Indigenous Composers Bridge Traditions

About 50 years after evangelical missions started among the Xerente people of Brazil, singers and other musicians started composing their own songs. These compositions blended *traditional* Indigenous elements with aspects of popular music typical of the region. This *fusion* is a result of the cultural shifts that occurred over many years. But are these *fused* compositions authentically Xerente? Should outsiders insist Indigenous peoples restrict themselves to what we think is *historically authentic*?

Music and the arts are no strangers to missionary work. Wherever the message of Christ has been preached around the world, they have often been present from day one. We see music in Paul's instruction to be filled with the spirit by "singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart" (Ephesians 5:19, ESV).

We see it in the hymns missionaries taught to African Christians in the nineteenth century. We also see it in lively musical worship scenes in the Majority World in our generation. But determining what music or art is appropriate for Christian worship has often been contentious.

Many missionaries may have thought, "If *we* are bringing the true message of Christ to those in darkness, isn't it then *our* responsibility to decide what music or art is good for our hearers?" And out went most local musical and art forms ...

LOCAL ARTS AND MISSIONS

Over the centuries,[1] *isolated* voices called for local arts to be used in missions. By the early twentieth century, more theologians and missionaries were considering how to include local arts in missions.

For example, Daniel Fleming, a professor at Union Seminary in the early part of the twentieth century,[2] stressed how important it was to contextualize in missions and use local forms. He stated this long before this practice became a trend. John F. Butler made similar suggestions in his book *Christian Art in India*.[3]

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Cabeceira Verde, Brazil – Many Xerente live in traditional homes on the Xerente Reservation.

Now… greater attention and value is given to local artistic expressions of worship.

The very first edition of *EMQ* (October 1964) contained an article by Raymond Buker that discussed the value of local music based on how it was accepted in the Ivory Coast.[4] Global missions movements, like Lausanne (Switzerland, July 1974),[5] have highlighted this concern and encouraged respect for local cultures, and their arts, encouraging them to be *redeemed* for the kingdom of God.[6]

Even though it has been slow, many have prepared the way for change in twenty-first century missions. Today, we more fully understand the value of integrating arts into "virtually all efforts of transmission of the gospel message and into the practices of discipleship."[7]

Now, in many places and through multiple missions organizations, greater attention and value is given to local artistic expressions of worship. Local communities of Christians are also taking responsibility for creating their own arts. However, even though outsiders are finally ready to affirm local cultures, some creations from local communities may appear strange. For example, local musicians might blend the old with the new. Is this an authentic development?

WHO ARE THE XERENTE?

The Xerente (pronounced *Sheh-ren´-teh*) live in the north-central region of Brazil. They are one of Brazil's 266 Indigenous peoples.[8] They managed to maintain their ethnic identity throughout the centuries. Their population declined from an estimated 2,200 in 1851 to only 330 individuals in 1963.[9]

In the 1960s, the older generation expressed their pain saying: "Once we were many, but now we are few. All that's left is for us all to be finished."[10] Brazilian evangelical missionaries began their work with the Xerente around 1960. They tried to "improve the precarious health conditions," bringing literacy and other educational tools, and guiding them "into the knowledge of the Christian gospel."[11]

Today, there are more than 4,000 Xerente living on their reservation. The evangelical Christian population is estimated to be 25% of the total population, with more than 40 congregations with local leaders.[12] Xerente Christians have demonstrated a strong sense of *ownership* for their culturally appropriate Christian faith expressions.

THE XERENTE MUSICAL SCENE

In 2017, when I first visited the Xerente, we talked about their traditional music genres. I encouraged them to redeem their *own* traditional musical styles for their Christian services, evangelism, etc. I met composers, pastors, as well as their beloved missionaries, some of whom had given nearly 60 years of their lives to serve the community.

Like in any community, Xerente Christians had many opinions about what music they should develop for their church. Some have become very accustomed to Western hymns, while others look to the contemporary music scene of Brazilian churches.

A few may even advocate for a radical return to traditional songs or styles from their culture to maintain the unity of the culture. But the reality on the ground is that musicians across the spectrum have already been fusing elements. They have essentially been singing and playing a new genre in their congregations.

Xerente traditional songs fall into various genre categories based on their function in the culture. They are mostly monophonic and the melodies extend no wider than an octave and a half. Unlike the traditional music of their cultural cousins, the Xavante,[13] Xerente songs are essentially tonal and can easily adapt to Western musical harmonies. The rhythm of their songs is typically binary and marked by the stomping of feet or the hitting of a club on the ground on the first beat.

The verses are "divided into two musical phrases. The first phrase serves as a question, and the second one, with the music and lyrics somewhat modified, as the answer."[14] Each phrase is normally sung twice, and it continues repetitively until the *puxador* (the "puller" or song leader) indicates that it's time to stop.[15]

Over the centuries, the Xerente undoubtedly encountered various Brazilian music styles. No one really knows how much other genres may have influenced even what are now called 'traditional' Xerente cultural songs. In the second half of the twentieth century, Xerente people were exposed to more outside cultural influences particularly the distinctly Latin American musical genres from northeastern Brazil such as *sertanejo, forró*, and *brega* (or *tecnobrega*).

