

Chapter 14



Côte d'Ivoire

Abraham Goes Senufo: Communicating the Scriptures through Song by Roberta R. King

As we pulled into the northern town of Ferkessédougou, Côte d'Ivoire, I thought, *What a providential time for a New Song Workshop designed to set the life of Abraham to song!* The community was preparing for *Tabaski*, a celebration of the life of Abraham, with emphasis on God's requiring him to sacrifice his son, Ishmael, per their tradition. Known as the "Big Feast," sheep and goats would be slaughtered and then feasted upon at the end of a formal worship ritual.

Dusty, desert-like Ferkessédougou (known as Ferké) is a communication crossroads among three diverse West African nations: Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, and Mali. In its town square, huge semi-trucks, garishly painted in shockingly bright colors, were either crammed with live cattle or loaded sky-high with the limited manufactured goods that manage to make it to this desolate region. Besides this, the main plaza teemed with growing numbers of sheep and goats, roaming freely around the lone, stark obelisk that serves as a war memorial. Although the physical setting is stark, Ferké is a place I have come to love.

Along one side of the town square lies the mission compound where the ten-day New Song Workshop took place from February 11–20, 2002.

Senufo Believers Grab Hold of the Blessing

Forty believers from Côte d'Ivoire and Mali attended my classes, representing four Senufo language groups: Nyarafolo,* Shenara, Minyanka, and Djimini. I looked at them and asked God for the wisdom to share about his faithfulness and desire to bless them through the story of Abraham. They came from both towns and villages, some able to read, others dependent on oral communication. Being oral learners, their primary means of receiving information is through songs and stories. They came longing to learn the Scriptures—in a way that would be meaningful and enjoyable to them. Their eagerness to worship God and grow in him resulted in the most successful workshop to date.

The workshop—setting the life of Abraham as recorded in Genesis 12–22 to song—did not function separately from local churches and missions. Rather, it enhanced translation and church planting projects among the Senufo peoples. This included setting newly translated passages to song and simultaneously developing an oral translation of the Scriptures.

The overall mission strategy is to present translated Scriptures chronologically, building a growing foundation for understanding who Jesus Christ is. Several mission and church groups** participated in the workshop by sending church leaders, translation teams, or singers. The songs produced will be used in a cassette ministry, with hopes they will be sung regularly in churches and eventually get radio airplay.

The workshop approach allows national believers to set longer passages of Scripture to song in their own language and musical styles. It is essential that singers first internalize the story well. Then they must allow the teachings about God to inspire them in transforming the Scripture passage into their own authentic and distinctive song forms. This method, developed over the last thirteen years, has proved effective. (see King 1999, 101–125).

Each day we began with a plenary session that included studies on music in the Bible, worship, and prayer. Then, dividing into three teams, we worked with the designated text, averaging one to two chapters of Genesis per day. Three of the language groups had enough participants

to form a distinct *New Song Fellowship*. The fourth language group had only one representative, a Shenara-speaking pastor. He chose to move among the teams, often helping by playing the *balafon* (xylophone) after songs had been composed.

Each team read and discussed the newly translated Scriptures on Abraham's life in their vernacular language—an essential to creating indigenous songs since melodic and rhythmic contours of the song are intimately wed to patterns in the language. Working in vernacular languages also allowed women, who often speak only their mother-tongue, to participate freely.

The overarching workshop goal was to communicate the life of Abraham through indigenous song creation. However, teaching and learning the Scriptures remained the focal point. Indeed, many heard the story for the first time in their own language and were amazed at God's faithfulness to Abraham. For example, when Abram and Sarai tried to take things into their own hands, such as having a child through Hagar, God remained faithful to His promise to bless Abraham and his family. (Senufo customs and cultural practices share so many similarities with the biblical text that workshop participants wondered whose culture came first, theirs or the Israelites'.)

