

Music of the Heart



Ethnomusicology in the Work of the Summer Institute of Linguistics

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As an ethnomusicologist working in Brazil with the Summer Institute of Linguistics/Wycliffe Bible Translators, it was always my goal to tap into the heart music of a people to reach them most effectively with the message of God's Word in song. In my role as International Coordinator for Ethnomusicology, it is my desire that this powerful, culturally-sensitive approach to music be used wherever SIL works.

What is heart music, and why use it? The heart music of a people is usually the traditional music of that group. It is the music which they have heard and participated in as children and young people. We are told that music is even experienced prenatally. A musical style associated with the warmth and safety of a mother's womb must have profound emotional associations with that most secure period of a person's life.

Ethnomusicologists have long known that, contrary to popular belief, music is **not** a universal language. The Lord did His work well at Babel and confused not only tongues, but, in my opinion, human cultures and musics as well. No matter how much a hymn, Gospel song, or praise song means to me, it will not mean the same thing to a person raised in another musical culture. It may sound sad to that person; it may sound like noise. But even if it is pleasing to their ears, it remains foreign. We don't want to transmit the universal message of God's offer of salvation in a way that makes it sound alien. It is for this reason that we discourage hymn translation in which foreign music is used to accompany words that are translated into the local language. Instead we encourage the development of an indigenous hymnody, in which the local people themselves produce Christian songs in the local language and music system.

There are several things that SIL ethnomusicologists do to reach the goal of indigenous hymnodies. We give Bible translators and other workers orientation in the form of special presentations and offer a non-technical course called "Music and the Missionary." We show how maintaining a positive attitude toward the local music, doing simple research projects, avoiding translating hymns and encouraging indigenous composition can often lead to the development of an indigenous hymnody. Unfortunately this orientation is not available at all SIL training sites, and we are seeking a means to make it more widely disseminated.

SIL ethnomusicologists engage in music workshops with native peoples. These workshops vary according to the immediate need, but typically they involve illustrating the value of using local music systems (especially where the people are stuck in the rut of using only foreign music in church), thinking through the Psalms or other Scripture passages that might be put to music, composing new Christian songs, and recording the new songs.

The most challenging job of an ethnomusicologist is when he or she learns the local music system. After analyzing traditional music, the ethnomusicologist sets Christian song texts, usually provided by a missionary who knows the language, to new tunes in the local musical music system using a style appropriate for the Christian message. It would be much easier to simply put Christian words to existing tunes, but then the old meaning of the songs might confuse the new message. Large analysis projects of this type are mainly used when for some reason (few Christians, heavy influence of outside music in the church, etc.) direct encouragement has not produced indigenous hymns.

Whatever the means, it is worth the effort, because by using this approach, we are touching something very close to the heart of the people we seek to reach with the Gospel. The following examples from Brazil illustrate this point.

The traditional music is usually the music that speaks most profoundly to the emotions. A Palikúr woman was asked, "Which do you like better, the hymns with non-Indian music, or the ones with the Palikúr tunes." She replied, "We like them both, but the ones with our music can make us cry."

In many cultures, the traditional music is extremely important. The Canelas use music extensively in their great ceremonies during which the essential elements of what it means to be a good Canela are passed on to the next generation. During the ceremonial season, the Canelas traditionally sing 5 times a day every day: early morning, dawn, noon, afternoon, and evening. It is no wonder that Canela-style hymns I composed after analysis meant so much to them.

The Canela response to the new hymns was explosive, like pouring gasoline on a bonfire. The people gathered around eagerly to

hear the new songs and learn them. The song leader for the village wanted to master the songs so he could lead the people in singing them. Jack Popjes, the translator, told me that one Canela came up to him and with tears in his eyes said: "You gave us the book in which God speaks to us, but your friend Tom gave us the songs in which we speak to Him."

Using the heart music of a people can be a way of connecting the Gospel message with the authority of their ancient traditions. The older Apinayé women, normally apathetic about Christian things, listened with great attention to the words of the new hymns in Apinayé style. Putting the Biblical message in a traditional setting gave it an authority with them that it would not have otherwise had.

The heart music of a people is usually the most expressive music for them to use. When the Sateré sang translated hymns (i.e., foreign music but Sateré language), they looked at the ground and shuffled their feet. When they began singing hymns in Sateré style, they sang with such enthusiasm that the jugular veins on their necks stood out!

The traditional music is family music. When we sang Urubu-style hymns for Floriano, a Christian leader among the related Guajajara, he said "That's just like the kind of music my father used to sing."

Finally, showing appreciation for the music of a people is a powerful way of saying "I love you!" I have found time and time again that carefully listening to it and developing an appreciation for it (the latter often takes effort, especially when at first the local music is not pleasing to our ears --reread I Cor. 9 if you need encouragement) is a gateway into the heart of a people, amazingly enough even after only a short time with them. For some reason, expressing "I like your music!" is often interpreted as "I like you!"