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For seven years my family and I lived and worked among the Dida people of south-central Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>1</sup> Our presence in the region was part of a larger initiative undertaken in 1959 by our sponsoring agency, the North American-based Mennonite Board of Missions. This initiative focused on establishing fraternal relationships with a variety of independent religious movements across West Africa.<sup>2</sup>

My specific assignment during this period was a response to an invitation from leaders of the Harrist Church in southern Dida territory to design and implement a program of biblical instruction for the church's preachers and young people in the area.<sup>3</sup> For the first few years I worked from Yocoboue, one of the southernmost Dida villages, doing itinerant teaching in a network of Harrist communities fanning out in all directions from that central point. Upon completing a three-year assignment in that region, I was then asked by local church leaders to extend the project by repeating the study program for villages in and around Divo, a larger urban center 60 miles farther north.

My initial encounter with Dida Harrist hymnody, which was in later years to occupy so much of my time and energy, came on my first brief visit to Yocoboue in July 1979. I had been invited to the village on that occasion—along with my wife Jeanette, and colleagues, David and Wilma Shank—to begin discussions concerning what our mission agency might be willing to contribute to the Dida Harrist vision of a Bible school for training church leaders.

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this article are based on my Ph.D. dissertation (Krabill 1989), subsequently published in Peter Lang's "Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity" series (Krabill 1995).

<sup>2</sup> The nature and early history of these relationships are described by Edwin and Irene Weaver (1970, 1975); Wilbert Shenk (1974); David A. Shank (1985a, 1985b); and James R. Krabill (2006).

<sup>3</sup> For more details on the historical development of this Bible teaching program, see my treatment of the subject in longer and shorter versions (1987; 1985).



The rather arduous, late rainy-season trip from Abidjan to Yocoboue took nearly four hours. But it proved worthwhile from the moment we approached the outskirts of the village and discovered the entire church choir waiting patiently since early morning to accompany us in song and dance to our place of meeting.

As we gathered that afternoon to review the upcoming weekend's activities, a passing comment from our host Dominique gave a first hint of the several, independently developing musical traditions within Dida Harrist hymnody. "The processional songs you heard this morning," he informed us, "are what we call *nouveautés*—songs composed only recently by young people within the church. Tonight, however, when the sun goes down, we will gather at the preacher's house for a concert of *dogbro* music, our really powerful songs dating from the earliest years of the Harrist movement among the Dida."

This meant very little to me at the time. We had come to Yocoboue to discuss biblical instruction, not ethnomusicology. But I remember thinking how intriguing it would be to know what was being sung in these hymns, as a way of understanding how Harrists themselves perceive their own religious history and experience. For readers unaware of this history—as we certainly were at the time of this first village visit—I'll recount how it began.

### Going back to the beginning

It was in mid-1913 that a 53-year-old West African prophet-evangelist named William Wade Harris left his native Liberia and stepped across the French colonial border into neighboring Côte d'Ivoire. He was equipped with little more than a passionate desire to share the good news of Jesus. Walking barefoot from village to village for hundreds of miles along the coast, Harris challenged people everywhere to lay aside their traditional objects of worship and turn instead to the one true God.

Harris's ministry lasted a mere eighteen months before he was arrested by the French regime, beaten, and sent back to Liberia. During this brief period, however, an estimated 100,000–200,000 people from over a dozen different ethnic groups—including the Dida people—accepted the evangelist's call, received baptism, and took their first steps toward a new life in Christ.

One of the questions frequently asked of Harris by new converts during their encounters with him concerned the type of music that they were expected to sing once they arrived back home in their villages. "Teach us the songs of heaven," they pleaded, "so that we can truly bring glory to God."

But Harris—though himself a lover of the Western hymns he'd sung since early childhood—would not give easy answers. "I have never been to heaven," he wisely told them, "so I cannot tell you what kind of music is sung in God's royal village. But know this," he continued, "that God has no personal favorite songs. He hears all that we say in whatever language. It is sufficient for us to compose hymns of praise to him with our own music and in our own language for him to understand."

