interview Schedule For Focus Group Participants.) The responses included first the objective name of the particular teaching or story being taught, and then also more subjective, theoretical principles gained. The two highest responses which surfaced in five of the six groups were: (1) "Creation – (including the devil and the spirits), and "God created me" as one Tripura woman put it (Post Focus Group Bondarbon 2004:1-2); and (2) Jesus’ birth and miracles showing that Jesus is God. (This covered the teaching from Session 1 and Session 3.) The next highest response, mentioned in four of the focus groups, was “Elijah and the Prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel showing that God is almighty.” (This was from the teaching in Session 2.)
In two of the focus groups, it was mentioned that they received teaching that they have power over the demonic world. “Now we see that we can overcome barriers and have power over demons” were comments that were made (Post Focus Group Feni 2004:1). This teaching came from Elijah and the Prophets of Baal in Session 2 and Jesus’ Miracles in Session 3. It was interesting that this neglected area of teaching on the spirit world, identified by the Hermeneutical Community, made an impact on the participants.

The modern day “Changed Life” drama only surfaced in one of the focus groups as a response to teaching received. There was one comment: “We were really able to learn through drama” (Post Focus Group Kagrachuri Chakma 2004:1). This, however, could apply to any of the above-mentioned teachings as each had elements of drama in them. So, the participants seemed to connect teaching received with the participatory drama based on Scripture and not on the modern day drama nor on the commitment ceremony. The enthusiasm, confidence and accuracy of responses present a case that the event was successful in transferring the desired teaching. For an overview of the first question, see Table 2 below.
Table 2: Focus Group Response to Question # 1 – Teaching Received –

(What teaching did you get from the ceremony?)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses:</th>
<th>Group Responding Affirmatively:</th>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creation of Spirits and Earth</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus’ Birth and Miracles</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elijah on Mt. Carmel</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power over Demons/Spirits</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Changed Life” Drama</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that the numbered columns in Tables 2 through 7 do not correspond to particular focus groups. The tables present the number of times a particular issue came up in various focus groups.

The second question was, “How does this compare to the teaching you received from previous Christian seminars or other teaching you have received?” Each of the six groups strongly affirmed that this teaching was very different from previous teaching. Also mentioned in all six groups was the participatory and ceremonial aspects of the teaching being different.

One participant affirmed,

We never did the candle ceremony – so that the light of the Holy Spirit would shine in our lives... The Tripura are really afraid of giving promises, but the way we held fire in our hands - it is also dangerous. So it gave more significance to our promise. When I made this promise with a candle it made an impression that I will keep. (Post Focus Group Bondarben 2004:1-2)
A second area in which the participants found the event’s teaching different was its appropriateness for oral learners. This was affirmed in five of the six focus groups. “We never knew that those who can not read can learn” was a comment from one group (Post Focus Group Rangamati 2004:1). It is interesting to note that in the Pre-Ceremony focus Group interviews all six groups affirmed that one does not need to know how to read in order to be a true Christian. “Those who cannot read can hear from those who can” (Pre-Focus Group Kagrachuri Chakma 2004:2).

Nevertheless, through the oral teaching methods in the constructed event there was a new sense that oral people “can learn.” While they already affirmed that an oral person could become a Christian, it seems that until now Christian learning or discipling was reserved for the educated. This empowered the oral participants in new ways for their Christian walk.

Here I will also insert the findings of question number eight: “Could an oral person learn from/understand such a ceremony?” To this in all six groups there was an enthusiastic, resounding “Yes!” There was a side comment in one of the groups that the teaching needed to be in the mother tongue of all of the participants in order for oral people to learn. Two of the groups also mentioned that educated people could also learn and enjoy such teaching.
In four of the focus groups drama surfaced as an element that differentiated this teaching from others. “Previous teaching was more for educated [literates] and we could not catch everything. Through dramas and ceremonies we easily learned” (Post Focus Group Shylet 2004:1). Also in three of the focus groups it was mentioned that this teaching and memorization will remain in their memory. “There was a difference. What we hear or read we forget, but that which we do, we remember. The things we did practically will remain in our heart. The things we have in our mind, we can share with others. Uneducated [people] can learn this way” (Post Focus Group Feni 2004:2). The table below gives an overview of the responses to questions two and eight:

Table 3: Focus Group Response to Questions # 2 and 8 – Comparison/Orality –

(How does this compare to the teaching you received from previous Christian seminars (literate) or other teaching you have received? Could an oral person learn from/understand such a ceremony?)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Groups Responding Affirmatively:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different from Previous</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory Element</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral Understanding</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral Appropriate</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drama Element</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory Element</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literate Appropriate</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother Tongue</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The next question explored the likes and dislikes of the ceremony. The element which was most liked and surfaced in all six of the focus groups was the dramatic element of the event. “We liked the dramatic reenactments of Jesus’ birth. We especially liked the creation story in Bengali and Chakma, but when we did the play we learned and enjoyed it very much. We can do the same thing in our own village” (Post Focus Group Kagrachuri Chakma 2004:2). The last sentence gives evidence of the reproducibility of the teaching which can up in three of the focus groups. The appropriateness of the teaching for oral people also came up in three of the groups.

Also in the above quote is evidence that the participatory aspect was enjoyed. This was mentioned in two of the groups. A Tripura woman mentioned, “Before in all meetings, as women, we keep quite, but this time we spoke and took part, and we really received a lot of encouragement through this” (Post Focus Group Bondarbon 2004:2). The candle lighting commitment ceremony was mentioned in two of the groups as well. The following were mentioned in only one of the groups as likes: memorizing the mantra, the food and camp facility, the teaching being in their mother tongue, and the showing of the Jesus Film. (In the second constructed
events there was a showing of the Jesus Film as an optional activity following the close of the last evening session.)

