SIL Global
Language and Culture Archives

Journal of Translation
ISSN 1558-7282 (online)
https://siljot.org

God's Word Became Our Poetry and Sang within Us: Facilitating Contextualisation through Indigenous Poetry

Sheryl Morris

Journal of Translation 10 (1), 2014: 1–14.
https://doi.org/10.54395/JOT-N5TDY

License

©2014, SIL Global

Made available under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0

More resources available at:
https://sil.org/resources/language-culture-archives

God's Word Became Our Poetry and Sang within Us: Facilitating Contextualisation through Indigenous Poetry

Sheryl Morris

Sheryl Morris is the Queensland Ministry Coordinator for Missions Interlink, Australia's network for organisations and churches engaged in cross-cultural and global mission. After completing the Bachelor of Ministry through the Australian College of Theology, she is currently studying an Honours year with Sydney Missionary and Bible College, with a research focus on the relevance of missions educational tools for developing 'Global/World/Mission-Minded' Christians in Australian churches. Sheryl has worked previously as a teacher librarian. She holds a B.A., a Master of Applied Science Library and Information Management, and a Graduate Diploma of Learning and Teaching. She enjoys studying and writing poetry.

Abstract

Many cultures around the world esteem poetry as a medium for communicating truth and preserving traditions, and which can impact peoples' cognitive, affective and volitional dimensions of life. This exploratory project discusses the necessity of effectively contextualising theology for indigenous churches, and the inherently beneficial nature of poetry to help achieve this process. Research includes the study of relevant missiological literature and material acquired by questionnaire. This questionnaire was completed by linguistic field workers involved in Bible translation and by their professional colleagues. The findings of this research indicate that indigenous poetry is inherently valued in a variety of cultures and can be appropriately applied by both indigenous poets and cross-cultural workers to facilitate the contextualisation of Bible translation.

1. Contextualising Theology Effectively

1.1. Missiological imperatives for contextualisation

Many Australians associate poetry with dull and seemingly irrelevant studies in secondary school English classes. It is possible that this perception of poetry, as peripheral to daily life, may result in Australian cross-cultural workers being blinded to the potential role of indigenous poetry as a significant tool for effective contextualisation of biblical theology. In contrast, many cultures esteem poetry as a medium for communicating truth, preserving traditions and expressing the joys and struggles of everyday life. Consequently, this article discusses the inherent valuable and appropriate role of indigenous poetry for contextualising theology in Bible translation.

Contextualisation, as used in this article, is essentially 'concerned with how the gospel and culture relate to one another across geographical space and down through time' (Whiteman 1997:2). Theology is defined as 'the study of God and all his works,' but is not a purely cognitive activity, since 'theology is meant to be lived, prayed and sung!' (Grudem 1994:16). The core of this process is to contextualise theology by 'forming, expressing, and diffusing an understanding of God, the gospel, and the Christian life' in a way that speaks 'powerfully to a people's contemporary situation' (Hatcher 2001:475-476). It is the indigenous[1] church, through the power of the Holy Spirit, which must undertake this continual process of challenging, incorporating, and transforming elements of their culture 'in order to bring them under the lordship of Christ' (Gilliland 2000:225). This involves borrowing from the culture words, concepts and practices which are 'in harmony with the fundamentals of the Christian faith,' so that the church may be 'truly Christian and also truly indigenous' (Musasiwa 2007:68–69; Kraft 2002:345).

[1] Throughout this article the term 'indigenous' is defined as something or someone 'generated from or within or originating from within the local context' (Living Springs International 2005:2).

The word *contextualisation* may have only been present in theological discussions over the last fifty years or so, but the concept is ancient, since it was central to Christianity from its beginning (Maxey 2010:175; Whiteman 1997:2); the whole Bible is 'a record of contextualised revelation' (Musasiwa 2007:67). As Kraft (2002:344) states, 'Contextualization of Christianity is part and parcel of the New Testament record,' because the documents themselves owe their very existence to the early Church's missionary endeavour (Hesselgrave and Rommen 1989:7). Flemming (2005:234) describes the four Gospels as 'four contextualisations of the one story,' together they record the incarnational ministry of Jesus, which represents the very heart of Christian contextualisation (Musasiwa 2007:68).

Beginning with the early Christians living in pagan Roman society, the history of the Church is a long story 'of contextualised theologies that are varying responses to the work of the Spirit of God in particular historical contexts' (Nicholls 1979:54; Flemming 2005:291). The early Church was 'in danger of being dominated by Hebrew theology' (Kraft 2002:345). Through the prompting and guidance of the Holy Spirit the early Church established 'a basis for the ongoing contextualisation of the gospel' by systematically working to eliminate obstacles[2] (Hesselgrave and Rommen 1989:8, 9). Paul's epistles also give scriptural case studies in contextualisation, modelling 'a complex conversation' and 'magnificent balance' between the uncompromisingly Christ-centred gospel and 'an identificational approach,' which proclaims Christ in ways his audience was able to understand (Flemming 2005:86, 116).

In fact, New Testament writers were involved in contextualisation as they sought to communicate the Christian message to those who spoke in Greek the message that had come to them in the Aramaic language and culture (Kraft 2002:344). This early translation process proved to be foundational to the ongoing work of contextualising God's word into every 'mother tongue' or 'heart language.' Bible translators serve in this essential process, which Maxey (2010:175) describes as 'a prime example of contextual theology.' Moon (2009:51) suggests that when these heart language translations engage with cultures through contextualisation, a deeper understanding and communication of truth is achieved. As the Scriptures are then 'enfleshed' in new languages, the worldwide Church is gifted with new, enriching gospel understandings (Maxey 2010:178, 181), and 'the inherent translatability of Christianity' is displayed (Musasiwa 2007:69).

