

# [Article] “They’re Playing Our Song”: Functions of Western Hymns and Indigenous Songs in the History of the Non-Western Church, with a Case Study of the Maninka People in Kankan, Guinea



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## Introduction

Ethnodoxology is the worldwide practice and study of local arts facilitation that encourages the grass-roots production of relevant, biblically sound, emotionally resonant songs for Christian worship. Ethnodoxology success stories are often happy anecdotes from the last day of a songwriting seminar or project; but they may not include what happens next. What does it mean when a community that composes vibrant, locally grounded music still insists on maintaining their repertoire of the same poorly translated, badly performed Western hymns in church? Perhaps the ethnodoxologists have failed in their perceived task, or perhaps they have simply failed to gain an adequate understanding of the situation. In this article I will explore why Protestant church communities all over the world, with whom ethnodoxologists have worked, may continue to use Western hymns,<sup>1</sup> even after they begin to produce local songs. Though originally an “outside” form for non-Western cultures, Western hymns have dramatically affected the world by way of colonial expansion, mass media, and now through global webs of social connections in the worldwide church.

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<sup>1</sup> I define “Western hymns” here initially as hymns that originated from Western European or North American, mainly Protestant, vernacular devotional songwriting. These hymns have generally been perpetuated in the dominant languages of Western Europe—German, French, and English—and are often translated among these languages, then packaged and transmitted through denominational hymn books. Many of these hymns cross denominational lines, creating an even deeper canon of cross-denominational music. But in many places in the world, the Western hymn remains a staple of the Christian worship order, even when locally produced options exist. Unfortunately, we have ceased to view Western hymnody as “ethnic”—a mistake I hope this paper will begin to remedy. While the term “ethnicity” has in the past been perceived as racist or hegemonic, I am using the term in the same sense as Stuart Hall (Hall 1997b, 1997a), that everyone is “ethnic” and we all have a group identity based on language, race, history, tradition, or customs. Western hymns were born out of indigenous Christian movements, entrenched in political and religious struggle, and ethnically located. Martin Luther’s “A Mighty Fortress” was used as a literal war cry on the battlefields of Germany (contextual), but in other contexts the song has been viewed purely in reference to spiritual warfare (transcultural). Conflating these traditions under the umbrella of “Western hymnody” is only possible when the major ethnic and historical differences in Western hymnody are overlooked with the passing of time and the stamina of certain songs’ placement in the church life and liturgy of Christian worship across the globe. The inclusion of translated hymns from a variety of European-based languages in denominational hymnals can also produce a sense of “globalized” hymnody (though “global” is inaccurate, since many cultures’ voices from the globe are missing).



The abbreviated case study is based on fieldnotes from my own ethnodoxological fieldwork facilitating the recording of 35 indigenous,<sup>2</sup> locally produced songs of Maninka Christians in Guinea, West Africa, in November 2003, and the subsequent return to translated hymns the following Sunday.<sup>3</sup> A functional analysis of this and similar situations from archived missionary letters and ethnomusicological literature demonstrates how a “non-Western,” Protestant Christian community’s use of Western hymns and locally produced songs can help illuminate, in part, the role that music plays in complex local ethnic Christian identities (ECI). The discussion will conclude by looking at the array of meanings and social functions of translated Western hymns and indigenous hymns, along with a few recommendations for helping communities navigate a worship landscape that includes Western hymns and local songs.

### **Ethnic Christian Identity (ECI)**

Localized Christian identities are entangled with concerns of spirituality, contextualization, syncretism, uniqueness, and the status of relationships with the local non-Christian community. Christians often want to carve out a separate place for themselves to be “in the world, but not of it,” while remaining relevant to the “outside” (John 17:16). This liminal state of delayed citizenship is important in Christian communities—and often especially so in persecuted or minority communities. The need for relevancy and resonance is a key motivator for the creation of indigenous hymns that will communicate the message of the church in the “heart music” of a people. But the equally relevant motivation of “separateness” has been a key factor in decisions about retaining indigenous aspects. The process of deciding on the music practices appropriate for church use can be understood as a series of contestations, capitulations, and navigations—building an artistic component of what I call Ethnic Christian Identity (ECI).

ECI can be understood as the way members of an ethnically distinct Christian community define their identity as Christians in relation to the local culture and the global church.<sup>4</sup> ECI is often negotiated informally, through

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<sup>2</sup> “Indigenous” has been the dominant descriptor in discussions of Christian musical compositions by local people in various non-Western contexts and is defined as something “originating, growing, or produced in a certain place or region” (Pickett 2016, 894). This term is also supported by organizations such as the United Nations, Internal Labor Organization, and World Bank. I’m aware that the term has problems, including its strong sense of “otherness,” but I feel that it is a better choice than “local” in many cases because locality doesn’t necessarily indicate any sense of historical placement or bounded set of cultural values. And I have chosen not to use the term “native” in this context due to the negative associations between that term and the concept of “primitive” culture and unilinear musical evolution.

<sup>3</sup> The reader will appreciate how such a drastic assertion of Western musical preference after a songwriting seminar could make ethnodoxologists question whether they had adequately communicated the very premise of ethnodoxology to the local culture.

<sup>4</sup> I generally make use of the term “global” when alluding to global branches of denominational affiliation or intercultural connectedness amongst members of a specific Christian tradition which spans different cultures. I use “worldwide” as an ecumenical

a constant process of interaction, simultaneously narrowing and expanding what constitutes acceptable worship practice. A community's need to define its ECI can also prompt more formal discussions about the degree of indigenization that the community might attempt, the cultural norms that can survive and those which must be put aside for the sake of Christ. These decisions, though culturally located, are often made according to local understandings of scripture, doctrine, or tradition.

Christianity expresses itself differently depending on cultural contexts and theological lineages. In addition to biblical guidelines that are universally applicable (that is, transcultural)—the Ten Commandments, for example—each community also delineates what is meant by “Christian” in ways relevant to its members, with an eye to differentiate themselves from the “other.” For example, people who say they are Christians are likely separating themselves from the religious categories of atheist, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist, while also separating themselves into denominations or political sectors. A closer look reveals multiple layers of ethnicity, class status, and age group at work in the decisions of a typical church community. This complicates the process of ECI creation. Georg Simmel notes that the reason for feeling conflict or mixed emotions in relationships is that there is not a single, simple connection between us, but, rather, many different types of connections (1972, 78). Add to that the complication that individuals can simultaneously be aligned with different facets of identity in different areas of their lives (politics, religion, ethnicity, economics, culture), and this challenges us to look past simple dichotomies and understand the complexities of individual and group identities.

ECI might, then, be defined as a Christian community's cumulative (but not necessarily dominant) cultural attributes, preferences, inclinations, and influences. The nature of ECIs varies around the world, depending on economic, social, and political webs and defined by past events and internal belief systems. ECIs can vary within ethnic subgroups (age, education, region) and can be defined as either “who we are” or “who we aren't.” It follows that musical selections and other worship choices will reflect these webs of group associations and exclusions.

### **Fieldwork in retrospect**

In September 2003, I arrived in Guinea, West Africa, invited by resident missionaries to spend time with the small community of evangelical Maninka Christians in the town of Kankan and conduct research in the

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reference to the entire true Body and Bride of Christ. The Catholic Mass is indigenized in many areas of the world, but this is outside the central scope of this paper—though the issues here will pertain to the hymns, prayers, and songs within the Catholic tradition.

surrounding areas on sung oral histories.<sup>5</sup> The Maninka, a linguistically distinct subculture of the Mande people, are a large group in the northern half of Guinea and parts of Senegal. When I was there, folk Islam was the dominant religion (with an underlying appreciation for the old animistic belief system often contained under the umbrella term African Traditional Religion (ATR)).<sup>6</sup> The Maninka near Kankan live in town and have strong tribal ties; many still return to villages to farm their land. Most musicians are born into professional musician castes, and most survive by subsistence farming and running small businesses in town.

