Insights on Arts and Mission in Oral Cultures

After personally experiencing the power of the arts in my own life, I've discovered how the arts can be helpful and transformative tools for workers to bring the good news to oral cultures. The arts reflect the values of and dynamics in a community, bridge generations, and aid in discipleship. They also provide avenues for the hearers of the gospel to creatively and meaningfully express their understanding of the gospel, their growing faith, and their worshipful response to God.

Though a music graduate, I could not write a song because of fear of failure and rejection. I hid my deep-seated insecurities behind the busyness of ministry. I masked my fear of people by spending hours in church and the seminary, where I taught worship and church music.

My job and ministry became my source of identity and security. Despite these feelings of inadequacy, during my 15th year at the seminary, I felt God's nudge to leave and serve wherever he would send me. What was clear then was it had something to do with music and mission. The training that opened up for me was a three-month course in ethnoarts.

I eventually realized that to share God's love with people cross-culturally, I had to experience the love of God for me all over again. In my ethnoarts training, God used people who cared enough to mentor me and loved me enough to listen to the amateurish songs I began to compose.

I was listened to, even if half the time I did not believe I was worth listening to. And in that safe environment where

Philippines – The Subanen Indigenous people live in the mountains of the Southern Philippines. They are one of more than 100 etholinguistic peoples in the country.

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tears freely mingled with poetry and realizations expressed through childish drawings, I began celebrating God's love and acceptance of me.

The arts allowed me to rediscover myself and to develop a deeper appreciation for my culture before anyone commissioned me to the field. I learned that my language and our people's languages, music, and culturally creative expressions of our minds and hearts are valuable in the eyes of God. We are not inferior to nor better than anyone else.

Little did I know that people in the minority communities whom I would serve also struggled with culturally embedded identity issues of very low self-worth. Though some considered themselves Christian, went to church, or possessed the Scriptures printed in their language, many lived with shame over who they were. They are looked down on by society, ridiculed, and marginalized for having a darker skin color or shorter height or for speaking with a strange accent, dressing differently, or being poor.

But when they discovered that their language, musical instruments, bracelets, baskets, songs, and dances – things close to their hearts – mattered to God, their faces lit up with hope. Ah! Then they, too, mattered to God. God not only spoke through their spoken and written language but also gave them many other artistic forms they could communicate to him. They knew that he understood them all! God's love became even more real. His word became more alive.

I believe that God loves each of us so much that he uses whatever means available to help us grasp that truth. For me and the friends I have met through my ethnoarts journey, God has used the gift of the arts and loving mentors who understand the power of the arts to touch and transform.

EMBODYING EMOTION

According to Yi-Fu Tuan, artworks possess the power to embody complex human emotions.[1] For the Matigsalug people of the Philippines, playing and listening to the *kuglung*, their two-stringed lute, not only brings a feeling of calmness but also transports them to their past as a family and as a community. It allows them to ponder the wisdom of their elders.

Their songs and musical instruments and the accompanying tribal wear and dances are not mere entertainment. They are intricately linked to their history, culture, individual personality, and communal identity.

Oral cultures teach their values to the next generations through verbal arts like storytelling, proverbs, riddles, and poetry. History and genealogies get etched in their memories by passing them orally through stories, folktales, songs, music, and dances.

For higher orality-reliant peoples, learning does not occur in isolation but with a group. It happens through observation and concrete, hands-on experience.[2] Rituals, where visual, aural, and gestural symbols abound, are obligatory to all community members. The sanctity of

PHOTO COURTESY OF ROCE MADIGNER.

Philippines – Bracelets or binakol are traditional to the Philippines.

place or land is vital for their collective heritage, inseparable from their survival, sustenance, and identity.

All these things are where higher orality-reliant peoples connect with their forebears and acknowledge that their identity will remain long after them. Though many oral cultures struggle or suffer to keep ownership of and sustainably care for their ancestral domains, they will endeavor to chant and sing about it, dance and celebrate it, and tell stories about it to the next generation.

According to Bagele Chalisa, "In predominantly oral societies, cultural knowledge, beliefs, and values are expressed and transmitted through language, stories, songs, myths, and proverbs."[3] Suppose now that I want to more deeply understand the people I'm there to serve. It will do me well to do more than learn their language.

I also need to observe and actively engage in their artistic, creative expressions: their stories, symbols, songs, jokes, riddles and proverbs, visual arts (including attire, accessories, architecture, tools, and other artifacts), drama, and dances. It is easy to nitpick and be discouraged by a culture's weakness, but greater joy comes from seeing God's image reflected in these creative expressions.

Through the arts, I realized that mission work is not solely concerned with the monologic proclamation of the gospel. It first entails humbly listening to the oft-unrecognized voices, learning from them, and earning their trust before I could speak. When I then can share the good news that God cares for them, I would also need to listen to them again so they can respond to what they have heard or understood.

The most memorable moments in our ministry are when we glimpse their insights and deep feelings expressed through their beautiful, original works – poetry, song, dance, or visual art. The mission has now come to mean that I, as God's messenger, am a learner first, listening before speaking and providing the hearer with the creative and safe space to respond in faith and worship.

