

## **Educating Ama: Empowering Minority Communities through Integrated Learning Programmes**

*This is the story of how Ama learned to read. It is based on the use of the Shellbook localization method— Patterned Oral Paraphrase.*

Ama is a 9-year old Masii girl, and member of the Omali clan. She is a "Masii-Omali", one of the 14 major clans that each speak a dialect of the Masii language that is more or less different than all the others. Ama lives in a small hamlet, seven kilometers north of the remote village of Hekwati.

Ama's older brother attends the community school in Hekwati, but Ama and her sisters do not. Neither do most of the girls who live in dozens of other hamlets around Hekwati village. The school is too far away, and the walk can be dangerous for girls. Besides, Ama speaks only her mother-tongue, the Masii-Omali language, and her mother's brother-- who would have to pay her school fees-- feels it is not worth it to send her. He believes school would be too difficult for Ama. She'd drop out like so many other Masii children who had tried to learn to read in a language they didn't understand or speak— and failed.

But Ama is learning to read anyway. An Omali clan elder, Tekume, has authored many books in the local language, even though he himself cannot read or write. Now the elders require all Omali clan children to learn to read Tekume's books, especially the girls who don't go to school in Hekwati. Many mothers are learning to read these books, too, since everyone believes they *belong* to the Omali clan now that their own leader, Tekume, "wrote" them.

*This is how it happened:*

Three years ago an NGO based at the nearest government station in Menasa held a meeting one afternoon near the Wednesday market in Hekwati village. Tekume had been there with other Omali clan elders. The NGO worker explained in Pidgin about a new way to prune coffee trees to make them produce more coffee cherries. His explanation was based on the story of a farmer who had used the new pruning technique successfully. As the NGO worker told the story, he showed pictures about what the farmer had done, and talked about why he had done it, and how it had benefited him and his extended family.

When he finished telling the story, the NGO worker led a discussion about the meaning of the story, and what it might mean for Masii coffee growers. The discussion was in Pidgin at first. After the NGO worker told the story again, Tekume and the other elders began to discuss the meaning in terms of their own language and cultural perspective, and how the lesson of the story might apply to them.

Finally, the NGO worker asked if one of the Masii men would use the pictures to tell the story. Everyone hesitated at first. Then Tekume stood up, took the pictures and told the story. He told it very well, and after that, many elders from other clans took turns as well. Everyone was very careful to tell the story correctly in front of their peers. They used the pictures to help them remember all the details of this new information. There were smiles and shouts of approval for especially artistic renditions as the story was told over and over, first in Pidgin, then only in various dialects of Masii.

The meeting ended after the NGO worker gave a "pictures only" copy of the coffee booklet and a new pencil to each of those who had told the story. The pictures were at the top of each page, and

the bottom half was blank. The elders were to tell the story to those back in their own village or hamlet, discuss it further, and then write it in the booklet (or tell it to someone who could write it carefully.) Then they were to bring their stories to the NGO office at Menasa station the next time they came to the regional market. There a copy of the book would be printed for them, one per elder. If anyone wanted more copies, they could buy one for a small amount of money or produce.

Tekume had his book published in this way, and when Ama's uncle saw it and heard it read out loud, he bought a copy for Ama's hamlet for one large pawpaw. It was beautiful and looked just like printed books at the community school. But it was in perfect Masii-Omali dialect. All the other Omali clan hamlets purchased copies, too. The booklets were stored carefully in large bamboo tubes for protection from insects and moisture.

Since then, Tekume has published over three dozen books in Ama's Masii-Omali dialect. The other resource stories were provided by the NGO in Menasa, just like the coffee pruning book. They were about different agricultural practices, maternal and child health, water/sanitation, forest protection, and many other topics of interest. The NGO had also helped Tekume to tape record and then publish various Omali clan stories that had been told for generations, much like the oral versions of the Iliad and Odyssey were written down long, long ago.

Ama loves to read all of the Masii-Omali books.

*Educating Ama is a fictionalized case-study by Mike Trainum. Nevertheless, it is a composite picture drawn from the lives of real people, situations, and events over the past 20 years. It describes an ideal-- yet increasingly possible-- outcome for millions of the most marginalized children, worldwide.*