The Christians in Kankan self-identify as Protestant or Catholic, and the Protestants have several small church groups in the Kankan area, comprising about 10–15 people per meeting, as well as an Anglican church that serves predominantly immigrants and refugees from the forest region of Guinea. The small sizes of the groups reflect the logistics of the meeting space, which is usually a private, one-room house.<sup>7</sup> One church group had just split and could not find a pastor, because the only man otherwise qualified to teach had two wives and was not permitted by the church to take the role of elder or pastor.

During my first couple of weeks in Kankan I attended three worship services. The worship styles were somewhat different, but one thing was common: they all used a French/Maninka hymnbook of translated Western hymns. Visitors from “the West” tend to get a sense that “They’re playing our song!” When two musical cultures collide—when “our” language becomes “their” language, when “our” music becomes “their” music—that code switch becomes a moment that forever affects the trajectory of musical choices and stylistic aesthetic preferences.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> I also peripherally researched the *jeli* tradition and drumming traditions in the area, but the missionaries and local church leadership were interested in helping the Maninka people create their own songs for use in church and hoped I could assist with this, which I was happy to do. Through a series of circumstances too complicated to recount here, the Maninka hymn project became the main focus of my research and work.

<sup>6</sup> The most recent demographic information about Guinea shows a religious spectrum of 86.7% Muslim, 8.9% Christian, and 4.4% animist, other, or none (“Africa: Guinea”), though other sources show that the Maninka are 98% Muslim, 1.98% Animist, and .02% Christian (“Maninka, Eastern”).

<sup>7</sup> An exception to this in Kankan is the EPE (L’Eglise Protestante Evangélique (CMA)) church, which had a church building near the center of town. This church consisted mainly of immigrants to the Kankan area, and many were not Maninka. French (the trade language) was the main language used in that church. But the music director had been composing songs in Maninka to try to draw people into the church. An entourage from this congregation, including the choir director, participated in the songwriting seminar. Statistics for L’Eglise Protestante Evangélique (CMA) de Guinée include: 437 organized churches, 154 unorganized groups, 176 ordained ministers, 23,230 baptized members, and 67,224 inclusive members (“Guinea”).

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey Summit draws on this idea of code-switching in Jewish ceremonies (2003, 140). Code-switching, as conceived by Heller (1988), occurs when there is a shift between language and meaning. Summit applied this concept to ritual music and the shifting between music of the dominant culture and music of the micro-culture of the Jewish synagogue.

One week, in a small house church, we sang “Revive Us Again,” “Holy, Holy, Holy,” and “Come Thou Almighty King,” among others. The words had been translated into the Maninka language but the tunes remained the same. Even though I was new to the language and the location, I was able to follow along with the phonetically romanized hymnal that the missionaries were using and the locals were holding (even though most could not read). For me, this was a surreal experience, and one missionary even remarked wistfully to me, “Isn’t it wonderful how the universal language of music unites us all in worship?” As an ethnomusicologist, I had quite a different feeling. I was deeply biased against the simplistic concept of a “universal language” of music,<sup>9</sup> and I wondered if the meanings of the songs translated accurately, or if these songs were simply being sung because there were no other options.

During interviews in Kankan, several church members told me that the lyrics of the translated Western hymns were nonsensical, but the songs were sung because it was “tradition.” The people I interviewed confessed that they really did not like the tunes, either. Nevertheless, two of the three congregations sang a few hymns and then proceeded to sing indigenous hymns that had been composed years ago. When they started singing their own songs I noticed a subtle difference from the reserved, quiet way that they had performed the Western hymns. While still maintaining a sense of reverence, the adults were softly clapping and smiling, and many of the children danced quietly.

I asked questions to assess the needs of the community, both musical and spiritual. From their perspective, their greatest spiritual concern was division in the church (the church split) and learning to read scripture (most Maninka Christians were nonliterate). Musically, the Christian leaders were very interested in composing new songs. They told me about a man in a nearby village, Baranama, who wrote a few original songs, and when I found him he introduced me to another songwriter friend. These two men and their families were the only Christians in Baranama at the time. Their songs were distinctly Maninka, written in the farming style (call and response, with short downdrift phrases and slight text variants in the verses). These village songwriters sought a way to share their songs with others in the larger Kankan community.

In the months after my arrival, I worked with the three Protestant churches to organize a songwriting seminar (the Catholic church was invited but did not attend).<sup>10</sup> Two participants were active composers from the

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<sup>9</sup> A phrase coined by the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

<sup>10</sup> A more in-depth description of the seminar is available in my MA thesis and will be available in a slightly different form in a forthcoming publication.

village, and the seminar was planned as an opportunity for them to share their work and set the example for other potential songwriters. My role was to act as a catalyst, encouraging the composition and documentation of new songs based on the “heart music” of the people involved.<sup>11</sup> After a morning lesson on unity, given by the lead elder of the hosting church, I shared some teaching on worship, based on general biblical principles, and one basic compositional technique.<sup>12</sup> Then one of the missionaries led them through a group exploration of Maninka musical genres and their functions, since village music in Maninka culture tends to be discussed only rarely. About 20 new songs based on verses from the Bible were composed during the seminar and were compiled on a cassette, together with fifteen existing indigenous Christian songs, thus aiding in scripture memorization in this oral culture. Most of the new church songs were loud and boisterous, in a farming style that uses call-and-response. We ended our time singing some of the new songs together in worship that Sunday, and the response was vibrant. People danced, shouted, sang, and clapped in a way that I had not yet seen inside the church building.

Most of the new Maninka songs tell the story of the life of Jesus, from his birth to his death and resurrection. Jesus Christ is important to the Maninka believers because a true understanding of him is new to most of them, having come from Muslim or ATR backgrounds. The songwriters have been following Christ for only a few years, and this understanding of Jesus, they say, was transformational for them. The songs also convey the theme of repentance. In this sense, the Maninka songs simultaneously evangelize and instruct, with a peripheral awareness of Muslim neighbors. While Maninka Muslims recognize Jesus (Isa) as a prophet and teacher, they do not regard him as savior, nor faith in him as a guarantee of eternal life.

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<sup>11</sup> “Heart music” is a term that has sometimes been used in ethnodoxology to refer to the type of music that best expresses the collective personality of a cultural group or subgroup. Though many different music genres may be viewed as “heart music,” especially with the influx of internet music technology and the ease of digital sharing, we were looking at the styles of music rooted in village life. Even those who consider themselves “modern” in musical taste seemed to have a nostalgia for these styles—especially farming music, which most closely resembles the style of music produced during the seminar. Though the concept of heart music is contested and can vary greatly among individuals of the same people group, especially in urban areas, there are broader cultural aesthetic streams that seem to override individual preference with a sense of place, nostalgia, and shared meaning.

<sup>12</sup> For the composition portion, we looked together at examples of text fitting the melody and the melody fitting the text (and we also considered a few bad examples). This is important in church contexts, since a common, and significant, problem with translated Western hymns is that the new words do not fit the existing tune, in many cases causing a dissonant rendition as the congregation tries to squeeze or stretch the target-language words to the shape of the melody. For the worship teaching we defined what worship is meant to be in the life of the believer, based on Matthew 22:37–39: “Jesus declared, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

It would be easy, and perhaps more heartwarming, to end the story there. But that would be incomplete. The next week, I went back to the church I had visited my first week in the field. To my surprise, they pulled out the old hymnbooks and began singing. One of the new songs was used, though muddled through, since most people remembered only a small portion of the song. But many of the Western hymns continued to be part of worship during the church service.