It is a discipleship process done in dialogue where Jesus is our example. He immersed himself in the culture of his day, observing and complying with those cultural nuances for 30 years. Jesus spoke their language, ate their food, wore their clothes, and sang their songs. Then he healed their sick, raised their dead, proclaimed the good news to the poor, and gave them hope.

KNOWING A COMMUNITY MORE DEEPLY

During the early years of our work, a community for me meant a small representation of a larger group of people who gathered for an ethnoarts workshop. The *community* consisted of artists, songwriters, poets, elders serving as cultural experts, and young people sent by their elders to learn from each other. They came from a bigger collective that spoke the same language and identified as belonging to the same cultural-linguistic group.

While researching a dance festival in one of the Philippines' provinces in Mindanao, my perspective changed. It was during an annual event – a fiesta where families and alumni from the city schools came together to celebrate – that my eyes were opened to the complexity of what a community really is. The highlighted act of the fiesta was a dance competition for public schools. The meaning-laden choreography of the dances honors the community's patron saint. That year, the theme was "The good things of our city, dance it!"

As I interviewed their head of tourism, he explained that it is not just the dancers, choreographers, and the audiences who get involved. He said that the whole community participates. Political, economic, religious, educational, and the media all have very significant roles in it.

The event is political because the local government grants permission for selecting public venues and deciding what roads are to be opened or closed. It also deliberates on and allocates a huge budget for the event every year. During the festival itself, political and motivational speeches are given by local government officials.

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It is an economic event because more money is involved, and there is a higher rate of cash movement between hands, creating more jobs and putting workers in more demand. Nearly a thousand elementary school students need colorful costumes, so tailors, seamstresses, and assistants are at their busiest. Because dancers need transportation to and from their homes, tricycle drivers earn more money with additional trips.

Truck drivers and trucking companies have more income because of the large props and other paraphernalia they need to transport to and from the festival venue. Then you have people designing and constructing these gigantic props. The sound system crew lands a well-paying job. In the bustling town plaza, crowds buy from vendors selling ice cream, popcorn, various street food, shoes, bags, purses, balloons, etc. Manicurists and pedicurists even serve their clients in the open plaza.

It is a religious affair because the festival was under the auspices of the Roman Catholic Church – the priests and churchgoers are present and actively involved. The celebration – especially all the dances – are rehearsed for months and performed in honor of the town's patron saint whose statue is lifted up in all choreography.

It is a media event with videographers, photographers, and broadcasters who interview people for radio programs and other media platforms. Bloggers, vloggers, YouTubers, and anyone with a phone capture favorite scenes, people, and activities shared face-to-face or virtually.

The education sector is at the center because the dancers are elementary and high school students representing their school. Each school delegate has a team of teachers supervising the students. All these bring whole families together, bonding around what made their community special. Even people from the big cities come to pay homage. Sons, daughters, siblings, and grandchildren perform in the competition.

Oral cultures attach great importance to belonging and contributing to a larger community, from family to clan to clusters of kin residing in their communal land. Together with the high financial cost they willingly bear and the amount of time and effort they invest, their symbolic art forms reflect this value. A phrase used often, especially around the time of the festival, is "Mag-iban ta!" which means, "Let's be together!" It is not only an invitation to be part of an event but an invitation to be together, to be with *us*.

I didn't realize how much more I could learn about a community, its members, its values, its rituals, and other meaningful matters simply by looking at one of its artistic events. It also made me reflect on my attitudes and prejudices. Evangelical Christians, especially those who come from a Catholic background like me, tend to have scruples about participating in this kind of religious celebration.

PHOTO BY JANEEN MICHIE, COURTESY OF WGA.

Philippines – A woman from the Bukid Indigenous people group participates in the Kamulan festival.

In hindsight, what would happen if, instead of concluding the matter to be idolatrous (and therefore, a Bible-believing Christ-follower should have nothing to do with it), I and the rest of the body of Christ in the city probed about the deeper meaning of the festival ritual and the symbols used? What if we asked soul-searching questions regarding our role as salt and light?

What could happen if we intentionally targeted, named, prayed for, and engaged with specific political, economic, religious, media, education, and family sector members who communicated their values through dance? I believe we, together with them, would be radically transformed.

WITNESSING INTERGENERATIONAL DIALOGUES

Sharon is a mother-tongue Bible translator of the Western Subanon language of the southern Philippines. She was inspired to use their local instruments and dance in their worship when she saw it done in a big church in Manila. Unfortunately, their young people didn't know much about their culture. She invited us to facilitate an ethnoarts workshop.

The high school youth, who were supposed to be in class that week, joined the workshop. When we asked them why they were not in school, they said they would not learn what they were now learning from their elders in the classroom. They were asking questions, taking down notes, observing, learning dance steps, listening, composing songs, and cooking with their elders.

Their elders were earnestly sharing their expertise. One of the participants testified after the workshop: "I'm really, really joyful because now I am not ignorant of my own culture!"

