

Music, Life Events, Missions, and Indigenization:

A Case Study From East Asia

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Looking fearful and uncertain, the dozen or so believers walked into the nondescript conference room in a nameless building in a large East Asian city and sat down. They came for a songwriting workshop, but they had other issues on their minds. On top of persecution by local police, one Christian in their group had recently died. An area pastor agreed to plan and officiate the funeral, and a great many non-believers came, they said. The attendees, though, left unsatisfied and angry – experiencing no sense of closure – because it looked completely different than a normal funeral to them. The believers seemed very bothered by their community’s response to the funeral.

After we introduced ourselves, I started with a Bible discussion on 1 Corinthians 14 with the idea that music holds meaning that its audience should understand, especially when it talks about the gospel. They listed all the different types of music and song genres in their people group and surrounding area, and I taught them a simple songwriting process. But one woman kept bringing up what happened at the funeral – the main idea being that there is an expectation in her people group that attendees must bow

down and worship the dead body. “We can’t let people do that because we’re Christians,” she said. “And when non-Christians die in our group, we can’t bow down either. What are we supposed to do?”

Maybe a synonymous statement to her question is: “Tell us what to do,” which would lead to a more colonial approach to missions. The goal, though, for me is indigenization. A cursory Google search brings up this definition of that term: “the action or process of bringing something under the control, dominance, or influence of the people native to an area.”¹ Harvey Conn believes the term describes “the ‘translatibility’ of the universal Christian faith into the forms and symbols of the particular cultures of the world.”² These believers were wondering how to reconcile their Christian faith with their culture’s funeral practices. Though not easy, indigenization requires intentionality, adequate discipleship, and empowerment of local believers to avoid grave errors. Though the believers were puzzled by barriers between their faith and their culture’s practices, they applied indigenization to this problem, which we will see as the story continues.

For 20 years, I have been facilitating music, songwriting, and worship workshops among various peoples in Asia. I had suspicions that some missionaries who preceded me to this continent imposed their own musical culture on the peoples they led to Christ. As I began ministering among the people, these suspicions were confirmed. My predecessors encouraged Asians to throw away their instruments and melodies. They also translated Western hymns and songs into their peoples’ languages. The resulting Asian churches, therefore, have a Western face in the midst of an Eastern world. I

¹ *Google Search*, n.d., accessed January 6, 2025, https://www.google.com/search?q=indigenization%2Bdefinition&sca_esv=ebde43d0a45f2ea2&rlz=1C5GCCM_en&sxsrf=ADLYWIJKv1abPchL7SIgxcxGZyyczjzqZQ%3A1736154459898&ei=W517Z6a4NpvgseMPpe252Ak&start=0&sa=N&sstk=ATObxK4YpVTPggv3psF-PgYYyuK2V0zf1zHRRgVTmQ-mwVRGkidx674eUPqVlITXykJBP7K0Bz4QnYmisEGsRRc3jMsrfRjXhLUJ5ukjFPGKCsEkBBq7cLt5b19bQfc2BpS&ved=2ahUKEwjm0e2u3-CKAxUbcGwGHAV2Dps4ChDy0wN6BAgKEAQ&biw=1336&bih=726&dpr=2.

² Harvie M. Conn, “Indigenization,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 481.

struggled as a budding ethnomusicologist with the ideas of critical contextualization, incarnational living, and syncretism.

The word *ethnodoxology* was a new concept for me, defined by the Global Ethnodoxology Network as “the interdisciplinary study of how Christians in every culture engage with God and the world through their own artistic expressions,”³ and I wanted to do it right. I also had to deal with the limitations of my own cultural background and linguistic abilities – always needing to be translated because the trade languages and mother tongues were beyond my ability. I could not write a song in their language and in their musical style. If I tried, I risked Americanizing their artistry, appropriating or essentializing it to any of the stereotypes I believed their music had. Previous ethnomusicologists had succeeded in this before, but I did not have the luxury of time to go deep into the art forms, cultures, and languages represented in the workshops I did.⁴ Ethnodoxologists can easily fall into neocolonialism – choosing traditional genres of music for believers to use instead of letting the local believers make the choice themselves.

At our debriefing session after the first day of the workshop, I asked the leaders if we could take the following afternoon and work through what happens at a traditional funeral in their context. They agreed. After a second morning of more songwriting attempts, we had the participants explain step-by-step what happens at a funeral. As a result, the whiteboard was covered with about 40 events and rituals – some involving local shamans – which aimed to help the spirit of the dead person make its way back to the ancestral home of that people group.

