



# How to build community.

## An introduction to orality

### Summary keywords

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### Speakers

Jake Lloyd, Paul Conteh

### Episode 16: An introduction to orality

#### Jake Lloyd 0:17

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Before writing was developed, cultures passed along their traditions, history and identity through stories, proverbs, poems, songs and riddles. These are all known as oral art forms. In other words, they are spoken, sung or chanted and can form part of dance, drama or discussion. They're a way to communicate everything that matters without putting anything into writing.

I'm Jake Lloyd. You're listening to the *How to Build Community* show and in this episode you'll hear that even though these oral art forms are ancient, they're still an important way to build community today.

#### Paul Conteh 1:07

When people who cannot read and write or make contribution in orality, it is a disservice. These people have rich knowledge. That is the change it brings.

#### Jake Lloyd 1:20

That's the voice of Paul Conteh from Sierra Leone. He is a pastor, farmer and an expert in using these oral communication techniques, otherwise known as orality, to bring people together to work on shared goals. And in the interview you're about to hear, Paul tells me how he does this. You'll find out how orality has

helped him to make sure that everyone in a community can participate in local decision making processes, including those who cannot or struggle to read and write. You'll learn how orality can be used to effectively build understanding in a community. And you might pick up some tips on how you could use orality skills in your own life and work. But I asked Paul to begin by telling me about the context in which he uses orality in Sierra Leone. And he told me about the aim of his work when he goes into communities as a pastor.

### **Paul Conteh 2:21**

It is community development. It's how can we bring people to the point of living a full life, that is looking at the social aspect, looking at the spiritual aspect, looking at the emotional aspect of the people. So it is the holistic aspect, developing people holistically. So it's not only focused in evangelism, but it is looking at how the person can grow holistically.

### **Jake Lloyd 2:53**

So Paul works with communities to help them lift themselves out of poverty, using their own skills and resources. He also trains other people to work with their communities in the same way. But when he began to do this work, he noticed that his methods did not work for everyone.

### **Paul Conteh 3:13**

As you go along, there are people who are left behind, like those who cannot read and write, those who are illiterate, they are left behind. So I thought of how can we include them. Because an aspect of the process is including others, inclusion and participation. And if we are working with communities, we have people who cannot read and they are also important and need to be included. This is how orality came in. How can we work with these people? How can they do the same process but do it in a way that they also can be part of it?

### **Jake Lloyd 3:52**

He told me that he came across orality after receiving training from an organisation called Progressing Together, and he says he immediately saw its potential. Orality is simply a method of learning whereby people acquire knowledge by using symbols, drama, telling stories, drawing and other techniques not necessarily reading and writing as the formal education. I then said to Paul that although orality was new to me, it sounded like something ancient, and he agreed.

### **Paul Conteh 4:32**

That is very true! But we have left it behind. That is the challenge now we are having. We have left it behind. Now it is time to pick it up again and see how we can work with both of them. Because when the reading and writing came, we left it completely. Now we are saying, let's work with both of them so that those who cannot read or write can work with it easily. It has been there, in our context and our culture, we are taught orally. The history of our villages, our grandparents taught us not by writing, they would sit with us in the evening and tell us the story of our village, how it came about, people who have been there, and that is what has been passed on from generations. We just forgot about it, and we are saying 'let's take that

important aspect and put it back in the toolbox and use it for our development and growth.'

### **Jake Lloyd 5:40**

I then found out from Paul that for any community activity he did that would normally involve writing, he could now use an oral alternative. But how would he do this? Well, he started from the beginning.

### **Paul Conteh 5:54**

Now, one of the things that we do when we go to the community is for the community to develop a vision, a vision for the community. And in orality, we help them so that they will imagine the community that they think they want to see. And after imagining that community, we give them opportunity to divide them into different groups and then they draw the community that they want to see. Drawing that community, they will come and display it, and by just displaying it, we have seen a lot of community people, you see the joy on their face to see the development that they want to see, the change that they want to see someone put up in the community. We do not have good drinking water and you see them put a tap, they want a tap. In the community we do not have electricity lights, to see they put that as part of what they want to see, you know, a community to realise they are not united, they have some division, you see that in the symbol is part of those things that we do. The good aspect of it is because all of them see it and then they start to walk towards it. We've seen communities where they have done things like that and they are working towards achieving those things one after the other. And that's the beauty of it. That's the richness of it, because even those who cannot read and write, they will have that in their mind and they are wanting towards it. We've seen that in many communities. And also I know that in some of our communities, when we take them through the process of talking about resources, they have a lot of resources in the communities, but they don't know that they have that. So when we do this process with the community, they come to realise that we have these resources around us and then they begin to use them. That's also the other beauty, starting to use those resources that they have.

### **Jake Lloyd 8:09**

Now I realise drawing isn't, strictly speaking, an oral activity, but this exercise obviously involves discussion and not writing. But how does it use orality to help a community turn a drawing into reality? Well, he told me that the next step is to create a plan and for people to work in small groups on different parts of this plan. And, well, I'm used to a plan being information written on paper or typed on a computer screen so that people can remember it, refer to it and add to it. But Paul explained to me how he would use oral techniques to do exactly the same thing.