Encouraged by these words, new believers set to work immediately, transforming various traditional genres of music into praise songs to God. One such early hymn proclaims:

*It was the Lord who first gave birth to us and placed us here.  
How were we to know  
That the Lord would give birth to us a second time?  
Thanks to Him, we can live in peace on this earth!*

In the years following Harris's short visit to southern Côte d'Ivoire, and continuing right up to the present day, composers within the Harrist movement have written thousands of hymns, exploring new themes and developing additional musical styles as they read the Scriptures and grew in Christian understanding. Some of these hymns tell Bible stories or relate events from Harrist history. Other texts function as prayers, miniature sermons, and confessions of faith—all set to music by members of the church, for the church, and in a language that the church can understand well.<sup>4</sup>

As we came to know and appreciate more fully this remarkable story of Harris's ministry, our desire to partner with local church leaders in encouraging and preserving the church's musical traditions grew deeper. An unforeseen crisis in the community soon gave us that opportunity.

### **Two singers die, a project is born**

In our first year of living in Yocoboue, two of the church's leading singers—a middle-aged man and an elderly woman—died. "With that old lady probably went some of our earliest songs," one preacher told me. "Her 'library' contained a few hymns our younger sisters may never be able to reconstitute." I discussed the matter further with church leaders on several occasions and we finally decided on a plan of recording the oldest local hymns on cassette tapes to preserve them for future reference.

News of our project spread rapidly from Yocoboue to other villages and we began receiving requests for copies of the cassette recordings being produced. Puzzled at first by these requests, I soon made a number of important discoveries:

1. The village of Yocoboue had been from the earliest days of the Dida Harrist movement the principal center of hymn composition and diffusion throughout Dida territory.
2. Even after all these years, many Dida villages continued to look to Yocoboue for leadership in this domain.

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<sup>4</sup> For more on Harris's remarkable ministry, see my Chapter 7, "Gospel Meets Culture: A West African Evangelist Provides Clues for How It's Done," in Krabill 2005, 88–102.

3. Any documentation or preservation work with these traditions should be done quickly; and such work could be accomplished most effectively from the very village to which I had been appointed (though for quite another reason).

It was not my intention at the outset of the Dida hymn project to assemble a complete, definitive repertoire of all the hymns sung by the present-day Harrist Church. My chief concern, which was shared by the Harrist leaders in Yocoboue, was to preserve the oldest of these hymns, those dating from the earliest years of the Dida Harrist movement and those which seemed to be slipping into oblivion with the passing of the church's elderly lead singers who knew them best.

When we began our recording project, there were far fewer possibilities, other than the long-standing and largely trustworthy practice of oral transmission, for preserving the music of the Harrist church: no CDs, no video cameras, no YouTube. Just fragile and vulnerable cassette tapes that braved the dust and heat to record memories. Now, so much more is available and the expressed desire of the 1980s to preserve what was possible for future generations seems far less urgent.

## Methods

Our first recording session in Yocoboue took place late on Sunday night, October 10, 1982, in the courtyard of Head Preacher Legre N'Guessan Benoit. Thirteen choir members (ten women and three men) showed up for the session. We recorded ten early Harrist compositions over three hours. At the end of the evening the next session was scheduled for three weeks later, or for "whenever it could be arranged."

Ten hymns were, I thought, a decent beginning, but the amount of time it took to produce them was discouraging. Furthermore, the recording session had developed into something of much greater importance than the simple, informal gathering of musicians I had originally envisioned. It had become an "event."

For two weeks before the session, lengthy announcements during worship services had prepared participating choir members for the task ahead. "The songs to be sung," it was stressed, "are not *chants d'amusement*, but the sacred music of the church which was blessed by the Prophet Harris himself and which now, after many years, has been entrusted to us." The seriousness of the matter was again emphasized by the Head Preacher in his emotion-laden introductory comments on the evening when the singing finally took place. Yocoboue's entire corps of preachers attended the event, which was solemnly opened and concluded with special prayers.

At the close of this first evening of recording I made several mental notes which would later alter the methods used in the Dida hymn project:

1. I observed that hymn collecting, in the minds of the Harrists, was far more than a simple, banal, or routine exercise. It was, rather, a sacred occasion, itself a form of "worship," and I would need to respect it as such.