There were no dislikes which surfaced more than twice in the focus group interviews. Those which came up in two groups were: (1) games or recreation needed to be included as part of the event; (2) the participatory dramas needed to be followed up with Bible study or storying teaching; and (3) there needed to be more time for the individual focus groups to prepare for their part in the event. (The time between the event planning of the Hermeneutical Community and getting word of specific responsibilities to each focus group before the actual event was limited.)

Also mentioned in only one focus group as dislikes were: (1) they would have liked having the dramas done outside; (2) they would have liked having early morning prayer time included in the event; (3) there were some language problems particularly in the groups with multiple languages; (4) they would have liked to have films included (this prompted the showing in the second group); and (5) they would have liked to have had the event in their own village. Below in Table 4 find an overview of the likes and dislikes of the event.
Table 4: Focus Group Response to Question # 3 – Likes and Dislikes

(What did you like/dislike about the ceremony?)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Groups Responding Affirmatively:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Likes:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drama</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candle Ceremony</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memorization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food and Setting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother Language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus Film</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dislikes:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Games</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Follow-Up Bible Study</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Preparation</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Held Outside</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Early Morning Prayer</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Films</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not in Own Village</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Questions four and five dealt with the *communitas* that developed among the participants. (See Appendix D.) In five of the six groups the participants stressed that the teaching and fellowship created a sense that they were “all one in Christ.” One new Meithei believer mentioned, “We were all learning together. We liked this. Usually we do everything in our own separate cultures. Here we felt close together because we are one in Christ. We liked being together and we received joy and encouragement” (Post Focus Group Shylet 2004:2). Three of the six focus groups mentioned
that they had “become like family.” A Mru man said, “We always have
good relations, but through the drama we became like one family. Being part
of the drama made me really happy” (Post Focus Group Bondarbon 2004:2).
In one group there was a comment that there were some problems due to the
different languages. Also in one group it was mentioned that the feelings
among others in the group were not different from other meetings.

Table 5: Focus Group Response to Question # 4 and 5 – Communitas

(What were your feelings towards the other participants in the ceremony?
Was this different than feelings you have had in other group meetings?)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses:</th>
<th>Groups Responding Affirmatively:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One in Christ</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Became Family</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Problems</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same as Other Meetings</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“What would non-Christians think of such a ceremony?” was the sixth
question. The most common answer given in four of the six groups was that
non-Christians would like the ceremony and would “understand our beliefs.”
One group expressed, “They could understand better what Christians
believe. They would see the unity of Christians” (Post Focus Group Shylet
2004:2). One group felt that some non-Christians would like it and some
would not. One group also questioned whether or not the present day drama
would be appropriate in the non-Christian context.
The second most common response which came up in three of the groups was that they could invite their non-Christian friends to such an event. One young man from Feni enthusiastically said, “They could really learn. Through the Holy Spirit they would become Christian. If we really prepared a nice drama – immediately they would be baptized. If we could do this in the village, they would learn and become Christians” (Post Focus Group Feni 2004:3). In his excitement he probably exaggerated, but the sense of having found a new way of reaching non-Christian villagers came through.

Table 6: Focus Group Response to Question # 6 – Non-Christian Response

(What would non-Christians think about such a ceremony?)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Groups Responding Affirmatively:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They Would Like Event</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand Beliefs</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could Invite Non-Christian Friends</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioned Use of Drama</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some Like – Some Dislike</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The final question was, “Do you feel a greater commitment to Christ as a result of this experience?” All six groups responded positively that they were more committed. “When I go to the village and see the puja now through the teaching I have proof that we have power through Jesus over such things. We need this type of preaching in our village. If we had it we
could really see a lot happen… (Post Focus Group Bondarbon 2004:4). In four of the groups reproducing such a ceremony and a commitment to evangelizing in the villages was mentioned. Part of this were several rededications and other such new commitments. One Tripura young man said, “Through this meeting I am willing to become a pastor or evangelist” (Post Focus Group Kagrachuri Tripura 2004:3).

In three of the groups participants mentioned making specific commitments to stop drinking wine. Again a Tripura woman said, “Now there is a change. I used to drink a little wine. Now I will get all those evil things out of my house” (Post Focus Group Bondarbon 2004:3). Also in two of the groups the following commitments were mentioned: (1) to give their tithe more faithfully; (2) to be more faithful in attending worship in their local church; (3) to be committed to pray more faithfully. All of these are interesting as there was no specific teaching in any of these areas. Through the ceremony, however, the Holy Spirit seems to have convicted them in each of these areas.

Table 7: Focus Group Response to Question # 9 – Greater Commitment

(Do you feel a greater commitment to Christ as a result of this experience?)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses:</th>
<th>Groups Responding Affirmatively:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5  6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Committed</td>
<td>X X X X X X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelism</td>
<td>X X X X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These findings from the focus groups – the oral participants themselves – are the most telling in determining the effectiveness of the event. In terms of the teachings understood, there are strengths and weaknesses. The teaching on Creation, Elijah, and Jesus’ birth and miracles appears to have been understood and received well. The Changed Life drama and commitment service, however, were not mentioned in the teaching category and thus were not recognized as such. It appears that historical events from the biblical record are easier to grasp than the personal application and symbolic teaching. Nevertheless, the teaching did seem to have a personal impact from the event as a whole.

The event was certainly perceived as very different from previous Christian teaching meetings. The strengths of these differences were described as the participatory and dramatic elements as well as the appropriateness for oral learners. The *communitas* which developed and appropriateness for the greater tribal community was also a particularly strong element. The symbolic elements as well as the memorization of the mantra were mentioned less, and we can assume, therefore, that these were
less appreciated. It could be argued that the drama was appreciated more because of its entertaining value. The fact that the desired teaching was gained through drama, however, would seem to counter this. Though there was no real consensus on weaknesses of the event, several mentioned by smaller numbers of the participants need to be addressed in the future.

