



Giving Voice to the Gospel through Song: Music, Culture, and the Tanzanian Lutheran Church

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THE GOSPEL MESSAGE THAT GOD HAS RECONCILED HIMSELF TO THE WORLD through Jesus Christ is a radical one. The values of the kingdom of God—of justice and mercy, kindness and humility—are also radical in our dog-eat-dog world. Indeed, one might say that the gospel has a culture of its own, complete with its own worldview, thought patterns, imagery, and language.

This gospel culture, in order to be believed and integrated into one's life, must be communicated in ways that can be understood. Every recipient culture, whether it be first-century Palestinian, sixteenth-century German, twentieth-

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The stages of translation, adaptation, and birth-giving in the interculturalization of the gospel continue in many parts of the world. Interculturalization, like the reformation of the church, is an ongoing, never-ending task. The gospel relates to and challenges each culture with its radical message of forgiveness and hope in Christ.

century secularist, or twenty-first-century African, needs to find ways in which it can relate to the gospel, understand it, and embrace it. Because this involves interaction between two cultures (at least)—the gospel culture and the recipient culture—a process often known as “inculturation” is necessary. Those who bear the gospel, especially to “foreign” cultures (that is, outside their own culture), are called missionaries. Perhaps in this day and age, all those bearing the gospel might be called missionaries, whether in Africa, Asia, Europe, or America. While this article is about the inculturation process between gospel and Tanzanian church music, the principles involved can also relate to other kinds of intercultural dialogues.

Aylward Shorter, African theologian, and Joseph Healey, Tanzanian missionary, speak of three stages in the inculturation process of the gospel in Africa: translation, adaptation, and incarnation.¹ Deusdedit Nkuruzinza, Catholic priest from Uganda, describes the process as *interculturation*, an interaction on several planes between a particular human culture and the gospel, which has a culture and world-view of its own.² The interculturation of gospel and Tanzanian culture, expressed in the music of the Lutheran church in Tanzania, may be understood through the three stages mentioned above. As the stages progress from one to another, the role of the gospel-bearer, the missionary, also changes.

I. THE STAGE OF TRANSLATION

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania (ELCT) was officially organized in 1963 at the time of the nationalization of the country itself. The church was formed out of the Federation of Mission Churches (organized in 1938 from seven mission churches) and today is comprised of 20 dioceses throughout the whole country. These seven mission churches had their origin in Lutheran missionary activity from various mission organizations, chiefly German but also from Scandinavia and America.

It is well documented that when the early missionaries arrived, many rejected all forms of traditional music in the Christian worship service, assuming that the music would carry unwanted associations with unchristian understandings and ways of life. Having rejected the indigenous forms of music, the missionaries substituted their own. Wherever they established a mission station, they learned the vernacular language and translated hymns and liturgies to be used in worship, but retained the original tunes.³ As a result, Lutheran Christians in Tanzania often consider only these tunes to be “Christian” music, distinct from everyday music.

Many people, western and African, deplore this situation. Sixteen years ago, writing as a student at Makumira, O. M. Mdegela (now bishop of the Iringa Dio-

¹Aylward Shorter, “Liturgical Creativity in East Africa,” *African Ecclesiastical Review* (October 1977) 258-267; and Joseph G. Healey, “Inculturation of Liturgy and Worship in Africa,” *Worship* 60 (1986) 412-423.

²Deusdedit Nkuruzinza, “Liturgy, the Privileged Arena for Inculturation,” *African Ecclesiastical Review* (August 1985) 209-215.

³There are over 120 tribal groups and languages in Tanzania, according to U.S. State Department 1998 statistics. Swahili, one of the two official languages of the country, is a second language for most people.

case of the ELCT) mourned the loss of traditional music in the church, stating that such a treasure, once lost, is not easily regained.⁴ However, some Tanzanian church members, young and old, feel it was a necessary step in order to make a complete break with old beliefs and embrace the new. Even as I teach, I get various reactions to this situation. Some students agree with Mdegela. Others do not. As I was discussing Mdegela's views one day in class, sympathizing with him, one student unexpectedly and fervently said, "No, Teacher! You must not say such things about the old missionaries! They are the ones who brought us the gospel of Jesus Christ, through which we have been saved!" Other students have said, "If we were to bring traditional African melodies into the church, the elders would reject them as non-Christian."

