

Article

Strengthening Christian Identity through Scripture Songwriting in Indonesia

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Abstract: Bible translation and indigenous hymnody have always been important parts of the localization of the Christian faith. In this study, we describe how local songwriters creating songs with lyrics based on translated scriptures play a vital role in the process of localization in Christian communities in Indonesia. We focus primarily on thirty-nine scripture songwriting workshops that we and our colleagues conducted over the past six years in Indonesia, as well as ongoing interactions we had with communities in Ambon and Central Sulawesi. We begin with a literature review to establish the influences which shaped our songwriting workshops and our motivation for conducting them, and then we describe the workshops themselves and the process of musical localization that took place. Throughout the study, we highlight the role of local agency, the importance of fusion genres, and the creation of unique Christian identities through the localization of music.

Keywords: musical localization; fusion; hybridity; songwriting; bible translation; ethnodoxology; ethnoarts



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1. Introduction

Most of the fifteen members of the songwriting group Pontong crammed into our small, sweltering studio to record a recent composition. Anez Latupeirissa, a church musician trained in Western hymnody, had recently returned from a trip to the remote island of Haruku. He had heard a traditional *marinyo* calling the village together and was inspired to write a new song inviting Moluccans to worship. As the recording light turned from green to red, a retired Ambonese policeman began beating the *tifa*, a traditional Moluccan hand drum. This was shortly followed by a piercing *huele* yodel by John Beay, a pastor who had served in the remote mountains of Buru. Latupeirissa began singing in a rich Western classical vocal style followed by steady electric guitar chords and a simple chorus in harmony, chanted by the rest of the Pontong members. The goosebumps raised on my arms, and I noticed tears brimming in the eyes of the musicians around me. This perfect mix of language, musical style, and creativity had led to a truly hybrid and unique faith-affirming moment for everyone in the room. After the last notes of the last *huele* died away, the members of Pontong were silent for a long time, engulfed in a holy moment.¹

This small songwriting group in Ambon, Indonesia, that I (Author 1) worked with in the story above is one of the many groups that were born out of scripture songwriting workshops in Indonesia. During the past six years, we and our colleagues conducted thirty-nine such workshops, representing over one hundred languages, spread across most of the Indonesian archipelago. We additionally facilitated more extended and in-depth work with songwriters and arts groups in the Indonesian provinces of Maluku (Author 1) and Central Sulawesi (Author 2).

Our primary goal was to support Bible translation projects by further localizing scripture through the creation of songs in local musical styles. Over seven hundred languages are spoken in Indonesia, making it an ideal location to study the localization

of scripture songs in a wide variety of cultures (Eberhard et al. 2021). Over the course of our fieldwork, and building on the musical localization work of others, we developed the theory and practice which has enabled us to encourage local agency and spark musical localization in Christian communities.

If local agency is as important as we believe it is, can someone from outside the local community actually help in the process of musical localization? Whenever Ambonese musician John Beay facilitated songwriting workshops with us, he told the participants, “The missionaries came to our islands hundreds of years ago and told us that we couldn’t use our drums, conch shells, and traditional music to worship God. Then they recently came back and told us to pick it all up again.” The second set of missionaries did not seem to be any different than the first—still ignoring local agency as a sort of neo-colonialism.

How do we help in the process despite being from outside these communities? First, it is important to understand who these local communities are and how they fit into the broader surrounding culture. Translation initiatives define them linguistically, but communities are rarely monolingual. The reality is even more complex when we consider artistic traditions from a variety of local and global sources. We recognize that communities are a complex congeries of relationships and sub-groups, sometimes with contradictory aims and differing narratives. Schrag (2013) reminds us that communities “are composed of individuals who each make their own decisions, enter and leave the community, and respond to external and internal factors differently. Every community has internal variation and changes over time” (p. 2). So, although we could be considered “outsiders,” we recognize that every individual who influences these communities has a variety of identities that make up who they are and how they connect with others in the community.