1.2. Risks of inadequate or improper contextualisation

Contextualisation is 'a biblical, theological and missiological imperative,' which draws both professional theologians and untrained indigenous Christians into the theological process (Musasiwa 2007:66, 68; Gilliland 2000:227). This contextualisation of the gospel is a risky endeavor however, in which the participants must constantly be on guard against the threat of syncretism[3] (Flemming 2005:297). When the gospel is not appropriately contextualised, there is a great 'risk of establishing weak churches, whose members will turn to non-Christian syncretistic explanation, follow nonbiblical lifestyles, and engage in magical rituals' (Whiteman 1997:5). Non-contextualised forms of Christianity discourage deeper inquiry into the claims of Jesus, fail to engage the deepest needs and aspirations, cause missionaries and 'their small band of converts' to be viewed as 'cultural misfits and aliens,' and are culturally offensive and ultimately unchristian (Whiteman 1997:3, 5; Kraft 2002:348).

Even well-meaning missionaries may fail to recognise that all theology is contextual, including their own (Flemming 2005:298; Musasiwa 2007:67). This may result in 'theological imperialism,' where theologies relevant in one cultural context are imposed on the people of another, resulting in either negative reactions to the gospel and theologising, or churches characterized by a high degree of foreignness (Kraft 2002:347). For example, Christianity has been perceived in many cultures as a foreign religion identified with Western culture, which requires converts to adopt Western ways (Hiebert 1987:106). Furthermore, non-contextualised theologies smother, rather than consciously wrestle with, unbiblical elements of culture. This causes values, concepts and practices, incompatible with the gospel, to go underground and persist

[2] See Galatians 2:11–16; Acts 10; 15.

[3] Syncretism is defined as the 'blending of one idea, practice, or attitude with another,' which results in 'the replacement or dilution of the essential truths of the gospel through the incorporation of non-Christian elements' (Moreau 2000:924).

within an 'uneasy coexistence of public Christianity and private paganism,' which ultimately leads to syncretism (Hiebert 1987:106). Musasiwa (2007:70) suggests effective contextualisation involves developing theologies that respect the authority of the Bible as their primary source, which take into account the lessons learned throughout the history of the Church; remain open-ended, because no society is static; and dialogue with all other theologies so that the global Church may be unified. Therefore effective contextualisation is critical for the clear communication and appropriate application of the gospel in the lives of people from every nation, tribe, people and language.

2. Poetry and Contextualisation

The task of the Church in every culture and age then is to contextualise theology, and thereby enable 'the gospel to address its world in transforming ways even as it utilizes the stories and cultural resources at hand' (Flemming 2005:53). Kraft (2002:348) suggests this may occur by means of various mediums, such as sermons, discussions, art, hymns and poems. The latter three are related and relevant to the focus of this project, namely poetry. Poetry can be defined in many ways[4] and is found in literature, music, and the visual arts[5] (Martin 2007:149). For the purpose of this discussion, poetry is understood to include all metric compositions, verse[6] and song texts, commonly known as lyrics. While the primary concern of prose is to make things perfectly clear, poetry, instead, strives to invite, evoke and delight; operating beyond explanation in 'a geography of soul and spirit whose heights and depths are beyond any of our calculations or merely logical connections' (Shepherd 2006:10). To achieve this, poetry employs a more frequent and intense use of imagery and figures of speech than does prose (Lucas 2008:522), such as simile, metaphor, symbol, irony, prosopopoeia and anthropomorphisms (Travers 2005:595). Poetry is also 'inherently aesthetic' (Klein 1996:616), due to its 'measured forms of language' (Dyrness 2011:11), such as rhyme, metre/rhythm, paronomasia, alliteration, assonance and repetition.

2.1. Poetry in the Bible

The use of poetry in contextualising theology should not be as surprising as it may sound, given that God Himself 'speaks the language of poetry' (Martin 2007:149). Vast sections of the Bible are either written as poems or reflect the use of poetic language. In fact, 'between one-third and one-half of the Old Testament is written in poetic style' (Klein 1996:614), including 'the poetic books,'[7] nearly all the prophetic books, and sections of the Pentateuch[8] and historical books[9] (Watson 1994:15, 77; Klein 1996:614). Watson (1995:78) suggests, 'It is extremely likely that Hebrew poetry was oral, at least in origin.' Refrains and questions in the Psalms (e.g. 24:8–10; 129:1–2; 136) suggest that audiences were not passive, but participants in poetic performances. The Israelites valued oral poetry, making use of it in both the Old- and New-Testament eras. Jesus taught poetically, using symbols and parables with 'rare beauty and simplicity' (Martin 2007:154; Travers 2005:595). Singing and speaking 'psalms, hymns and spiritual songs'[10] functioned as an avenue of spiritual formation and incarnating the gospel into the lives of early Christians,[11] and have accompanied Christianity ever since (Hatcher 2001:475, 476).

---

[4] Murfin and Ray (1998:290) state that 'one might easily argue that there are as many ways to characterize it as there are people.'

[5] Visual arts are excluded from this discussion although their significance and usefulness in contextualisation also deserves further investigation.

[6] Even though technical definitions either distinguish poetry from verse (Cuddon 1999:682) or consider it a subset of verse (Murfin and Ray 1998:290).

[7] Namely, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon.

[8] For example, Genesis 49; Exodus 15; Deuteronomy 32–33.

[9] For example, Judges 5 and 2 Samuel 1.

[10] See Ephesians 5:19–20; Colossians 3:16.

[11] Various passages have been suggested as examples of early Christian poetry/songs, such as Luke 1:46–55, 76–79; 2:29–32; Ephesians 2:14ff; Philippians 6:6–11; Colossians 1:15–20; 1 Timothy 3:16; 1 Peter 3:18–22; Hebrews 1:3; John 1; Revelation 5:9; 12:10ff; 19:1, 6, 11 (Hatcher 2001:476; Meeks 2004:79).