I left a week later. In response to a follow-up email I sent about six months after arriving home, one missionary happily reported the reunification of the churches, and credited the seminar as part of bringing them back together. However, the correspondence also hesitantly revealed that most of the new songs were not being performed in church—despite the fact that I had made and distributed cassette players and copies of cassettes, including all the new songs, to each participant before I left, and I had deposited a copy of all of the lyrics at a local agency. There seemed to be a disconnect or lack of intentionality on their end when it came time to incorporating the songs into the Sunday morning repertoire.

This news raised several questions, but here I'll address just one: If people had these new, exciting, original songs, why were they still singing poorly translated Western hymns? I began to think it had a great deal to do with the intercultural (cross-cultural) and intracultural (local) identity they were crafting for themselves and how hymns helped in that process, so I researched other examples of successful and failed indigenous hymnodies, or cases in which people showed a preference for Western hymns. What follows is a brief survey of a few of the “early” attempts at encouraging indigenous hymnody for worship contextualization. Afterwards, I'll discuss of the functionality of Western hymns versus indigenous hymns, along with assessment of the issues of ethnodoxological practice and choices determined by ECI that I believe led to the retention of Western hymns in this West African context. In conclusion, I'll offer a few recommendations for working with communities who continue to use Western hymns in worship.

## Early attempts at contextualization in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

### Musical Darwinism

To give context to the mindset of music and missions at this time, one prevailing (if, in hindsight, ludicrous) idea from the late 1800s through the early 1900s was that different areas of the world are at various hierarchical stages of musical development and will eventually reach the level of excellence already attained by Western music. This idea likely arose from a combination of an inflated appreciation of Western music (including hymns) and a type of “cultural Darwinism” that had been appropriated for missionary strategy. A.

M. Jones, writing on the subject of harmony, said that Africans “are progressing musically in the same way as our forefathers” (1943, 9), and so, it seems, would eventually “arrive” at Western music. Arthur Bonsey wrote in 1909: “I can conceive no higher ideal than to seek to lead the Chinese church to inherit the wealth of hymns, songs, and chants which already exist with all the treasures of music which the West possesses” (Bonsey 1909). Though we may cringe at these comments now—and this section is no attempt to excuse such prejudiced statements—they must be understood within their historical context.

Even into the mid-20th century, many comparative musicologists, missionaries, and musicians held evolutionary views of music, regarding Western music as the most advanced in the world and Western hymns as the standard to which “primitive” cultures should aspire. They genuinely thought they were helping. Missionaries brought organs, pianos, and harpsichords, and hymn tunes composed by some of Europe’s most revered musical minds (Bach, Mozart, Beethoven).<sup>13</sup>

### **Doctrine fused through heart**

During this period, the missionaries prized the hymns for their ability to do four things: evangelize, instruct new converts through text, teach literacy, and establish new churches within the musical tradition of the European church through song and instrumentation. But of all of these, the role of doctrinal instruction was viewed as music’s most highly prized function—and hymns allowed them to do that. The concept of music as a carrier of text and civilization has been central to missionary approaches in the past. Hymns were introduced as part of the Christian tradition for the primary purpose of teaching Christian principles. Chauncy Goodrich, a missionary in China in the late 1800s, said that the hymns allowed the convert to experience “doctrine fused through heart” (1877). Reverend W. E. Soothill stated in 1890, “An impulse to a better and holier life can come just as easily through good music as through a good sermon. Good music takes a shortcut to the heart, it goes straight there. A sermon has to take a byway through the mind first” (1890, 227).

Because the hymns were used for indoctrination as well as a marker of religious identity and tradition, they can be seen as a unified canon based on function, drawing on transcultural biblical themes, creeds, and scriptural quotes which were taught and maintained as an integral part of church traditions worldwide. Teaching the hymns was also a way for newer churches to be brought into fellowship with the parent church

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<sup>13</sup> A note for short-term missions teams to consider when planning to donate keyboards, guitars, and sound systems: How can we keep from repeating the mistakes of missionaries gone before us? Did the uncritical importation of Western hymns and instrumentation into non-Western areas enrich or cripple the global church?

denominations, located ethnically and denominationally in European Christianity. Though text is most important in the function of indoctrination, issues about the carrier (musical style, melody, and instrumentation) have always existed, though sometimes in the periphery, in Christian dialogue concerning worship.

Some missionaries, however, saw the need for a more contextualized carrier—locally produced, indigenous hymns. When first introduced to Western hymns, “converts found the tempered scale and harmonic arrangements unfamiliar and difficult to learn” (Charter and DeBernardi 1998, 83). The result of teaching diatonic hymns to people more accustomed to pentatonic tonalities was sometimes disastrous, leading many missionaries to make comments such as: “the Chinese will never be able to do more than make melody in their hearts before the Lord” (Bonsey 1909, 284). The problem was that most Chinese people did not intuitively sing the seventh and fourth pitch degrees, since these pitches were not traditionally part of their scales. Noting these musical differences in scales and aesthetics, some missionaries tried to adapt Western hymns to the pentatonic scale. Entire hymnbooks were rewritten with pentatonic melodies, replacing the fourth and seventh pitches.<sup>14</sup> Other missionaries advocated for indigenous hymn composition. Unfortunately, neither pentatonic arrangements nor indigenous hymn composition demonstrated long-term success at that point in China.<sup>15</sup>

According to Vernon Charter and Jean DeBernardi (1998), indigenous hymn composition posed many problems for the missionary in China. First, in the early 1900s, the only recognized national language among the many minority languages was classical Chinese, a written dialect that few Chinese people at the time knew. Second, when missionaries tried to compose in Chinese, they were frustrated by the rhythm and meter that are very different from Western poetry. Missionaries were learning that language shapes rhythm, meter, and melody. Because Chinese is a tonal language, translated hymns could be nonsensical. It was nearly impossible for a non-fluent speaker to produce a natural-sounding song or poem in Chinese.

Soothill suggested that “if trumpets, harps and cymbals were used with such effect in the Jewish temple service; if in our churches in England and America fifty years ago violins, flutes, clarionets and basses lent such

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<sup>14</sup> Some missionaries disagreed with this approach, as seen in a letter to the editor in *The Chinese Recorder* in 1906: “I would like to ask if it would not be better to broaden the standard of music in China rather than compose tunes which would keep them down to their pentatonic style? The popular idea of Westerners is to elevate the Chinese in religion and civilization, which would certainly include music.”

<sup>15</sup> China has since been blessed with an immensity of Chinese indigenous hymnody through the composer Xiao Min, who wrote the *Canaan Hymns*, along with expressions of worship coming from others in the Chinese church.

an effect to the singing that many people now-a-days think the old style better than the new; and if in our own day we think so much of our choirs and spend so much on our organs, then why should we not in our Chinese services *use the instruments* THEY DELIGHT IN to make our unattractive services more enjoyable” (Soothill 1890, 227, emphasis in the original)? But when traditional Chinese tunes, instruments, and languages were used in compositions, some new Christians complained that they were “too closely associated with unchristian amusements to be appropriate for use in a Christian setting.”<sup>16</sup> Doubtless this included associations with “singing girls” and with operas performed at temple fairs. When some missionaries tried to encourage Chinese Christians to produce their own songs, those Christians did not know enough about either Christian doctrine or Chinese music to feel confident composing new songs.

