Ethnomusicological Research and Local Songwriting in Local Churches in Sarawak, Malaysia

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Abstract

Ethnomusicology is a relatively new field of study. Its value is seen as Christian worldwide employ the principles of ethnomusicology to encourage the local church to use their musical gifts and styles to worship God. Many indigenous people groups in Malaysia are being overlooked and treated unjustly. The local Christian Church in Malaysia is responsible for reaching the local population with biblical truth and hope. Although Christians in Malaysia are a minority, Christianity is a major religion in Sarawak, Malaysia. This disparity is reflected in more ethnomusicological research conducted in Sarawak than West Malaysia. Local pastors and musicians in Sarawak are some of the leading ethnomusicologists in Malaysia. Their approach is informal, and they need to document their process. This research aims to study the process of ethnomusicological research and local songwriting in two other predominantly Muslim countries and to present songwriting methods that can be adopted by the local churches in Sarawak, Malaysia.

Ethnomusicological Research and Local Songwriting in Local Churches in Sarawak, Malaysia

An overview of the history of Christianity in Malaysia and issues that the local church currently faces also provides context and support for the need to integrate local arts in worship. Biblical analyses on the purpose and practice of musical worship support the practice of writing new songs for worship. Local songwriting workshops are a popular approach to writing new songs by and for the local church. The churches in Sarawak, Malaysia should adopt this practice because integration of local arts in worship edifies the church. It is also a means of evangelism through the arts. Similar approaches have been proven to be effective on other sites. An understanding of how missionaries from the West have influenced the worship scene in Asia is necessary in to understand the context in which the workshops will be introduced. The analyses and summaries of two previous songwriting workshops in Muslim-dominant cultures provide guidance on the songwriting workshops that can be conducted in Sarawak. Malaysia is culturally diverse, and so is the Christian Church in Malaysia. The incorporation of local arts is a manner through which the church can reflect its diversity and, more importantly, communicate that God is calling people from every tribe, tongue, and nation to worship Him.

History of Worship Introduced by Missionaries

Christian missionaries from Western countries have played an integral role in spreading the Gospel of Christ to Asia, Africa, and South America. Their labor has greatly expanded the Kingdom of God. Their contribution is undoubtedly precious. However, their methods were not faultless, some of which have caused harm to the local church rather than building it up. As Western missionaries travelled to foreign nations, they brought with them their understanding of the Gospel and their traditions. According to Frank Fortunato in “From Trickling Tributaries to

Rushing Rivers: 50 Years of Music Missions," missionaries who lacked global music training found local music traditions underdeveloped and so translated "their Western songs, taught Western notation, imported pianos and organs, and much more," which, was not always appropriate, but their efforts were sincere.[1] While this is not innately wrong, it has created barriers between the missionary and the people being reached and between Christianity and non-Western cultures. Music is an expression of culture, and it is unique to each culture. Ethnomusicologists Dr. Vida Chenoweth and Darlene Bee write that "while music is not a universal language, it is, like language, a universal: both are activities common to all mankind."[2] The introduction and practice of Western hymns in non-Western countries have created a barrier between the local culture and Christianity. According to "On Ethnic Music," "an outsider confronted with a music system different from his own faces a music barrier when he tries to communicate musically."[3] Musical worship involves communication. Therefore, a barrier caused by musical styles would inhibit one's worship. This is an important issue that must be addressed for the benefit of the local church.

Christianity is often regarded as a Western religion because when one becomes a Christian, one adopts a Western culture including its music such as hymns. While many hymns are deep in theological meaning, their musical style is distinctly Western. To highlight the importance of this situation, ethnomusicologist Dr. Swee Hong Lim writes in "Just Call Me by My Name," that the majority of churches in Asia are self-governing, self-supporting, and self-

[1] James Krabill, Frank Fortunato, Robin Harris, and Brian Schrag, *Worship and Mission for the Global Church: An Ethnodoxology Handbook* (California: William Carey Library, 2013), 525, ProQuest Ebrary.

[2] Vida Chenoweth and Darlene Bee, "On Ethnic Music," *Missiology: An International* Review 15 no. 5 (Oct. 1967): 205, https://doi.org/10.1177/009182966801500502.

[3] Ibid., 205.

propagating, but "this has not been the case in the area of worship music – an area that critically informs and shapes a localized Christian identity."[4] Furthermore, regarding the experience of a Christian in China, Lim writes "We have paid a heavy price to be Christians. It would appear that when we choose to be reconciled with God, we become alienated from our own culture, and if we choose to be culturally grounded, we risk being alienated from God."[5] Being a Christian often comes with the connotation that one must adopt a Western culture as that is the one taught by missionaries. In "We're All Bananas and Coconuts," Swee Hong Lim describes the Christians of the global south as "bananas" and "coconuts" because "in character – the congregation is an ethnic cultural layer that is distinct and separate from their essentially Euro-North American (Caucasian) core in worship practice as received from the Euro-North American missionaries."[6] Lim writes that this description reflects "the disconnect between faith and local culture in post-missional realities."[7] A discrepancy between one's culture and worship practice must be addressed for the edification of the local church.

Swee Hong Lim categorizes the music currently employed in the global south into three categories: adopted song type, adapted song type, and contextual song type. The adopted song type includes hymns and contemporary songs typically "translated into the vernacular and juxtaposed onto existing Western tunes."[8] This can be a harmful approach, especially in cultures

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[4] Swee Hong Lim, "Just Call Me by My Name: Worship Music in Asian Ecumenism," *The Ecumenical Review* 69 no. 4 (Dec. 2017): 503, https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12317.

[5] Ibid., 503.

[6] Swee Hong Lim, "We're All Bananas and Coconuts: Congregational Song in the Global South," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 23 no. 1 (2017), 138, https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt-2018-0059.