2.2. Poetry and art in the world's cultures

Hebrew use of poetry was both biblical and extra-biblical—Common people sang poetry during family and tribal gatherings, work and travel. Wandering bards were employed for festivals. Later 'scribal schools were set up in Israel' to record existing oral compositions, which 'produced a new breed of writing poets' (Watson 1995:77–79).

In addition to the Israelite nation, poetry is also a significant medium employed by numerous cultures around the world. Generally speaking, the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization (2005) endorses the vital role of indigenous arts in evangelism and mission, 'because of the strategic role they play in every culture,' as 'intrinsic communication forms that are integrated within and across structures of society where they define and sustain cultural norms and values.' Schrag (2007:5) suggests that in many cultures 'communication through artistic channels is at least as important as communication through didactic channels.' Walker (2005:111) illustrates this importance with an example: 'Poetry is so pivotal to Romanian culture that an old proverb claims, "Every Romanian is born a poet."'

2.3. Communicative and emotive impacts of poetry

Careful analysis of the symbols and forms of indigenous art, such as that undertaken in ethnomusicology and ethnopoetics,[12] may open windows to 'the language of the heart,' revealing otherwise hidden aspects of indigenous culture (Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization 2005; Moon 2009:2; King 2000:328). This is because 'local art distills the essence of a people – their values, longings, dreams, fears, sufferings and celebrations' (Jones 2010). Furthermore, communication in poetry has the power to 'appeal to the cognitive, the affective, and the volitional dimensions of people' (Hatcher 2001:475, 482).

In terms of cognitive impacts, the artistic rendering of poetry flags the importance of the messages and aids memory and memorisation (Klein 1996:616; Wendland 2009:10; Schrag 2007:3), enabling people to develop 'storehouses' of beliefs and theologies (King 2009:44). Wesley, for example, 'intentionally used hymn singing to implant Methodist teaching in the minds and memories of the people' (Hatcher 2001:478). Baumgaertner (2007:149) argues that theologians need poets and their poetry 'just as much as Christ needed to speak in parables,' because Christian poets incarnate the spirit of the gospel into the flesh of this material world. An additional feature of poetry in every language is 'concreteness;' its ability to reify theology, by using symbols and imagery to enable one to see, taste, smell, hear or feel ideas and concepts (Travers 2005:595). In these ways, poetry 'speaks as no other language can' and 'does what no other art form can do…it uses words to say the unsayable' (Baumgaertner 2007:147). Poetry also concentrates and frames information, which generates increased 'expressive freedom and truth-telling,' and creates intensity and 'phenomenological space' for focusing, reflecting and altering one's perspective (Schrag 2007:3; Martin 2007:149; Murfin and Ray 1998:291).

While poetry undoubtedly affects the mind, its use of imagery and symbols also speaks to the heart, creating deep emotional responses, whilst simultaneously reflecting and shaping a people's worldview (Ciccarelli 2007:5; Murfin and Ray 1998:290; Moon 2009:30, 50; Lucas 2008:522). Martin suggests that, through this powerful figurative language, the 'poet-theologian' creates 'a passage into the mystery of direct, existential knowledge of God,' and, in so doing, poetry 'becomes *theology par excellence'* (Martin 2007:150, italics are the author's).[13] Poetry's power lies in its nature and purpose to 'move' people. In this way, it is similar to all artistic forms of communication, which can bring about change in cultures by their 'unique abilities to motivate people to action, inspire feelings of solidarity, and provide socially acceptable spaces to disagree,' imagine and dream (Schrag 2013:10, 12). Therefore, as Hatcher (2001:475–476) concludes, poetry and singing are significant and suitable vehicles for 'forming, expressing, and diffusing

[12] These cultural studies of music and poetry can assist in the contextualization of theology through the development of culturally appropriate poems, song texts and music for evangelism, discipleship and worship (King 2000:328; King 2004:299; Watson 1994:33; Schrag 2007:4).

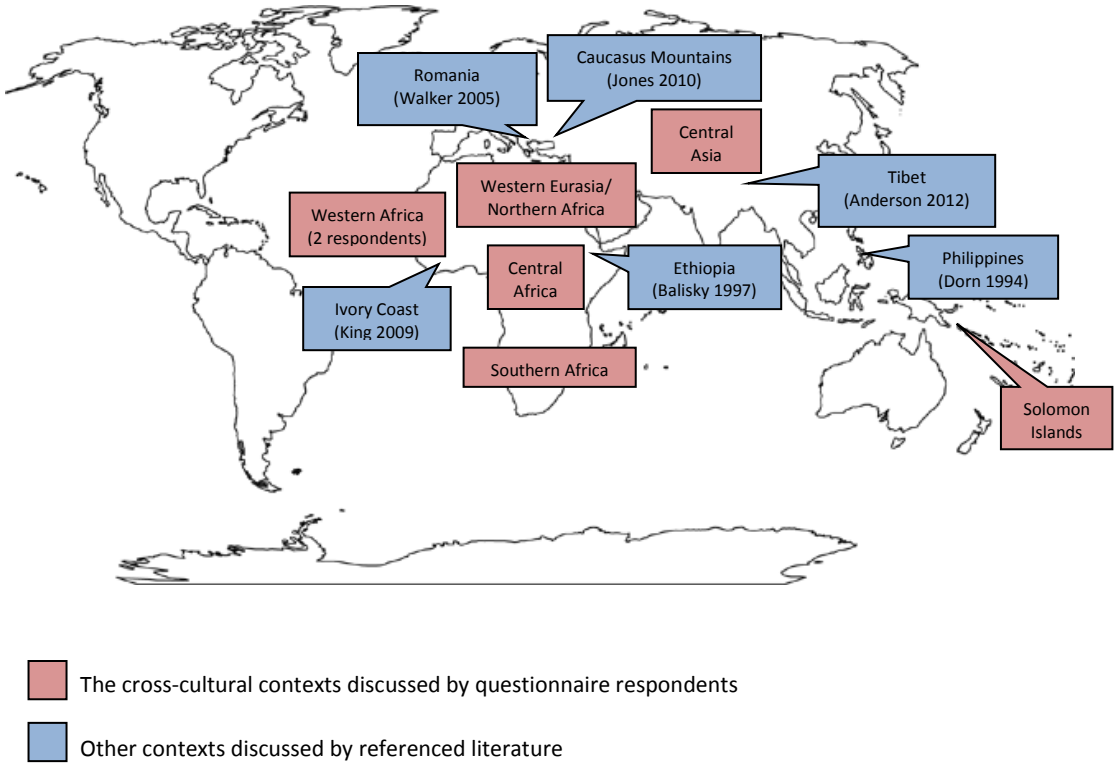
[13] Although theological contextualisation has been understood by some to involve modification of the message itself to suit a host culture, this is not what is being endorsed. Instead, while the language and medium may be altered, the essential biblical message should shine through unadulterated and clearer to the receptors.