To summarize: the people with the theological training and motivation to produce the text could not produce the music, and the people who enjoyed indigenous music were perhaps not equipped theologically or musically to produce relevant text appropriate for Christian services. In addition, indigenous instrumentation was associated with behaviors and practices that were markedly un-Christian, and the hesitancy to include these instruments in worship contexts was due in large part to a fear of syncretism—a frequent concern of missionaries (see Simbandumwe 1992, for example). These complexities may in part explain why, in 1936, when the self-acclaimed “first truly indigenous Chinese hymnal” was published, 453 out of the 512 songs in the book were translations from Western sources, the texts of which had been newly translated into the “universal Mandarin dialect.”

Another failed attempt at creating indigenous hymnody can be found in Chipili, Zambia, during the 1920s. The Bemba used folk music (of unspecified style) in church to encourage attendance and provide a genre for Bemba Christian worship songs. In 1928, a Father Godfrey was sent as head priest to Chipili, where he put together a 1933 hymnbook that included several indigenous Bemba songs. Unfortunately, after Godfrey left Chipili the use of folk music in church declined. Isaiah Mapoma gives an overview of a number of possible reasons for this decline, including: opposition from Godfrey’s successors and from the congregation members themselves; resentment toward the European regard of African folk music as primitive; and the young people’s opinion that the folk music was old-fashioned (1969). Because of these other issues seen in multiple case studies, Western hymns, texts, tunes, and instrumentation dominated the musical climate in the worldwide church into the mid-20th century.

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<sup>16</sup> Vernon Charter and Jean DeBernardi, “Towards a Chinese Christian Hymnody: Processes of Musical and Cultural Synthesis,” *Asian Music* 29, no. 2 (1998): 83–113.

In other places, however, indigenous compositions have enjoyed great success. Even in the early 1900s some missionaries encouraged indigenous hymn writing. Carol Ann Muller (2004), looking at the Nazarite community of South Africa and surrounding areas, describes the indigenizing process of Christianity led by Joseph Shembe, who was not inspired by missionaries or ethnodoxologists, but by dreams. These songs persist today. Also, in many cases, there is a sense that Western hymnody was introduced with the intention of being temporary, useful only until the indigenous population was sufficiently grounded in theology to produce their own music. This is evident in the case of Shembe and is also seen in some missionary newsletters from China. From what we have seen recently with the Canaan Hymns in China (Neeley 2011; Strandenaes 2009), and with hymns in other parts of the world, movements inspired from within rather than from the outside seem to be especially successful.<sup>17</sup>

### A move toward critical contextualization

By the early 1950s, and through the 1960s, we see a general trend toward appreciation of cultural heritage both in the secular world and academia and in Christian circles. The historical events leading to this new viewpoint were numerous: from the reaction against the racist politics and genocides that had caused devastation in World War II, to the civil rights movement, to the independence movements of various nations breaking free of colonial rule. Indigenous music was no longer discussed as primitive and inferior but began to be appreciated as complex and of equal value to Western music. For Roman Catholics, a watershed moment was Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Musicae Sacrae*:

Many of the peoples entrusted to the ministry of the missionaries take great delight in music and beautify the ceremonies dedicated to the worship of idols with religious singing. It is not prudent, then, for the heralds of Christ, the true God, to minimize or neglect entirely this effective help in their apostolate. (Pius XII 1955)

Missionaries were learning that song style can serve as either barrier or bridge when carrying text between cultures, and that the devotional songs from a local church can also reflect the health and agency of the church and the level of gospel penetration in the lives of followers of Christ. The efficacy of teaching through translated Western hymns seemed to have been overestimated. Due to poor musical and textual translation, many indigenous church members did not even understand the songs (and this is sometimes still the case today). Many missionaries were motivated by a renewed zeal to help indigenous Christians compose their own

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<sup>17</sup> This makes sense musically and culturally, but it can also cause conflict grounded in ECI, as demonstrated in my church years ago when a youth group tried to rap at a Sunday morning church service.

songs for worship, but they were (and sometimes still are) shocked when Western hymns continue to hold their place in worship services even after local Christians are encouraged. One possible conclusion is that Western hymns still function as carriers of meaning even without a comprehensible text. Johan K. Louw, a missionary of the Dutch Reformed Church, wrote in 1956:

There is no doubt that with the years many hymns have come to have real meaning to African Christians who associate them with genuine spiritual experience. . . . The hymnbook with its foreignness has come to be regarded as an essential [sic] part of the Christian religion, and it is considered that it must be so. . . . Many a hymn may carry scarcely any meaning, “But,” says a catechumen, when questioned as to the meaning of a certain hymn, “I never understood that these hymns were supposed to have any meaning!” (1956, 43)

For the catechumen, the only “meaning” the hymns had was tied up in association, tradition, and identity, and not at all with the intended meaning in the text. Though the words were sometimes not understood, it seems that the hymns still conveyed “meaning.” This conflict between understandings of meaning invites further examination. It might encourage us to rethink the complete abandonment of Western hymns where they have been in place for centuries, or it may hasten our insistence of their uselessness.

While an outsider’s perspective of “meaning” might look at lyrics and observable behavior (that is, the performance of these songs), for insiders, emic meanings may be primarily tied up in the melodies themselves, which are understood to convey meaning and memories and are inseparably connected to the cultural context. This type of sonic meaning is further strengthened when the language of the song is not clear (perhaps due to poor translation or the use of an ancient liturgical language, such as in the Latin or Syriac mass). As Jeffrey Summit states about Jewish prayers sung in Hebrew—a liturgical language that many American Jews do not understand fluently—the “tune *is* the prayer” (2003, 33). Musical sound itself, even apart from lyrics, connotes meaning through collectively understood associations and an individual’s musical memories connected to personal experience. Cultures may associate some songs with specific times of day or seasons of the year, some are related to rituals, some are connected to worship practices. Western hymns around the world convey meaning not only through text but also through sonic associations with childhood, family, community, and spiritual experiences and events. They have often been adopted as a fully functioning, meaning-filled, indigenous musical form, complete with associative and experiential ties (though these associative ties may differ between cultures).

There is an unspoken, underlying premise in the discipline of ethnodoxology. Some may think that performing Western hymns and praise songs in non-Western churches hinders church growth, since the sounds are so

foreign to the local aesthetic and are reminders of Western hegemony often resented throughout the world. The overall uneasiness with Western hymns in non-Western areas is grounded in translation problems, negative historical associations of colonialism, and past European dominance. Hymns are seen as cultural artifacts of colonial memory, reminders of a “civilizing mission” despised by social scientists, resented by locals, and discouraged by contemporary missionaries. Even beyond colonial associations, these hymns present other problems for ethnomusicologists, missionaries, and indigenous Christians. Musically, the translated words often do not fit the tune. Culturally, Western hymns and other types of church music have been perceived as symbols of Western European political dominance and European/Australian/North American cultural dominance of mass media worship music streams. So the question remains—in light of the history of Western hymns, and with the full knowledge of how to produce their own music, why would non-Western churches keep using Western hymns in worship?

Is it simply that indigenous hymns have failed for some reason? Maybe they were too syncretic, out of fashion, written in the musical language of a low-prestige subculture, not part of the religious domain, not theologically rich, or no one fought for them. It is possible that these are factors, but these are only reasons that indigenous hymns may not succeed, not reasons why Western hymns should remain so immovable in the global church repertoire. The persistence of Western hymns in non-Western churches might to some extent be attributed to mimesis of some sort, or the determination of some missionaries to incorporate Western music into their field’s Christian repertoire. But these factors alone cannot account for the ongoing popularity of Western hymns sung all over the postcolonial world. Local agency is often the primary factor in a community’s decisions to continue using Western hymns or compose their own songs, and this is often decided in relation to how these songs function in navigating local (intracultural) and global (intercultural) identities.