Having voiced these strengths and weaknesses, I must add that there was a real sense of excitement over the event by the majority of the participants. The data confirm that the teaching used was more appropriate to oral learners than previously used methods. They were able to grasp and had a desire to pass on the teaching learned through the drama of the ceremony. A family-type feeling of unity in Christ displayed that *communitas* was achieved. Finally a deeper Christian commitment at different levels gave evidence of part of the discipling process we had hoped to achieve. These were the findings from the focus group interviews. In the next section I will present the evaluation of the Hermeneutical Community.

**Hermeneutical Community Evaluation**

The Hermeneutical Community met following each of the two constructed events, and then for a final evaluation. The following represents the discussion on each of the questions of the Hermeneutical Community Post Event Evaluation. (See Appendix E.)
The first question was, "Do you have positive or negative feelings about the ceremony?" The Hermeneutical Community said that people were excited from the beginning to the end. They felt that the meeting was not a problem for anyone – even sitting for long periods. The oral teaching methods were very good for the group. Members of the group affirmed that 90% to 100% of the participants had a very positive experience. They said that the dramas were very good and enjoyable. (Post Hermeneutical Community 2004:1)

There was a relationship between the nice environment of the camp and the good acceptance of the teaching. Many of the participants really liked the food. The group did admit that some of the positive feelings were dependant upon the nice environment, but not all. There were a few different tribal groups together in each event. This was a little difficult due to the difference in language. Many came to such a meeting for the first time, however, and had positive feelings about the event.

The second question discussed the strengths of the ceremony. The results here were congruent with the fifth question regarding what the participants liked about the ceremony. Group participation was seen as a real strength, and was strongly affirmed in both post event evaluations. Ujal Gazi said, "We were worried that they would not participate, but they did"
The ceremonial aspect of the program was the main strength according to the Hermeneutical Community. The commitment service, although relatively simple, was very good for them. Though there was really little preparation time, the whole ceremony went well. They also mentioned that breaking up the program with tea breaks and singing kept the event moving.

Drama was seen as another strength of the event. The participatory aspect mentioned was reflected in the drama as well. Rajamoni Chakma said, “If we teach in this way we can learn more. Through drama they will want to know more. We only preach in the village. When they take part they become more committed” (Post Hermeneutical Community 2004:1). In question number eight, the group believed that the ceremony would be attractive to non-Christians for the same reasons listed above.

Next we discussed the weaknesses of the ceremony. This question also corresponded to the sixth question of problems or aspects that the participants did not like. The greatest weakness voiced by the Hermeneutical Community was the minimal preparation time. Kakul Tripura mentioned, “We had a short amount of time to get organized. It would have been better to have one more day to prepare” (Post Hermeneutical Community 2004:2). Already stated above another weakness
was the occasional language problems due to the different tribes present. Also mentioned was the difficulty some tribals have in expressing their feelings. The music in the event was also seen as a weakness. Very little planning went into that aspect of the event.

There was some sense also that the setting of the event was too nice. The Dishari camp is just that – a camp – even by standards in Bangladesh. The food also is very basic and served out of large pots and buckets. For many of the participants, however, not having to worry about food and accommodation even for a short period was a bit of a luxury. There is some sense that this could have factored in to the positive feelings to a minimal degree. Some members of the group had a desire for more sessions and to use some of the time to learn new songs. Also related to weaknesses in question ten, the community found no threats from the ceremonies, but did say that sensitivity and carefulness must be observed in the planning and performance. These were the weaknesses discussed by the Hermeneutical Community.

The fourth question was, “Do you think that your focus group received the desired teaching through the constructed event?” Probir Tripura seemed to summarize the discussion with this statement, “As deep as we gave [the teaching], they received it. They understood 70% to 80% of
the teaching” (Post Hermeneutical Community 2004:3). (This is very good according to our history with oral learners.) The drama and participation of each member was again cited as an aspect which will strengthen the memory of the teaching. Finally, the commitments made through the event confirmed the strength of the teaching. The answers to question eleven mirrored the evidence of many strong commitments coming out of the event. Sushil Tripura said,

They don’t want to have feet in both boats. [This is a proverb referring to waffling back and forth between two positions – or religions in our case.] They themselves said God is Almighty... Through this they really made a commitment to leave the old pujas and Hindu ways. (Post Hermeneutical Community 2004:3)

Question seven dealt with communitas. “Did the participants form a special bonding through this process? If so, in what ways?” The group definitely saw communitas build during the event. In response to the question Dirbadhon Chakma said,

Yes, they experienced nicer relations and made new friends. The joint tribal meeting also formed deeper relations with those outside their tribe and areas. One old Chakma man thought he was the only Chakma Christian his age. He really enjoyed getting to know Chakmas from another district. (Post Hermeneutical Community 2004:4)

Pawsing Mru also commented, “They were sad to leave and seemed to have a deep feeling for each other. They see that there are other Christians and
they get a lot of encouragement. Doing the drama with each other they
became close” (Post Hermeneutical Community 2004:5).

Next we discussed whether or not this was an appropriate method of
discipling oral believers. Everyone in the Hermeneutical Community
expressed that they felt it was an appropriate method of discipling for oral
people. Sushil Tripura said, “This type of seminar is good for uneducated,
oral people. They need encouragement. We need commitment services for
them. We must use different methods all the time to keep their interest”
(Post Hermeneutical Community 2004:5). Tushar Biswas added,
“Memorizing is very important for oral learners. The candle service gives a
symbol and any symbols used will be very effective for oral people.
However, we must teach all the different stories through pictures, stories,
and drama” (Post Hermeneutical Community 2004:5-6).