[7] Ibid., 139.

[8] Ibid., 142.

that have tonal languages. When accents are placed on the wrong syllable, the meaning is altered. In the example of "He is Lord," when the Chinese words follow the melodic contour of the original Western tune, the words mean "He is pig."[9] Adopted song types do not always communicate right theology. Lim writes that adopted song types "perpetuates an orthopraxis of faith that privileges Western expression at the expense of meaningful local engagement."[10] This should not be so, and local churches should address this problem.

Adapted song type is a combination of local and Western musical styles. According to Swee Hong Lim, "this song type continues to be popular in many churches in the global south."[11] These songs are written by local Christian musicians and display Western influence in harmonics and instrumentations. This is also an effect of globalization. Christians in non-Western countries are influenced by Western music. This is seen in locally written music. In *Worship and Mission for the Global Church*, Julisa Rowe writes, "as globalization continues in many countries… Christian artists can blend the two worlds [contemporary and traditional, indigenous forms] into an artistic heart language for today's urban audiences."[12] Artists that compose in this genre include Nigerian Nathaniel Bassey, Stream of Praise, a music band in California, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, and JPCC Worship which is a music band from Indonesia. These are only a few of the many artists whose music are a combination of local and Western contemporary styles.

[9] Lim, "We're All Bananas and Coconuts," 143.

[10] Ibid., 145.

[11] Ibid., 146.

[12] Krabill, Fortunato, Harris, and Schrag, *Worship and Mission for the Global Church*, 128.

The contextual song type is music written in the local musical style. It "prioritizes local cultural elements… [and] sees Western nuance playing second fiddle to the local."[13] This song type incorporates local instrumentation, scales, and music styles. Because contextual songs can only be composed by locals or people who have studied and know the local style well, training is required to equip songwriters and musicians. Churches also need leaders who "publicly welcome and privilege local cultural expressions and purposefully hold them in high esteem."[14] With the encouragement and support of local Church leaders, local Christians may see songwriting as a valuable tool for the Kingdom of God.

The book *Worship and Mission for the Global Church* provides many examples of how local songwriting has benefited the local church. Alice Compain, an ethnodoxologist in Laos and Cambodia with the *Overseas Missionary Fellowship*, witnessed local Christians "writing their own hymns to traditional tunes."[15] Compain worked with a Khmer named Sarin Sam and together, they published the hymnbook *Holy Khmer Songs*, which, in its third edition, had over 300 indigenous hymns. These songs continue to be sung today by the Khmer people who, because of the intentional work of missionaries and locals to write local songs can sing "in the language of their hearts, using their own music and poetry."[16] However, there is still work to be done in Cambodia as there are other ethnic groups that have musical styles that are different from the Khmers, and they, too, need songs that speak to their heart.

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[13] Lim, "We're all Bananas and Coconuts," 150.

[14] Ibid., 154.

[15] Krabill, Fortunato, Harris, and Schrag, *Worship and Mission for the Global Church*, 477.

[16] Ibid., 478.

Musical worship is greatly beneficial to Christian believers who are experiencing persecution. Nik Ripken, a missionary to North Africa and the Middle East, has a passion for the persecuted church, and he identified four common principles regarding persecution that was shared by believers who were persecuted. These four are that "indigenous hymns, choruses, and songs are central to their daily life and worship," memorized Scripture and indigenous songs were the greatest comfort after prayer, "what a believer takes into persecution is all he has to build upon during persecution," and there was little evidence of victorious faith without songs of faith that are indigenous to the host culture as "songs or choruses translated from another culture seldom, if ever, appeared."[17] The importance and value of indigenous songs are evident. In Ghana, recording of indigenous live worship "spread like wildfire, even among those heavily resistant to the gospel."[18] Encouragement for the persecuted church and preaching the Gospel are a couple of the many ways local songwriting benefits the church and is a worthwhile investment.

Malaysia and Christianity

Malaysia has a history of colonization. British and Dutch colonization introduced Christianity to the peninsula and Borneo. Mission schools and Catholic churches were established, and the presence of Westerners was extensively felt. When Britain granted Malaysia independence, the established government was comprised mostly of Muslim men. This set a precedent for the Malaysian government to be predominantly Muslim. Because of this, there is often no separation between political and religious matters. Persecution of Christians is especially severe on a specific people group, the Malays, because of the Malaysian government.

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[17] Krabill, Fortunato, Harris, and Schrag, *Worship and Mission for the Global Church*, 522.

[18] Ibid., 527.

In East Malaysia, many ethnic people groups continue to be neglected and even persecuted. Two significant issues facing the Christian Church in Malaysia are persecution and injustice.

Demography and Religion in Malaysia

Malaysia is a country located in Southeast Asia. It consists of a peninsula and part of the island of Borneo. Sabah and Sarawak are the two states in Borneo, also known as East Malaysia. Malaysia is ethnically and culturally diverse with many people groups including the Chinese, the Malays, the Indians, and over 100 other indigenous groups. According to "Current Population Estimates, Malaysia, 2022," published by the Malaysia Department of Statistics, the Malays and indigenous people groups are considered *bumiputra* and represent 69.9 percent of the population in Malaysia; the Chinese are 22.8 percent of the entire Malaysian population, and the Indians are 6.6 percent of the Malaysian population.[19] There is a higher presence of ethnic groups in Sarawak and Sabah, the two states in East Malaysia. According to the latest available survey regarding the demography of East Malaysia published in 2010 by the Malaysia Department of Statistics, the *Iban* is the biggest ethnic indigenous group in Sarawak and constitutes 30.3 percent of Sarawak's citizens.[20] The *Kadazan*/*Dusun* make up 24.5 percent of Sabah's population.[21] Regarding religion, 63.5 percent of Malaysians are Muslims, and Christians make up 9.1 percent

[19] Prime Minister's Department: Department of Statistics Malaysia, "Current Population Estimates, Malaysia, 2022," 2, https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/pdfPrev&id=dTZXanV6UUdyUEQ0SHNWOVhpSXNMUT09.