In this article, we will describe how we worked alongside songwriting facilitators, such as John Beay, to help musicians create localized musical compositions that were based on the translated scriptures, using resources from the full spectrum of the musical heritage available to them. In our workshops we tried to spark the process of localization by asking the participants to evaluate their musical milieu, including the variety of genres that are considered indigenous, adapted, or imported. Their whole musical history was available for the creation of what they considered to be their localized music, and participants had the agency to choose what to use. As participants created, they naturally progressed through important conversations about what they considered to be local and authentic. They asked important questions of themselves and their communities, leading to artistic creations that naturally benefitted the community. However, before we describe our process and involvement further, we will consider other perspectives on localization and applied ethnomusicology.

2. Background

2.1. Encounters with Musical Localization

Over the past seventy years, many missiologists have described the adaptation and integration of Christian faith into local communities (Bulatao 1966; Hiebert 1985; Newbigin 1989; Kraft 1996; Shaw and Burrows 2018). Most of these authors have used terms such as contextualization, indigenization, inculturation, and hybridization to describe this process. Ingalls et al. (2018) define musical localization as “the process whereby Christian communities take a variety of musical practices—some considered ‘indigenous,’ some ‘foreign,’ some shared across spatial and cultural divides; some linked to past practice, some innovative—and make them locally meaningful and useful in the construction of Christian beliefs, theology, practice, and identity” (Ingalls et al. 2018, p. 3). They go on to say that “musical localization conceived in this way is capable of encompassing the ecumenical aspirations of the concepts of inculturation and contextualization and the emphasis on local agency signified by indigenization without succumbing to their pitfalls, especially those of ethnocentrism and essentialized notions of authenticity” (Ingalls et al. 2018, p. 13). We prefer to use the term localization as it is defined above because it aligns with what we experienced during our fieldwork in Indonesia.

We see many parallels and valuable theory presented in other studies of localization of Christian music. In her book *Music in Kenyan Christianity*, Jean Kidula (2013) describes how European and American hymns taught by missionaries evolved over time, taking on more traditional Logooli musical traits. In contrast, when describing newly composed songs, she states, “the earliest pieces derived musical elements from indigenous styles, while later songs incorporated missionary modes and popular ideas that had gradually been absorbed in the community” (Kidula 2013, p. 84). The process of the localization of Christian arts was clearly attested as introduced songs exhibited more traditional Logooli traits and newly composed songs exhibited more Western traits, creating a more unified identity. All over Indonesia, churches have adapted imported hymns—perhaps not to the extent of Logooli hymns in Kidula (2013), but there are nonetheless many similarities.

Elsen Portugal (2020) describes the effects of colonialism on a community and responds to tensions in the Xerente church around local and external musical influences and genres. The situation he describes closely mirrors our experiences with Indonesian communities as they wrestle with their colonial past and the ongoing influences and pressures they face from both inside and outside their locale. His research investigates contemporary Xerente musical genres, and whether and how the community—not outsiders—characterize them as foreign or local. He proposes an evaluative framework for how authenticity is determined within a community, and who has the cultural power to make those decisions.

Justice (2018) theorizes that many mainstream American churches have a renewed interest in “old-timey” music in Christian worship, because “they want to express a sense of corporate history; they want to participate in American society’s valuing of diversity; they want music that reflects their heritage” (p. 87). The banjo and folk music meant to hearken back to a more “authentic” American expression is not necessarily the kind of music that was played two hundred years ago in America. In fact, “most of this ‘old-time religion’ repertoire is relatively recent and comes from songwriters active around the turn of the twentieth century.” Many Indonesian churches have successfully integrated indigenous sounds into church music, while others have only recently decided to include more of what they consider “indigenous” sounds into Christian worship. For instance, the Ambonese have adopted sounds from all over the province of Maluku to recreate an “authentic” Moluccan sound, similar to Justice’s description of a revival of folk sounds in American churches.

Most of the literature about the localization of Christian music consists of in-depth descriptions of how localization has taken place. Our approach differs somewhat, because we did not only want to describe what was happening—we were involved in the process. We consider our approach to be a branch of applied ethnomusicology, defined by Jeff Todd Titon as “a music-centered intervention in a particular community, whose purpose is to benefit that community” (Pettan and Titon 2015, p. 4). Our goals, that aimed to benefit Christian communities with whom we worked with, will be described in the following section.