The official hymnbook of the ELCT, *Mwimbieni Bwana*,⁵ is a product of the translation stage of interculturalization of gospel with Tanzanian music. Similar to many other hymnbooks of its time, it contains only 15% Tanzanian melodies. By contrast, 60% are German, and the remaining 25% are from British, American, and Scandinavian sources.⁶ That distribution is indeed unfortunate. However, on the positive side, there is a strong evangelical thrust to the texts of these hymns, which have anchored the faith of the ELCT in the profession of the church catholic. The texts have provided doctrinal stability in this young church, a strong pillar of Christian witness during times of testing and growth. For better and for worse, the missionary hymns and liturgies constitute the adopted language of worship in the ELCT. They have served as a vehicle for the gospel culture that has penetrated the minds and hearts of this young church.

Along with Scripture itself, the texts of the hymns have provided the essence of the Christian culture in the interculturalization process. However, the problem of the music remains. The translation process stops short of being completely effective. Some tunes are not difficult to sing, particularly those that come out of nineteenth-century revivalism, which use the primary chords of one major key. However, those hymns which modulate to different keys, use minor tonalities, and secondary as well as primary chords, are more difficult for Tanzanians to sing. One of the musicians of the Tanzanian church, Sila Msangi, has complained, "Why do we give our people hard food?"⁷ He suggested that these foreign-sounding hymns did not sufficiently motivate the people to sing and called for authentic Tanzanian music for new hymns.⁸

One of the big problems, musically, in the translation process is that the accents of the Swahili words do not fit the accents of the foreign tunes. The result is

⁴O. M. Mdegela, "Traditional Psalmody and Hymnody in ELCT" (BD thesis, Makumira Lutheran Theological College, 1984) 18.

⁵The title of this hymnbook, first published by the ELCT in 1988, means "Sing to the Lord."

⁶By my own count.

⁷Samwel Malaki, "The Theology of Msangi's Hymns" (BD thesis, Makumira: Lutheran Theological College, 1993) 9.

⁸*Ibid.*, 8.

that although the texts have correct grammar and meaning, the music itself emphasizes the wrong syllables. It would be like singing “Come, you faithful, raise the strain”⁹ to the tune of “Lead on, O King eternal.”¹⁰ The number of syllables in each line is correct, but the accents turn out like this: “Come YOU faith-FUL, raise THE strain of TRI-um-PHANT glad-NESS.” (Try it!) It is very difficult, if not impossible, to correct this problem without changing the rhythm of the melody altogether.

The first stage in the interculturalization process, represented by missionary hymns and liturgies, is translation. In order to get the word out, to make a complete break with non-Christian beliefs and life-style, early missionaries simply translated the words and kept their own music. In this process the missionaries have done the work almost unilaterally. Participation by Tanzanians was limited to word-translation only, and did not involve indigenous thought patterns, imagery, or worldview. Some scholars and researchers have pointed out that the early missionaries could have made a greater effort to learn the culture and its expressions, making more subtle distinctions between what was helpful and gospel-bearing, and what was not.¹¹ However, we today are not in a place of judgement so much as at a border crossing; what we have to do lies before us, not behind.

II. THE STAGE OF ADAPTATION

The second stage of interculturalization is adaptation. In this stage there is more of an effort to recognize the forms of the recipient culture, as well as to include its participation and gifts. Since the Second World War, and particularly during the time of nationalization in Africa, more attention was given to adapting Christianity to the African cultures.

In Tanzania that process involved church music, particularly the liturgy. When the ELCT was formed, it had a vision for a united liturgy for the whole Lutheran church, and even for an ecumenical worship in Tanzania. Two liturgies were the outcome of that time: the *United Liturgy of East Africa* (1966)¹² and the *Liturgy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania* (1968).¹³ These liturgies were put together by African church leaders, for the East African churches, in Swahili.