2. I sensed that the setting which had been created for the purpose of hymn recording was an artificial, unnatural one for most of the participants. Harrist hymn singing under normal circumstances takes place in five very specific contexts: *regular worship* (seven times weekly); *extra-liturgical processions* (for example, travelling to neighboring villages or welcoming visitors); *special festivals* (Christmas, Easter, church dedications); *choir rehearsals*; and *funeral-related activities* (all-night wakes, walks to cemetery). What we were proposing here was an innovation, a new “institution”—one which, unlike the others, required the participants to sit in a circle and do nothing but sing. The setting was most similar in form to the all-night wake. It seemed possible to me that the novelty of this new context might attract the singers for two or three singing sessions, but I was less hopeful that their interest could be sustained for the number of sessions necessary to complete the project.
3. Head Preacher Benoit had made it clear that Sunday was the only day worthy of this type of activity. The problem here was that Harrists already held three scheduled services each Sunday: 5:30 in the morning, the “regular” 9:00 morning worship hour, and a final vespers service at 3:30 in the afternoon. To expect that choir members should regularly assemble yet a fourth time did not seem to me to be a promising suggestion.
4. What was missing the most in the sterile setting we had created was the liturgical context in which these hymns were ordinarily sung—the context that gives the hymns so much of their life and meaning. It’s one thing to sing, in the quietness of a late afternoon Good Friday vespers service:

*Joseph goes to Pilate and says,  
“Truly, He has been killed.”  
He asks for His holy body  
To bury Him.*

But it is quite another matter to meaningfully sing this same hymn on a Sunday evening in mid-October. I later learned that we may never have been able to record some songs of this kind, because they are sung only once or twice a year, and only at appropriate liturgical times.

Due to these considerations, we eventually decided that the best way to record Harrist hymns was to avoid new, unnatural situations and instead focus on hymn collection within the church’s established worship contexts. These include the seven weekly worship services:

1. Sunday, 5:30 a.m.
2. Sunday, 9:00 a.m.
3. Sunday, 3:30 p.m.
4. Tuesday, 7:30 p.m.
5. Wednesday, 5:30 a.m.
6. Thursday, 7:30 p.m.
7. Friday, 5:30 a.m.

### *Collecting hymns in regular worship settings*

Harrist liturgy, unlike the liturgies of most other independent churches in Africa, is conducted with remarkable solemnity and restraint. Starting and closing times are clearly stated and carefully respected. The order of service is “formal” in style and essentially unaltered in structure from one instance to the next. Spontaneous elements in Harrist worship are almost unknown and would be considered disruptions of the established order. The one major exception to this rule is that choir members have the right to interrupt the sermon whenever they like, and as often as they like, with appropriate hymn selections. Singers may also choose not to interrupt at all. In longer services, such as on Easter or New Year’s Eve, the choir might interrupt ten or fifteen times.

The standard, predictable constituent parts of a typical Yocoboue Sunday morning worship service include the following:<sup>5</sup>

**First bell** (d-i-n-g d-i-n-g ding ding [pause] d-i-n-g d-i-n-g ding ding) rings for several minutes around 7:30 a.m. to announce the upcoming worship hour.

**Second bell** (ding ding [pause] ding ding) begins ringing at about 8:30 to warn that little time remains. Choir members should change into white apparel and begin gathering with preachers in the Head Preacher’s courtyard. All other church members should likewise now be dressing and make their way to church close to 9:00 a.m.

**Third bell** (d-i-n-g [pause] d-i-n-g), at about 8:55 a.m., is the cue for the Head Preacher, in the presence of other preachers and choir members, to speak a short prayer, immediately followed by the beginning of the procession.

**Procession** of preachers and choir members from the Head Preacher’s courtyard to church. There is singing and playing of calabash instruments, but generally no dancing.

**Silent entrance** into church at 9:00 a.m. The bell is tapped once for each preacher’s entrance.

**Short opening prayer** of invocation by the Head Preacher. Preachers remain standing for prayer; everyone else is kneeling.

**Recitation of Ten Commandments**, followed by the “**Eleventh Commandment**” (that is, Jesus’s resume of the Law in Mark 12:29–31) and the **Apostles’ Creed**. Everyone is standing.

**Song** (a cappella). Everyone still standing.

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<sup>5</sup> The six other weekly services are shortened versions of the Sunday morning service, omitting the recitation of commandments and creed, special prayers, offering, and announcements, and considerably reducing the length of the sermon.