In the Baptist church that missionaries helped to establish, the hymns from the *Cantor Cristão* (the standard Baptist hymnbook in Brazil at the time) added a new layer of musical styles. Soon came the popular choruses (*corinhos*) loved by Brazilian Christian congregations in the 1970s.[16]

Pastor Rinaldo de Mattos,[17] one of the first evangelical missionaries working with the Xerente, said that in the 1990s, two young men asked him to teach them to play the guitar. He gave them no more than 10 lessons and provided them with a method, chord charts, etc. Soon they had developed their skills on their own and began to play for church services.

Not long after, they also asked for help learning to play the keyboard. Pastor Rinaldo, feeling unable to teach them an instrument he didn't play well, gave them a method book (an old standard in Brazil by music educator Mário Mascarenhas).[18] This initial support was a catalyst to the multiplication of musicians in Xerente churches.

But what happened to the traditional instruments? In fact, the use of the traditional wind and percussion instruments was already dwindling, partly because of the scarcity of people in the 1960s carrying on musical traditions.

One shaker, however, the *zâ* (similar to instruments from other Brazilian indigenous groups called a *maracá*) stood the test of time. Many Xerente believers

consider the *zâ* to be "of the devil" because it "belongs to the shaman." It was used in rituals by local shamans. In recent years, some churches have begun to use the *zâ*. Yet, the guitar and the keyboard, with their multiple auto-rhythms, have become standard in church meetings.

FUSING MUSICAL GENRES

Since around 2010, Xerente Christian musicians have started to compose their own songs. They are a fusion of elements from their traditional songs with harmonies, rhythms, and other features that they have adopted from northeastern Brazilian genres.

Outsiders may try to dissect the musical features and wonder if this new genre is authentically Xerente or if they are just trying to imitate other cultures. However, this rise of fusion is not unique to the Xerente people. It's common among many Indigenous groups in Brazil.

So, what an outsider might label as *fusion*, can certainly be the natural outflow of the musical imagination of a Xerente individual. For a Xerente person who has grown up hearing the sounds of both *traditional* songs and ones on the radio throughout the day – both are natural parts of his or her sonic environment.

Xerente Christian musicians have created their songs using the sounds from their sonic environment. Their music has the following qualities:

- Frequently sung by a soloist or duet in unison or with a second voice.
- Singing style resembles the soft spoken and tentative demeanor of the Xerente people.
- Singers sing into a microphone very close to the mouth or held close to the body.
- Composers seem to envision a harmonic structure from the beginning of their preparation.
- Songs show preference for duple meter characteristic of Xerente traditional songs.
- Melodic contours support Western harmonies.
- Melodic phrases are repeated multiple times frequently following the traditional AABB pattern found in traditional songs.
- Electronic instruments used for accompaniment are the general preference.
- Melodic rhythm does not contain syncopations except occasionally, nor frequent anticipation of notes, unlike the related northeastern genres from which the accompanying rhythms are drawn.
- Song lyrics are generally directed to the audience and are not primarily a conversation directed to God himself.

BUT IS IT *AUTHENTICALLY* XERENTE?

The term *authenticity* can have a variety of definitions depending on the context. Dictionaries define it as being true to the personality or character of an individual or group,[19] or to "an emotionally appropriate, significant, purposive, and responsible *mode* of human life."[20] As different as these definitions seem to be, they focus on the relationship between authenticity of some *thing* and an individual or community.

The key question is whether the Xerente Christian musical fusion genre is *genuine*. Does it have a true connection

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Cabeceira Verde, Xerente Reservation, Brazil – A group of Xerente vocalists prepares to sing for a recording during a music workshop.

to a given society and its individual members? Does the community itself consider it to be appropriate and significant within their culture? Does it fulfill certain functions in their society as directed by its leaders?

One of the core values of ethnodoxology is its high regard for local agency and locally-grounded methods. This value refers to the respect for the right and capacity of every individual and all communities to shape their own artistic realities."[21] This anthropological principle recognizes that local communities are best suited to indicate what is truly authentic in their own cultures.[22]

With this perspective in mind, I suggest four types of cultural and sociological demonstrations or *signposts*. They indicate the authentic character of cultural expressions.

1. *Meaning*: the presence of significance for individuals and the community, including emotional content and identity markers.
2. *Function*: the existence of roles for a music genre integrated into the life of the community (or church) in indispensable ways (or so perceived by the community).
3. *Competence:* the ability of local musicians to combine features that fuse as a genre, as well as the competence to compose and reproduce music in this genre.
4. *Agency*: the reality of local control or administration in the community's decision-making practices concerning the local genre's performance within church services.[23]

All of these signposts have been noticeably present in all my contacts with the Xerente and their fusion genre(s). *Meaning*: Xerente Christians regularly acknowledged this music as a source of profound spiritual significance and deep emotional connections to their Christian life.