The sources were liturgies that came from the mother churches, notably the German *Deutsche Messe* and the British *Book of Common Prayer*. This work went beyond simple translation to try to adapt to Tanzanian usage and understanding by mixing elements and orders, so that the resulting work was different from the origi-

⁹Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship, *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) #132 (hereafter *LBW*).

¹⁰*LBW* #495.

¹¹Not all of the early missionaries, of course, rejected all of culture. Notably, Bruno Gutmann of the Leipzig Mission, who studied the Chagga people of the north, called for evangelization through culture. See Carl-Erik Sahlgren, *From Krapf to Rugambwa: A Church History of Tanzania* (Nairobi: Evangel, 1986) 77-79.

¹²This liturgy was an ecumenical effort on the parts of Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist, Moravian, and Presbyterian Churches in East Africa.

¹³In Swahili: *Liturgia ya Kanisa la Kijijili la Kilutheria Tanzania*, first published in *Tumwabudu Mungu Wetu* by the ELCT in 1968.

nal sources. For example, the Tanzanian Lutheran liturgy begins with the recital of the Ten Commandments, a feature of Anglican worship. It also includes an affirmation which comes from the Church of South India (1963) in the Lord's Supper.¹⁴

The music of the liturgy demonstrates this stage of adaptation even better. All the tunes were rewritten to fit the accents and syllabification of the Swahili language, in some cases using traditional tunes¹⁵ and in other cases being newly composed.¹⁶ The result is much more pleasing, with rhythmic integrity and interest, emphasizing the text more cleanly and attractively.

Another effort that reflects the adaptation process is an English language liturgy that uses East African melodies. It was written for the congregation of Makumira University College (MUCO)¹⁷ for use in its monthly English service. Since use of a foreign liturgy with foreign melodies was not appropriate, a new liturgy was devised that would be easy to sing and reflect its location. Borrowing African traditional melodies, it reshapes the texts and the service as a whole to fit into this context.¹⁸ The rhythms, drums, and exuberance have a clearly African character, and the people have learned it quickly and easily.

These efforts represent an important stage in the intercultural process. Both missionaries and Africans are involved, each offering their own gifts in a collaborative effort. But adaptation still does not go far enough. Nkuruzinza says,

Liturgical inculturation, therefore, is not merely a question of dancing, drumming, clapping of hands and making various body gestures. First and foremost, it is a search for authentic self-expression in that act of encounter and worship with the living Lord through which the individual and the community are touched by the divine healing hand.¹⁹

That "search for authentic self-expression" leads us to the third stage in the intercultural process: incarnation.

III. THE STAGE OF INCARNATION—OR GIVING BIRTH

I am a little wary of overuse of the word "incarnation." The word made flesh was an amazing and one-time event: God's coming to earth and being born as a human being, dwelling among us. "Incarnation" has been popularly used in the context of inculturation—effectually minimizing that one-time event. So I would rather substitute another phrase which carries the meaning that is expressed here

¹⁴This affirmation is as follows: "His death, Father, we proclaim; His resurrection we affirm; His return we await. Glory be to you, O Lord."

¹⁵One traditional melody is for the *Agnus Dei*, which in this liturgy is from a Maasai song in which the singer cries for help.

¹⁶An example is the *Gloria*: "Mungu atukuzwe pekee" (God alone be praised).

¹⁷Formerly Lutheran Theological College at Makumira.

¹⁸This liturgy is called "Listen! God is Calling," and is available from MUCO.

¹⁹Nkuruzinza, "Liturgy," 214.

in this discussion of contextualization. I think that the phrase “new birth” or “giving birth” carries that meaning adequately.

In this birthing process the recipient culture needs to be well understood. Understanding of thought patterns and the worldview of the culture—more than just language acquisition—is required. This birthing process is rightly done by people of the culture itself; missionaries can really do no more than play the role of midwives. Obviously, the gospel culture also has to be understood well, at least as far as it is possible by the limited human mind. The gospel has now been active in Tanzania for over one hundred years. The time has come.