**Second prayer**, 5–10 minutes in length, pronounced by officiating preacher, followed immediately by the Lord’s Prayer repeated by entire assembly. The praying preacher is kneeling behind altar-table during prayer; everyone else is seated.

**Song**, a cappella. Everyone standing.

**Third prayer**, 5–10 minutes, offered by officiating preacher, followed again by communally recited **Lord’s Prayer**. Preacher standing, all others sitting.

**Song**. Only officiating preacher and choir standing; all others sitting. This and all following songs are accompanied by calabash instruments (unless otherwise indicated).

**Special prayers** offered by preacher for church members presenting specific requests (upcoming school examinations, healing from sickness, safe travel, forgiveness for particularly serious sins, presentation of newborns). Some Sundays no special prayers are requested; on other occasions up to five requests may be made. The choir can, if inspired, sing a hymn following any or all of these special prayers.

**Officiating preacher**, accompanied by song from choir, **climbs steps to pulpit** behind altar-table and prepares for sermon.

**Sermon**, from 15 to 40 minutes long (depending largely on the number of “**inspired interruptions**” from choir).

**Offertory song**—immediately following sermon—during which time the “guards” pass from front row to back with collection boxes.

**Announcements** from preachers, apostles, or committee members. Roll call (to check attendance or remind those still owing unpaid church dues) is sometimes taken. The church treasurer reports on the sum collected in morning offering.

**Final prayer-hymn** (a cappella) sung before departure.

**Dismissal hymn** sung with musical instruments as assembly files out from front row to back, followed by apostles, elders, and preachers. When all have gathered outside of the church building, the dismissal hymn is terminated and a **new song** is chosen to accompany the procession back to the Head Preacher’s courtyard.

**Processional**, usually embellished with much joyful dancing. On ordinary Sundays, the return to the

preacher's courtyard is often quite direct with the same hymn sung throughout the entire procession. On special days, however, the "return" can be prolonged for up to one and a half hours, with as many as 15–20 songs sung.

**Final benedictory prayer** pronounced by the Head Preacher once procession has arrived back in his courtyard. Preachers remain standing while all others lower themselves to some kind of kneeling, crouching, or bent-over position.

The Head Preacher closes service with a final "**Amen**," everyone stands, greets one another (especially the preachers) with a handshake, and returns home.

Once we decided to focus on regular worship settings as the context for our hymn collecting, the job comprised little more than carrying a tape recorder to church and recording the hymns as they were sung. Over a period of two and a half years (November 1982–April 1985), we recorded 190 worship services, with an average of twelve songs per service.

I registered the date of each recording, noting in abbreviated form the day of the week: (S) Sunday, (M) Monday, (T) Tuesday, (W) Wednesday, (Th) Thursday, (F) Friday and (Sa) Saturday. ("Monday" and "Saturday" designations indicated that some annual festival, like Christmas or Easter, happened to fall on that "off" day when no service was ordinarily held). On Sundays or other special service days (such as Good Friday) when three services took place, a number system indicated which service was recorded: (S1) Sunday, 1st service; (S2) Sunday, 2nd service; and so forth (examples in Table 1).

**Table 1.** Example date records for the four-year recording period.

1982	1983	1984	1985
15-11 (T)	16-01 (S2)	01-01 (S2)	03-01 (Th)
20-11 (S2)	20-01 (Th)	03-01 (T)	17-02 (Th)
11-12 (S2)	23-01 (S2)	08-01 (S2)	20-01 (S1)
24-12 (Sa)	25-01 (T)	11-01 (W)	20-01 (S2)
<i>etc.</i>	<i>etc.</i>	<i>etc.</i>	<i>etc.</i>

## Classifying hymns by usage, style, and date of composition

### Usage

From the outset of the recording experience, I established a code system which would reflect every possible occasion in a typical Dida Harrist worship service where a hymn might be sung. These occasions are listed in Table 2.

For each hymn collected, a chart with this code system was established and the date of its performance registered next to the particular “liturgical moment” at which time the hymn was sung. Instances of one early *dogbro* hymn, for example, are entered in the third column of Table 2.