Function: This music plays crucial roles in church meetings and in private music listening. It attracts people to church meetings, as the medium to encourage one another through the musical contribution of multiple church members, and it has come to be an evangelist tool.

Competent: These creative musicians are able to collaborate and create while also acknowledging their need to have more musical training. They are capable and responsible for the production of this music which is primarily intended to be used by and for their own community.

Agency: Administration of this genre, although influenced by earlier choices made by the missionaries to introduce Western music, is solidly in the hands of the Xerente Christians themselves. The very accommodation of northeastern Brazilian popular music styles into their context would not have been the choice recommended by the missionaries. The development of the genre is, in a sense, "an emancipatory element, a product of this autonomy,"[24]

FUSIONS ARE AUTHENTIC REPRESENTATIONS

The story of the Xerente church and their music illustrates well the overall direction of Indigenous Christian communities in South America. Without despising their heritage, they are living in the present context of their society with all its recent cultural adoptions and changes.

The *fusions* that outsiders notice can, in fact, be the *authentic* representation of their current culture. Today's twenty-first century co-laborers in the harvest who are appropriately concerned with issues of contextualization and respect for cultures, also need to be conscious of ongoing changes occurring in their communities of service.

Local communities need to decide what local musical and artistic expressions to develop and administrate what is authentically meaningful and functional for the present and for the next generation in their context. Rather than adopting simplistic *pigeon-hole* models of culture, it is time to celebrate and support these choices of local communities. ■

1. This paragraph has been adapted from my own book *Authenticity in Fusion Music Genres,* 10–11, in which I develop this historical outline in greater detail.
2. This is a relevant topic addressed in Daniel Fleming's books such as *Whither Bound in Missions* (1925).
3. John F. Butler, *Christian Art in India* (Madras, India: The Christian Literature Society, 1986).
4. Raymond B. Buker, "Missionary Encounter with Culture," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1964): 9–18.
5. Lausanne Movement, "Our Legacy," accessed October 11, 2019, https://www.lausanne.org/our-legacy.
6. Lausanne Movement, "Redeeming the Arts," accessed December 6, 2023, https://lausanne.org/content/lop/redeeming-arts-restoration-arts-gods-creational-intention-lop-46.
7. Elsen Portugal, *Authenticity in Fusion Music Genres* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2024), 215.
8. Povos Indígenas do Brazil, "How Many Are They?," Instituto SocioAmbiental, 2018, accessed December 11, 2023, https://pib.socioambiental.org/en/How_many_are_they%3F.
9. Povos Indígenas do Brasil, "Xerente," Instituto SocioAmbiental, 2018, accessed December 11, 2023, https://pib.socioambiental.org/en/Povo:Xerente.
10. Cristocentrado, "Pastor Guenther Carlos Krieger e o Evangelho" (Pastor Guenther Carlos Krieger and the Gospel), July 22, 2012, accessed April 6, 2019, http://cristocentrado.blogspot.com/2012/07/pr-guenther-carlos-krieger-e-o-povo.html; The phrase cited in Portuguese is *"Um dia fomos muitos, agora nóis é pouco, só falta nóis acabá tudo"* (translation mine).
11. Elsen Portugal, "Musical Choices in Early Baptist Missions among the Xerente," in *Intégrité: A Faith and Learning Journal* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 82.
12. Elsen Portugal, "Musical Choices," 82.
13. "Xavante in Brazil," Joshua Project, accessed December 11, 2023, https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/15433/BR.
14. Elsen Portugal, "Musical Choices," 269.
15. Ibid., chapter 3.
16. Ibid., chapter 3.
17. Pastor is a title commonly used in Brazil by evangelicals in reference to ordained ministers of the gospel regardless of whether they are literally functioning as pastors at a local church or not.
18. Mário Mascarenhas, *Método Rápido para Tocar Teclado,* vol. 1 (São Paulo: Irmãos Vitale Editores, 1991).
19. Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "Authentic," accessed July 15, 2019, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/authentic.
20. Merriam-Webster, "Authentic."
21. Global Ethnodoxology Network, "Core Values," #4, accessed December 20, 2023 https://www.worldofworship.org/core-values/.
22. Renata Hodgson, "Perceptions of Authenticity: Aboriginal Cultural Tourism in the Northern Territory," doctoral thesis (Sydney: University of Western Sydney, 2007), 57.
23. Elsen Portugal, *Authenticity in Fusion Music Genres*, chapter 6.
24. Carolina Bertolini, "Performance Musical e Reconhecimento: a etnomusicologia da relação entre os povos Sateré-Mawé e Tikuna através do estudo do grupo musical Kuiá, da Aldeia Inhãa-bé," master's thesis (Manaus: Universidade Federal do Amazonas, 2016), 168; translation mine.

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