Through centuries of performance in worship, Western hymns now function in at least two broad ways: shaping an internal identity for the purposes of being in and among local community; and the formation and sustaining of tradition that connects to the global church. Looking at the Maninka case study, and what we can gather from the previously described attempts at indigenous hymnody, how can we explain the continued perceived usefulness of Western hymns in terms of ECI and intercultural and intracultural functionalities?

### **Intracultural negotiation: Defining ourselves and “our” music**

Some underlying functions of the existing Western repertoire seemed important to the Maninka, as I finally began (in retrospect) to understand their resistance to change as a desire to hold onto something precious to

them, rather than a dislike of the new songs. Their tight hold on their favorite Western hymns reflects key abilities of that repertoire that helped them navigate ECI within their context, in light of their neighbors and their minority status.

### **Hymns safeguard against syncretism**

During a group discussion, some local Maninka Christians stated that local secular musical styles were not appropriate for church use. When I asked why, many people mentioned that drumming, for example, was inappropriate because it was traditionally used to call the spirits.<sup>18</sup> Music communicates meaning through lyrics, cultural associations, individual and collective memory, and performance context. Despite what ethnodoxologists assert about the freedom of a community to utilize whatever music they would like in worship, in reality music can never be experientially regarded as amoral because music is never free (from an emic standpoint) from all four of these components. While ethnodoxologists want to promote local musical styles, they also want to respect believers' initial reticence toward using songs or genres that could be misunderstood as worship of other deities.<sup>19</sup> Musical resonance can communicate and facilitate worship, but even then, miscommunication can sometimes impede worship, even with the best intentions. Continual clarification and communication of intent is key as ethnodoxologists work out with local communities the importance of communicating a vision of contextualized worship to insiders (in the church) and outsiders (outside of the church).

### **Hymns fill an artistic void**

Many people in the local Maninka congregation also stated that they didn't feel they had the expertise to compose in indigenous styles. Recall the missionary letters from China from the early 1900s, regretting that those who had theological training had no musical experience and those who had musical experience lacked musical depth. In areas where there is a caste of professional musicianship, laypeople can often feel ill-equipped to sing.<sup>20</sup> In the Maninka case, people traditionally believe that musical ability is literally carried in

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<sup>18</sup> We did not have time to discuss this issue during our one-day seminar, but if we had time, I definitely would have pushed through this with them Biblically so that they did not continue to live in fear of the spirit world.

<sup>19</sup> One of my favorite examples of musical miscommunication in terms of associations is among the Dan people in Côte D'Ivoire (Reed, 2003), where the Christians' drumming in church was most likely a symbol of God's redemptive ability to redeem what was once used as worship to other spirits, whereas to the outside (non-churched) community members looking in, they thought the spirit of the drums had infiltrated and conquered the church!

<sup>20</sup> Which is probably exacerbated by the fact that the intervals of Western hymns are very different from those of Maninka music.

the blood. Hymns were therefore filling the void where there were (from their perspective) no artists. The Maninka needed to redefine their concept of “artistry” so that they could feel free to write songs for worship.

Both of the issues above (syncretism and local definitions of artist) were addressed and discussed with the Maninka, and seemed to have been resolved during the seminar through theological discussions and by bringing in a local composer willing to share his songs. It seemed that neither of these were major concerns for the Maninka, since they chose to work in the morally and religiously neutral genre of farming songs, a genre that does not require professional musicianship because it is not actually considered to be “real” music—they are just songs (donkili).<sup>21</sup> The more likely issues for the Maninka are described below.

### Hymn singing as separation: A negative<sup>22</sup> definition of ECI (who we are not)

Most ethnodoxological efforts have sought to help Christians compose in indigenous styles that contain the essence of a culture’s traditional musical preferences and genres, to lead to more accurate and effective worship and communication of the gospel message. Is it possible that the Maninka are intentionally choosing a singing style *devoid* of distinctive Maninka features, prizing their absence because Maninka music is frowned upon by the strictest Muslims in the region?

New Maninka Christian songs are not automatically accepted, and Western hymns maintain a significant presence in church life. Only one man was unenthusiastic about the prospect of writing these traditional song styles for redeemed purposes in the church, which was evident when he stood up during the seminar and said, “But we should be *different* from our neighbors.” His statement made me wonder if this might be the reason Western hymns have survived—and even thrived—on “foreign” soil.

To a significant extent, the Maninka Christians define themselves by what they are *not*, in part because they are a minority. Primarily, they are not-Muslims and not-animists. Since many song styles in Maninka culture

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<sup>21</sup> For communities that contain no professionals but want to obtain musical training to play “good” music, one should see Brian Schrag’s story of the Cameroonian Mono men’s groups that learned to play an African harp from a local musician so that they could play it in church one day, which proved to be a good long-term strategy. His sensitivity to the needs and direction of the people serves as a model of servant facilitators that ethnodoxologists can inspire to be. See his story here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aR8fbbSPQDE>.

<sup>22</sup> The online *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word “negative” as “consisting in or characterized by the absence rather than the presence of distinguishing features.”

have ties to animistic worship practices, these associations must first be acknowledged.<sup>23</sup> Christians are deliberately against the tenets of these “more indigenous” religions, so from their perspective, why would they want church music to sound indigenous? Though hymns may once have represented Western society, they now represent local Christianity. These songs create a liminal space of stepping out of local culture and into the global reality of connection with the worldwide body of Christ. The hymns are not just part of the religious ritual of church services but have become an expression of group identity: “our music.”

Jane Sugarman states that “singing style is the aural counterpart to [one’s] visual presentation of [oneself]” (1989, 202). She also argues that not only does the singing determine identity, but each person as a singer works to create musical identities and to continue the expectations related to them. I discovered that the Maninka Christians were very aware of how society perceives them. Their softer church singing style (compared to their singing in other contexts) reflects the quiet, reverent tone of worship considered respectable in Muslim society, yet it is different enough to express a separate identity from their Muslim neighbors. These Christians in Guinea, in other words, were more concerned to distance themselves from their Muslim and animist neighbors than from the West. The hymns had become a statement of ECI—something that sets them apart from their Muslim and animist neighbors and connects them to their denominations and the worldwide church.<sup>24</sup> To borrow song forms from their culture would mean acknowledging their connection to other people of different (African traditional) religions. The decision to emphasize cultural separate-ness is a stance that ethnodoxology has not yet fully explored, and it leads us back to questions of power imbalances and the benefits of “being Western.”

### Hymn singing as sameness

On the other hand, in many ECIs the Western hymn forms remain distinct from the rest of society as decidedly “Christian,” as opposed to Muslim, Hindu, or animist, or even secular (worldly) music in general. Music can be seen as a symbolic marker of religious identity (Gans 1979). Music is a sonic territorial marker (Cloonan and Johnson 2002, 29). Because many churches in Kankan meet in private homes, the hymns identify the homeowners as Christians—which can expose them to danger. The music is also part of what defines the space as a place of worship for those who gather there.

<sup>23</sup> For example, the *balafon* (wooden xylophone) in West Africa is said to have been given to the Sorcerer King by bird jin spirits. The *jembe* (goblet-shaped drum) was played first by the jin in the forest and was heard later by the blacksmiths who built the drums themselves. According to this worldview, music was a gift from pagan spirits.

<sup>24</sup> I emphasize the connectivity to the global church and to denominations in a forthcoming publication.