2.2. Translation and Localization as Incarnation

The eminent church historian, Andrew Walls, describes this localization process as a form of translation, and one of the unique characteristics of the Christian faith: “Incarnation is translation. When God in Christ became man, Divinity was translated into humanity, as though humanity were a receptor language” (Walls 2015, chp. 3). “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14 NIV).

When the Bible is translated from the Greek or Hebrew, an act of incarnation takes place, mirroring Christ “translating” himself from the divine. However, the arts hold the power to integrate this message more holistically into cultures. Beeman describes artistic communication as “the means—perhaps the principal means—through which people come to understand their world, reinforce their view of it and transform it on both small scale and large scale. It can be conservative, or transformative” (Beeman 2002, p. 95).

The arts provide a space for concepts and feelings that are more difficult to express through words alone. Not only do we understand a message more deeply when it is presented in an artistic way, but when we are part of the creation process, we are involved in transformation: “Imagination . . . has essentially to do with possibility. It is this sense of the possible, of transformation, that presents a fundamental link between imagination and religious faith” (Thiessen 2018, p. 83). Songwriting helps Christians engage with the Bible in a deeper way, allowing us to imagine a possible future where God’s truth intersects with our broken world, creating a better future. John de Gruchy observes, “Through discovering their creative abilities, people are enabled to rise above their circumstances and contribute not only to their own well-being but also to the healing of their communities and keeping hope alive . . . Hope is, in fact, part of the creative human capacity of imagination that brings past and future into the present” (de Gruchy 2018, p. 428).

3. Our Fieldwork and Methodology

Over the course of our fieldwork, we used a variety of sources to enrich our theory and process. The Creating Local Arts Together (CLAT) approach, described below, was our primary framework.

3.1. The Creating Local Arts Together Approach

Brian Schrag developed the CLAT approach based on his experience in Cameroon as a way of encouraging the creation of local scripture-based arts. Schrag’s (2013) book *Creating Local Arts Together: A Manual to Help Communities Reach their Kingdom Goals* includes the following seven steps:

1. Meet the community and its arts;
2. Discover what goals the community has for a better future. This usually involves some kind of appreciative inquiry;
3. Define what artistic genres and mediums might be best suited to communicate the message defined in step two;
4. Research the chosen event and genre, including all related artistic domains. Understand how the genre relates to the broader cultural context and how the Christian community relates to the chosen genre;
5. Spark creativity: examples may include a creator’s workshop, commissioning an artistic creation, or a creator’s club;
6. Improve new works;
7. Integrate new artistic works into community life and celebrate local artistic creations.

These seven steps are presented sequentially and generally occur in this order, but the process is not often linear; at times these have been referred to as seven “conversations” with a community. When we discussed the CLAT process in Indonesian, rather than calling these “steps” (*langkah*), we called them “principles” (*prinsip* or *pokok*). Although they are described in the CLAT manual as steps, Schrag writes, “Think of these steps as a reliable, solid framework you can refer to, but not one etched in stone . . . Our emphasis is not on rigidly defining and requiring separate steps, but helping the community make sure that they’ve included each component somewhere in the big picture of their lives” (Schrag 2013, p. xxix).

We loosely embraced the principles of this method, often in a different order. We prioritized CLAT Step 5 “Sparkling Creativity” over Steps 3 and 4 as we emphasized the participant’s agency in the research process and in choosing what needed to be researched. In our methodology, we saw Steps 2, 3, and 4 as naturally occurring during the creative process of workshop participants.

3.2. Activities to Increase Localization of Music

We learned together with local churches and partners how to facilitate scripture songwriting workshops in Indonesia that met the needs of the communities we served. Most of our work in Indonesia centered on either songwriting workshops or songwriting

groups, often formed through the workshops. The following section describes both in more detail.