Finally came the clincher, “Have we constructed a ceremony that
incorporates the indigenous features of character formation in our tribal oral
societies?” Had the observations of village religious ceremonies and
interviews with the religious leaders led to indigenous forms in our
ceremony? Their expressions and responses I had awaited with baited
breath turned out to be different than I had expected. There was a bit of a
defensive tone when Ujal Gazi said, “We got ideas from them, but we made
*our own* ceremony. Hindus and Buddhists also use dramatic songs, but this was *our own Christian ceremony..."* (Post Hermeneutical Community 2004:7). This represented the sentiment of the group. They had come from these backgrounds of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Animism. Because of this there was no great fascination with those forms themselves. Finding a more indigenous and appropriate form of Christian discipling, however, did excite them. More important than the indigenous forms was the *ownership* the Hermeneutical Community felt for the event they had constructed and performed.

Another key question was, “Do you believe that this process leads to the Christian formation we desire?” The group again was very united in their positive response. Dirbadhon Chakma represented the group when he said, “Yes. They have become more faithful. They are serious about the Great Commission now. The idea of going out to make disciples will remain with them” (Post Hermeneutical Community 2004:7).

The group also affirmed that there were opportunities presented for the use of such ceremonies in the future. The group felt that such events should take place on a smaller scale in villages. Occasionally a large group training for leaders could take place at a camp similar to the constructed event. In the village areas, however, they could observe the ceremonies as
tribal groups avoiding the language problem. Nevertheless, everyone agreed that the inter-tribal Christian unity achieved through events which included multiple tribes was very desirable. Suna Chakma concluded,

They can easily understand, take part and remember. Not everyone can tell the stories, but everyone can be part of the drama. If we had only preached, we could not have taught as much, nor would they have retained as much. There was interaction and because of this they really learned. (Post Hermeneutical Community 2004:7)

This concludes the findings from the data collected from the field research. The event, while it had weaknesses, achieved our desire of constructing an event in which indigenous oral forms of learning through ceremony were used for discipling. In the final chapter, I will give my overall analysis of discipling through ceremonies in an oral context.

Notes

1 I have never been to a place outside the West where Christianity seems so indigenous to the people. This is particularly interesting as many of the neighboring church regions in northeast India have very Western church forms. "...The revivals in Mizoram were distinctive to the Zo people, not "copies" of "imported" revivalism. They must therefore be understood on the basis of the specific cultural context" (Kipgen 1996:250). The revivals that swept Mizoram in the early 1900s had little to do with the missionaries, though they prayed for them vigorously. Rather the Holy Spirit met the Mizos directly at their point of greatest spiritual need.

2 Christianity was introduced to the remote and isolated hills of Mizoram by William Williams, a Welsh Presbyterian missionary, in 1891 and J. H.
Lorrain and F. W. Savidge, British Baptist missionaries in 1894 (Hrangkhuma: 1998:271) In less than 60 years, it can be safely said that 99% of the entire Mizo population had become Christian. “According to the 1991 census, there are 591,342 Christians in Mizoram out of the total population of 689,756, that is 85.73%... All the [other] Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists are non-Mizo” (1998:265) I have personally never been in a more Christian area anywhere in the world. On a Sunday morning in Mizoram, the entire society is seen with Bibles in hand on their way to church.
Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him...

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. “Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them. “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them. (John 13: 3-5, 12-17)

Jesus understood the power of ritual and ceremony. The above record of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples is a supreme example of discipling through ceremony. He passed on a key discipleship teaching of servanthood, not with a lecture nor even teaching from Scripture, but with a ritual act – somewhat of an initiation or rite of passage – ushering his disciples to a new level of understanding.
We have come to the point now where it is appropriate to ask the question, “What does all of this mean?” I have built a case for the use of ceremonies as a discipling tool in an oral context. In this chapter I will present my conclusions of this study. This will come in the interpretation of the data presented according to the theories I proposed. First, I will interpret the data presented on the context of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the theory of introducing change through Kraft’s concept of “dynamic equivalence.” Second, I will interpret the data on orality according to Klem’s theory of discipling through indigenous cultural forms. Third, I will interpret the data on ritual and ceremony according to Zahnisier’s theory of cross cultural discipling through indigenous ceremonies. Finally, I will look at the data on indigenous discipling according to Hiebert’s theory of “critical contextualization.” In each of these sections, I will show how the research expands and/or enhances each of these theories. Finally, the resulting missiological implications will be identified.

**Dynamic Equivalence in the CHT Context**

Most of the discipling done in the CHT to this point has been done according to imported, Western methods. Chronological Bible Storying represented a departure from those methods, but even with this method the
cultural context of the tribals was not seriously considered. In each of these cases, “canned” programs designed to be used for any group precluded much adaptation to or consideration of the local context. In Chapter 2, I presented a look at the unique context of the CHT and some basic themes among the tribals. The multifaceted religious setting combined with an overwhelmingly oral population make the setting complex and unique. Add to this the poor human rights situation, struggle for survival, and context of rapid change, and one finds a challenge in any endeavor. Henrichsen says, “One of the fundamental requisites for true discipleship is a spirit of desperation that burns deep within the soul” (1974:36). Similar to the situation of first Century Christians, it is clear that the desperate situation of the tribals in Bangladesh provides fertile ground for discipleship. This context also makes the tribals ripe for change. As Flatt states,

Students of cultural change know that cultures will not tolerate a vacuum. To introduce change deliberately one must know what are the most significant values and concepts in the culture and, if challenged, have something as good or better to offer in replacement. One must begin at the place where there is a felt need that is not being satisfied in the existing order of things. (1979:192)

It is here that we have attempted to find dynamic equivalence in discipling which bring “a new use of previously existing cultural forms plus the necessary borrowing and internal development of new forms [that bring]
about change in the culture” (Kraft 1979:315). In observing the religious ceremonies in the tribal villages, interviewing the religious leaders, and then working with a local hermeneutical community, a dynamic equivalent was constructed which was used for discipling in our context. This was an innovation of old indigenous forms and new teaching creating the type of combination which Barnett describes. “An innovation is, therefore, a creation only in the sense that it is a new combination, never in the sense that it is something emerging from nothing” (1953:181).