From these data it becomes possible to make observations such as the following: (1) that during the course of our survey this particular hymn was sung four times; (2) that intervals between singings ranged from two months (21-08-83 to 23-10-83) to almost a year (23-10-83 to 02-09-84); (3) that all four instances took place during the Sunday 9:00 a.m. worship service; but that (4) each singing took place at a different “liturgical moment”—the first, following a special prayer; the second, while the preacher was climbing to the pulpit; and the last two, at different points in the sermon.

### Style

Until now I have here mentioned only one style of Dida Harrist music—*dogbro*—whose origins and significance were discussed briefly above. *Dogbro* music is, however, only one of several Harrist styles which developed over the years. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide more precise details concerning these additional musical genres, other than to explain how they have facilitated the work of collecting and classifying hymns from the Dida Harrist corpus.

The choir of the Yocoboue congregation, in the 1980s and still in 2014, is subdivided into three groups according to the musical styles presently in use by the church:

**Dogbro Group**—composed of the oldest women of the church and a few middle-aged and elderly men. *Dogbro* songs are traditionally “women’s songs”—originally composed, and presently directed almost exclusively, by women.

**Yedje Group**—composed of middle-aged men and women. This style too is largely “women’s music,” originating from a traditional musical genre found among the Avikam people who live directly south of the Dida along the coast. These hymns have for the most part been translated from Avikam into Dida and became a part of the Dida Harrist corpus from the 1930s.

**Nodilo/Ebrie/Nouveautés Group**—composed of young to lower middle-aged men and women. *Nodilo* (“young men’s songs”) have been written from the 1920s onward to counteract or complement what was otherwise a musical world dominated by women. *Ebrie* hymns entered Dida territory following the 1949 visit of John Ahui—the longtime Spiritual Head of the Harrist

**Table 2.** Code system for occasions within a worship service.

TC	To church	
OP	Following opening prayer (in the six weekly services when the Ten Commandments are not recited)	
OP/CM	Following opening prayer/Ten Commandments	
LP1	Following 1 <sup>st</sup> Lord's Prayer	
LP2	Following 2 <sup>nd</sup> Lord's Prayer	
SP1	Following 1 <sup>st</sup> special prayer	
SP2	2 <sup>nd</sup> special prayer	21-08-83 (S2)
SP3	3 <sup>rd</sup>	
SP4	4 <sup>th</sup>	
SP5	5 <sup>th</sup>	
CP	When preacher climbs to pulpit	23-10-83 (S2)
S1	1 <sup>st</sup> song interrupting sermon	23-01-83 (S2)
S2	2 <sup>nd</sup> interruption	02-09-84 (S2)
(...)	(...)	
S15	15 <sup>th</sup> interruption	
OF	Offertory song	
AN	Following announcements	
LP3	Following 3 <sup>rd</sup> Lord's Prayer	
EX	Dismissal song used to exit	
FC	Processional-hymn sung from church to preacher's courtyard	
FP	Final prayer-song back at preacher's house	

Church from the Ebrie ethnic group in Ivory Coast. And *nouveautés* (“the latest hymns”) date from about 1965 onward and represent the musical creativity of Harrists from all over Dida territory.

Each of these three groups is responsible for providing the worship music for one “liturgical week” at a time—beginning with the 5:30 a.m. Sunday morning service and finishing with the 5:30 a.m. service on Friday. This makes up a three-week cycle composed first of a “Dogbro Week,” followed by a “Yedje Week,” and concluded by a “Nodilo/Ebrie/Nouveautés Week” before beginning the cycle once again.

For the purposes of hymn collection this arrangement meant recording music during each of the three weeks, concentrating particularly on the *dogbro* and *yedje* weeks (those being the oldest songs), but also doing some recording during the third week in order to collect *nodilo* and other hymns of more recent composition. Of the 190 worship services recorded, 73 were *dogbro*, 63 were *yedje*, and 54 were *nodilo/ebrie/nouveautés*.

