

JAARS **SPEEDING THE WORD TRANSCRIPT**

Speaker
Dr. Thomas Headland

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Interviewer
Arthur Lightbody

Primary Topic(s)
**Growth of the Agta church,
population changes among the
Agta**

Other Topics
**The “Agta Demographic
Database”**

Location Discussed
Philippines

People Group (if named)
Agta

Announcer:

Welcome to *Speeding the Word*, coming to you from the JAARS Center in Waxhaw, North Carolina, where JAARS speeds Bible translation for all people. And now our host Arthur Lightbody.

Lightbody:

We are talking again with Tom Headland in Dallas, Texas. He is an adjunct professor at the University of North Dakota and the University of Texas at Arlington, and he is an international anthropology consultant with SIL International, a partner with Wycliffe Bible Translators. Tom has also published 100 scientific articles in anthropology and 10 books. He is still active with SIL International and with Wycliffe Bible Translators. He has talked with us about his work among the Agta of the Philippines, a forest-dwelling people. You have told us, Tom, about the wonderful things that have been happening in the Agta church. In a recent letter you wrote about one of those visits, and you talked about “testimony time.” What was it like to be there with Janet and hear this?

Headland:

We live here in Dallas, Texas, but we go back every other year for one semester. Our last time there was the spring of 2008. Now there are, I think, four different churches in different communities among the 600 Agta people. We attended this church—they don’t only meet on Sunday, by the way; they meet almost every night, and on Sunday they meet for hours. On Sunday they meet in this little bamboo church they’ve constructed. There were about 60 people crammed in, sitting on the dirt floor and some sitting on bamboo poles. They have testimonies—they go around and share. A lot of the people can read now—at least 25% of these 600 Agta people are very serious practicing Christians. They are reading the New Testament that we’d translated—reading it out loud to each other in the service and standing up and giving testimonies. They are a little different than what you’d hear in our churches.

Lightbody:

In what way?

Headland:

One woman stood up; she’d been baptized that morning in the river, and she came back—she’s still standing there in her wet clothes. She was just weeping and confessing her sins publically, how she had lived before and how sorry she was, and how thankful she was that Christ had come in and changed her life and the life of her husband. It was pretty emotional to watch this. You can imagine how Jan and I felt—this woman had grown up as a child playing with our children. It was pretty awesome, Arthur.

Lightbody:

Thank you for sharing that, Tom. It is great to hear what God is doing. I’ve known you for some time, and I know how hard you have worked, and God has used that in His way. They were reading—how did they learn to read?

Headland:

Well, we had taught some of them to read. In the meantime, lots and lots of outsiders had moved into the area, and the government had set up schools. And these Agta—who had no interest in their children learning to read before—by the 1990s now they all want their children to go to school and read. Most of the children are attending the small public schools; some of them walk two hours to get there in

the morning and two hours to return home in the afternoon.

Lightbody:

I'd like to look at the academic area for a while in the remaining time we have here. Your expertise is anthropology. You have a Ph.D. in anthropology. We'd like to invite people, if they'd like to explore the world of SIL, the academic side, they can always go to www.sil.org and find out a lot about this side of our work. I would like to ask you about this whole documentation of Agta culture—how have you been doing that?

Headland:

Well, I'm an anthropologist, and one thing anthropologists do is write descriptions of the cultures of the people they study. I've written quite a bit on the Agta people. Now, I consider my major academic contribution to the scientific world is my recently published "Agta Demographic Database." This was published in a trial version in 2007, and the actual first edition was published just last week, in January of 2009, on the Internet. It is entitled "Agta Demographic Database." "Demography" means "population." It is a huge production describing the population changes among the Agta people during the last 50 years. There have been very interesting changes. Their population has some startling statistics.

Lightbody:

That can be found on the SIL Web site. A simple way to find it is to go to Google and type in "Agta database," two words, and you will go right to it. A fascinating study. I understand you presented this at the American Anthropology Association not too long ago?

Headland:

That's right. Last year I presented it at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association. I am presenting it again next month at the annual meeting of the Society for Anthropological Sciences. Anthropologists, scientists and scholars are interested in this data, and here it is all laid out. The whole thing, if you were to print it from your computer, is more than 4,000 pages, with facial photographs of every Agta in the population and all the statistics on their family history.

Lightbody:

We've said you lived among them for over 40 years—47 years since you started, and of course the listener needs to understand you weren't there 24/7 during all those years, but you were there a significant part of that time, and you've gone back for many years, so you observed cycles of their lives. What were the things that were unique?

