

Why Local Arts are Central to Mission

by Brian Schrag

We could see that our tires would never touch the dirt on the other side of the bridge.¹ The truck's wheels were spaced further apart than the rotting logs of the bridge, so the sixty or so Congolese pastors and I got out and began to walk to the church conference twelve miles up the road. We were in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where my family and I had come to start a project to translate the Bible into the Mono language. At each village we passed, mothers, fathers, and children whom I had never met yelled out the name our local pastor had given me, "Gyaregbo! Gyaregbo!" They ran up to shake my hand and laugh and ask me to play and sing the one Mono song I had learned on the kundi, an 8-stringed harp. I felt like a politician running for office. The non-Mono pastors looked on in wonder: "They really love you a lot!"

When we reached the pastors conference, I gave my report of Wycliffe's activities in the northwest region of DR Congo. As part of the report, I performed the same song, to great applause. Even people who didn't know Mono asked me to play it again. And again. And again. Another pastor remarked, "They sure love you." But why? Why do they love me so much here? Then this thought struck me: "They love you because they think you love them." My interest and involvement in Mono music served as a clear statement of respect and affection.

Christians communicating Truth cross-culturally have often misunderstood and undervalued local artistic forms like Mono song. Wycliffe's ethnomusicologists and friends are developing conceptual foundations and training for arts consultants, people who will instead research and recognize the crucial roles of communication and identity formation bound up in these forms. The arts consultant's goal will be to spark the emergence of enduring traditions of Scripture-based song composition, drama, dance, story telling, chanting, visual and other locally thriving arts. This article encapsulates the vision God has

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Brian Schrag is Wycliffe's International Ethnomusicology Coordinator, with language program experience in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Cameroon. He holds a Ph.D. in ethnomusicology from the University of California, Los Angeles. He writes songs for his wife, weddings, anniversaries, funerals, children, self-expression, God-expression, and fun.

given us for a fresh, rigorous approach to the arts. We'd love to have you join in the conversation and work.

Missionary Approaches to the Arts

Throughout church history, attitudes toward unfamiliar performing arts have included distrust, cautious acceptance, and at rare moments, open embrace. Missionaries who were instrumental in producing churches outside of Europe and North America beginning in the 1700s normally discouraged the use of local art forms. This occurred because of associations with competing indigenous beliefs and rituals, a general ideology of European cultural superiority, to promote a deeper sense of unity between European and American based churches and their far-flung progeny, and ethnocentric views about the uncivilized nature of non-Western cultures (see Turino 2000:113). By the mid-1900s, these attitudes resulted in a theological and philosophical milieu in many Protestant missions and the churches they had planted around the world, in which local art forms were at best ignored, and at worst, demonized.

One person who responded forcefully to these attitudes in the domain of music is Vida Chenoweth. Dr. Chenoweth popularized the Guatemalan marimba in European art music circles, crowning that part of her career with a performance in New York's Carnegie Hall. She joined Wycliffe Bible Translators and helped translate the New Testament into Usarufa, a Papua New Guinean language. In the 1960s, she began to draw on the field of ethnomusicology to engage with local Papua New Guinean musics. In large part through Chenoweth's influence, there are now over 20 Wycliffe members dedicating most of their time to music in the service of language development projects,² many more with solid training in applied ethnomusicology, and other Wycliffe members engaging with oral arts as part of other disciplines. Despite this stream in Wycliffe and other Christian organizations (witness the

wide range of mission and educational organizations represented at the Global Consultations on Music and Missions in 2003 and 2006—110 organizations at the 2006 meeting alone), music and other arts are often viewed as ancillary to core goals in the expansion of the Kingdom of God.

Yale Divinity School professor Lamin Sanneh reminds us that 60% of Christians now live outside the United States and Europe (2003). Worldwide Christianity is enriched by the multitude of cultures that contribute to one another, and Sanneh argues that the



West has not adequately come to grips with a Christianity that is no longer—and in fact, never has been—an intrinsically Western religion. Communities that embrace Christ where there was “no bureaucratic tradition with which to domesticate the Gospel,” express their faith through their own cultures, customs, and traditions (p. 22). World Christianity is thus indigenized Christianity, at home in every culture's forms of expression.