[20] Population and Housing Census of Malaysia and Department of Statistics, *Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristics 2010*, 5, https://web.archive.org/web/20140522234002/http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/download_Population/files/census2010/Taburan_Penduduk_dan_Ciri-ciri_Asas_Demografi.pdf.

[21] Ibid., 5.

of the population according to the 2020 Malaysian census report.[22] The percentage of *bumiputra* and Muslims only differ by 6.4 percent because Malays are required to be Muslims in Malaysia. The difference of 6.4 percent can be attributed to the *bumiputra* who are not Malays but who belong to other ethnic groups. According to *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia*, Malays are "Muslim by birth,"[23] and Islam and Muslim identity are "fused together constitutionally at the creation of independent Malaya."[24] The constitution allows freedom of religion to those who are not Malays. However, freedom of religion is eroding as the government performs actions that protect Muslims to the detriment of other religions. One such action is restricting non-Muslim communities from using certain words such as *Allah*, which means God in Malay and is found in Malay Bibles. This was because it "would confuse Muslims and threaten their identity."[25] This law greatly harms not only the Malays but also other ethnic groups as Malay is the common language and many of the indigenous people groups do not have the Bible in their language and are often illiterate. Another example is the increase of hindrances in attaining land and property for churches and the requirement that Christian churches must be of a certain size to be called a church. In West Malaysia, which makes up most of Malaysia, it is unlawful for any Muslim to convert from Islam regardless of race. By law, a Muslim is a Muslim for life. However, it is "possible for Muslims to renounce their faith in East Malaysia," and "Christians form the

[22] Prime Minister's Department: Department of Statistics Malaysia, "Launching of Report on the Key Findings Population and Housing Census of Malaysia 2020," 2, https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/pdfPrev&id=akliVWdIa2g3Y2VubTVSMkxmYXp1UT09.

[23] Joseph Chinyong Liow, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 141.

[24] Ibid., 150.

[25] Ibid., 159.

majority of the population in Sarawak and Sabah."[26] Racial and religious tensions is more prevalent in West Malaysia than in East Malaysia.

Although citizens in East Malaysia may experience comparatively greater religious freedom, many of the indigenous ethnic groups encounter injustice. The indigenous ethnic groups are also called *orang asal*. According to "The Indigenous World 2020," the 2009 poverty rate, the latest data available, of indigenous peoples in Sabah was 22.8 percent and 6.4 percent in Sarawak.[27] This is due to numerous factors including "destruction and degradation of their traditional lands and territories."[28] The government has not been properly implementing laws that protect the indigenous peoples' right to their customary lands. In the 2020 report, logging and oil palm plantation "severely affected their source of livelihood and subsistence as well as polluted their source of water" which was polluted with unsafe levels of iron and magnesium and the presence of dangerous bacteria.[29] Because many *orang asal* depended on daily work and income, they were heavily affected by the Covid Pandemic. Children of the *orang asal* communities were unable to keep up in school when the school moved online as there was a "lack of good internet connectivity, or even any connectivity at all, plus the lack of access to digital equipment such as laptops, tablets, mobile phones and even printers."[30] Because of a lack of proper supervision,

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[26] Liow, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia,* 164-165.

[27] Dwayne Mamo, ed., *The Indigenous World 2020*, 34th ed. (Copenhagen: The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2020), 284, https://iwgia.org/images/yearbook/2020/IWGIA_The_Indigenous_World_2020.pdf.

[28] Ibid., 284.

[29] Ibid., 284.

[30] Dwayne Mamo, ed., *The Indigenous World 2021,* 35th ed. (Copenhagen: The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2021), 258, https://iwgia.org/doclink/iwgia-book-the-indigenous-world-2021-eng/eyJ0eXAiOiJKV1QiLCJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiJ9.eyJzdWIiOiJpd2dpYS1ib29rLXRoZS1pbmRpZ2Vub3VzLXdvcm

overlogging caused destructive flooding that destroyed crops, bridges, and roads, on which the *orang asal* relied for their livelihood. The government has made it more difficult for the *orang asal* to claim land rights and has instead been selling large amounts of land to logging and development companies. According to the 2022 report by IWGIA, "the economic disruption caused by the pandemic also resulted in dire food security situations for many Orang Asal communities."[31] The government displays its lack of care for the *orang asal* as it restricted "non-essential" activities during the pandemic that "severely affected Indigenous livelihoods,"[32] but allowed logging to continue as an essential activity even though it is "destructive of the environment and ignore the rights of the Orang Asal, especially with regard to customary lands."[33] The *orang asal* depend heavily on land, and their livelihood comes from the land through subsistence farming and other methods. Taking away their land further impoverishes the *orang asal*. The 2019 national poverty rate was 5.6 percent, but the poverty rate of Malaysian indigenous people was 89.4 percent.[34] This statistic clearly reflects the injustice and abuse faced by the indigenous peoples of Malaysia.

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[31] Dwayne Mamo, ed., *The Indigenous World 2022*, 36th ed. (Copenhagen: The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2022), 245, https://www.iwgia.org/doclink/iwgia-book-the-indigenous-world-2022-eng/eyJ0eXAiOiJKV1QiLCJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiJ9.eyJzdWIiOiJpd2dpYS1ib29rLXRoZS1pbmRpZ2Vub3VzLXdvcmxkLTIwMjItZW5nIiwiaWF0IjoxNjUxMTM5NTg1LCJleHAiOjE2NTEyMjU5ODV9.jRnv3PeantfRZtJg4jph8xdshK5Mh25Z3hlcPs9As_U.