One of the components was each funeral guest entering the home of the deceased, greeting the relatives, and then bowing down to the dead body and crying to the best of his or her ability. The believers said this leads

³ “What Is Ethnodoxology?” Global Ethnodoxology Network accessed November 1, 2024, <https://www.worldofworship.org/what-is-ethnodoxology/>.

⁴ Pat Ham, “‘How About That! That’s Our Song!’” in *All the World Is Singing: Glorifying God through the Worship Music of the Nations* (Tyrone, GA: Authentic Publishing, 2006) 22-26.

to awkward moments when they attend others' funerals. One of the other leaders reminded the believers that there are few Christians in their area, so maybe they should first focus on what they should do when they go to a nonbeliever's funeral. On the first day of the workshop, they brought up one song genre normally sung to children about why they must do certain things – like household chores or school or hygienic ablutions. They proposed, therefore, to make a song about why they as Christians cannot bow down to the dead body. After a brainstorming and songwriting period, they came back with a song with the gist of it saying: "We're Christians. We won't bow down to the dead body. Don't be sad."

The woman reciting the lyrics in the trade language had an embarrassed look on her face when she finished. To break the awkwardness, it was culturally acceptable for me to start laughing, which led to everyone else laughing. I told them that people in many cultures can sing things in a song that may be offensive or too direct when they are simply saying them. It was close to the end of the day, so we put all our discussions aside, did another brief songwriting exercise, and then sent them home for the night.

The next morning, they said they had made another song to use when entering the house of a grieving family. The melody was very similar to the one from the day before, but the words were very different. Translated into the trade language and then into English, the lyrics are:

God, You are powerful. Everyone has life because You have given it. God, You have also told us – all people on earth – You will explain many things. They will experience pain, and they will experience joy. Today is a sad day. An elderly person has died. All of us here are very sad. God, You are most powerful. Please tell us: What shall we do? All people on earth have sinned. There is no one who has no sin. Before You, we confess our sin. Please forgive us. All things we have experienced, You know. We pray

that You will give us peace. Give us peace.⁵

They all laughed a little when the translation was finished, but more out of triumph than embarrassment. The lyrics expressed empathy and love, and we remarked that families of the deceased who hear this song would see the sincerity the Christians could offer despite not being able in good conscience to bow down to the dead body in their midst. We recorded both versions of the funeral song at the end of the workshop so the believers could test both with their non-Christian friends, and the group left more encouraged, edified, and emboldened than when they arrived. The members of this East Asian people group set aside three days of their lives, not including travel, to mull over the issues dealing with music and art and learned how to apply them to one of the biggest cultural markers in their area – the funeral ceremony.

This workshop happened in January 2017, and I heard nothing about the group until the summer of 2019. The missionary who had invited me to come had visited the believers, who told him a very exciting story. The father of one of the attendees of the songwriting workshop had passed away, and he was a believer. Instead of asking an outside pastor to plan the funeral, the Christians used all the discussion at the workshop to craft a funeral that was more culturally sensitive, but also true to their faith – even sharing the gospel as part of it. They included the second, more empathetic version of the funeral song they wrote at the workshop. Part of the funeral took place outside, and all the attendees noticed that up in the blue sky were a couple of clouds that formed the shape of a cross. One of them took a picture that the missionary shared with me. After seeing the cross-shaped clouds and knowing what the cross meant, an attendee came up to one of the believers and said, “Your God must be real.”

⁵ Xiongdi Jiemei, “Funeral Song 2,” translated by author, written January 6, 2017, in undisclosed location.

In the span of about three years, these believers went from asking a pastor-outsider to plan a funeral, that the community didn't accept, to creating a funeral that did not compromise their belief. Moreover, the people group attendees focused not on themselves, but on the God who uniquely created them. The first funeral presented a ritual in forms and an organization they did not understand, but the second one meant more to the audience because the insider-creators crafted it for greater understanding with an innate knowledge of meaning. Intended meanings got lost in the first funeral because the meanings did not transfer in the correct form.

This also happens with music. Poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow posited that music is a universal language.⁶ Most ethnomusicologists tend to disagree, believing that music is a universal phenomenon, but meanings within the music are mostly culturally bound.⁷ The common practice of translating hymns and worship songs into other languages may bring about some cross-linguistic unity in the global church, but it can also convey incorrect ideas like God preferring Western styles of music or God thinking a certain culture's instruments or melodies are spiritually deficient or evil. Drawing from Harvey Conn's definition, we can conclude that indigenization is where cultural insiders live out their faith within their culture and within the bounds of Scripture.⁸ The creation of art forms that express faith is key for clear communication of the gospel to the groups the creators represent.