The event we constructed was an innovation in that it did not come out of nothing, but rather was based on existing forms we observed in traditional religious ceremonies and leader interviews. Two issues came from the interviews which were already somewhat in place in our context. First, I found that oral people first must enter or be a part of the society in order to learn religious principles. In our Christian context, joining and becoming part of the society had already taken place at the point of believing and being baptized into the Christian community. The next finding from the traditional religions was that oral people first learn by observation and then by participation. In our context, learning by observation already began for many of the participants, but this was emphasized in the ceremonial aspects of the event.
In both the interviews and village ceremony observations, the following findings were made and then utilized in the constructed event. First, symbols bring the worshipper to a deeper level of participation. In the constructed event, symbols were used to enhance a particular teaching and bring the participants into the ceremony. Through the candle lighting ceremony the participants experienced an encounter with God. Second, we observed and found that memorized mantras have power to make a teaching part of the worshipper’s life. A mantra was used to internalize some basic principles of the Christian faith in our event. Third, we found that drama was an enjoyable way to learn and remember important histories and teachings. In our constructed event, the power of participating in the event through dramatic reenactments was another dynamic equivalent which replaced the jatra aspect of traditional festivals. So, Kraft’s theory of dynamic equivalence was central and used effectively in discipling through ceremony in this oral context.

As with each of the theories, Kraft’s principles of dynamic equivalence had to be adapted when they move from the theoretical to the practical realm. The use of the Hermeneutical Community took the dynamic equivalence theories to a deeper level. We did not just take cultural forms from the CHT and adapt them for Christian uses. The Hermeneutical
Community was very intentional and had a specific aim. The spiritual needs of the tribal people were considered and very pivotal in what forms were used in which context. This is where the idealistic theories were brought down to earth and became subject to the more important biblical, discipleship needs of the tribals in the CHT. The pure dynamic equivalence theory neither takes into account the issue of a multiple culture context with shifting identities nor the many other variables we face in the CHT. The Hermeneutical Community, however, being concerned members of the affected community, pushed the methodology to its optimum effectiveness. For these reasons, this research goes beyond the dynamic equivalence theories and provides a practical model of adaptation to the point of finding a useful tool for discipling.

**Discipling through Indigenous Cultural Forms**

Herbert Klem claims that most of Jesus' teaching methods catered to the majority population of his day who were oral communicators. In Klem's African context he also found that "there is without literacy a valid and effective way of spreading knowledge and passing on cultural tradition..." (1982:8). Klem's theory is that discipling is possible through indigenous cultural forms which are based on oral methods in the majority of the
world’s societies. The use of ceremonial forms of learning for discipling was based on Klem’s model.

These forms of discipling were quite different from the individualistic, Western methods. Oral learning methods are more communal and will happen “by participation in a kind of corporate retrospection – not by study in the strict sense” (Ong 1982:9). Ong goes on to say, “Oral communication unites people in groups. Writing and reading are solitary activities that throw the psyche back on itself” (1982:69). Likewise, the constructed event was based completely on communal, oral activities. There were no individual learning times. It was a community event in which we learned together.

To reach a community like the tribals of the CHT which is over 80% oral, we must move to oral methods. If the discipling methods are not appropriate to the oral community, we will never reach the whole society. In addition, Christianity will never be seen as an indigenous movement, but continue to be viewed as a foreign, Western religion. The use of the above-mentioned indigenous, cultural forms represents a new step in making discipleship and Christianity more indigenous. The event constructed by the gathered community achieved a form of discipling more appropriate to the tribal context.
While Klem’s work in Africa was used as a model, what we did among the tribals in Bangladesh goes beyond this. Klem’s study used one oral form – rhythmic music – to teach the book of Hebrews. In this study we drew on a few different forms observed in village ceremonies. Drama, symbols, and mantra memorization were all employed as forms more useful in discipling oral people. As mentioned above, a pre-determined, imported study was not used but rather teaching based upon the spiritual needs discerned by the Hermeneutical Community.

The Hermeneutical Community determined that there were six basic spiritual needs of their community: confidence in the existence of God; awareness of God’s almighty power over Satan, other gods, and the spirit world; belief that Jesus and God are one and the same; ability to relate the Scripture to every day life; tools for memorizing teachings; and having an opportunity to express a new commitment made. After identifying these spiritual needs, the Hermeneutical Community then selected the most appropriate teaching to address each need. The story of creation, God’s power shown through Elijah, Jesus’ birth and miracles, a modern day drama of a changed life, memorizing a mantra of the Apostles’ Creed, and a candle lighting commitment service were chosen as appropriate teachings for each of the needs of the tribal people. Identifying specific spiritual needs and the
corresponding Christian teaching is a deeper contribution which this
research made not found in Klem’s model.

As will be mentioned in the next section, issues of liminality and
communitas also entered in and were effectively utilized. So, while this
study affirms Klem’s model, it also goes beyond it by employing multiple
oral forms and thus achieved greater indigeneity by being guided by a local
hermeneutical community.