3.2.1. The Scripture Songwriting Workshop

We started leading scripture songwriting workshops in 2015 after requests from local churches, Bible translators, and Bible translation organizations. Many translators are encouraged by scripture songwriting workshops as they see their work used creatively in the local community. Sometimes Bible translation teams will translate portions of the Bible specifically for songwriting, such as the Ambonese Malay translation team translating verses needed for certain liturgical songs requested by the local church ([“Liturgi | ABMA” 2019](#)).

It usually takes a team of translators anywhere from seven to fifteen years to complete a translation of the New Testament into a new language. Because of the length of time required, most translation teams publish books of the Bible as they are completed to encourage scripture use and to gather feedback from the community. Musical localization is helpful to them in several ways. Not only is music helpful for exposing the community to the translation project early on, but it also provides helpful feedback for translators. The Bible is written in a variety of styles (poetic, narrative, prophetic, apocalyptic, and more) and local artistic genres can provide valuable insights to translation teams as they consider the forms which most clearly communicate the meaning of a text ([Mullins 2021](#)).

The organizations with which we worked all conducted a meaning-based translation rather than a literal translation. They focused on clarity, accuracy, naturalness, and acceptability and go through a rigorous set of checks and revisions ([Wendland 2005](#)). If the Bible is translated well, it is much easier for songwriters to create scripture songs that are meaningful and natural. We once conducted a workshop in a language where no translation was completed, and it was much more difficult because the participants needed to undertake an ad hoc translation of the verses before they could start writing songs.

Most workshops lasted about five days and were attended by fifteen to forty participants. The needs of the participants were always different, so we began by getting to know them—especially their expectations for the workshop and their background in music and songwriting. After introductions, we discussed the theological basis for all arts used in Christian worship ([Man 2012](#); [Schrage 2013](#), pp. 186–87). We then asked the participants to discuss the genres of music they experienced in their context and what genres or fusions might be useful for their goals ([Schrage 2013](#), pp. 4–8).

Engaging with Local Needs

Because many of our church partners (such as GPM in Maluku, and GPID and GMIM on Sulawesi) were from the reformed Christian tradition, prescribed liturgical music was central to worship services.² This was also often expressed as a felt need by local congregants. As a result, scripture songwriting workshops with these churches often focused on creating liturgical songs based on relevant scripture passages, and sometimes the localization of other artistic and symbolic elements of the service, such as dance and visual arts.

In some cases, the community had other needs they wanted to address through song. Occasionally these were discussed in the planning process; other times, they emerged during a songwriting workshop as we facilitated participatory sessions on felt needs ([Kumar 2002](#)). Small groups of participants discussed what challenges the community was facing and what hopes and dreams they had for their community. They then discussed the underlying dynamics that contributed to these issues and finally looked for Bible portions that might address these forces. Workshop facilitators guided the groups through this process, but the participants themselves identified the needs, hopes, underlying forces, scripture resource, and appropriate genres for songwriting. At one workshop in the highlands of Papua, the group decided to write a song about famine. I (Author 1) had no experience with songs about this, but they took inspiration from the book of Ruth and

wrote a song about the temporary nature of famine. It was a unique and refreshing use of scripture to deal with a felt need—the creation of a song as well as a local theology about famine (Uldam Village Songwriters 2019).

Songwriting

When the participants were ready to begin creating, we encouraged them to work in groups of three to five people. This allowed group members to complement one another's skills and critique the songs in a natural way (Fitzgerald and Schrag 2014). Experienced creators worked alongside those with less experience, different generations and genders cooperated, and musicians, poets, translators, artists, and others found ways to collaborate. Indonesian culture places a high value on the group over the individual, and the participants seldom experienced any difficulty working together (Hofstede et al. 2010). The facilitators were also available to help with ideas or direction if needed. We typically had 2–3 experienced facilitators and 1–2 facilitators-in-training at the workshops. Our goal was for Indonesian facilitators to take the lead role and to always be training new ones. Over the course of a few days, we sometimes brought everyone together to discuss an issue many of them were struggling with, but the majority of the time was allocated to creation in groups (Hollingsworth and Negrao 2013).

Songwriting workshops are an engaging way to write many songs in a short amount of time and help burgeoning songwriters gain experience and confidence. They can also help songwriters to explore new ways of writing that they can build on later.