Because of this, indigenization in music and other art forms requires intentionality. Though songwriters have said at times that songs can metaphor-

⁶ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Outre-Mer: A Pilgrimage beyond the Sea*, vol. 2 (Boston: Lilly, Wait, 1834), 4.

⁷ See, Linda Shaver-Gleason, "Is Music a Universal Language?" Not Another Music History Cliché! accessed November 1, 2024, <https://notanothermusichistorycliche.blogspot.com/2018/01/is-music-universal-language.html>. Cf., Huib Schippers, *Facing the Music: Shaping Music Education from a Global Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Cf., Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-Three Discussions* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

⁸ Conn, "Indigenization," 481.

ically drop out of the sky through their pens and voices, mostly it takes concentrated periods of time to make and polish songs for public usage and performance.⁹ If missionaries want to see churches in their settings become more indigenous, they need to devote specific workshops and seminars to what the Bible says about music and arts and how their culture uses those art forms, in addition to giving time for songwriting and arts creation sessions. Afterwards, they should help each other check their creations for Scriptural and cultural accuracy, edit them, and then adequately distribute and share them with a larger audience.

For indigenization to succeed in an orthodox fashion, the believers must receive a great amount of discipleship. Cultures are full of symbols and associations that show up often in arts and music, and Christians must be astute in biblical knowledge and cultural norms to discern wisely what is appropriate and what the church should avoid. Furthermore, as cultures change over time, Christians must frequently revisit the same questions and standards to see what answers need adjusting. Lyrics and inherent messages in artistic creations must remain faithful to Scripture. I was once in a workshop where we nearly recorded a song saying Noah was sinless, but we caught it in time. For indigenization in missions and arts efforts to be biblical, the believers must know what Scripture says and how to live it out. If the believers crafting the funeral brought in a shaman or allowed some idolatry, syncretism would have replaced the unadulterated truth of the gospel.

Finally, indigenization in music and other art forms requires the empowerment of local believers. If missionaries force a neocolonial agenda which uses only certain art forms, song genres, or instruments without any input from the believers themselves, they are creating a church that does

⁹ See, Scott Miller, "Friends Are Friends Forever – 1983," *TheScottSpot*, accessed January 6, 2025, <https://thescottspot.wordpress.com/2018/04/04/friends-are-friends-forever-1983/>. Cf., "Xiao Min," *Women of Christianity*, accessed January 6, 2025, <https://womenofchristianity.com/hymn-writers/xaio-min/>.

not reflect the heart of those believers. If the believers in East Asia thought themselves inadequate to craft a funeral – as they did some years prior – they would have lost the opportunity they had to celebrate their Savior in a culturally sensitive way when their brother had passed on.

During my years in South Asia, I was in workshops with groups who said certain tunes or sounds for them held quite strong associations with Hinduism or Islam, and they were uncomfortable using them. Some groups felt a bit freer and used them anyway after times of prayer and reflection, but others decided using them was not the right thing at that time. In one recording session in a mostly Muslim area, the studio engineers put in effects on a song about Jesus being the Good Shepherd that sounded to one believer like Shiite Muslims whipping themselves on the back in sacrificial self-flagellation. She asked the mixing director to remove that sound, and he did.

One believer from a predominantly Buddhist country told me she was fine with using most of her culture’s musical instruments in Christian worship except for a two-sided drum made from the top halves of two human skulls. Monks used the instrument to conjure up spirits. Though I previously held the belief that all instruments could be washed in the blood of the Lamb in worship to Him, I had to agree with her judgment.

When it comes to creating musical and artistic forms with the aim of sharing the gospel in a certain people group, indigenization promises greater success in the correct transmission of meaning and reception. Simply said, the insiders say it better than the outsiders. One of my favorite quotes comes from an airport encounter between Mother Teresa and Bob Geldof, the Irish rock star who organized a bunch of British music stars in 1985 to record “Do They Know It’s Christmas?” – two very different people, though both spent much time in humanitarian efforts. When she needed to leave, Mother Teresa told Geldof, “Remember this, I can do something you can’t do and

you can do something that I can't do. But we both have to do it."¹⁰ I could not effectively write a song in the East Asian language that would communicate that I could not bow down to a dead body at a funeral, but those believers that night wrote an empathetic song infused with prayer and love that allowed them to share about their Savior. We should empower believers in the global church to make art that reflects their culture and their Savior in order for the nations to hear more effectively about Him.

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¹⁰ Bob Geldof and Paul Vallely, *Is That It?* (London: Macmillan, 2012), 242.