Cross-cultural Discipling through Indigenous Ceremonies

Rites of passage, as described by Arnold van Gennep and Victor
Turner, exist in all traditional societies. This is also true in the tribal context
of the CHT, even though many of the traditions are being lost due to the
chaos and rapid changes. Mathias Zahniser has taken these theories, and
proposed that “[s]ymbols and ceremonies, the discipling tools of religion,
represent crucial resources for effective discipling” (1997:63). Turner’s
ideas of liminality and communitas add to the learning potential of such
ceremonies. The constructed event was based on and employed many of
these ideas for the purpose of discipling.

During the event the participants were taken from their normal
societal roles and entered a liminal phase in which they became a part of
enacted Scriptural teaching. *Communitas* developed even across tribal lines and a sense of family and oneness in Christ was evident. These oral learners grasped biblical teaching presented in contextual forms in a way that they had not experienced before due in part to the liminal aspect of the event. They were reintegrated and returned to their tribal areas with a self-proclaimed new commitment to their Christian faith.

In addition to these elements, there was a sense of celebration which began and slowly grew during the discipling event. In addition to the cultural appropriateness for our context, ritual and ceremony add a sense of celebration important in discipling.

Celebration is central to all the Spiritual Disciplines. Without a joyful spirit of festivity the Disciplines become dull, death-breathing tools in the hands of modern Pharisees. Every Discipline should be characterized by carefree gaiety and a sense of thanksgiving. (Foster 1978:191)

Celebrations are attractive and remain in the memory, both of which are important to disciple-making in our context.

In addition to the fact that many of the participants expressed a desire and ability to reproduce elements of the event in their local areas, I believe the event was more than a one-time celebration. Just as the "Life of Christ" event was very much in the memory of the student participants a year later, so too will the teaching of this constructed event remain with the
participants. “Powerful symbols and ceremonies will support believers coping with suffering, bafflement, and temptation by persistently reminding them of the one ultimate God’s involvement in the issues that touch their daily lives intimately” (Zahniser 1997:68). As the tribals returned to the struggles that characterize their lives in the CHT, many had made new commitments, gained new learning, and come to a deeper level of discipleship than before.

We went beyond what Zahniser proposed and what I did prior to the research by “Christianizing” the Shin Byu ceremony. There are striking differences between the Shin Byu ceremony done with students in November 2003 and the “Changed Life” ceremony constructed by the Hermeneutical Community in October and November 2004. In the Shin Byu ceremony, I simply had local leaders put the parts of the ceremony together based on my theoretical findings. In the “Changed Life” ceremony, however, the Hermeneutical Community helped guide the use of indigenous forms in an appropriate way. While the “Christianization” of the Shin Byu brought memorable and biblically based teaching, most of the participants only had a vague idea of the Buddhist ceremony we were Christianizing. Therefore, the ceremony was lacking in indigeneity and as a dynamic equivalent. My
hunch is that this will generally be the case if an outsider leads in such attempts.

The Hermeneutical Community, however, insured both appropriate indigenous use of cultural forms, and also identified appropriate spiritual needs and the corresponding teaching. The missionaries or outsiders proposing to use Zahniser’s and other missiological theories must be a good listeners. They must also develop an atmosphere of trust with a local hermeneutical community, and they must be willing to take risks in following their lead. When the needed elements are all in the right place, liminality and *communitas* will naturally fall into place. With the guidance of a hermeneutical community, however, these applicable tools will be used more purposefully, and the resulting product will be a deeper and more intentional form of discipling.

**Contextualization of Indigenous Discipling**

The final overarching theory at play in this research project was Paul Hiebert’s theory of critical contextualization. In this theory also, the Hermeneutical Community was critical to the whole research process. The first part of Hiebert’s theory is to study the culture (1978:109). Study of the worldview of each of the tribes took place before and will continue after the
present study. The Hermeneutical Community, however, was involved in the observations of the village religious ceremonies and interviews of the religious leaders which supplied the intensive analysis needed here. This laid the foundation for constructing the discipling event.

The next steps in Hiebert's theory are to look at Scripture and find bridges to the culture (1987:109-110). In the event planning sessions the Hermeneutical Community very naturally and deliberately proposed Scriptural teaching and other elements of the event. With the previously mentioned ceremonial observations in mind, the Hermeneutical Community proposed teaching within their own cultural forms. In addition to this, they discussed and found teaching appropriate to the level where their people were spiritually. While Hiebert's process is designed to be a long term process of developing an indigenous theology, we applied the principles to creating this short-term discipling event.

As described in the preceding chapters, there were a series of ceremony observations, interviews, and meetings leading up to the actual event. The Hermeneutical Community also guided the six focus groups to lead and/or take part in different aspects of the constructed event. Through all of this it really became their ceremony, as they had planned it, guided in carrying it out, and later evaluated its effectiveness. When asked if we had
achieved a dynamic equivalent of their former religious ceremonies, the groups was defensive in their ownership of this newly constructed form. They admitted that we had borrowed forms from their old ceremonies, but strongly expressed that what we had created was Christian and their own creation. In this the Hermeneutical Community created “new symbols and rituals to communicate Christian beliefs in forms that are indigenous to their own culture” (Hiebert 1987:110). One of the most satisfying elements of this research was the involvement of the Hermeneutical Community.

Many cross-cultural workers are familiar and agree with the critical contextualization theories. My experience, however, is that most go through the steps of critical contextualization on their own and never involve a hermeneutical community. This short-cut, while easier, circumvents the whole indigenous aspect which is desired in critical contextualization. Finding a hermeneutical community which includes the necessary variety in membership, and then building the essential trust takes time. In actuality, it would not have been possible for me to have done this for my research without years of building relationships. The result of involving a local community will be far superior to critical contextualization done solely by the outsider.
Summary of Missiological Implications

In this final section I will summarize the missiological implications which have risen out of this study. First I will look at the contributions which this study makes to the field of missiology. Then I will make some recommendations regarding discipling in an oral context. Finally, I will consider further areas of research related to the study at hand.