[32] Ibid., 245.

[33] Ibid., 245.

[34] Ibid., 249.

Christianity in Malaysia and Sarawak

The history of Christianity in Malaysia can be traced back many centuries. According to *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia*, Christianity was first introduced to Malaysia in the 7th century by Persian and Turkish traders.[35] In the 15th century, the Portuguese introduced Catholicism and the Dutch introduced Protestantism. According to an article published in 1911, the Portuguese colonizers introduced Catholicism, and later, the Dutch combined the interests of the Christian religion with trade when they established themselves in Malaysia"[36] In 1841, James Brooke became the official British governor of Sarawak, and the Brooke dynasty lasted approximately a century. Because of the British colonization, Protestantism gained popularity. Malaysia was a British colony for 83 years before being granted independence by Britain. Liow writes that "the nature of Christianity's expansion during the colonial era doubtless contributed to widespread perceptions that it was a "white man's religion.""[37] Hakka Christians, South Asian migrants, and local Christian networks have also contributed to the growth of Christianity in Malaysia. Today, the influence of Christianity is seen in churches and education. Many schools that were established by missionaries and the Methodist and Catholic churches continue to be recognized for their academic excellence. In West Malaysia, "Christians mostly consist of upper- and middle-class Malaysians from the ethnic Chinese and Indian communities" while the demography of Christians in East Malaysia is spread across many ethnic groups.[38] The diversity

[35] Liow, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia*, 140.

[36] John Rauws, "Islam and Christianity in Malaysia," *The Muslim World* 1 no. 3, 243, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-1913.1911.tb00030.x.

[37] Liow, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia*, 140.

[38] Ibid., 141.

found in the Christian Church in Malaysia should be reflected through a musically diverse worship.

Christianity is more widespread in East Malaysia than in West Malaysia. Liana Chua writes that "Christianity has been linked in one way or another to the state" through the Brooke dynasty and the Malaysian government.[39] However, in recent history, the government no longer supports Christianity in East and West Malaysia. In East Malaysia, centering on "moral and material uplift," the Brooke governor worked to improve "health care, education, and general native welfare."[40] Although the indigenous ethnic groups were not immediately accepting of Christianity, many converted to Christianity over time. According to the census in 2010, Sarawak was the only state in which Christianity was the prevalent religion rather than Islam as in all the other states of Malaysia. This is significant because Malaysia is recognized as one of the 50 nations with the most severe persecution of Christians.

Integration of Scripture

The instances and mentions of musical worship in the Bible are guidelines for how the church today should worship through music. Scripture encourages the use of many kinds of songs. Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs are some of the types of music that are to be included in worship. New songs are also part of worship as God gives His followers new songs to sing. Corporate worship is a communal expression of praise and gratitude. It is also used as the early Christians endured persecution. Corporate worship that is structured after biblical examples recognizes the precedence that God has set but it also recognizes that certain practices are not

[39] Liana Chua, *The Christianity of Culture Conversion*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 82, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137012722.

[40] Ibid., 82.

explicitly commanded. Several areas in this context have generated debate in the body of believers. An example would be the use of indigenous instruments. The Bible does not explicitly exclude musical instruments in worship, but the church should be cautious about what could cause a believer to stumble. Paul writes to the church in Corinth that one's freedom should not become a stumbling block to another believer (I Cor. 8:9: New King James Version). Understanding worship according to Scripture aims to build up the church.

Worship in the Old Testament

Worship is more than music, but music is a universal and timeless expression of praise. Music is a gift from God to be used for His glory. One of the ways in which man reflects the image of God is through the creativity that God has given His image-bearers. Creativity and an appreciation for beauty and art are traits unique to human beings. Therefore, to worship through music is to recognize that music is a gift from God to be offered back to Him. Moreover, Zephaniah 3:17 records that God will rejoice over His people with singing (Zeph. 3:17: New King James Version). Because God sings over His people, it is "logical" for His people to give Him praise through song.

After witnessing the saving hand of God through the miraculous parting of the Red Sea, Moses and the Israelites worshipped God with song (Exodus 15: New King James Version). Miriam played the timbrel as part of the worship. This was before God had given the Israelites any commandments or instructions on how to worship Him. To sing a song of praise was a natural expression of gratitude and adoration. When Joshua was preparing to succeed Moses' leadership of the Israelites, God commanded Moses and Joshua to write a song to be taught to the Israelites to remember how God cared for them. The purpose of the song was so that, "When many evils and troubles have come upon them, that this song will testify against them as a

witness; for it will not be forgotten in the mouths of their descendants, for I know the inclination of their behavior today, even before I have brought them to the land of which I swore to give them" (Ex. 31:21). The song was to remind the Israelites to remain faithful to God as they live in comfort in the land that God had brought them to. Worship through song was used to praise God and to remember His faithfulness.

King David, a man after God's own heart, wrote at least 73 of the 150 psalms according to the titles of the psalms (Acts 13:22: New King James Version). David incorporated the use of musical instruments in worship. As David brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, he appointed Levites "to be the singers accompanied by instruments of music, stringed instruments, harps, and cymbals, by raising the voice with resounding joy" (I Chron. 15:16). Bringing back the Ark of the Covenant was to be handled with utmost care as the Ark was the dwelling place of God's presence. The music and great rejoicing were the worship that accompanied the return of the Ark. In David's old age, he appointed 4,000 Levites to praise the Lord with the musical instruments that he had made "for giving praise" (I Chron. 23:5). As a man who was faithful to God, musical worship was a significant aspect of David's life.