### *Date of composition*

During the collecting process, I soon realized that the final result of the project would be far richer if a way could be found to situate these hymns in their historical contexts. I had originally hoped to establish an exact date of composition for each hymn but was soon forced to abandon that goal as unrealistic for a still primarily oral society. Oral societies, if not *date*-oriented, are, however, *event*-oriented and so by digging out and dusting off the dates of certain important transitional events (for example, the death of Jacob Towa, Yocoboue’s first Head Preacher, in 1927; the first trimestrial meeting held among the Dida in 1939; the coming of John Ahui in 1949), I was eventually able to place Harrist hymns in one of five historical time blocks:

<b>Time block</b>	<b>Number of hymns collected</b>
1913–1927	115
1928–1939	72
1940–1949	74
1950–1965	57
1966–1988	187

I then established a code system which attempted to take into consideration these historical findings, in order to facilitate easy identification of the hymns: for example, Hymn DE25, Hymn YM4, Hymn NN6. Three features of each hymn were thus designated by the code—first, the hymn’s *style*:

D = Dogbro  
 Y = Yedje  
 N = Nodilo  
 E = Ebrie  
 L = Latest (*Nouveautés*)

second, the *time block* of its composition:

E = Early (1913–1927)  
 M = Middle (1928–1939)  
 N = N’Drin era (1940–1949)  
 A = Ahui (1950–1965)  
 R = Recent (1966–1988)

and third, the *number* of that particular hymn within the larger category of hymns where it was to be found. Thus, for example, Hymn DE25 denoted Dogbro Early No. 25, or the twenty-fifth hymn in the *dogbro* collection of hymns dating from the 1913–1927 period.

This system also revealed at a glance which hymns were sung during the course of any given worship service. Thus, Table 3 displays the hymns of the Christmas Eve service on December 24, 1983:<sup>6</sup>

### The multiple benefits of collecting and analyzing indigenous hymns

I have described in some detail the measures taken first to collect Dida Harrist hymns and then to classify them according to liturgical usage, musical style, and date of composition. I hope that these reflections will encourage other people involved in music ministries or other fieldwork activities to take seriously the wealth of information which can be gleaned from studying a church’s hymn traditions.

Admittedly, such a project is easiest with hymns of a “fixed-form” variety: that is, hymns which have been transmitted faithfully through the years in a relatively unaltered fashion. Such is not the case for many churches, where one is more likely to encounter a high degree of musical improvisation in newer, indigenous hymn compositions. This was the situation encountered by Bennetta Jules-Rosette in her study of hymns in the Church of John Maranke:

As a new member, I was often surprised to hear the same texts sung to different melodies. This difference was particularly noticeable when I visited other congregations and made it difficult to follow “songs” that I had already learned, thinking that they could not possibly change. . . . Not only melody varied. Altered texts would often be inserted into what I assumed was the “original” or real song so that only some small refrain or fraction of the song, as I had so carefully learned it, remained.

<sup>6</sup> Noteworthy here is the wide variety of musical styles being sung. This occurs particularly during certain annual festivals (Easter and Christmas, for example) when hymns from across the entire Harrist repertoire are freely offered.

**Table 3.** Hymns during the Christmas Eve service, December 24, 1983.

TC	(walk to church in silence)
OP	
OP/CM	NE39
LP1	NM57
LP2	YM36
SP1–SP5	
CP	
S1	YM37
S2	NM58
S3	NM46
S4	NE40
S5	YM47
S6	NM40
S7	DE63
S8	DE23
S9	DE9
S10	NM59
S11	NR24
S12	ER10
S13	YM27
OF	
AN	NE3
LP3	NM6
EX	ER11
FC	NM57
FP	(assembly disperses in silence)



Ultimately, I could no longer assume that there was a “real” or original text or tune. (Jules-Rosette 1975, 146)

While such problems make it much more difficult to collect and preserve hymn texts than is the case for the Harrists, my growing conviction is that every effort should be made nonetheless to at least listen carefully to, and learn all that we can from, the musical faith-expressions which are so much a part of the life and worship of newer churches in the global South. Studying hymn texts, says Harold Turner, will “take us near to the center of [a church’s] life, and reveal its understanding of the Christian faith, for here is a wealth of material bearing its own imprint and in daily use in its service” (Turner 1967:294).<sup>7</sup>

Certainly nothing has been more instrumental in helping me to understand the grassroots faith of the Dida Harrist people. Nothing has more effectively contributed to my appreciation of the church’s past and ushered me more fully into the realm of what for Harrists is most sacred: the worship of God.