The Maninka worried that bringing secular tunes into Christian worship may seem not only odd but blatantly irreverent to a Muslim neighbor. Christians in Guinea have already experienced this in one church that is a little more varied in its worship. Their Muslim Maninka neighbors view the Christians' music in this congregation as loud and irreverent and equate their music with that of people who practice African traditional religions (ATR). Maninka house churches that use hymns and quieter indigenous melodies have not been accused of irreverence. Their reticence toward offending their neighbors with loud singing suggests the possibility that choosing a calm song form, like Western hymns, allows the Christian Maninka to share a common religious expressive aesthetic with their Muslim neighbors, or at least portrays an acute awareness of Muslim ideals of musical behavior.<sup>25</sup>

In many cultures, religious music is separate from secular music. This is especially true in Muslim contexts, where the two domains of religious and secular sound are emically compartmentalized as dissimilar or conflicting. In some Islamic contexts, people have been taught to resist music in general, and especially in worship. In the following excerpt, Sue Hall discusses the concept of religious and secular domains in Muslim contexts and also gives several suggestions for use of music in Christian worship:

If it is for non-prayer activities (Sunday school, outreach cassettes), there is a wider choice of song types open to you, since a wider range of music is usually accepted. Both secular and religious styles of music can be considered, depending on the local situation. If it is for prayer activities (e.g. a seeker-sensitive meeting or church service for Muslim background believers, personal devotions) it may be wiser to consider looking only at the Islamic religious styles initially. This could include group chanting, reciting Scripture, a sung call to prayer and worship, etc. Another option is to separate musical worship from the prayer and teaching meeting, which may be quite acceptable (this has been tried in several locations in West Africa).<sup>26</sup> (2004, 2)

Instead of comparing all traditional musical genres to each other (work songs, rites of passage songs, celebration songs, story songs, along with religious), some ethnodoxologists recommend comparing only the religious musics of the area to identify commonalities. In the Maninka context, this might mean comparing the

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<sup>25</sup> Maybe Maninka Christians would readily compose in Christian chant forms? Outside of Sufism, Islam does not typically view music as an integral part of the religious experience. Chanting the Qur'an or sounding the call to prayer is not considered musical behavior, but chant—a distinct genre of expression and decidedly NOT singing. Further proof of their justified caution was the intense rise of anti-music sentiment among Muslims in Mali where some Islamic rebel groups controlling two thirds of Mali banned music altogether. Kankan is considerably close to the Malian border and tends to be very aware of cultural clashes that could spill over the border into Guinea (Denislw, 2013).

<sup>26</sup> In the same article, she also discusses the domains of “professional” and “community” music as well as “instrumental” and “vocal” music.

music of Islam (folk songs and praise songs), traditional religions (drumming, chants, stories and myths), and Christianity (story songs, hymns, some gospel songs), or it could mean writing new songs that sound like chant, demonstrating a respectful, religious mindset.<sup>27</sup> If ethnodoxologists propose the incorporation of secular song types into worship without taking into account emic domains, they may cause a great deal of confusion, at least initially; or the congregation might welcome indigenous songs from the secular domain as stylistic diversity.

### Hymn singing as stylistic diversity

These quieter services feature an interesting dichotomy, with songs divided into two sections. First, the Maninka sing two or three translated Western hymns, and then they sing two or three older Maninka hymns or spiritual songs (while seated, with some light clapping). This practice suggests that these Christians already maintain a balance of multiple genres, even just within church music. It also suggests that the Western hymns and indigenous hymns can be viewed not as opposing binaries but as complementary tools to create an ordered worship service.

Does the presence of Western hymns reflect an unwillingness to fully integrate indigenous music styles into worship? This is a possibility, but it's not always necessarily true. Ellen Koskoff discusses the case of the Lubavitcher Jews—that secular music may be used in worship, but it must first go through a process in which the secular becomes sacred, or is “redeemed” (2001, 77–79). In fact, the use of secular music styles in church may reconcile a musician's love for performance with his or her desire to live a holy life (Lange 2002, 32). This is not an issue for the Maninka, since no professional musicians in the Kankan area have yet converted to Christianity. But when they do, they will be equipped to lead the Maninka church in a new direction musically, if the current believers are open to this.

### Hymn singing as adopted/unified/traditional canon

Another explanation, which I believe more likely than the rejection of indigenous hymnody, is that the Maninka have accepted the hymns as essentially “indigenous.” Charter and DeBernardi suggested this in their

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<sup>27</sup> Of course, though this is still only one approach and must be balanced with other methods of observation and member-checking. The one problem with taking this approach is that it does not confront the issues and roots of musical constraints in worship, which may be necessary to do. For instance, if a group is actually afraid to have traditional instruments come into the church because of the fear of possession or other spiritual attack, the church may need some theological teaching before proceeding to songwriting (reinforcing the necessity of the ethnodoxologist to develop the skills to assess core needs of the community).

example from Chinese hymnody (1998, 100) but did not fully explore the enormous repercussions of this possibility. Is it possible that Western hymns hold the key to understanding not only the complex history of a local church's music but also the collective identity of the church? One possibility may be that Western hymns now function as cross-cultural hymnody.

### **The intercultural connection: Retention of Western hymns as cross-cultural connection**

The relatively rapid dispersion of theological ideas through cultures, space, and geography may be due to the music that carries them. In fact, Western hymns were so thoroughly incorporated into the common musical practice of European churches that they seemed indigenous to all of the West. According to Wilhelm Tappert, songs are “the world's most indefatigable tourists” (quoted in Nettl 2005, 193), and their speed of travel is just as remarkable. The ethnodoxologist would need to assess in each context whether a desired sense of “separate-ness” or “sameness” in the ECI of non-Western Christians would lead them to adopt non-Western hymns or, more recently, mass-mediated songs by artists such as the Gaither Vocal Band or Hillsong.

### **Western hymn as global church canon**

Case studies tell us that Western hymns (and many other foreign musics) have been transplanted into other cultures and become completely integrated by the second generation of exposure. Catherine Gray writes from Uganda:

[Western] Christian hymnody is now so much a part of Christian worship and Baganda life that it could be called indigenous music. Hymns have even replaced traditional lullabies and work songs they are now sung by house girls when ironing or hoeing. Songs warning about the dangers of AIDS are often composed in hymnodic stanzaic structure. (1995, 153)

Gray's example shows the possibility of foreign music becoming assimilated into the local culture, even where the hymns once sounded foreign. Just as a person can acquire fluency in another spoken language, so a person (or group of people) may become fluent in—or at least acquire a working knowledge of—another musical language (bi-musicality). Many Christians around the world have become bi- and even tri-musical—an important issue, given the rapid increase in mass media distribution and diasporic movement of people. For social gatherings and events, they may use indigenous styles and genres, but for church rituals and services, they use the music of the missionaries, which has now become their own.

Consider the metaphor of adoption. Parents adopt a child with no biological or cultural connection to them. Once that child joins their household, he or she is no longer thought of as a stranger but as a family member, an active participant in family functions. When the parents are old, many of their memories are tied up with that child, who they love and cherish and for whom they would give their very lives. It's not difficult to imagine a culture adopting one or many musical repertoires with no historical or cultural connection. This could be because of missionary involvement or the cosmopolitan sharing between cultures through today's global networks.

Western hymns used in non-Western churches may provide circumstantial evidence of past intrusions of foreign music styles, governments, and cultures. But while the initial introduction of Western hymns may have been intrusive, those hymns have now become an integral part of many indigenous church traditions around the world. Furthermore, in looking at the past use and function of hymns, it should be noted that an old hymn does not mean that it can automatically be traced to colonial times. Old music can also be newly added to a church leadership's toolbox at conferences, foreign schools, and concerts by itinerant musicians, or merely from overhearing an outdoor event such as a tent revival or other performance. In studying Western hymns, we are studying what has, at least from an insider's perspective, become a unifying traditional canon for Christians around the world, for better or worse, especially in Protestant churches.