an understanding of God, the gospel, and Christian life that speak powerfully to a people's contemporary situation;' or, in other words, 'they facilitate the contextualization of theology' (Hatcher 2001:476).

3. Method of Research by Questionnaire

To gain a general understanding of how poetry is currently being used in cross-cultural ministries to facilitate the contextualisation of theology, Bible translators and their professional colleagues were surveyed. An Australian colleague emailed her contacts to ascertain the level of interest in this research project. These contacts then forwarded information on to others from which emails from around the world, expressing an interest in participating, began to filter back. The fourteen contacts who indicated a willingness to participate were subsequently sent an email questionnaire consisting of six questions.[14] Seven were completed and returned during 2012, and their answers were compiled and assessed. A number of the contacts, who had initially indicated they were interested in participating, did not complete the questionnaire after reading it because they felt their ministry situation or experience was not directly relevant to the focus of this study. A small number who did not follow up their initial interest, however, suggested and provided relevant literature.

The introductory questions asked the respondents to describe the context of their cross-cultural ministry in relation to their location, people groups and languages, as well as their ministry roles (see map).



Map: Some locations where indigenous poetry is used to facilitate contextualisation

One respondent completed the questionnaire twice in order to address two different, yet related, contexts. Two other respondents indicated that they worked with a people group or language that extended beyond the political borders of any one country. Approximately half of the contexts described were located in the African continent, but included Western, Southern, Central and Northern African countries. The other half ranged from Western Eurasia, Central Asia, and the Pacific Region. Although nowhere near comprehensive, this diversity of cross-cultural contexts provided an array of perspectives on how poetry

[14] See the appendix for a blank copy of this questionnaire.

may be a relevant contextualisation tool in various cultures around the world. The respondents also represented a diverse range of language development roles, including Bible translation and consultancy, vernacular literacy and education, academic instruction in languages, research, resource project development and discipleship. Some of the respondents are currently working on the field in cross-cultural contexts, and others are in consultant or training roles, after having previously served cross-culturally. It is hardly surprising to find that the respondents, who are involved so closely with language and the work of providing Scripture in heart languages, have considered the value of poetry in their language development projects.

4. Results of the Questionnaire Research

The following subsections each reflect a question asked in the interview form (see the appendix). They correspond to questions 4, 5, and 6.

4.1. How poetry is used by indigenous people, and its value/role in their culture

Across the various contexts, poetry was found to be an important medium for preserving and communicating cultural values and traditions. One respondent described how members of an unreached people group of Western Africa play a simple guitar to accompany historical readings or genealogical recitations, in order to guard their heritage. Similarly, another respondent described a people group in Western Eurasia/Northern Africa, who pass on their stories of heroic ancestors through poetry. According to the respondent, 'such stories were not considered valid unless they had an accompanying poem that related to the story, and the poem was not complete without a story explaining it.' In fact, five out of the seven respondents, ranging across Africa, Western Eurasia, Solomon Islands and Central Asia, indicated that poetry plays an important role in preserving the cultural heritage of indigenous peoples. Many of the respondents involved in North Africa, Western Eurasia and Central Asia noted that traditionally nomadic peoples often value poetry as part of their oral traditions.

Within their cross-cultural contexts, a number of respondents had also discovered poetry to be a powerful communication tool for both persuasion and critical discussion. On the one hand, in Western Africa one people group values the ancient role of the 'Griot,' a 'kind of wise man, right-hand man to the king, a poet, wordsmith.' Wedekind (1972:245) also documents the role of the Griot, describing him as a 'praise singer…the one who adds charm and authority to the chief's announcements, singing and drumming them into everybody's mind.' Another respondent, describing a context in Western Eurasia/Northern Africa, comments, 'Poetry is very important to this people group, especially as a "pressure release valve" that allows them to talk about feelings and problems that are otherwise taboo or hard to accept in their society. One can say things in poetry that are not acceptable in prose.'

Proverbs were found to be a particularly valued form of poetry often mentioned by the respondents working in Africa and Western Eurasia. The respondent who described the context in Western Eurasian/Northern African noted that, for peoples of a Muslim background, 'to talk about religious subjects only in ordinary prose is possible, but it misses a major dimension that the people employ in their communication.' A Central African tribe used poetry in songs, proverbs, and traditional drum calls beaten on a two-tone slit wooden drum. The respondent working with this group observed that all these forms are 'valuable in the culture' for communicating 'truths and opinions,' challenging and instructing. This sample provides contemporary, real-world examples, which verify the assertion of missiological literature[15] that many cultures around the world consider poetry a significant and vital part of their culture, and endorses the wisdom of cross-cultural workers who consider the implications of indigenous poetry for the individual contexts in which they minister.

4.2. How indigenous poetry strengthens the contextualisation of biblical theology

The respondents of this study have indeed considered the significance of indigenous poetry, and provided descriptions of how it has been utilised in their contexts to facilitate the contextualisation of theology.