Furthermore, the benefits of the hymn project were mutual, far exceeding whatever personal blessings I may have received from the endeavor, and extending into the Harrist community itself. For many years, Harrists have been ridiculed by other Christian bodies and made to feel insignificant, inferior, and ignorant. They have been told that their hymns were primitive, theologically unacceptable and, worse, perhaps not even getting through to God for whom they were intended.

The Prophet Harris had, on the other hand, reassured his early converts in 1913–1915 that, despite their illiteracy, they could with sincere hearts compose songs and prayers in their own words and dialect, and God would hear and understand their pleas. One Dida hymn dating from the 1920s even documents the criticism Harrists were receiving from Protestant missionaries and catechists (“the Bible people,” so-called) at the time:

*We have Your Name, yes indeed!  
Yet the “Bible people” tell us  
That with the work we are doing here,  
We cannot come near to the Lord.  
Why can't we come near to our Father?  
[. . .]*

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<sup>7</sup> I should perhaps add that for hymns to be authentic faith-expressions of a given church or movement, they should be original, indigenous compositions and not hymns “borrowed” from another musical tradition. The point is made here because a surprising number of new religious movements in Africa and elsewhere have simply brought with them the hymnbooks of the parent mission churches from which they separated (for examples, see Krabill 1995 and 2008). There is, of course, nothing wrong with churches borrowing liturgical materials from outside sources. (Why certain hymns are retained and others rejected would make an interesting study in itself.) If, however, we hope to learn something from hymns about the religious experience of a given movement, then we must know whether the hymns under examination originate within the movement itself, or with Wesley, Sankey, or someone else.

*Let us take our own wisdom<sup>8</sup> and pray to the Lord.*

[. . .]

*Let us take our own wisdom and pray to Papa.*

*The Father of the Children, the Doer of Good,*

*He will then add many years to our lives.*

[...]

*Each village has its own language;*

*Take this then to pray to our Father!*

*And the Lord will understand our poor and needy word.*

As the hymn project grew, I sensed on the part of many Dida Harrists a feeling of pride and amazement—pride at both the quantity and quality of hymns produced over the years, and amazement that someone from outside of the tradition should consider their music worthy of attention.

Eventually, throughout the course of 1988, the project led us to publish four hymnbooks, one for each of the musical styles: *dogbro*, *yedje*, *nodilo*, and *nouveautés*.<sup>9</sup> These materials were among the first ever to be published in the Dida language. So, aside from assembling and classifying over 500 Harrist hymns for the first time, these texts become important tools for teaching Dida-language literacy in preparation for the translation of the Bible underway at that time.

It remains to be seen how important these books will become in the life of the community. The Dida Harrist Choir Association, composed of representatives from across Dida territory, has made use of them in their quarterly choir rehearsals. Another project discussed by some is the use of these hymns in reconstructing the history of the Dida Harrist movement. Virtually no other sources in this oral society are available for working at the task.

## Afterword

It is now almost twenty years since my family and I returned to the United States from Côte d'Ivoire. I have made several trips back to visit friends and in recent years have been able to stay in contact through mobile phones and Facebook media, unimaginable in the 1980s–90s. The Harrist Church has continued to evolve as a new generation of leaders takes the helm. With those changes come new initiatives in music and worship. In December 2013 I received a music CD from the Harrist Church of Abobo-te, an Ebie community just north of Abidjan. What I heard was beautiful, though somewhat shocking. Local languages were still exclusively used. But there were new harmonies, new instruments (drums, formerly forbidden within the church walls, are now being employed), and new, unapologetic borrowing from other musical styles and traditions (Ghanaian highlife, reggae, South African vocals, and much more). And this is because the Harrist Church is a vibrant,

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<sup>8</sup> Another rendering of this Dida word, *nyandla*, would be “wise sayings” or “proverbs.”

<sup>9</sup> These books were published in 1988 by the Société Internationale de Linguistique/SIL (Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire). They appeared with the subtitle, “Chants harristes dida, Nos. 1, 2, 3, and 4.”

living faith community as it always has been, interacting with and adapting to its changing surroundings. All of today's Harrist music, however, is still "original" music, so far as I can discern. So William Harris's wise counsel remains intact and relevant today, as it was 100 years ago: "God has no personal favorite songs," Harris said. "He hears all that we say in whatever language. It is sufficient for us to compose hymns of praise to him with our own music and in our own language for him to understand."

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