

THE ISLES ARE SINGING

Chapter 14

IS ANYTHING TOO HARD?

*Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh:
is there any thing too hard for me?*

Jeremiah 32:17

Realizing the urgent need of reaching the Owena people for Christ, we diligently applied ourselves to learning the Owena language and culture. A lot of time was spent in concentrated study with my house helper, Marava, and Lewis's language informant, Wenera. Many hours were also given to practicing what we were learning as the local people came to our home or we went to theirs. Our adversary, the Devil, however, was striving to maintain his territory and was making an all-out effort to prevent our moving ahead. During our first year in Owena, I was up and down with various illnesses. They all seemed to be different, and we couldn't come up with any root cause even after talking with medical workers via radio and visiting doctors in Goroka. The daily emotional and physical strain made it difficult for me to carry the load of language study, teaching Tina first grade, and fulfilling my responsibilities as wife, mother, and missionary.

Lewis was spending an average of eight hours each day in learning the Owena language, the first step toward communicating the Gospel in the heart language of the Owena people. Language learning involved eliciting practical language material, then editing, recopying, making audio recordings, and repeatedly listening and mimicking the taped lessons until a lesson had been memorized. It also meant being with the people in their daily activities, making use of what we had already learned, taking notes of their ideology and customs, and just listening as the people conversed with one another. Kevin and Lewis worked together part of the time, and also took time to pray together which gave them renewed encouragement to keep pressing on.

As my body became weaker from undiagnosed illness, however, time was taken away from Lewis's language study to help care for me and the girls. Eventually, through a visit with a medical doctor in the city of Lae, I was diagnosed with amoebic colitis. With a change in diet, I began to see improvement and to gain back strength for my daily duties. I was thankful that Lewis was also able to get back to a more rigorous schedule of language learning.

Two years passed since our move into the little remote village of Owena. The Lord was helping us to make good progress in understanding the language and culture of the Owena people. After months of listening, writing, checking, rewriting, and comparing, we were able to draw some temporary conclusions regarding orthography. Up until this time, Owena had never had an alphabet. It was only a spoken language. We chose to use English letters to represent their sounds since the official language of the country is English and the trade language Melanesian Pidgin also uses English letters. Therefore using English letters for Owena would make it easier in the future for any of them to learn to read Pidgin or English.

We had also determined that Owena is a semi-tonal language, and we would need to include a tone mark in its orthography. By semi-tonal, we mean that two or more words may be spelled and pronounced the same, except for a variation in voice pitch on one or more

syllables, but will have different meanings. For example, the word *kwai* (pronounced *kwa-ee* as in making a statement) meant dog; and the word *kwai* (pronounced *kwa-ee* as in asking a question or having a high pitch on the second vowel) meant rat. In the end, twenty letters (seven vowels and thirteen consonants) and one tone mark were chosen for writing the Owena language. (Some years later it was agreed that only nineteen letters – one less vowel – were needed.)

After making decisions concerning orthography, these decisions had to be tested for accuracy and acceptance by the native speakers. Therefore a set of primers had to be written for running a trial literacy class. The sounds and syllables of the language were quite simple to work with, and the single tone mark wasn't too difficult. The grammar structure, however, was incredibly complicated, capable of producing words as long as twenty letters or more. Eventually we were able to come up with four fairly simple primers to begin checking out our deductions.

How exciting it was to begin teaching unlearned people to read and write! Most of them had never even used a pencil before so had no idea how to hold one. The little scribbles, called letters, made little or no sense at first. But as the days went by, it began to dawn on these early literacy students that all these marks and shapes had meaning. Then they began to get motivated about learning and eager for each class. What a thrill it was for them to realize that all these scrawls that at first seemed meaningless could speak to them! And what a joy it was for us to realize that we would one day be able to see pages of a book with God's word written on them in their own heart language!