[15] See section 2, 'Poetry and Contextualisation.'

Many of the respondents involved in Bible translation work indicate that an important consideration was the use of indigenous poetic styles in the translation of Scripture. One respondent with extensive experience in African Bible translation comments that indigenous poetic forms had 'been used to contextualise the translation of the Scriptures, which in turn would tend to support the contextualisation of theology in the cultures concerned.' The focus for this type of translation is the poetic passages of Scripture, especially the books of Proverbs and Psalms. One respondent from Western Africa shared a story about a Christian who, while helping test the book of Proverbs, was astonished and delighted to find so many proverbs in the Bible, since proverbs are so treasured in his own culture. Due to the 'enthusiastic reaction' of the people in this context to the translated biblical proverbs, the respondent from Western Africa suggested that 'Proverbs can be an excellent pre-evangelistic tool to draw interest in the word of God.'

Likewise, the respondent working in Western Eurasia believes 'it was essential to utilize poetry in communicating biblical stories, especially considering the high place it has among them.' Consequently, translation teams work to translate the Bible passages, which were originally poetic, into indigenous poetic forms. In one case, the story of Solomon, incorporating sections from Proverbs, was written into poetic form by an indigenous poet. Another example was given of Luke 1:39–56, where Elizabeth speaks to Mary, and then Mary answers. The respondent explains that, in his cross-cultural context, 'it is very common to have someone praise or address someone in a poem, and then the other person responds with a poem in the same meter and rhyme scheme.' Consequently, the translation of this passage replicated this form, with Elizabeth speaking in a poem and Mary responding in another poem. Zechariah's Song in Luke 1: 67–80 was also translated as a poem. On the other side of the world, in the Solomon Islands, the respondent observed that the parallel lines of the Hebrew poetics of some psalms were compatible with an indigenous poetic form. This main poetic form is associated with an indigenous dance, which is 'the major cultural marker of identity.' It is described as 'a quatrain in which the first and last lines are identical lexically, but not musically. The song is a call and response form.' A number of psalms and psalm portions were translated to conform to this indigenous pattern.[16]

However, five of the seven respondents indicated that poetry was a tool used not only by Bible translators, but also employed by indigenous Christians to communicate biblical truth. For example, in Northern Africa/Western Eurasia, one respondent's translation team arranged for a poet to take Bible passages, which had been translated into prose, and rewrite them as poems. The initial intent was to translate the actual verses of Scripture in poetic form, but the poet found it difficult to be free and elegant in his poetic expression, while remaining true to the entire content of the text. Walker (2005:112) states, 'Poetry is virtually impossible to translate; indeed some poets and critics believe it can't be translated.' However, this does not mean that Bible translators and indigenous poets should not attempt this difficult task, since such a large portion of the Bible is originally poetry, and the Bible must be translated. As Ciccarelli (2007:5) notes, there is an 'ever-present tension between accuracy and creativity' in this process, and 'the poet is often very sensitive about having his poem changed in any way to accommodate exegetical suggestions.' Despite any challenges, the respondent makes a point of noting, 'We have found working with local musicians and poets to be a rewarding experience.' Consequently, the team decided to ask the poet to write poems summarising the main themes of the stories he was given. The team predetermined these themes based on analysing both the story and the indigenous culture to determine which themes would be most important to emphasise for the poet's people group. The respondent observed that this approach was more effective, and the poet would often incorporate key phrases from the story. Recordings of these poems being chanted in traditional style and/or recited were then produced.

The questionnaires also reveal that indigenous poetic song texts are being produced in the Solomon Islands, Africa, and Western Eurasia. One denomination in the Solomon Islands changed its position on rejecting the use of traditional music in the church, after music cassettes, which mixed custom, hymn, and chorus music for church, were produced. Consequently, the launch of the New Testament translation featured a significant indigenous component to the music. One respondent suggests that in African churches indigenous Scripture-based songs are becoming more prevalent as a strategy to confront aspects of the

[16] Namely, Psalm 23, 134, 136, 148 and portions of Psalms 13, 41, 47, 72, 75, 89, 106, 107, 116, 118 and 141. A total of 15 of the 150 psalms have a custom component.

people's worldviews that do not 'mesh with biblical teaching.' This observation is supported by King (2009:11), who states, 'On the African continent today, songs drawing from the roots of various cultural heritages are sweeping through the African church.' She argues that 'the use of such culturally-appropriate songs' is generally recognised to be 'playing an important role in the growth and development of relevant Christian practices in Africa' (King 2009:11). In Western Eurasia, a respondent describes how passages translated in poetic style were slightly reworked by musicians to create biblical examples of 'sung poetry.' A traditional musical style, used by Muslims to express their devotion to Allah and Mohammed, was then adapted and applied by local Indigenous Christian musicians. The respondent notes that communicating Scripture in this form is emotionally powerful, and both 'Christians and Muslims who have heard the final production have been greatly moved.'

4.3. Effective use of indigenous poetry strengthens the contextualisation of theology

As many of the respondents reported, indigenous poets provide invaluable skills and knowledge in translating Scripture into heart languages. This is because, as Watson (1994:15) states, many 'passages and books in verse cannot be properly understood if they are read simply as prose.' Poetry's intrinsic power to communicate an emotional message means it is perfectly suited for passages 'as diverse as laments, oracles of judgement, and paeans of praise' (Klein 1996:614). However, biblical poetry was very concerned not only with its message, but also with its form (Klein 1996:616), and so translations 'ought to be characterized by a similar measure of orally-expressed rhetorical impact and aesthetic appeal' (Wendland 2009:11). In fact, the more form is connected to the text's meaning, as in all poetic passages, the greater effort required 'to match the original text in terms of content, beauty of poetic form, emotive tone, evocative imagery, rhetorical impact, and the oral-aural medium of communication' during the translation process (Wendland 2009:11). The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization (2005) suggests that artists, such as indigenous poets, 'would be valuable discussion partners in translating such texts.'