Worship in the New Testament

The New Testament provides guidelines for musical worship. Jesus sang a hymn with His disciples the night He was betrayed (Matt. 26:30). In Acts 16, Paul and Silas sang hymns to God when they were imprisoned. Paul encouraged the church in Colosse to teach and admonish one another in "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" and to sing with "grace in your hearts to the Lord (Col. 3:16). Paul similarly encouraged the church in Ephesus to speak to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs and to sing and make melody in your heart to the Lord

(Eph. 5:19). Although both churches were struggling with different obstacles, Paul advised both on the importance of musical worship. Songs can be used to edify and build up the church.

New Songs in Worship

The encouragement to sing a new song to God is found throughout both the Old and New Testaments. In a psalm by David, he proclaims that "He [God] has put a new song in my mouth – praise to our God; many will see it and fear and will trust in the LORD (Psalm 40:3: New King James Version). This theme is also found in other Scripture passages. Isaiah, a prophet of God, encouraged the Israelites to sing a new song to the Lord in Isaiah 42. In a vision of Heaven, John saw 24 elders each with a harp singing a new song to God (Rev. 5:8-9). The biblical precedence of singing new songs should encourage believers to sing new songs in worship.

New songs in the form of hymns were being written in the early church. This practice is seen in Paul's letters. Certain passages in the Pauline letters are considered hymns. Ethnomusicologist Dr. Sooi Ling Tan writes that the two functions of New Testament hymns are "to communicate and form truths" and "to destroy and create worlds."[41] Hymns were to be used to edify the church. They were a means of instructing and reminding the believers of the truth of God and following Jesus. Paul incorporates hymns into his letters. I Corinthians 16:22 is a hymn that Paul used at the end of his letter to the church in Corinth. I Timothy 3:16 is a hymn that professes Jesus' deity and ascension. These are used as instruction and encouragement to the church. The hymn incorporated in Colossians 1:15-20 indicates the reality of the spiritual world and the sovereignty of God. Philippians 2:5-11 is a hymn that clearly presents Christ's incarnation, obedience to the point of death, resurrection, and exaltation by the Father that all

[41] Sooi Ling Tan, "Transformative Worship Among the Salako in Sarawak, Malaysia," (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2008), 109.

will worship Jesus. While these are only a few of the many hymns in the New Testament, each one of them teaches important truths so that the church may grow in its understanding of God. God has given and continues to give His people new songs to worship Him with, and it is the duty of the church to recognize and use these songs for the church.

The Purpose of Songs

The purpose of songs as worship is clear in Scripture. The first is that it is a natural expression of praise and rejoicing. Moses, Miriam, and the Israelites worshipped with song not because they were told to but because it was a means of expressing gratitude. It is human nature to praise with song because God created and sings over His people. Just as children follow their parents' examples, the children of God have an innate inclination to sing to God. Songs are also used for remembrance. God commanded Moses and Aaron to write a song for the Israelites to remember His faithfulness. This song was to be passed on to the generations to come so that their descendants know the ways in which God brought them to a prosperous land. It was also to remind them to be faithful to God amidst a comfortable life. It is human nature to draw away from God and to be distracted by the things of the world when life is good, and the song was intended to remind the people to remain faithful. Songs are also used to encourage amidst difficult times. David writes "I call to remembrance my song in the night" (Psalm 77:6: New King James Version). Paul and Silas also sang hymns while they were in prison. Today, songs continue to bring comfort to Christians who are oppressed. In Nik Ripken's interview of 600 persecuted believers, many noted that "after prayer, the greatest comfort for persecuted Christians seems to come from having memorized large portions of the Bible and many

indigenous songs."[42] Songs greatly encourage believers in their walk with God. Worship through song is an offering back to God what He has given His people, a way of remembering God's works and character, and a reassurance of His faithfulness in persecution.

In John 4:24, Jesus taught that His believers must worship in spirit and in truth. This statement should guide the writing of new songs. Andrew Hill writes that "Christian worship is spiritual."[43] When a Christian sings hymns or songs, the activity is more than just an action. Like other spiritual disciplines such as fasting or reading Scripture, worship through song is done whilst listening to and engaging with the Holy Spirit. Truth is vital to worship. Jesus claims that He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and no one comes to the Father except through Him (John 14:6). Therefore, one must worship God in truth. As believers write new songs, the words and meaning should be tested against Scripture.

Ethnomusicological Research in East Malaysia

Over the years, ethnomusicological research has been conducted in East Malaysia by Malaysian and foreign researchers and musicians in local churches. Because there are so many ethnic groups in East Malaysia, there continues to be a need for more research focusing on specific people groups and their music. This need can be met by locals learning to practice musicology in their fields and environments. The church can play an instrumental part in this process by encouraging and resourcing the integration of local musical styles into corporate worship. Diana Boer et el. state, "Music, identity, and musical ethnocentrism of young people," "one of the powers of music is the ability to link individuals and communities to imagined and

[42] Krabill, Fortunato, Harris, and Schrag, *Worship and Mission for the Global Church*, 522.

[43] Ibid., 46.

real places," and "the performance and consumption of culture-specific music is a unique expression of national and cultural aspirations and ideals."[44] Music conveys the values of the culture. A better understanding of the ethnic music in Malaysia may result in the development of approaches that encourage local churches in using local arts in worship. The use of ethnic music may also strengthen their identity as believers. There remains a need for change in Malaysia from the connotation that Christianity is a Western religion to the truth that Christianity is transcultural. The incorporation of ethnic music is an active step towards debunking that myth.

Sarawak Cultural Village and the Rainforest Music World Festival

Aside from the work of local churches, local organizations have recognized the value of ethnic music and organized events that promote local ethnic music. The Sarawak Cultural Village is a project aimed to provide local and foreign visitors with an experience of the different lifestyles of the different ethnic groups in Sarawak including their typical houses and activities. The village is built away from the capital city of Sarawak and shows are held daily, demonstrating the different local dances and music. This allows for a partly immersive experience of the local cultures. The concept of the Sarawak Cultural Village "is perceived to have added value to their [Sarawakians's] experience of local cultures."[45] The practice of integrating local arts into Christian worship can add value to local Christians.