Contributions to Missiology

This research makes three contributions to the field of missiology. First, discipling in oral societies must fit the oral learning methods. I have given a practical example of this. Second, in non-Western, traditional societies discipling must be presented in appropriate forms. In our case we have used ceremonies based on indigenous forms. Third, attempts at contextualization must involve a local hermeneutical community. I have provided a basic "road map" in developing, guiding, and allowing a hermeneutical community to create an event indigenous to their own culture.

In oral societies, Christianity and discipleship must be presented in ways from which oral people can learn and understand. When we look at the discipling models available, most are based on Western, literate methods. Because of this all around the world we are reaching and discipling the educated elite, and training them in ways which are ineffective in reaching
the majority of their own people. Klem affirmed, “I am contending that
what is missing from modern mission strategy are presentations of the
gospel and Bible content that are styled to suit the oral media of the
masses…” (1982:93). Sadly, in the twenty-three years since Klem’s study,
few new oral-appropriate discipling methods have been proposed. In this
study an event was constructed which employed multiple forms from
indigenous religious ceremonies as well as elements of liminality and
communitas. This study offers a method of discipling appropriate to oral
cultures.

Using symbols and ceremonies is an attempt to provide discipling in
contextual forms. In looking at the former religious ceremonies of the tribal
people, we sought out “dynamic equivalents” which could be used for
Christian discipling. This follows our desire to see Christianity more
contextualized to the Chittagong Hill Tracts setting. Without such
innovations, Christianity will remain foreign, couched in Western forms.
This is ultimately disastrous as “[i]n the long run, this uneasy coexistence of
public Christianity and private “paganism” has led to syncretism” (Hiebert
1987:106). In the constructed event we presented a non-Western,
indigenous form of discipling through symbols, a memorized mantra, and
participatory drama resulting in ceremonial learning.
Much is said in missiological circles about contextualization. Then, in most cases, a Western missionary goes to the foreign field and seeks to contextualize irrespective of the local Christian community. Without the involvement of "local experts" we will never find truly indigenous methods and forms. Again Shawyer affirms this. "It is unlikely that an expatriate missionary will understand the hearts of national believers sufficiently to devise new forms which will not be foreign. Thus it is for the national believers to devise indigenous Christian forms of worship" (2002:331-332).

In this study I have provided a model for building and using a hermeneutical community to do the contextualization necessary to produce an indigenous product. The Hermeneutical Community wedded the spirit of critical contextualization theory to the practical discipleship needs resulting in a useful product for their context. Now I will move from the contributions of missiology to the recommendation for discipling in oral societies.

**Recommendations for Discipling in Oral Contexts**

Here I will make a few recommendations regarding discipling in an oral context. In my attempts to present what I feel are the real benefits of these ideas for cross-cultural discipling, I need to temper what I have stated with some practical recommendations. While I have just shown that non-contextual forms of Christianity can lead to syncretism, *over-contextualizing*
can also lead to syncretism. Hiebert's caution is well-taken. "...[A] call for contextualization without an equal call for preserving the gospel without compromise opens the door to syncretism" (1987:109). My first recommendation is, therefore, that in any attempt at contextualization a unwavering commitment to the authority of the Bible must be foundational.

Secondly, symbols and ceremonies in a discipling format must be a part of the whole discipleship picture. As we saw in the indigenous religious ceremonies, teaching – often in the basic lecture format – accompanied the ceremonies. Each drama, symbol, and ceremonial form in the constructed event was backed up with biblical teaching. Zahniser also confirmed this. "Symbols and ceremonies without teaching soon lose their reference to God; teaching without symbols and ceremonies soon lacks relevance to life in the world" (1997:68). We must guard against the symbol becoming the idol. So, a second recommendation is to combine symbols, drama and ceremonies with the appropriate biblical teaching.

Finally, we come again to the importance of the hermeneutical community. It is easy to get excited about studying indigenous forms and producing dynamic equivalents. Often the answers seem obvious, but as foreigners – even with long tenures overseas – we cannot see the worldview issues as the local people can. There were many occasions in the
construction and performance of the event in which I would have done things quite differently from what the Hermeneutical Community decided.

The success and resulting indigenous form of the event were due directly to the guidance of the Hermeneutical Community.

Each culture (and often each generation), needs to devise its own version of biblical forms to express its heart in adoration to our God. Such forms will free the worshipper to truly worship God in spirit and truth. This worship will also ultimately be very attractive to nonbelievers who can begin to see that following Christ does not mean belonging to a foreign Western religion. (Shawyer 2002:331)

The final recommendation is for the outsider to stay in the background as much as possible, and allow a local hermeneutical community composed of both newer and more mature Christians to plan, implement, and evaluate such events.

Further Areas of Study

This research represents a beginning rather than a finished product in the whole realm of using ceremonies to disciple oral learners. While I contend that the principles and findings herein are sound, there are many areas in which further study should take place. After studying tribal groups in Bangladesh for almost ten years, many times I feel that I am just beginning to understand them. Each of the tribes listed and around 30 others found in the CHT are deeply complex, fascinating, and intricate creations of
God. Each of these cultures warrants further and deeper study in order to understand, appreciate, and know how to minister among them properly. Part of understanding how to minister among tribals of the CHT (or any particular people) is to have a vision of what a discipled person in that context would “look like.” Again with out such a framework we are likely to impose Western standards or ideas on those from a different background. Research on a cross-cultural model of holiness needs to be done. Then in consultation with local Christians, characteristics, qualities, and activities of a CHT Christian disciple should prayerfully be envisioned. In addition to further study of the culture, deeper research in the areas of orality, ceremony, and rites of passage needs to take place. Again, orality only recently has been studied in much depth. Much more study of oral cultures and people is needed to find general and localized principles for reaching them and providing teaching methods appropriate for them. Likewise, rites of passage and ceremonies need to be researched in more detail if we are to create dynamic equivalents to be used for Christian discipling. I am convinced that further research in each of these areas will provide deeper insights to reaching and discipling these people. I believe that the findings in this study are applicable to many traditional, oral settings. This study, however, was limited to the tribal
people of the CHT in Bangladesh. The model proposed, can easily be adapted to other settings and needs to be used in other contexts. In other settings, hermeneutical communities need to be formed which find indigenous forms of ceremonies that can be used for discipling. So, this research needs to be repeated in multiple settings with more indigenous forms of discipling as the end results. “Cross-cultural discipling involves helping all believers see that the ultimate Creator wants to be their Companion – wants to be involved in the intimate issues of their individual and communal lives” (Zahniser 1997:33). May this be our aim as we move forward in using ceremonies to disciple oral learners.
Appendix A