The positive outcomes of 'enfleshing' Scripture into the poetic forms of heart languages have been documented for some time. For example, Dorn (1994:301) records, 'When the Tagalog Good News Bible was published in 1980, one of the initial reactions was that of general pleasure at the use of normal forms of Philippine poetry where such forms were called for.' Furthermore, the questionnaire respondent serving in West Eurasia observed that when people in his context hear the Bible in their traditional devotional form, it 'makes a powerful statement' that Christianity is not a 'Western religion.' Another example came from the Solomon Islands, where an indigenous form was found to be compatible with Hebrew poetics, and so was incorporated into the translation of the Psalter to varying degrees. Boerger suggests that, any time these psalms are read or sung, it will strengthen both the indigenous language and the poetic song lyric form, and bring great joy. 'One of the people who had previously opposed the custom songs was one dancing most enthusiastically when they were sung' (Boerger n.d.:14).

4.4. Roles for cross-cultural workers in utilising indigenous poetry

Cross-cultural workers are unlikely to have the skills and deep cultural understanding needed to compose poetry in an indigenous form, whether or not they are relatively fluent in the language (Hatcher 2001:484; Schrag 2013:16). Indeed, it is arguable that they should not attempt to do so, because, for the resulting artistic creations to be truly indigenous, the poems must be generated from within the intended audience. If a cross-cultural worker were to attempt to write poetry with and/or for a Christian community, who do not currently possess the necessary skills for such a task, this would need to be undertaken with the greatest sensitivity and humility. However, even then, every effort should be made to collaborate with indigenous Christians and local artists; the evaluation of poems/song texts must belong to indigenous Christian leaders; and the creative process should be handed over to the Christian community as soon as possible.

4.4.1 Gain an understanding of biblical literature and cultural poetic devices

Cross-cultural workers still have significant roles to play in the translation of Scripture into indigenous poetic forms. Firstly, Bible translators should research the diverse genres found in biblical literature and note different poetic devices during the analysis of an original biblical text, so that they may share their professional expertise with indigenous and other cross-cultural members of the translation team (Wendland

2009:8, 18; Maxey 2010:179). Secondly, translators should carefully analyse the symbols and forms of indigenous art, such as that undertaken in ethnomusicology and ethnopoetics,[17] This may open windows to 'the language of the heart,' revealing otherwise hidden aspects of indigenous culture (Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization 2005; Moon 2009:2; King 2000:328). Cross-cultural language personnel should investigate, identify and collate a well-documented inventory of all 'linguistically and culturally equivalent form-functional techniques,' which may be later used in translation (Wendland 2009:8, 18).

This inventory involves developing 'a clear understanding of the norms of good indigenous poetry,' including metre, line length, rhyming patterns, varieties of poetic genre, style of expression and types of imagery (Dorn 1994:314). The respondent from Central Asia indicated that he is currently researching indigenous proverbs and other genres, in the hope of guiding the translation of relevant biblical texts 'into a culturally appropriate style.' The respondent from Western Africa also suggests that, while cross-cultural workers can be catalysts for such investigation, 'an interested national can carry the research and explorations further;' so both parties should work together, since 'it takes time, effort and focus to tap into these hidden riches in the culture.' In support of this, both Wendland (2009:18) and Ciccarelli (2007:7) recommend cross-cultural workers collaborating with mother-tongue translators and other supportive indigenous people who can propose poetic equivalents for biblical passages and critique trial versions. However, throughout this process, the 'metacultural grids' of the cross-cultural worker should enable him/her to build bridges between the original biblical texts and the local heart language, poetic forms and culture (Hiebert 1987:110).

4.4.2 Endorse and champion local poetic expression

In addition to its vital role in Bible translation, poetry provides even broader opportunities for facilitating contextualisation of theology. Both Hatcher (2001:485) and Atkins (2011:10) endorse the composition of indigenous poems and song texts for praise, confession, and thanksgiving, which integrate biblical and cultural materials through a process of inspiration and spiritual reflection. This is particularly relevant in worship, which 'is the deepest expression of a religious worldview,' and, therefore, ought to be the point where contextualisation is most clearly seen (Nicholls 1979:62). For example, one respondent from Western Africa notes that indigenous songs, as opposed to 'foreign-translated' songs, went a long way toward demonstrating to people that Christianity can be indigenous. Additionally, poetry can be an effective contextualisation tool in enabling the gospel to permeate every aspect of people's lives—and that can break out into effective indigenous witness.

According to the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization (2005), 'every people group has its own unique cultural traditions' and 'artistic expressions,' which are 'woven into their daily life.' In some cultures, indigenous poetry, proverbs and songs accompany basic daily tasks, such as carrying water, travelling, hunting, sharing meals and playing games (Atkins 2011:3, 11). Wherever possible these must be redeemed, restored and sanctified for Christ by indigenous Christians. In such places, poetry provides an effective and ever present method of communicating the gospel, and confronting everyday 'practices and values that clash with Scripture, such as witchcraft, oracles, jealousy, clannishness, and immorality' (Atkins 2011:10). In this way, indigenous poets may be 'empowered to contribute to the expansion of the kingdom of God' (Schrag 2013:11). The respondent located in Western Eurasia notes that it is particularly beneficial in honour/shame societies for the local people to experiment with new ways of expressing theology and to adopt creative innovation as their own, because this creates 'the key sense of ownership and dignity.'[18] Moreover, unless new artistic and creative means of communicating are 'deeply rooted in local traditions and social systems,' they are unlikely to become an enduring part of the local culture (Schrag 2013:15).

[17] These are the cultural studies of music and poetry, which can also assist contextualisation of theology through the development of culturally appropriate poems, song texts and music for evangelism, discipleship, and worship (King 2000:328; King 2004:299; Watson 1994:33; Schrag 2007:4).