The Rainforest World Music Festival is an annual international festival at the Sarawak Cultural Village. Musicians worldwide are invited to attend and facilitate workshops on ethnic

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[44] Diana Boer, Ronald Fischer, et al., "Music, identity, and musical ethnocentrism of young people in six Asian, Latin American, and Western cultures," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 43 no. 10, (2013), 2360, https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12185.

[45] Hamzah Muzaini, "Informal heritage-making at the Sarawak Cultural Village, East Malaysia," *Tourism Geographies* 19 no. 2, (Mar. 2016), 254, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2016.1160951.

music and perform their music. Musicians from the United States, Australia, India, Thailand, Cambodia, and Singapore are some of the many musicians who participate in the event. The workshops include an introduction to East Malaysian rhythms and Indonesian instruments. The Rainforest World Music Festival celebrates world music and attracts music enthusiasts. Hiram Tang and colleagues write that the Rainforest World Music Festival "exhibits diverse cultural elements through shows of various ethnic musical songs and dances," ethnic food kitchens, handicrafts bazaars, tattoo festivals, and dance and music classes, all of which "increase the awareness of Sarawak and Borneo."[46] The awareness and appreciation of the rich musical heritage in Sarawak by locals and foreigners can be applied in local churches and used in evangelism.

Methodology

While academic research is needed for the various ethnic musical styles in Sarawak, local churches should consider the benefits of incorporating ethnic music in worship. Formal academic research is unnecessary for churches to initiate partnerships with local believers in writing new worship songs in local styles. Tanya Merchant studied a group of women musicians in Uzbekistan and concluded that "music facilitates a community of practice wherein women cross disciplinary and generic boundaries, engaging music as a joyful expression of group cohesion."[47] While the church comprises men and women, they are all joined together with a common cause, following Jesus. Regardless of their vocations and backgrounds, everyone who is a disciple of

[46] Hiram Ting et al., "Intention to Attend the Rainforest World Music Festival: Local Visitor Perspectives," *Tourism, Culture and Communication* 17 no. 2 (2017): 120, http://dx.doi.org/10.3727/109830417X14966810027562.

[47] Tanya Merchant, *Women Musicians of Uzbekistan from Courtyard to Conservatory*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 173, ProQuest Ebrary.

Jesus belongs to the same family. Likewise, music can facilitate a community where believers join, and music expresses unity. Ultimately, the Holy Spirit unites the church, but God has given His people music as a tool for building unity. Incorporating ethnic music into corporate worship may edify and encourage local believers and provide new strategies for evangelism.

Overview of Methods

There are many approaches to incorporating ethnic music in local churches. Songwriting workshops are the most used methodology for helping indigenous communities to produce original repertoire. Ethnomusicologists have used this approach in many parts of the world such as Africa and Southeast Asia. Analyzing similar applications in other sites, such as Mozambique and Indonesia, may result in a clearer understanding of the best approach for integrating ethnic music in churches in Sarawak.

Although Mozambique is in Africa and Malaysia is in Southeast Asia, the cultures are both influenced by Islam. The northern region of Mozambique is predominantly Muslim, and it was in this region that a songwriting workshop was held for the local church. Hansen and Meyers identified two goals of the workshop: to teach "about music as a valid means of worship expression" and to teach "the participants how to create indigenous hymnody."[48] Both of these purposes are biblically valid. Psalm 100:1 is an exhortation to all lands to make a joyful noise unto the Lord. The lands are charged to enter God's presence by singing. Paul exhorts the church in Ephesus to speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; music is an act of worship unto God. The goal of teaching that music is a valid means of worship expression is

[48] Antoinette Hansen and Megan Meyers, "Iron Sharpens Iron: Lessons Learned from a Songwriting Workshop in Mozambique," *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 44 no. 4 (2020): 374, DOI: 10.1177/2396939319864809.

important because music is taught to be *haram* in Islam. Something that is *haram* is forbidden. Because northern Mozambique is predominantly Muslim, local Christians should know what the Bible teaches about musical worship. They can create new music for worship only after they understand musical worship according to Scripture. The host missionaries identified that it was important "not only to teach a method of songwriting but also to teach about worship in a way that allowed the participants to discover their own expressions of worship through song."[49] With this approach, local believers will be encouraged to worship authentically and with the creativity that God has given them.

The songwriting workshop spanned 5 days. Each day was structured similarly, beginning with devotions, recalling songs, Bible study, small group time, and sharing.[50] The participants were then encouraged to write scripturally and doctrinally sound music. On the first day of the workshop, Psalm 40 and Psalm 96 were used during the devotion to establish and affirm the "biblical precedence of music worship."[51] Only after this foundation had been laid could they move on to writing songs for worship. Day 1 consisted of singing "familiar songs from their culture" as a warm-up activity, identifying significant themes, and collaborating to "ensure the words remained faithful to the biblical text and meaningful in their cultural context."[52] Days 2-4 were songwriting days in which the participants worked in groups and wrote songs based on a specific Bible passage; day 5 was set aside as a day to record all the songs that were written

[49] Hansen and Meyers, "Iron Sharpens Iron," 376.

[50] Ibid., 377.

[51] Ibid., 377.

[52] Ibid., 378.

during the songwriting workshop. This layout is typical of songwriting workshops worldwide such as in Indonesia.