Quality Control

Because these were scripture-based songs, fidelity to the Bible was important, and the local church leadership wanted to ensure that the songs were faithful to the translation and theologically sound. We relied heavily on the work of Bible translators to produce an understandable and accurate product from which the participants could work. The organizations that partnered with us completed a variety of checks. A mother tongue speaker of the language read a portion of the translation to ensure that the product was natural and was not stilted or clumsy. This was followed by an accuracy check against a more literal translation in a language of wider communication, such as the RSV in English or the TB in Indonesian. The translation was then back-translated into the language of wider communication—in most cases Indonesian, so that an outside consultant could help with the remaining checks. The portion was then checked for understanding with at least two mother tongue speakers from the language community who did not previously know much about the material in question. The final check was with an outside consultant—either an Indonesian or expatriate from outside the language community. After each check, the product was revised until the final product was natural, accurate, understandable, and accepted (Wendland 2005).

The song checking process was complex in that we wanted to ensure fidelity to scripture in the text, but we also had to consider the musical and artistic aspects of the songs and the creative license of the musicians. The checking of song texts was not as rigorous as Bible translation checking, because we did not claim that these songs were scripture, but rather that they were *based* on scripture. Since the musicians drew on translated scripture that had already been rigorously checked, we trusted that the songs would not stray far from the source material. We asked the participants to practice constructive criticism in groups—the local church or local Bible translation organization designated at least one person to check the theological appropriateness in each group as the songs were being written, and local musical experts were either placed in each group or were available throughout the workshop to help the participants create songs that were of quality, as defined by local musical taste. We preferred the checking to be integrated into the process of songwriting in the groups themselves, because the artistic quality of a song suffers if it is repeatedly sent back to the songwriter for extensive textual or artistic modifications.

We borrowed ideas from design thinking and the Agile programming methodology, striving to avoid a “waterfall” workflow in songwriting, where the planning is front-loaded and the creation is difficult to modify along the way (Morrison et al. 2019; Boller and Fletcher 2020). These techniques allowed the groups to sprint toward a goal and iterate their work, and we practiced just-in-time checking.

We agree with Frank Burch Brown that “The overall evaluation of any art used in worship needs to be a joint effort between clergy, congregation, and trained artists and musicians, taking into account not only the aesthetic qualities of the art itself but also the larger requirements and contours of worship” (Brown 2000, chp. 8). As Brown suggests, and in keeping with our high value for local agency, the church community itself needed to have a say in the evaluation process, and the songs were often further modified after the workshop was over when they were played for the community.

Ownership

We were careful to archive our work and document ownership of the final product and its permissible uses. Each workshop included a special session about rights and ownership, and while the specific decisions around ownership of the songs did vary from workshop to workshop, the group typically decided something such as this:

1. All products from the workshop may be freely used for non-profit purposes of any kind, without needing the express permission of the creator(s);
2. For any commercial purposes, prior permission is needed from the creator(s);
3. In cases where the workshop is sponsored by a local church denomination and they have plans to create a songbook or publish a liturgy, the rights might be given to the church itself for all products.

A key component of this part of our work was protecting the rights of the local creators, and we always involved them in the discussion from the beginning. Rather than seeing informed consent as a way to look after ourselves and gain privileges, we sought to archive each workshop to protect the creator’s rights. We were transparent that we would not profit from their creativity, but rather that we were documenting this for the benefit and protection of them and their community.

Final Workshop Session: Future Steps

On the last day of the workshop, we asked the participants to discuss their plans. The workshop was meant to be a catalyst for the continuing creation and use of Bible-based songs; we did not approach these workshops as the end of the musical localization journey for a community. Participants often planned to keep meeting together to write songs, to promote the use of the new songs in their churches, and to continue to explore their traditional arts for inspiration.

3.2.2. Songwriting Groups

Many good songs were written at these workshops, but from our experience we saw more high-quality songs from a community of songwriters that grew out of the workshop experience. In the following section, we will describe a few of these songwriting groups.