Another one said, "What I did not understand before is now made clear – what it really means to be a Subanon. Because even if I'm a Subanon, I did not fully understand what it means. But now my mind was opened to know what it really means to be a Subanon."

Likewise, among the Matigsalug, the dialogues and the teaching-learning between generations during the workshop were highlights for me. Elders taught the younger ones by demonstrating how to play the *kuglung* and *salurey* (bamboo zither) and the dance with its accompanying movements.

You could see the seriousness of the youth who wanted to learn and the calmness of their elders who confidently showed their skills. We realized they had been waiting for each other – the younger ones waiting for their elders to teach them and the elders waiting for someone to come and be taught by them. It was our privilege to provide the platform where they could finally come and dialogue together.

Oral cultures deeply honor their elders. Tribal leaders, parents, grandparents, uncles, and aunts are the revered voices of authority. However, with the introduction of formal

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education, the younger generation has less interaction with their elders.

Now they must learn to wait for their teachers, their new authority figures, to impart knowledge. Yet, the elders in the community still wait for younger generations to seek their wisdom and advice. Advocating for the learning and performance of their cultural arts is a bridge to close this generational gap.[4]

Research underscores the significant benefits of effective intergenerational practices. Older individuals experience a renewed sense of purpose and reduced feelings of isolation. Among the younger generation, the benefits are equally compelling: increased self-esteem, access to adult guidance during challenging times, and a decrease in negative behaviors such as drug use and offense.[5] Could this manifest the blessing foretold in Malachi's and Zechariah's prophecy "to turn the hearts of the parents to their children?" It certainly seems so.

MEETING, MENTORING, AND LEARNING

I met Bhor for the first time when an older relative sent him to attend one of our ethnoarts workshops in Davao City, in the southern Philippines. In his reflection, he expressed profuse gratitude and overflowing joy, realizing they could and should use their art forms to praise and worship God.

Through the years, he continued to attend many more of our workshops and grew in his understanding of his own people, the Matigsalug, and their culture. He would interview his elders and other cultural experts, passing on his learning to the youth groups he oversaw in their church. Eventually, others invited Bhor to speak or teach Indigenous arts to young students in different places.

He knows that many of them live with insecurities and low self-esteem. Before he persuades his audiences to rediscover and use their various art forms, he builds the foundation and encourages his listeners regarding their identity in Christ. It is God who truly loves and accepts them, no matter if people discriminate or misjudge them.

Bhor observes that teaching "Identity in Christ" has been the most moving and powerful portion of their ethnoarts activities to Christians and non-Christians alike. I have known Bhor for nearly 10 years. I am privileged to see him grow in his faith and skills and how God uses him for his people and his generation of Indigenous youth.

His *kuglung* playing has impressed even his father. Through this musical instrument, he wants to mobilize young people to be aware of their roots and be strong in who they are. He wants to innovate by combining *kuglung* music and Western music. He knows the Matigsalug sound also has a place in the global world of music. He desires to continue preaching the gospel to the tribes around him so they will know that God truly loves them.

GOD'S GIFT OF EXPRESSION

Oral cultures are not static in their orality, nor should they be perceived as slowly inching into literacy. They innovate and communicate through both routes but employ more bodily senses and abound in oral, aural, and visual performances.[6]

The arts are God's gift to us to speak to us. Through them we express our hearts back to God and declare the stories of his goodness to each other. Oral cultures hold their contextual artistic expressions close to their hearts because they are a mark of their identity that connects them with their roots, their community, and the larger world. They teach and remind us of the beauty and creativity of our loving Maker. May I remember these lessons well. ■

Additional resources on orality can be found at gomap.pro.

1. Yi-Fu Tuan, "The Significance of the Artifact," *Geographical Review* 70, no. 4 (1980): 462–72, https://doi.org/10.2307/214079.
2. Charles Madinger, "Orality in Missions: Applications of the Orality Discussion," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2017): 54–59.
3. Bagele Chilisa, *Indigenous Research Methodologies* (California: SAGE Publications, 2012).
4. Mary Elizabeth Saurman, *Hmong Songs in Education Through a Therapeutic Lens: An Innovative Approach in Northern Thailand* (Bangkok: White Lotus Co., Ltd., 2021).
5. Tine Buffel et al., "Promoting Sustainable Communities Through Intergenerational Practice," *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences* 116 (2014): 1579–1588, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.01.472.
6. D. Maxwell and C. Macaulay, "Oral Culture: a useful concept relevant to information seeking in context?" in *Proceedings of the InSciT2006 Conference*, International Conference on Multidisciplinary Information Sciences and Technologie (Merida, Spain: October 25–28, 2006).

ROCELYN ANOG MADINGER
roce@i-os.org

Rocelyn Anog Madinger is called Roce by her friends. She serves with her husband, Dr. Charles B. Madinger, at the the Institutes for Orality Strategies and volunteers part time for SIL Philippines. She is also currently a PhD student in Indigenous studies at the University of the Philippines in Baguio and is a member of the advisory council of the Global Ethnodoxology Network.