### **Western hymns as inalienable possessions and intangible heritage**

Western hymns can be viewed as ritual objects that have become the possession (that is, the inheritance) of indigenous Christians. Both Weiner and Muller use the concept of "inalienable possessions," objects that can be inherited but can never be taken away (Weiner 1992, 33; Muller 1999, 58). For our purposes, performing those hymns is part of a process of maintaining a connection to the past and to the heritage preserved in a hoped-for future. With these hymns, the inalienable possessions are not simply objects, but sites of emotional and experiential memory. Once Western hymns become the possession of a person through enculturation into Christian tradition, the hymn is no longer thought of as a strange, foreign song, but as part of a new, Christian identity; it's present at weddings, births, and weekly services. When church members are older, a significant part of their spirituality is connected with this adopted music that they love and cherish—sometimes even over their "indigenous" music.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> A young man in Kerala, India, for example, told me that Malayalam Christian songs were not as good as Gaither Vocal Band music because Malayalam was not "rich" in poetic capability (referring to lyrics). Sometimes, Western hymns and praise songs are regarded as capable of holding greater theological depth than are local languages and song forms. This attitude of cultural poverty must be addressed if newly composed indigenous songs are to be integrated into the local repertoire.

During a visit to China in 1999, I met a girl who told me that her grandmother was a Christian. When I asked her how she knew, she said that though her grandmother would never talk about it, she would always sing these strange songs. One that she remembered: “Jesus Loves Me.” Even though Christianity is discouraged in many areas of the world, the hymns function as an inalienable possession, an anchor for the individual’s connection to the local church, global church traditions, all members of the worldwide church, and, supremely, God. In fact, I would say that the hymns of the church have become the intangible heritage of millions of people worldwide, following UNESCO’s definition.<sup>29</sup>

We can’t simply dismiss Western hymns in non-Western churches as irrelevant relics of the past, when in fact they represent so much meaning and history for so many people. To do so would be to imply that their own history, memories, and opinions can be easily dismissed. Though scientific and psychological methods of analyzing the musical connections to memory and emotion are still in their early stages, continuing to develop these approaches will be essential to our understanding of how music functions within religious contexts and in formation of ECI.<sup>30</sup>

### **Best practices when encountering Western hymns in non-Western communities**

The indigenous church needs to be free from the constraints that often remain as a matter of habit, history, or poor communication, rather than intentional choice of the community. The importance of this task is paramount, and yet ethnodoxologists must also consider that people may have specifically selected Western hymns to remain, and at least in an adoptive sense, and to become indigenous to Christian practitioners who have been using these songs for many years.

A hymn shouldn’t necessarily be viewed as an irrelevant religious song for a non-Western context, but as one that has stood the test of time and popularity to form a musical canon which is intentionally and publically

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<sup>29</sup> To summarize, intangible cultural heritage is: 1) Simultaneously “traditional” and “contemporary” as understood in the lived-out present of our globalized world; 2) Inclusive—not questioning authenticity or culturally exclusive nature of the art but encourages a sense of belonging to each other by protecting what collectively belongs to them; 3) Representative of communities who perform them as they work to pass these things on and protect them; 4) Community-based in that intangible cultural heritage must be recognized by the groups that “create, maintain, and transmit it” as their own. It cannot be communicated to them what is or is not their heritage but must be recognized from an emic viewpoint as “heritage” (UNESCO 2003. “Text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.” Accessed July 5, 2017; <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention#art2>). Also see a more nuanced definition of intangible heritage at <https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003>.

<sup>30</sup> See Thomas Turino’s application of semiotics to ethnomusicology (1999) to begin to understand the challenges of analyzing music in relation to emotions.

displayed as a component of ECI. Songs that are older may be trustworthy because they have endured through cultural and political change, and these become the songs used for congregational worship, supported by a denomination or individual church. The hymns are markers of tradition and tell a church's story; they also become symbols of tradition and models of appropriateness to emulate.

In recognizing that the Western hymn has been adopted into the tradition of an indigenous church, ethnodoxologists should ask whether the discouraging of Western hymns, liturgical music, or other older devotional songs may in some contexts be offensive. It should also be noted that the encouragement of indigenous hymns is sometimes initially perceived as being just as much an intrusion now as the hymns were in the past—even if it ultimately benefits the local church's health. The solution is to assess and strive to meet the needs of the community rather than to focus on promoting certain musical styles upon arrival—though a discussion of the benefits of indigenous songs should happen eventually.

The negotiation of tradition is a complex process. As with the Maninka, the challenge lies in mixing heterogeneous peoples into the geographically and theologically homogeneous structures of the local church. Different denominations, languages, and social pressures may contribute to the creation of a single ECI, or make necessary the creation of multiple subgroup identities with their own musical preferences.<sup>31</sup>

The fact that hymns continue to be used in some non-Western churches, even after attempts at indigenization, supports the theory that hymns are deeply rooted, have become “traditional,” and are viewed as authentic indigenous expressions of worship. This doesn't mean that new indigenous compositions will necessarily be rejected, but rather that the church (and the ethnodoxologist) must be intentional about supporting new songs and new artists, allowing proper exposure in worship services, if the new compositions are to take root.<sup>32</sup> After a few weeks of singing a new song consistently, the community can assess whether the song resonates with the community enough to stay in the worship rotation. The role of the ethnodoxologist in these matters should be in researching and reflectively forming an understanding of ECI,

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<sup>31</sup> For example, the pressures of modernization exert themselves on tradition, usually spearheaded by the youth of society. Christopher Scales mentions that old and young often have different ideas of what makes “good” music, and often those modern ideals differentially stray from traditional values (2007), a topic which also needs to be explored.

<sup>32</sup> This must be seen, by extension, as the point at which the follow-up failed in our Guinea case study.

asking their host community questions and searching scripture together, when appropriate, to further the ongoing discussion.<sup>33</sup>

### **A call for continued academic, historically informed case studies of ECI and worship traditions**

What I have emphasized in this paper is that in many cases there are longer, messier, and more complex histories relating to the sharing of musical languages than we may realize. Tracking down these early discussions on music and cross-cultural missions in a particular region, and the reasons for musical successes and failures there, will both encourage ethnodoxologists and keep them from making similar mistakes in the future.<sup>34</sup> In order to explore these complex issues in-depth—which may apply not only to Christian identity but also to religious identity generally—a theoretical base should continue to be developed for applying an ethnomusicological approach to the religious domain by looking at historical and contemporary functions of music used in worship by local churches. Local song repertoires can be analyzed to show music histories and moments of cross-cultural engagement and local creative innovations. Local memory (oral histories), old hymnbooks, or newsletters between missionaries in regional areas will be valuable sources of information in these issues, but more possibilities and research strategies need to be developed.

The unique journeys of communities in creating a distinct ECI through music are of immense interest to ethnomusicologists and ethnodoxologists alike, and to anthropologists, performance theorists, sociologists of music and religion, and others. A great deal has been accomplished in this area since this paper in its initial format was initially given at GCOMM 2006,<sup>35</sup> and yet there remains a great need to continue to drive theory forward in the area of ECI as it pertains to music and the arts. The more we can interact with each other, the deeper our understanding will be of the ways music affects, intensifies, and expresses the Christian worship experience.

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<sup>33</sup> From an outside vantage point, the number of Western hymns to be sung, and their selection, could be studied in relation to indigenous song choices to show this relationship of adhering to or moving away from the tradition of Western hymns). Such a study might focus on an etic, historical, quantitative analysis of “what stays” and “what goes,” and specific decisions related to song choice and style. A more emic (from the inside-out), qualitative approach to the understanding of authenticity would draw from a discursive model of negotiation that asks “how” and “why” these songs were chosen over others with an attempt to connect them to ECI.