### **Paul Conteh 8:51**

In orality, we use storytelling, doing drama, singing, dancing. For example, when they do the visual drawing, they will encourage people who how to sing, how they can put this in a song? They will encourage people to know how to act, they will dramatise the community that they want to see or the communities that they have. So that is a clear picture that brings the attention.

### **Jake Lloyd 9:27**

So what Paul is describing here is how, as people work together to identify the needs in that community and look at ways they might address these needs using local resources or orality techniques allow everyone to use their gifts to add to the process. In groups, some might make up a song to describe their community and their vision for the community they want to see. Others might choose drama or tell a story, and when added together and shared, all these different communication techniques, help the community as a whole to understand their reality better and their vision for the future so they have a strong starting point from which to identify and address their needs. Now, I wonder if you've ever had to take minutes in a meeting listing what decisions are made and what actions people need to take after the meeting. Well, I've certainly had to do this in the past, but as an amateur musician, I told Paul that I'm much prefer the idea of writing a song instead of taking minutes. And I can imagine people would much prefer to listen to a song rather than read the minutes of a meeting. He said that this is exactly how he uses orality. And in this clip now you'll hear an example of this music from a community in which he works.

### **Paul Conteh 10:55**

Maybe some who are not a part of the meeting, hen others go, they sing the song. And through that they learn and they ask, 'Which song is this?' People share with them that it is a song about our community and what we want to see, the change we want to see. So that is the beauty. [MUSIC] You know, you are a musician and I'm also a musician. Music, it's one thing that brings together also, even those who cannot read or write. And the thing is the same in their local dialects. It's not English, it's what they speak out is. That's what they sing.

### **Jake Lloyd 11:47**

And what about drama, then? Give me some examples of how drama can be used.

### **Paul Conteh 11:52**

One of the things that we we take them to is to share how their community used to be. And so people will be divided into different groups and then they will ask the community itself, somebody who serves as a chief, someone who serves as a community doctor or whatever that has been happening in that community. That is what they will just ask. People will ask questions about that drama, what they see in that drama, what does that tell them about the community that they lead. Are they happy about the community? What is it that they want to change in that community, looking at the drama, that it is good to change? This is what helps the change, when they ask questions that will generate discussions around the changes that they want to see.

### **Jake Lloyd 12:57**

So how do people decide what to do next? Paul explained how he uses stones to help people make this decision.

### **Paul Conteh 13:01**

For instance, if we do something like prioritisation, you know, in prioritisation, you have three things or five things that the people will realise that they want to achieve. But we need to look at those things, which of

these things we should do first. So we give stones to people. If there are five items, we give you for the first three privatised things that you want to see achieved, we give you those three stones, each of them that are in the community, we give them the three stones. So they would take the stone, if piped water is what the person wants as the first thing, they will put the stone there. And as many people that decides with the stone, they will put the stone the place where they think 'this is what I need'. Piped water, a good road, a hospital. Those are the places that they will put the stones. And after which the facilitator will bring them all together to see the stones and then to count the stones.

### **Jake Lloyd 14:15**

And so there you have a basic introduction to how orality can be used in community development with music, drama, discussion and stories taking the place of the written word. And, as one key aim of orality is to involve people who cannot read or write, finally, I asked Paul if he felt these people bring something new or different into the process.

### **Paul Conteh 14:40**

When people are who cannot read and write make contribution in orality, when they know how to do those things, it is a disservice. These people have rich knowledge, but we just think they don't know. That is the change it brings. They make a meaningful contribution, like those who can read and write and sometimes those who can read and write, even admire, 'what did he get out?' Yeah, that is the thing about it. It is just the same. And sometimes even more for those who cannot read and write. I tell you, a greater part of where we are doing this thing, people who read and write are amazed to hear people who cannot read and write contributions in meetings, in studying the Bible. Their input in studying the Bible is amazing. They know it. And their contribution is amazing.

### **Jake Lloyd 15:51**

Wow, it must excite you. I mean, when you discovered orality and you began to see open up this hearing the voices of these people who you may not have heard from before, how did that make you feel? How do you feel about orality?

### **Paul Conteh 16:08**

Oh, that is the joy for me, because the whole aspect of the process is empowering people. That aspect of the process is what's special. But as you go along the process, the empowerment goes down. The participation goes down. When orality came, that answers the question at the beginning about empowerment, empowering these people, involving these people, their participation. So it gives me the greatest joy, I must tell you. And for me, I just think this is one of the ways to go if we are to get it right with people and involving people. This is one of the greatest ways to go.

### **Jake Lloyd 16:55**

That was Paul contact from Sierra Leone introducing us to orality. If it's something that you'd like to learn more about, then send an email to [jude.collins@tearfund.org](mailto:jude.collins@tearfund.org). That's j-u-d-e c-o-l-l-i-n-s and Jude will be able to put you in touch with and an orality expert in your part of the world. But that's it for this episode.

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