Songwriting Workshops in Indonesia

Indonesia is the largest Muslim nation in the world. Because the nation is comprised of thousands of islands, the musical culture of Indonesia is diverse, and there is a wide variety of languages. As Matt Connor and Matt Menger worked alongside colleagues from Wycliffe and SIL, they focused on how local Scripture songwriting can aid in localizing Christianity. Connor and Menger write that "if the Bible is translated well, it is much easier for songwriters to create scripture songs that are meaningful and natural."[53] There are several ways in which musical localization is helpful to Bible translators, one of which is that it helps expose their work to the community, allowing them to receive feedback.[54]

The 36 Scripture songwriting workshops that Connor, Menger, and their colleagues facilitated were structured after the CLAT method by Brian Schrag. The Scripture passages were chosen based on felt needs or relevance.[55] Like the songwriting workshop in Mozambique, the songwriting workshops in Indonesia were also held over 5 days. A unique step in the songwriting process in Indonesia was the complex song-checking process. This was to ensure "fidelity to the Bible."[56] Another aspect in which the songwriting workshops differed was by adding "a special

[53] Matt Connor and Matt Menger, "Strengthening Christian Identity through Scripture Songwriting in Indonesia," *Religions* 12, no. 873 (2021), 5. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12100873.

[54] Ibid., 5.

[55] Ibid., 5.

[56] Ibid., 6.

session about rights and ownership."[57] Oftentimes, songwriting workshops is the starting point for local communities to write worship songs. Songwriting workshops should be replicable and supply the participants with tools to continue in using local arts for the church.

The CLAT Method

Brian Schrag and Julisa Rowe developed the Creating Local Arts Together (CLAT) Method as a general guide to encourage local communities to create new art. The method can be used for more than just songwriting; it can also be used for dance, storytelling, drama, and many other arts. The 7-step process is "a flexible guide" in which steps may sometimes be done out of order or more time may be spent one step than on another.[58] The method was created to be adaptable to different cultures and arts. The 7 steps of the CLAT methods are to meet a community and its artistic genres, specify Kingdom goals, connect genres to goals, analyze genres and events, spark creativity, improve results, and celebrate and integrate for continuity.[59] This method can be adapted by missionaries and local believers to edify of the local church through the arts.

The first step in meeting the community and its artistic genres is to learn about their local arts and understand their contexts. The second step of specifying Kingdom goals includes determining goals "for a more Heaven-like life" that the community currently wants to work toward.[60] The first two steps require the facilitator to learn about the culture and what is needed

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[57] Connor and Menger, "Strengthening Christian Identity through Scripture Songwriting in Indonesia," 7.

[58] Brian Schrag and Julisa Rowe, *Community Arts for God's Purposes: How to Create Local Artistry Together* (Littleton: William Carey Publishing, 2020), 31.

[59] Ibid., 41.

[60] Ibid., 43.

before artistic work can be created. These steps are vital because they give purpose and direction to localizing the arts. The third step of connecting genres to goals is to assess which approach or art genre would be best to reach the goal. The third and fourth steps are linked because existing genres and events must be evaluated and understood to be utilized to meet the goals set. In an example by Schrag, the Mono community identified *gbaguru*, an artistic genre that offers counsel, to be the best genre for the goal of helping Christians "understand Scripture better."[61] The fifth step is to spark creativity. This can be done through conversations, workshops, events, and other methods. The goal is to encourage local Christians to think about how the specific art genre can be used to reach the goal. The sixth step is to improve results. This can look very different in different cultures and with different arts. This is vital because "evaluation according to agreed-upon criteria helps community members make their imperfect artistic communication more effective."[62] In songwriting workshops, this step could take the form of evaluating the songs written for biblical accuracy and stylistic significance. The seventh and last step is to celebrate and integrate "kingdom creativity into their [the community members'] daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly lives."[63] The goal is for the community to continue creating and not just stop when the event ends or when the conversations stop. The creation of local arts in the church should be self-sustaining.

[61] Schrag and Rowe, *Community Arts for God's Purposes*, 43.

[62] Ibid., 45.

[63] Ibid., 46.

Advantages and Disadvantages

The three previously discussed methods of encouraging local songwriting for Christian musical worship are valuable and effective methods. While each slightly differs from the other, they share similar structures and goals. Laying a solid foundation for incorporating music in worship was essential in the songwriting workshop in Mozambique because the culture's perception of music was that it was forbidden. They first had to know how Scripture presents musical worship before they could be encouraged to write worship songs. In the workshops held in both Mozambique and Indonesia, new songs were written based on Scripture passages. Attention was given to first right teaching the Word of God before encouraging the participants to write music inspired by that passage. This allowed for biblically sound songs that communicated themes from the specific story as they are sung. In cultures that prefer oral communication or do not yet have the Scripture in their language, these Scripture-based songs allow them to learn and share Scripture orally. Worshipping with music in the style with which one is familiar makes the faith seem less foreign and more personal.

An important aspect of the songwriting workshop that was present in Mozambique but not mentioned in the ones in Indonesia was the recording of the songs. Recording allows the local church to remember the songs that were written. As music in these cultures is mostly transmitted orally, the recordings greatly aid in the transmission process. Both in Mozambique and Indonesia, the songs were recorded for the participants and local churches. It was also necessary to clearly communicate how the songs would be distributed in terms of publishing rights and permissions. These songs are to be enjoyed not just by the church, but they can also be used to share Scripture with those who do not know Christ. According to "Iron Sharpens Iron," "sharing songs have become a natural method of evangelism in the participants' community;

playing the recordings on their cell phones or singing as they work."[64] Because the workshops first focus on studying Scripture and starting with a right understanding of the passage, participants do not have to be mature Christians who have followed Christ for a long time and know Scripture well. Participation should be open to whoever is willing and eager to write new songs for worship. Because a Muslim man was not deterred from participating in the songwriting workshop in Mozambique, after the workshop, he requested for a Bible, came to the Bible studies [*palestra*], and brought others with him.[65] This is an example of the value of local songwriting workshops.