Pontong

Pontong formed very naturally on the last day of our first scripture songwriting workshop in Ambon in 2015. The participants wanted to create a group to both continue writing new songs and to mine their musical heritage for inspiration. During the workshop, the participants—almost all of whom were from urban Ambon—expressed frustration and a feeling of loss at not knowing much about traditional Moluccan music. After the workshop, whenever any of the participants traveled to more remote islands where traditional Moluccan music was stronger, upon their return they would often integrate more traditional sounds into new compositions.

John Beay wrote several songs in a *kapata* style from Buru, utilizing a pentatonic scale and a free rhythm typical of music from the island of Buru.³ Beay also began writing more songs in Ambonese Malay, whereas most of his previous work had been in high Indonesian. When the songs were recorded, there was also an increased use of the Hawaiian steel guitar—an instrument that Indonesians associate almost exclusively with Ambon (Tamaela 2015, p. 141). Berthy Kaihatu started writing more songs using only the pentatonic scale rather than the diatonic scale he was used to using (Pontong 2015). After writing *Mae Lahatoe*, Latupeirissa went on to encourage the younger generation to play bamboo flutes and improved and promoted a traditional Moluccan stone xylophone.

When I (Author 1) lived in Ambon, Pontong would meet every month or two to share, edit, and record their songs. Pontong meetings usually lasted all day, and included eating, drinking, and laughing together. It was always a time of constructive criticism and the sparking of creativity. Often after hearing someone else's new song, another songwriter would be inspired to write their own song. They would also frequently visit one another and work on songs together outside of Pontong meetings. Usually, if someone wrote a new song, they would also send the recordings around by cell phone and obtain feedback and encouragement.

The members of Pontong began writing more songs that used traditional elements, but they also freely mixed them with Ambonese Malay, Pop Ambon, Indonesian, Western hymn styles, and other influences, creating a unique Moluccan.⁴ This new Pontong style had a binding effect on the members, giving them a shared identity. Van der Leeuw comments, "Style is . . . what binds artists together, what makes an organic whole out of a group of men who belong to the same age, the same nationality, and the same school of thought" (van der Leeuw 1963, p. 271). John Beay, the leader of Pontong, recently told me that "Music is a means for reconciliation because it has the power to change our hearts, thoughts, and worldview. Music also binds us together as a family."

Peronde Arts Group

Sanggar Seni Peronde (Peronde Arts Group) was formed in response to my (Author 2) plan for a large songwriting workshop with local church denominations in July 2016. Peronde members all speak the Tado language and live in the northernmost highlands of Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, by the shores of the remote and idyllic Lake Lindu.

Several months beforehand, in preparation for the workshop, a few Tado community musicians began to gather and discuss their artistic genres and song ideas. Eventually, a core group organized themselves and chose the name Peronde from the name of a nearby mountain.

During the songwriting workshop in July 2016, Peronde discussed their artistic genres, and a key outcome was their realization that, as mostly younger musicians—in their twenties and thirties—they were lacking in their knowledge of older, more traditional musical instruments and song styles. They were concerned that their communal identity and values were eroding, and the loss of their traditional arts was a sign of this decline. Although they wrote several excellent songs during the workshop, the most important outcome of the workshop was a decision to return home and learn more about their own culture. Todd Saurman (2013), in his research conducted in the highlands of Cambodia, refers to this phenomenon as autogenic research. We believe that this was one of the best outcomes of our songwriting workshops because of the sustainable effect of equipping communities to conduct research themselves and make their own informed decisions based on that research.

From 2016 to the present, Peronde has created three albums accompanied by music videos, featuring local song styles and dress, set in scenic locations from across their homeland. With each subsequent album, the use of traditional styles increased. This is evidence of their continuing autogenic research as they learned more about their history, music, and culture and applied this to their creativity. Additionally, they took more leadership in the recording and videography; for the first recordings, they asked for help

with audiovisual recording and editing of the songs. By the third album, the group recorded all media themselves and only asked for assistance with video editing.

4. Key Concepts

Besides Schrag's CLAT framework, several other sources contributed to our theory and methodology. We believe these concepts, and the related important conversation about outsider involvement in them, are critical to successful and sustainable musical localization.