[18] Schrag advises that, although 'local artists are some of the more open-minded people in a community,' it is 'very important to show respect to their expertise and to request their participation in an appropriate manner.

Therefore, cross-cultural workers can make a valuable contribution to an indigenous church's efforts toward contextualising theology by 'figuring out how to help people integrate new forms of creativity into enduring aspects of their lives' (Schrag 2013:16). This involves acting as a catalyst and 'arts advocate,' who champions the value of poetic forms (Schrag 2013:16) even within the indigenous community, and especially with community and church leaders. Arts advocates encourage indigenous Christians to research their creative mediums;[19] to discover motivations to create; to compose original works; to design events and contexts in which to create; and to critique what they produce (Schrag 2013:16; Hatcher 2001:484; Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization (2005). Although this may involve the professional expertise of relevant disciplines, such as ethnomusicology and ethnopoetics, the fundamental attitude and processes are not beyond the capacity of other cross-cultural workers (Schrag 2007:2–4). Each one of the questionnaire respondents describes the appropriate role of the cross-cultural worker in terms of being an encourager, researcher, supporter, advocate or catalyst for local artists and communities. As Schrag (2012:15) states, 'The approach usually requires long term relationships with people and an irrepressible commitment to learn.' This investment is worthwhile, because 'art is not only a window into a soul, but a treasure of a people,' and so taking the time 'to get to know the art of a people, and not simply to analyse it or to use it for our purposes, but to celebrate it with them and help reflect it back,' provides cross-cultural workers the opportunity to 'engage in an act of love' (Jones 2010). Additionally, to avoid 'half-hearted' efforts by the indigenous church, the importance of continuing the dialogue on contextualisation and releasing control of the creative process, to allow for complete indigenous expression, has been noted by the respondents from Western Africa and Central Asia respectively.

4.4.3 Provide practical, technical support

According to the respondents from Western Eurasia and Central Africa, cross-cultural workers can assist churches to facilitate contextualisation through the composition of indigenous poetry with technical, practical and organisational support, such as making recording equipment available for audio productions and facilitating artistic workshops. Schrag (2012:22) observes, 'One of the most common reasons that communities and organisations don't integrate the arts into their work is that they don't plan for it;' and so cross-cultural workers are able to help by learning the decision-making processes of churches and communities, and then to 'graciously ask to join those processes in appropriate ways, at key moments.' Finally, it is essential that cross-cultural workers protect, love and pray for Christian indigenous poets, because 'whenever they create something for a public space, they become vulnerable to negative cultural,' and possibly even spiritual, forces (Schrag 2013:22).

5. Summary

In light of the essential need for all churches to develop contextualised theologies, cross-cultural workers should continue to advocate for, and support the development of, Christian indigenous poetry which upholds the biblical gospel and expresses and encourages joy, hope and obedient faith. Indigenous poets should use their unique knowledge and skills in culturally-relevant poetic forms to assist translators to 'enflesh' the Bible into their heart language. Furthermore, they should be encouraged and empowered to compose poems and song texts, which the indigenous church may use for worship, evangelism, and discipleship in both congregational and daily life. The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization (2005) expressed surprise at 'just how reluctant most mission organisations have been to take up the arts and put them to work in the task of mission.' To this end cross-cultural workers, Christian ethnopoets and arts advocates, together with mission agencies and sending churches should give greater consideration to the role that indigenous poetry can play in writing God's powerful and poetic word on the heart of every nation, tribe, people and language.

[19] 'God gave every community unique gifts of artistic communication to tell the Truth…Many of these gifts, however, lie dormant, misused, or dying' (Schrag 2013:10).

Appendix: E-mail Questionnaire Sent to Bible Translators and their Professional Colleagues

Thank you for participating in this research project. It is my hope that this research may clarify how present/potential cross-cultural workers may consider poetry as an opportunity and tool for contextualisation, and perhaps encourage Christian poets to consider cross-cultural mission. You are welcome to request a copy of my project when it is finished.

For the purpose of this questionnaire, indigenous poetry may include written and oral poetic forms and the lyrical content of song writing, which has been developed by the local people of a given cultural context. Contextualisation of theology concerns the formation, expression, and diffusion of an understanding of God, the gospel, and the Christian life into the indigenous culture.

Answer in as much detail as you feel necessary to communicate your thoughts. Examples and stories (without naming individuals) to illustrate your points would be appreciated where appropriate.

Please make it clear when answering Question 1 if you are currently serving in a cross-cultural context, have previously served, or are preparing to serve in the future. If you have served in multiple cross-cultural contexts, and would like to provide answers for each of these, you may complete this questionnaire multiple times. To do this, please copy and paste every question and response at the end, so that all your responses are recorded within the same document.

1. Describe the context (location, people group, specific target groups, language etc.) of your cross-cultural ministry. If your work is in a sensitive area feel free to be general in your descriptions:

2. Outline the goals of the ministry, and your specific roles:

3. Describe the ways poetry is created and used by the indigenous people you described in Question 1, and the value/role it has in their culture:

4. Describe how this indigenous poetry has been utilised to facilitate the contextualisation of theology into the indigenous culture:

5. In your opinion, how effective have these processes (your answers to question 4) been in facilitating contextualisation of theology in this context?

   Very ineffective Very effective Don't know

   0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11

   Your number: _____

   Explain your reasons for this number:

6. What are the appropriate role(s) of cross-cultural workers in the process of facilitating contextualisation of theology through the use of indigenous poetry? Include your reasons for these views:

References

Anderson, Caroline. 2012. Tibetan believers find their heart's melody. *Commission stories Asia*, Accessed September 10, 2012. http://www.commissionstories.com/asia/stories/view/tibetan-believers-find-their-hearts-melody-in-song.

Atkins, Wendy. 2011. Oral Tradition among the Azande. Ms.

Balisky, Lila W. 1997. Theology in song: Ethiopia's Tesfay Gabbiso. *Missiology* 25(4):447–456.