Sociolinguist Paul Lewis views the arts as essential to the identity, social relations, and worship of these indigenized forms of Christianity. The arts

provide a way for us to value and celebrate the diversity that God has created in the nations. The picture of “every tribe and tongue and nation” worshipping around the throne is not just a celebration of linguistic diversity (a sort of eternal multilingual Scripture reading session)—it is, I think, a celebration of the wonder and wildness of God's

greatest creation (humankind) through their Arts. I expect we won't just be singing solemnly in our own languages but dancing, drawing, dramatizing and probably even juggling—each according to our own culture and identity (2007, personal communication).

Many of our approaches to the arts do little to encourage this astounding future. The replacement of local musics with missionaries' music common in church history suffocates the heart, deadens the mind, and stifles creativity. Catalyzing the composition of new songs in local styles, though much better, is insufficient because music is only one art, rarely occurs alone, and may not result in enduring traditions.

We propose to leverage the experience and reflection flowing from the growing community of people working with music and other arts cross-culturally in two fundamental ways. First, because the arts have common characteristics that bind them as unique, powerful contributors to language-based development, we should extend our view beyond music to include other arts. Second, we should articulate the arts' core roles in allowing Scripture to penetrate a community's life completely, and outline the preparation necessary for an arts consultant, a specialist intent on helping bring this about. This document establishes a framework for accomplishing these two goals in the Wycliffe context, with the expectation that much will be relevant elsewhere.

What are the Arts?

Five characteristics of artistic communication reveal their importance to mission. First, artistic acts are special kinds of communication, consisting of the processes and products associated with a person's skillful exploitation of a medium's formal characteristics to create, modify, expand, and shape messages. Our treatment of the arts, then, must take into account the formal characteristics of each artistic medium.

Second, artistic activity draws on and is embedded in cultural patterns and symbolic systems. Applications of the arts to

local contexts thus rely on understanding the meanings ascribed to them by the communities that produce them.

Third, artistic expressions seldom occur alone. Ethnographic literature abounds with examples of expressive events that simultaneously draw on multiple forms. Ghanaian dances, for example, include stylized body movement, song, choice of colors and clothing types, and heightened reenactments of events (see Nketia 1974). A single art's perspective—such as dance, music, costuming, or drama—almost never describes a performance adequately.

Fourth, artistic rendering enriches the experience of a message. Tapping into existing arts allows new messages of truth to be marked as particularly important, uniquely memorable, and distinctly engaging. Artistic expressions are often the most powerful and enduring means of communication within a culture.

Fifth, and finally, local arts exist, well, locally. Community members already master these media, in contrast to writing systems that often require the acquisition of completely new skills and cultural patterns.

Benefits of Scripture-Infused Arts to Local Communities

Tapping into local artistic expressions in language program work almost always increases its effectiveness. Interest and involvement in the arts also helps build relationships and make work more enjoyable. Really.

Scripture Use

Sparking enduring traditions of Scripture-based song composition, drama, dance, story telling, chanting, visual and other arts results in penetrating impact of Scripture into all areas of people's lives (see Adjekum 1989; especially the last half of chapter 6; Fortunato, Neeley, and Brinneman 2006; Klem 1982).

Language Analysis

Analyzing song texts often provides linguistic insights into phenomena

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such as repetition, discourse-level features, archaic language, word breaks, and stress (see Sollenberger 2002). Analyzing story telling, poetry and chanting can also provide insight into discourse level linguistic features (Bailey 1976; Finnegan 1977; Lord 1974).

Translation

Analyzing the poetic and musical characteristics of local song genres provides direction for producing engaging, accurate translation of Bible portions, especially poetic and song passages such as those in the Psalms (see Boerger 1997 & 2007; Kindell 1996; Schrag 1992; and Nida 1984).