Map of Bangladesh with Chittagong Hill Tracts

(Chittagong Hill Tracts Map:2005:1)
Appendix B

Religious Leader Survey

1. How do you teach religious principles to your people? Describe such a setting.

2. What role do families/mothers and fathers have in teaching religion?

3. What role does the priest or religious leader have in teaching religion?

4. How are new converts taught in your religion?

5. Are there sacred writings in your religion? What are they? Who reads them?

6. Many Chakmas/Tripuras/Mru cannot read. How do they learn and practice the Buddhist/Hindu/Animistic/Christian beliefs? How do they learn other things such as their trades?

7. What are the major festivals/ceremonies observed by your religion? Describe what happens and what people learn from one of these ceremonies?

8. What is the purpose of such festivals?
Appendix C

Pre-Ceremony Interview Schedule for Focus Group Participants

The leaders from each area will facilitate these focus group interviews with six to eight of the ceremony participants. Each will be instructed in ethical principles of the interview process. In our context, where exploitation and abuse are commonplace we will stress sensitivity in regard to each of the participant’s rights and dignity. The purpose of the study will be clearly explained, as well as the eventual availability of the findings to the participants through the District Fellowships of the Bangladesh Baptist Fellowship. Where confidentiality is desired it will be strictly kept.

Personal Information/Icebreaker

1. Give your name (or pseudonym if desired), age, and tribe.

2. What village and district do you live in?

3. What did you do as a child? (Try to ascertain if there was any schooling and to which level they progressed.)

Discussion-Starter – Discipleship Background

4. I know in your society there are many “stages” (*stren*con) that a child goes through to become a village elder. A. Can you describe those stages?
B. How does he or she learn the “duties” (dieto) in each stage? C. Who teaches him/her in these stages?

5. In the same way, does one grow in his/her Christian life from being a new believer to being an elder/leader in the church? Could you describe this?

6. Tell me how you came to know Jesus? Is this common for others in your tribe?

7. What is your experience in prayer?

8. How do believers in your area learn about God’s word? (listen to stories/Bible teaching, Bible reading/study…)

9. To be a true Christian does one need to know how to read? What do those do who have not had the opportunity to learn to read?

10. How often do most believers in your village go to worship/have fellowship with other believers? Do they give of their resources as a part of worship?

11. How often do CTM believers share their faith (what you believe as a Christian) with non-believers?

12. In your opinion how does a true Christian believer/disciple act? Describe in what he/she is involved?
13. Is there anything that is keeping CTM from being such believers?

What?

Discussion – Ceremony as Discipling

14. Sometimes a person remembers a happy event from his/her childhood.

What do tribal Christians think of the old religious ceremonies/festivals?

Do some still participate in them? Why or why not?

15. What is an example of a major festival or event from your Chakma Buddhist, Tripura Hindu, or Murong Animist background? What do CTM learn from such events? What would you say is the purpose of such events?

16. Describe your favorite times as a Christian? What do you like about being a Christian?

17. What Christian events do you like to invite your non-Christian friends to?

18. Is there any other information you can give that will help us reach and train new Christians from your background?
Appendix D

Post-Ceremony Interview Schedule For Focus Group Participants

1. What teaching did you get from the ceremony?
2. How does this compare to the teaching you received from previous Christian seminars (literate) or other teaching you have received?
3. What did you like about the ceremony?
4. What were your feelings towards the other participants in the ceremony?
5. Was this different than feelings you have had in other group meetings?
6. What would non-Christians think of such a ceremony?
7. What kinds of ceremonies happen in your village? How do they affect people?
8. Could an oral person learn from/understand such a ceremony?
9. Do you feel a greater commitment to Christ (a greater desire to know his word, spend time in prayer, share your faith, give your resources for the Kingdom...) as a result of this experience? Which? Why?
Appendix E

Post-Event Evaluation Questions for Hermeneutical Community

1. Do you have positive or negative feelings about the ceremony?
2. What were the strengths of the ceremony?
3. What were the weaknesses of the ceremony?
4. Do you think that your focus group received the desired teaching through the constructed event?
5. What did participants seem to like about the ceremony?
6. Were there any problems or aspects that the participants did not like?
7. Did the participants form a special bonding through this process? If so, in what ways?
8. Do you believe such a ceremony would be attractive to non-Christians from the various tribal backgrounds?
9. Is this an appropriate method of discipling oral believers?
10. Are there any threats that the ceremony poses? What are they?
11. Do you believe that the participants have a greater Christian commitment as a result of the ceremony? Why or why not? In what ways?
12. Have we constructed a ceremony that incorporates the indigenous features of character formation in our tribal oral societies?

13. Do you believe that this process leads to the Christian formation we desire?

14. What are the opportunities that the use of such a ceremony presents?

15. Would/could/should this process be repeated? Under what conditions?
# Appendix F

## Field Research Process

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