Headland:

They are a population of 600 people. In the year 1936, a government agent took a census. There were 1,011 Agta. When we got there in 1962 there were 800. A government agent and I did a count of them together—he did most of the work. Later, in the 1970s, Janet and I took two more censuses, and they'd declined from 800 down to 609 in 1984. The first interesting thing is that here you have a human population that is in decline. So scientists were interested, because I could document that. And of course their main question is, "Why are they declining?" Well, it isn't a low birth rate, because women have an average of seven children—for women who live through their child-bearing years. It was a very high death rate. In the United States, life expectancy at birth is age 78. Among the Agta it is age 23. That is the average age at death. We did an epidemiological study trying to find out what these people were dying of. The biggest killer among adults is tuberculosis. Among children it is pneumonia. I've gone through about four generations of people in this. Of the people that were children when we went there

in 1962, most of them are dead today—over half of those children died. More than 49% of the children die before they reach adulthood.

Lightbody:

Today if a child is born, what is the life expectancy?

Headland:

It is lower, but it is not as low as it was—age of death has gone up slightly. They live somewhat longer, mainly because of Western medicine. We introduced a medical program while we were there—we were paramedics and had our own medical program. They did not have any access to modern medicine, except ours. They had their own folk medicines. Sometimes they worked; sometimes they didn't.

Lightbody:

Cultures change. You have documented much of this—I found it fascinating in one of your reports about how the little children used to be able to shoot bows and arrows. A small child could hit a small bird and get a little meat to bring home to share and go to larger game. But now they are not doing that; they are playing basketball. Is that good or bad?

Headland:

Well, it's not good; it's not bad. Anthropologists are sad to see these exotic traditional ways of life disappearing, but we are in the 21st century, and as anthropologists we need to face the facts. These people are changing, and they like changing. They want to wear T-shirts; they like flashlights. Now, the Agta are sad because the game is gone—the deer they used to hunt are gone. There are no deer left in the forest. There is actually very little forest left. So those parts are bad. They are negative. That is really sad. They lived in the largest rain forest in the Philippines when we went there—a huge, dense rain forest, hundreds of square miles. That forest is all gone today. The old-growth forest is less than 3%. That is bad. The game is gone. The environment has changed. The rivers are polluted. Drinking water is no longer clean. There are thousands of people moving in. Almost all of that is negative, but when you talk to the Agta, they like riding around on logging trucks. They like wearing clothes; they like to be able to go to the town—where there is a hospital—and getting medical help when they are sick. So you've got good and bad mixed up. But the interesting thing for an anthropologist—we can cry or be glad about some of the changes—is the drastic change that has occurred in this culture. They are no longer mobile, nomadic-style hunter-gatherers. They are now living as landless peasants. And the sad part of this is they are poverty stricken. They work now for lowlanders, on their farms, doing casual agricultural labor. They work all day for a dollar—the equivalent, in Philippine pesos, of a dollar a day and their noon meal.

Lightbody:

We are going to have to leave the Agta. People can go to the study or investigate here at SIL and possibly get involved with us themselves. By going to www.sil.org they can find the schools. The University of North Dakota is one great place to go—that is where I met my wife. They could end up having you, Tom, as a teacher. We've looked at the Agta, and I really want to thank you for that. Before we go, the students at the university here, GIAL—www.gial.edu—and find out about studying here and meet Tom Headland here. Do you have students that you have taught, or students that are maybe not in your classes, yet that have walked into your office and asked, "Why do I have to study anthropology?" What do you tell them?

Headland:

Why in the world would an organization like Wycliffe Bible Translators require their new members to take a course in anthropology? Of course they are required to take courses in linguistics and how to actually learn an unwritten language.

That makes sense to most lay people, but they don't understand why we require the study of anthropology. We are not teaching human evolution, archeology and how to find lost cities in the desert and dig them up. We are teaching people to understand the cultures, the behaviors and the customs of the people they are going to live with. For those of you listeners who may be Christians, you'll understand that if you want to communicate Christ to other people, you need to have an incarnational ministry to these people you'll go live with. I'm not just talking about so-called primitive people in the jungle. I'm talking about neighbors from other ethnic groups. You need to understand their cultures; you need to understand their customs so you don't offend them. You can sit down and eat with them, for example. Elementary things like that. For those who are planning to do Bible translation, one of the greatest missionary statesmen of the 20th century, Dr. Eugene Nida, well-known to missiologists, once made a statement not too long ago: "More of the problems in Bible translation involve cultural anthropology than they do problems of theology."

Lightbody:

Thank you, Tom. God bless you, everyone.

Announcer:

We hope that you have enjoyed *Speeding the Word*. Arthur Lightbody would love to hear from you personally if you are interested in becoming part of the Bible translation movement. He welcomes your call at 1-704-843-6048. You may look us up on the Web at www.jaars.org.