Two efforts at MUCO have demonstrated this process. The first is a collection of hymns, begun in 1968 and continuing through the 1980s, called *Tumshangilie Mungu*.²⁰ This collection, now in its sixth edition with 152 hymns, is the result of a call for authentic expression of the faith-life of the church. Texts in Swahili were set by Africans to traditional melodies or to newly composed music. The result is a delightful medley of Christian thought and African expression. Songs from this collection have even found their way into western hymnbooks, sharing African gifts with the rest of the world.²¹

There is also work in the liturgical arena. As a project at MUCO some years ago, the graduating class developed a liturgy for Morning Prayer.²² The entire service was newly composed with African elements, such as the need to show respect and honor towards one’s elders, and its innate concern for community and environment. Music was completely new, primarily using the African style of call and response, so well suited to liturgy. Sometimes the call and response actually overlap into one thought, as may be seen in the following “Response to the Word” (accompanied by drum, hand clapping, cheers, and ululation):

Leader: Praise God, servants of the Lord; all you who stand in the courts of the Almighty God!

Congregation: God, we praise you and magnify you; we exalt you and worship you at all times.

Leader: Lord,

Cong: Savior,

Leader: You are

Cong: Redeemer;

Leader: Bring to us

Cong: Peace;

Leader: The day

Cong: of today. We honor you; we bring to you our prayers and petitions.

²⁰*Tumshangilie Mungu*, ed. Howard S. Olson, 6th ed. (Makumira: Lutheran Theological College, 1987). The first edition was published in 1968 with 81 hymns. The title means “Let us praise God.”

²¹See, for example, *With One Voice: A Lutheran Resource for Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995) #678: “Christ has Arisen, Alleluia,” and #712: “Listen, God is Calling.”

²²“A Short Service of Morning Prayer,” composed and led by Diploma IV class of 1997. English translations are mine.

In the recessional song, some of the African thought-patterns emerge.²³ The repetition of certain words and the use of language reflect a strikingly un-western style:

We have come out of slavery, our slavery of old.
We were in unequalled danger. *Refrain*

We thought we were safe; Ho! we weren't safe.
We opposed all the good, all that was whole. *Refrain*

Praise highly, O people, our Savior.
He has come to us; He is our Comforter. *Refrain*

Now we are a new people, with a new life.
We have accepted newness of new life. *Refrain*

This song is set to a traditional tune that used to be sung as a processional at the New Year. It is therefore especially appropriate to be used as people walk out of the church into the community, where they receive the blessing and the sending.

The day of unilateral effort by the missionary is past in Africa. As a missionary, I must say that midwifery is a sometimes difficult but largely rewarding occupation. Today, much of the Tanzanian church's work is conceived by Africans, who labor in the birth process and rejoice in its outcome. The missionary is still involved, but in a more detached manner. Still, our delight in cooperating in the gospel task is not diminished.

The stages of translation, adaptation, and birth-giving in the interculturalization of the gospel continue in many parts of the world. Interculturalization, like the reformation of the church, is an ongoing, never-ending task. It involves not only different geographical locations but also changes in time. In the west—indeed throughout the world—cultures change rapidly. Each generation represents a new culture. The gospel relates to and challenges each one with its radical message of forgiveness and hope in Christ.

The question is: At what stage in the process are we? Where it is possible, we should encourage movement towards the birthing stage, giving dignity and integrity to both the gospel culture and the recipient culture. When the gospel is clearly articulated, understood, and embraced by human culture, then there is real joy and delight in the outcome, to the glory of God. ☩

²³“Tumsifu Bwana Wetu” (Let us praise our Lord), Kindali tune; words by Andrew Kyomo. Translation is mine. The refrain, in antiphonal setting, may be translated thus: “Let us praise him, our Father God who sent His Son, that He should dwell with us. Jesus only, the victor over all things; He has been victorious over all things in the whole world.” The words “Jesus only” in Swahili have an emphatic character: “Yesu tu!” making a kind of musical exclamation point in the song.