Literacy

Incorporating music and other arts into all stages of literacy programs provides data for the compilation of easy-to-read literacy materials (such as alphabet songs), singing as an effective teaching methodology, publicizing literacy events, and as a motivational force (see Kim 1998; Kindberg 2002; Saurman 1993). Literacy specialist Elke Karan commissioned a Sango literacy song in the Central African Republic that became one of the strongest motivational factors in promoting that program (personal communication 2007).

Community Development

Music, dance, and other arts help communities educate themselves on health issues such as AIDS and diarrhea (Barz 2006; Saurman 2006), encourage healing from trauma (Alvin 1975; Bunt 1994; Hill et al 2004), and can even provide a source of income (Lausanne Committee 2005; Seeger 2003).

Language and Culture Learning

Learning a people's artistic expressions is a vital part of understanding their worldview and myriad components of their culture, including cosmology, religion, social organization, and worldview

(see Schrag 2005 and scores of musical ethnographies). Communication through artistic channels is at least as important as communication through didactic channels in many societies. In one culture in Eurasia, stories are not taken seriously if not accompanied by poetry based on the story. It was found to be very effective to present Scripture stories in the same way, using poems translating Scriptural passages or paraphrasing key themes in the stories. In Pirahã communities in Brazil, anything important is communicated in song (Sollenberger 2002). Cross-cultural workers need to understand the roles of various artistic channels of communication to be effective communicators (Lausanne Committee 2005).

Church Life and Outreach

Using local expressive forms in corporate worship provides immediate, deeply felt ways for church members to communicate with God and each other. A drama team in West Africa gives performances in their churches and surrounding communities for outreach and for church celebrations. In each presentation, someone has a difficulty, and a friend or neighbor shares a story from the Bible which helps the main character toward a resolution. The team also records a weekly half-hour radio drama program. Other examples of the crucial roles of local arts in church life abound (see, for example, Fortunato, Neeley, and Brinneman 2006)

The Arts Consultant

An arts consultant's job will be to research indigenous arts and explore ways to utilize them to help communities accomplish these ends. The activities of an arts consultant will fall into two categories:

1. *Research*—identifying, documenting, describing, analyzing.
2. *Encouragement*—strategizing, training, developing, strengthening.

Instead of presuming that a culture will have specific art forms as defined in Western educational traditions, the arts consultant's first job is to recognize whatever artistic communication acts occur in a local community. He or she will then describe the meanings and processes associated with these media, and use these analyses to propose ways to encourage biblically-based creativity. We envision the arts consultant coming alongside local creators, sparking moments of artistic activity that have the potential to become enduring traditions.

We will train arts consultants to become familiar with many *artistic domains* (such as music, dance, drama, story telling, etc.) and have special training in at least one. There are many *applications* of these arts to language development projects such as those discussed above that an individual may choose to focus on.

Next Steps

We are developing training programs, research aids, and promotional resources to help bring this vision about.³ If you'd like to join us in some way—helping design training or promotional materials, offering your own expertise in performance or research, etc.—please drop us a line. Or if you'd like to find out more about becoming an arts consultant, or wonder how your organization might incorporate the arts more effectively in its work, we'd love to be in contact.

God has created a wild diversity of beautiful, powerful means of communication. Please help us encourage our brothers and sisters to bring these fully into God's service, a kind of encouragement that speaks profoundly of our love. **IJFM**

Contact Information:

ethnomusicology@wycliffe.org
972.708.7517 www.wycliffe.org/
Explore/WhatWeDo/LanguageWork/
Ethnomusicology.aspx

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Endnotes

¹ I received especially helpful input for this article from Michelle Petersen and April Longenecker.

² In Wycliffe parlance, "language development projects" and variants refer to efforts to help minority language communities respond to their spiritual, physical, and other needs, through Bible translation, literacy, community development, and other means.

³ Though we are focusing on preparing specialist arts consultants, there are many attitudes and activities that any cross-cultural worker can put into practice. Let us know if you would like some of our resources for the non-specialist, such as Schrag & Neeley 2007.