Most amazing to them was the story of God demanding the sacrifice of Isaac. (The religious book many people in this area follow never mentions a specific name in reference to the sacrifice of Abraham's son. Yet, traditionally in this area, they speak of the sacrifice of Ishmael, not Isaac, as portrayed in Genesis 22.) They weren't sure they wanted to sing about this part of Abraham's life, afraid that their families would reject a God who demanded human sacrifice. Yet, in struggling through the passage, they reasoned this was God's Word and they must be faithful to tell the whole story. They later came to realize the impact and wonder of God faithfully providing the required sacrifice and its symbolic significance for the future coming of Jesus Christ. God was also preparing their hearts to sing about him.

And what about the songs? Each day, after interacting with Scripture, both in their small teams and then together, they composed songs in their

own languages. Amazingly, songs began to emerge; at first slowly and tentatively. As they were sung for the first time, they often improved as the group contributed additional musical ideas. Later, songs exploded, almost like popcorn.

As we “harvested” songs each day in the combined group, people spontaneously responded to ones that spoke on a deep level and in authentic Senufo musical styles; they rose up and danced with joyful abandon. Such Christian fellowship was an intoxicating and edifying experience for both insiders and outsiders.

In six days, the Lord gave a total of forty-seven new songs telling “redemption history” through Abraham’s story. And in one-and-a-half days, forty-two songs were recorded, and four CDs burned: two CDs for Nyarafolo (twenty-four songs), while the Djimini and Minyanka composed enough songs for one CD each. The singers were then able to take the CDs home to use as masters for making audiocassettes to help teach Scripture in their communities and churches.

Dynamics of a Successful Workshop

The outpouring of creativity in a successful New Song Workshop, such as we experienced in Ferké, springs from multiple dynamics. Below are five that especially contribute to the mission task of bringing all nations to worship before him (Psalm 86:9).

1. Applying Scripture to Everyday Life

Presenting and teaching Scripture to a people for the first time in their own language is a privilege and an awe-inspiring task. The ultimate goal is to help a language group learn how God can be a real part of their everyday life as they practice biblical faith (Gilliland, 227). For example, a special moment in the workshop came when the believers discovered that Abraham had such great faith and allegiance to God that he would turn down the spoils of war offered him. Indeed, Abraham had sworn to God that he would accept nothing belonging to the king of Sodom, and that is just what he told the king (Genesis 14:22–24).

Abraham’s keeping his oath spoke profoundly to people who rarely see promises kept. In addition, most people barely make more than twenty-five cents a day in income and would find it difficult to turn down an offer of riches. Abraham’s choice painted an intimate relationship with the God who comes close and is a part of our daily lives—a great contrast to their concept of a distant and angry god. Such an approach to applied ethnomusicology creates opportunities for sacred moments when the truth of the Word can be planted deeply within people’s thinking and lifestyles.

2. The Ethnomusicologist as Midwife

In leading such a workshop, my role is that of a musical midwife. I patiently wait for the music to come from the people, gently and prayerfully coaxing songs out of them. Colleagues have asked, “How do you make that happen? We live with these people all year long and never see them compose songs like these.”

What is going on here? Two things. First, we come not just as musicians who happen to be Christians, wanting to play a part in the mission task—even though that can be a valid entry point. Rather, we come as ministers of the gospel, and *music* simply provides a platform for communicating that good news on a deep level in cultural contexts.

Second, relating as musicians to musicians adds to the dynamics of the workshop. When we as musicians have taken time to learn the musical culture, we receive great credibility and influence, and the right to help “birth” new songs. Because I spent significant time researching Senufo music and Christian songs for my PhD studies (King 1989), people recognize how much I value their music and way of life. My affirmation of their culture and music releases them to sing freely in worship to Almighty God.

At the end of our workshop a missionary colleague acknowledged, “The magic was here again. Well, really we know it was the Holy Spirit.” In essence, such a ministry is dependent on the credibility and spirituality of the ethnomusicologist as he or she interacts with the people.