Baumgaertner, Jill Pelaez. 2007. "Silver catching midday sun": Poetry and the beauty of God. In Daniel J Treier, Mark Husbands and Roger Lundin (eds), *The beauty of God: Theology and the arts*, 145–157. Downers Grove: IVP Academic.

Boerger, Brenda H. Forthcoming. Bible translation as Natqgu language advocacy.

Ciccarelli, Andrea. 2007. Dramatized Scripture for special audiences: Making the message of Jesus engaging, relevant and meaningful. *Word and Deed*, 6/2, Summer Institute of Linguistics International. CD-ROM.

Cuddon, J. A. 1999. *The penguin dictionary of literary terms and literary theory*. London: Penguin Books.

Dorn, Louis. 1994. Philippine poetry and translation: A general survey. *Bible Translator* 45(3):301–315.

Dyrness, William A. 2011. *Poetic theology: God and poetics in everyday life*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Flemming, Dean. 2005. *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for theology and mission*. Leicester: Apollos.

Gilliland, Dean. 2000. Contextualization. In A. Scott Moreau (ed), *Evangelical dictionary of world missions*, 225–229. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.

Grudem, Wayne. 1994. *Systematic theology: An introduction to biblical doctrine*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press.

Hammer, Langdon. 1989. Hearing Mandelstam. *American Scholar* 81(1):56–59.

Hatcher, Mark J. 2001. Poetry, singing, and contextualization. *Missiology* 29(4):475–487.

Hesselgrave, David J., and Edward Rommen. 1989. *Contextualization: Meanings, methods, and models*. Leicester: Apollos.

Hiebert, Paul G. 1987. Critical contextualisation. *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11(3):104–112.

Jones, Eric. 2010. Giving back a Treasure. *Global Voices Engaging the Arts in Mission* 9(2&3).

King, Roberta R. 2000. Ethnomusicology. In A. Scott Moreau (ed), *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, 327–328. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.

King, Roberta R. 2004. Toward a discipline of Christian ethnomusicology: A missiological paradigm. *Missiology: An International Review* 32(3):293–307.

King, Roberta R. 2009. *Pathways in Christian music communication: The case of the Semfo of Cote D'Ivoire.* Eugene: Pickwick Publishing.

Klein, George L. 1996. Poetry. In Walter A. Elwell (ed), *Evangelical dictionary of biblical theology*, 614–616. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.

Kraft, Charles H. 2002. *Culture, communication and Christianity: A selection of writing by Charles H. Kraft.* Pasadena: William Carey Library.

Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization. 2005. Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 46. Redeeming the arts: The restoration of the arts to God's creational intention. Accessed September 9, 2012. http://www.lausanne.org/docs/2004forum/LOP46_IG17.pdf.

Living Springs International. 2005. Glossary of mission terms. *Kairos: God, the church and the world*. Butuan City, Philippines: Living Springs International.

Lucas, E. C. 2008. Poetics, terminology of. In Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (eds), *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, poetry and writings*, 520–525 Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press.

Macdonald, Fergus. 2010. Making culture with Scripture songs. *The Evangelical Quarterly* 82(4): 299–307.

Martin, Paul. 2007. Poetry as theology: An orthodox perspective. *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 52(1–4):145–195.

Maxey, James. 2010. Bible translation as contextualization: The role of orality. *Missiology*, XXXVIII(2):173–183.

Meeks, Wayne A. 2004. Inventing the Christ: Multicultural process and poetry among the first Christians. *Studia Theologica* 58:77–96.

Moon, W. Jay. 2009. *African proverbs reveal Christianity in culture: A narrative portrayal of Builsa proverbs contextualizing Christianity in Ghana.* Eugene: Pickwick Publications.

Moreau, A. Scott. 2000. Syncretism. In A. Scott Moreau (ed), *Evangelical dictionary of world missions*, 225–229 Grand Rapids: Baker Books.

Murfin, Ross, and Supryia M. Ray. 1998. *The Bedford glossary of critical and literary terms.* Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.

Musasiwa, R. 2007. Contextualization. In John Corrie (ed), *Dictionary of mission theology: Evangelical foundations*, 66–71. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

Nicholls, Bruce J. 1979. *Contextualization: A theology of Gospel and culture.* Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

Schrag, Brian. 2007. Performing the Truth: A proposal to integrate the performing arts into the very bowels of the Bible translation movement. *Word and Deed* 6(2). Summer Institute of Linguistics International. CD-ROM.

Schrag, Brian. 2013. *Creating local arts together: A manual to help communities reach their kingdom goals.* Pasadena: William Carey Library.

Shepherd, J. Barrie. 2006. *Whatever happened to delight? Preaching the Gospel in poetry and parables.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

Travers, Michael E. 2005. Poetry. In Kevin J Vanhoozer (ed), *Dictionary for theological interpretation of the Bible*, 594–597. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

Wadsworth, Yoland. 1997. *Do it yourself social research.* Crows Nest, New South Wales: Allen and Unwin.

Walker, Jeanne Murray. 2005. Poetry as a bridge to Romania. *Christianity and Literature* 55(1): 111–116.

Watson, Wilfred, G. E. 1994. *Traditional techniques in Classical Hebrew verse.* Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Watson, Wilfred G. E. 1995. *Classical Hebrew poetry: A guide to its techniques.* Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Wedekind, Klaus. 1972. The praise singers. *Translation* 7(3):6–7.

Wendland, Ernst. 2009. When life confronts the cultural factor: Preparing an oratorical translation in a predominantly oral-aural sociocultural setting – with special reference to Qoheleth's concluding lyric lament. Paper presented at the Bible Translation 2009 Conference: Bible Translation in Context – The Cultural Factor, Dallas, October 16–20, 2009.

Whiteman, Darrell L. 1997. Contextualisation: The theory, the gap, the challenge. *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 21(1):2–7.