<sup>34</sup> For a Christian academic model and vision of what this may look like, see Farhadian, Charles. 2007. *Christian Worship Worldwide: Expanding Horizons, Deepening Practices*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing. Perhaps such an understanding may also “redeem” the tarnished reputations of some past missionaries as we discover that many of them moved beyond a civilizing, colonizing, Christianizing mission, to critically approach issues of contextualization.

<sup>35</sup> A burst of efforts have been seen in recent years, including the practically organized Krabill et al. 2012 and Schrag 2013. See also the newest arrivals on the scene: Reily and Dueck 2014 and Ingalls, Landau, and Wagner 2013.

## Recommendations for future research and applied work

This paper focused on how the hymns function socially within the non-Western church, in regard to group identity, but it has not fully explored the ways that hymns function within the service itself, or within the local discipleship and evangelism of the individual believer. Questions for future reflection include: How do scholars and practitioners discuss tradition as an active process cross-culturally? How do we understand music histories and cultures when music transcends, invades, and passes through cultural boundaries? What is to be gained by promoting an insider perspective on religious music? From the development of Western hymnody, to the more recent conflicts about worship music styles in North America, to discussions of the indigenization of Christian hymnody in local contexts, one of the greatest challenges of any Christian community is reaching an agreement about the music that best represents them, expresses their worship, and represents their own ECI; but these conversations are crucial to the vibrancy of Christian community.

In relation to applied research with local communities, the challenge for ethnodoxologists is to continue working through the cultural collaboration, confronting issues of power imbalances and hegemony with responsibility, grace, and humility. Ethnomusicologists, ethnodoxologists, anthropologists, and missionaries have seen firsthand that relationships with outside researchers have shaped status hierarchies in local cultures and in the global church in countless ways— from musical style to clothing, to the creation of worldwide financial and social partnerships within the church. Positive reports are emphasized in field newsletters (for ethnodoxologists) and grant reports (for participatory action research and applied ethnomusicology), but an honest analysis may reveal a subtle ethnocentrism embedded in cultural and religious structures and musical options, and a hesitancy to recognize unbalanced systems of power and agency. Power inequalities are evident between teacher and student, priest and layperson, worship leader and worshipping congregation, missionary and convert, and between members of different classes. Even with a goal of collaboration between expatriate missionaries and local communities, hierarchies of power are difficult to overcome and should remain a topic of further research and assessment within applied ethnomusicology and ethnodoxology. It is also important to reassess our models of assessment and perceived success.

## Conclusion

How do global and local church identities and affinities affect choices about appropriate musical styles for use in the worldwide church? Using archival data from Africa and Asia and personal fieldwork from East Asia, West Africa, and South India, I've explored ways in which ethnic Christian identity (ECI) is negotiated through

musical discourse on intercultural and intracultural levels. In conclusion, I want to briefly restate the functions above, along with my support for the efforts of ethnodoxology.<sup>36</sup>

Translated Western hymns function socially in the following ways:

1. Communally, to provide connection to the past and a sense of longstanding tradition—an “intangible heritage.” Personally and collectively to serve as intangible and inalienable possessions that individuals “own” as mnemonic connections to past history or spiritual experiences.
2. To fill an artistic gap (this gap should be filled immediately by worship artists from the local community and potentially from professional or caste artists drawn to become a part of the community, thereby eliminating this function).
3. As a means of retaining a sameness/separateness distinction regarding local music and arts in ECI, thereby creating a public transcript that attempts to protect the community from syncretism. (One might ask: “Should Christians always sound foreign? Why might this give people a false impression of the church and its mission?)
4. To provide stylistic diversity with a global view (from the insider perspective). Similarly, they can provide a shared musical language among the global church, which one hopes is becoming more interested in incorporating “their” music into its denominational hymnbooks and canons, thus recognizing diverse artistic contributions to the whole body of Christ and its worship.

Locally composed, indigenous hymns in a heart-music style differ from translated, imported songs because they function socially in the following ways:

1. Provide a sonic bridge to connect with the local people; a sense that this music, this religion, and this God is “ours.”
2. Fill an artistic gap, allowing the local community to create relevant socioreligious musical commentary and song styles that speak straight to the heart.
3. Encourage the community to focus afresh on scriptural and theological themes, specifically relevant to their current needs and vantage points.

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<sup>36</sup> I am separating uses and functions for the sake of time. Certainly hymns can be used in a variety of contexts, but by function I am answering the question of *why* they are used in non-Western church contexts. In other words, how does their use function in society?

4. Utilize local creative culture and artistry that encourage and support the arts in community at large and in the church.
5. Convey a coherent, cohesive message (the text of a song), which is imperative if music is going to be used by the local church for doctrinal teaching, evangelism, or encouragement of believers.
6. Foster a sense of agency and self-sustainability in the local church, which stabilizes the church in society as a legitimate, locally rooted religious community.

Tom Avery, a pioneer of ethnodoxology, wrote, “I believe that translated hymns—where musical languages are shared—have a supplementary place, and that the substantial ‘meat and potatoes’ of any hymnody should be the products of composers and poets who are local musicians and native speakers of the language” (n.d., 10). A recent quote from a missionary newsletter affirms the power of local composition: “But when we compare even the best translated songs with the songs that are original in [the local language], there is a difference. . . . There is something that speaks to the hearts of people in the songs that originate here, both in the language of songs and in the themes.”<sup>37</sup> Statements like these motivate ethnodoxologists to encourage local songs from Christian communities worldwide.

For the Maninka, though “our” new songs did not replace “their” Western hymns for church, there were several benefits from the seminar. First, Maninka composers were engaged, encouraged, and recognized. Second, the Muslim translator I worked with commented on these new songs as “true Maninka songs” (as opposed to the old Maninka songs written in gospel or Western hymn style he had translated before). He wanted to listen to them. This showed that we had found an indigenous style that communicated to and intrigued the non-Christian Maninka. This should be viewed as a marker of success for a local church operating in a people group still determined to be “unreached” with the gospel. Finally, the church was strengthened through teaching about worship, and through scripture memorization through song. Most miraculously, the divided church congregations came back together. Thankfully, “love covers over a multitude of sins.”<sup>38</sup> In my focus on the music, I had missed a tremendous outcome. Sometimes our goals are different than the community’s (and God’s), even after we try to align ourselves with them.

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<sup>37</sup> Source undisclosed, for security purposes.

<sup>38</sup> 1 Peter 4:8.

## **“Our” one goal—our one God**

Though this paper has focused on the relevance of Western hymns in missions, the issue of musical style is peripheral compared to the focus of the worldwide Christian church, which is to love and worship God in every facet of life, letting his love pour out into genuine love for others as the church invites others to join us in relationship with each other and with God through Christ Jesus. This is the preeminent issue, though it cannot be given adequate space in this already lengthy essay. I mention it here to situate myself honestly and to conclude this discussion in its intended framework—that is, worship contextualization. The key issues, then, for the local community and for the ethnodoxologist are not a matter of singing the “right” songs or using the right instruments or dances, but of addressing the condition of the worshipers’ hearts—“ours” and “theirs.”

Only when people truly understand the centrality of worship to the believers’ primary life purpose as the people of God will hearts overflow into meaningful expressions of “heart music.” This is why worship, in theology and practice, must become and remain a central part of ethnodoxological training and its practice. Though the social issues involved in creating ECIs play a part in musical decisions and navigating the creation of church repertoire, the global church’s primary focus must always be the God we worship as the worldwide body of Christ. Regardless of whether “they” are singing “our” songs or “we” are singing “theirs,” our God alone is the reason we sing at all.

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