3. Musical Innovation Is a Process

The development of heart-level songs that inspire genuine worship can take years. In previous years, we developed a Senufo song form with a high text load (many words in the song text). This allows Senufo believers to “preach” via their songs. Each time I return to the area, I am pleased to see how this song form has grown in cultural authenticity and musical complexity.

Parallel to musical growth, it appears that spiritual maturity liberates people to respond more authentically in their singing style as time goes on. Discerning what is helpful to their Christian worship increases the more they understand that God accepts them as they are and that they have permission to draw from their cultural heritage.

The Nyarafolo, for example, suddenly felt they no longer had to imitate the neighboring Cebaara Christian worship style that incorporates the *balafon* (a 19-key, wood-frame xylophone). As the Nyarafolos began to sing about the sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22), they realized its import and wanted to add more weight to the impact of the song. They decided to leave out Cebaara balafons and use only their percussion instruments. They claimed this provided a truly indigenous sound and an authentic rhythm that fit the message of their song. I had falsely assumed that the balafon was part of the Nyarafolos’ repertoire of instruments. Such a sophisticated development came only after many years of working together toward worship songs that would speak meaningfully to them.

4. Meeting Felt Needs and Agendas

If at all possible, we respond to the felt needs of the musicians. Each group in this workshop was at a different place in the continuum toward developing indigenous, culturally-appropriate songs. The Minyanka group, for example, had come with a pressing issue. Drums were in use in their church, but the leadership had not yet allowed the balafon. Therefore, the Minyanka men wanted to know if they could worship God with their balafon.

We discussed that question when the Nyarafolo women needed to go to market on Thursday to purchase food, making good use of that

supposedly lost time. I taught the men, the ones who traditionally play the musical instruments, about the use of instruments in the Scriptures. They responded well and as a result, we soon found they were able to participate more freely and fruitfully in composing new songs. The song harvest continued to increase.

5. Advantages of Multiple-Language Workshops

In past workshops, I have preferred to work with only one language group at a time. Yet, in this workshop with four languages represented, the synergy heightened both song-making and Christian fellowship. The Nyarafolo group, already accustomed to such a workshop, could both develop their new set of songs and also model for the other groups how they could compose their own songs.

In addition, everyone had an opportunity to fellowship together in a region where Christians are few. One group was experiencing persecution in their village. They were encouraged and strengthened to hear how God was working among other Senufo believers. Thus, learning to relate to the family of God added to the important role of building positive relationships, ones that contribute to the spiritual growth of the church. The newly-formed friendships also contributed to their growing understanding that God wants to bless all peoples, just as he had blessed Abraham’s family.

Conclusion

The Abrahamic blessing continues among the Senufo. Though the workshop ended, the Scripture-in-song lessons have not. Each language group took with them the ability to continue composing songs based on scriptural passages in their mother tongue. As Senufo believers return to their churches, towns, and villages, they are committed to singing the new songs. They will use them in worship, evangelism, and various life events, such as funerals. They are even becoming missionaries to one another. The lone Shenara-speaking pastor has invited the Nyarafolo believers to hold a New Song Workshop for his people in Mali.

As we drove out of dusty Ferké, the Tabaski celebration had just concluded. Several thousand people, dressed up for the occasion in their long, brightly colored robes, were milling around the open square. A perfectly white ram, without a single spot, had just been ritually slaughtered. Yet, as the people disbursed, they seemed oblivious to the slain animal. I wondered what they really understood about the God of Abraham. I prayed that the new songs about Abraham and the faithfulness of God would make a difference in extending his blessings to all peoples in this region of Africa.

"The Nyarafolo people with whom I have worked intermittently since 1990 are young believers who sincerely seek to worship the true and living God. They long to bring their families to freedom in Christ so they will also share in the blessing that was foretold to Abraham, the man of faith (Galatians 3:9).

**The groups included CB International, The International Mission Board (Southern Baptist), the Baptist churches in Côte d'Ivoire, and the Assemblies of God of Ferkessédougou.

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