An important aspect of the songwriting workshops in Mozambique and Indonesia was the focus on specific Bible passages for the entire duration of the workshop. Rather than choosing a theme or several passages, one Bible passage was chosen for the participants to study during the 5 days and write songs on. This allowed them to have time to ponder on the Scripture passage and be inspired by it. In Indonesia, "scripture songwriting workshops with these churches often focused on creating liturgical songs based on relevant scripture passages."[66] The songs created from this approach can be used to address specific matters in a biblically accurate and worshipful manner.

Methodology for Local Songwriting in Sarawak

As churches worldwide begin to see the need for incorporating local arts into worship, songwriting workshops are seen as an effective way to begin the process. While there is a general

[64] Hansen and Meyers, "Iron Sharpens Iron," 380.

[65] Ibid., 380.

[66] Connor and Menger, "Strengthening Christian Identity," 5.

structure to songwriting workshops, facilitators constantly adjust the structure to suit the local culture better. In considering a methodology for introducing and facilitating songwriting workshops in Sarawak, there are four key features to include which have been proven vital in previous workshops. These are establishing a biblical foundation for musical worship, focusing on specific Scripture passages, working towards Kingdom goals, and recording new songs.

Focusing on a specific Scripture passage rather than a theme in songwriting workshops is crucial. As cultures have different values, focusing on a specific Scripture passage prevents the teaching of one's personal values. Still, it provides the space needed for songwriters to perceive the values of God and be inspired by that. This practice also allows the participants to study Scripture and glean from the word of truth. The word of God should and will inspire them more than any words a facilitator could say. Focusing on Scripture prioritizes the truth found in Scripture over anything else.

Practice research is a method that should be incorporated into songwriting workshops in Sarawak. "Practice research" means "doing research in and through the performance, composition or improvisation of music."[67] This method encourages musicians who are familiar with a specific style to work together with other musicians who may not be as familiar with the style. There are a variety of musical styles in Sarawak, and the objective of songwriting workshops is to create worship songs in styles that are familiar to local Christians without causing division. Practice research allows musicians to work together and creates a space to learn through practicing the musical style. Facilitators and participants learn other musical styles through practice, and performance in the field of ethnomusicology has been used as a "means to

[67] Simon McKerrell, "Towards Practice Research in Ethnomusicology," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 31, no. 1 (2022): 11, https://doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2021.1964374.

learn more about global cultures and values."[68] This practice builds unity as local church members learn to appreciate and join in musically diverse worship with the family of Christ.

Reasons for Caution

There are many ethnic groups in Sarawak, and in many of their cultures, music is often associated with rituals. Furthermore, stories and cultural heritage are passed from generation to generation through oral means such as stories and music. In *The Music of Malaysia*, rhythms and lyrics denote specific pictures and stories.[69] In addition to understanding musical worship according to Scripture, the workshop facilitator and participants should also understand the meanings behind the rhythms, melodies, and instruments.

According to *The Music of Malaysia*, "In Sarawak, performances usually occur in a social meeting place, on the veranda, of the longhouse. The village folks socialize as they listen to the music… The performance develops concord and harmony among the members of the society."[70] Awareness of the role of music in the specific culture will help the facilitators and the participants in detecting elements that are either in agreement with Scripture or not and therefore, need to be reassessed. Conversations concerning the rituals associated with instruments should be encouraged to prevent potential stumbling blocks for believers. According to missiologist Paul Hiebert, "an uncritical acceptance of a culture also opens the door to syncretism of all

[68] McKerrell, "Towards Practice Research in Ethnomusicology," 12.

[69] Patricia Matusky and Tan Sooi Beng, *The Music of Malaysia: The Classical, Folk and Syncretic Traditions*, 2nd ed., (London: Routledge, 2017), 9, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315223025.

[70] Ibid., 8.

kinds."[71] However, critical contextualization can prevent syncretism as the local musical art is incorporated into musical worship. Hiebert provides a 4-step approach for critical contextualization. The steps are to "gather information about the old," "study biblical teachings about the event," "evaluate the old in the light of biblical teachings," "and create a new contextualized Christian practice."[72] This approach can be applied in the songwriting workshops to encourage the participants to evaluate local music practices according to Scripture.

The goal of local songwriting workshops should be building the local church. This methodology is neither restricted to foreign missionaries nor local Christian artists. Unity should be a priority. Jesus taught his disciples that it is through their love for one another that the world will know they are Jesus' disciples (John 13:35, New King James Version). Unity and love are the mark of a follower of Christ. Therefore, encouraging the local arts of a specific people group should not cause disunity but draw people closer together.

In incorporating local arts in worship, leaders should be cautious against idolatry. The participants should be encouraged that their artistry are talents from God. As in the "Parable of the Talents" in Matthew 25:14-30, the master has given his servants talents that are to be invested in. Therefore, it is right to invest in one's talents. However, they are to be used for the purposes of the Master and not for selfish gain. Integrating local arts in worship should be for the glory of God and nothing less.

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[71] Paul Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," *Missiology: An International Review* 12 no. 3 (Jul. 1984), 289, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLA0000942824&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

[72] Ibid., 290.

Conclusion

Malaysia and Sarawak are ethnically and culturally diverse; musical worship in Christian Malaysian churches should reflect this diversity. There is a need for more songs to be written in local styles so that believers can worship with music that they can relate to. While the task of conducting songwriting workshops or writing new songs may seem daunting, God has gifted Malaysians and Sarawakians with musical ability, and it should be used for His glory. The methodology is simple and does not require trained researchers nor professional musicians for the creation of new songs in local styles. In the face of persecution and injustice, the Christian church in Malaysia has much to gain from the integration of local arts in Christian worship.

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