4.1. Importance of Process over Product

Herbert Marcuse's suggestion that art has the power to change, not necessarily because of its content but rather through its creative nature, was one of the cornerstones of our method (de Gruchy 2018, p. 427). We found that an intentional focus on the creative process early in our workshops organically flowed into stronger localization efforts in communities. After the experience of working with arts groups and local communities over the course of several years, we have realized that the ongoing development of a community's arts is more important than the products created at a weeklong workshop or even by a songwriting group.

Although we personally sometimes appreciated the older, more traditional musical styles, we prioritized the agency of the local community in making intelligent, informed decisions about the future of their music. In areas where we conducted a second workshop, songs from the first workshop tended toward pop or other more globalized musical forms, but at the following workshop we were surprised by a resurgence of more distinct local styles and instruments. In both the Pontong and Peronde arts groups now, there is a trend towards more distinctive localized musical forms. Rather than focus on the products created at a specific moment in time, we valued working toward a living, autogenic process in the community that leads toward localization over time (Saurman 2013, p. 141).

Research in Our Workshops and How It Relates to Process

The *Creating Local Arts Together* method has a strong historical connection to ethnomusicology, and it focuses on in-depth research. Though we have a background in this methodology and in applied ethnomusicology generally, our application of these ideas in Indonesia differed. As facilitators of creation rather than creators ourselves, we focused primarily on helping participants explore their own music rather than researching and creating it ourselves. We encouraged local musicians to create before the conditions were perfect and the research was completed, because the creative problem-solving process is in itself valuable toward reaching these goals. Darby and Lang's comment about online education informs this process:

We often think we must teach content and skills to students, and then give them tasks that will put that knowledge or those skills to use. But research from the learning sciences tells us that when we ask people to complete tasks before they learn something new, they will learn it more effectively. (Darby and Lang 2019, p. 12).

CLAT encouraged our active participation in the research process, but we also drew insight from Darby and Lang to apply a passive approach in which the participants performed the research on their own arts. Step 4 of the CLAT method contains several exercises we found helpful as research catalysts for workshop participants. We discussed culture and the arts by identifying events such as birth, death, harvest, marriage, or other celebrations (Schrag 2013, p. 5). At times we discussed music more specifically and created genre or instrument lists (Schrag 2013, p. 96). Playing media examples from the community's arts that have been recorded is a fascinating exercise in exploring what participants identify with—what music they feel is “from here.” As we played both local recordings and those from neighboring groups, lively discussions arose as to what was “from here,” what was “our” music, and why. The musical genre and instrumentation might have been the same as a neighboring group, but sometimes small yet significant

musical identity markers distinguished “them” from “us.” At one workshop in Kalimantan, we played a sample song to prompt discussion and as soon as the participants heard the opening, before any words were sung and without seeing the images, they knew it was “from here” because of the sound of running water (SMP Mandiri Pahauman 2015). At another workshop in Papua, the primary differentiating characteristic between two neighboring communities was the tempo at which the songs were performed in that genre (Global Ethnodoxology Network 2021).

These simple research activities were intended to spark further conversation and contemplation, leading workshop participants to ponder more deeply their cultural and artistic identity. We wanted to help them define some of the characteristics that made their music unique so they could recognize their creations as local. Defining what was authentic or “from here” was ultimately up to the participants. Whereas this step helped the participants think about localization, our assumption—thus far borne out by our experiences—is that they would naturally move toward writing music that reflected the variety of influences in their community.

4.2. Autogenic Research

Foundational to local agency is research. From the start, we sought to ask good questions and respectfully learn about a community and its needs. Through the research process, we attempted to draw the community into a conversation that would lead toward their empowerment. Ultimately, we prioritized not what we learned about the community, but rather what the community learned about itself through the research process.

The distinction between *process* and *product* is critical in these situations. Some workshops initially felt like failures because the songs written did not seem—to us—to have much of a local flavor. However, the participants in these “failed” workshops often went on to learn more about their local arts through that process and went on to write great songs.

Todd Saurman describes autogenic research as the process whereby a community researches itself (Saurman 2013). We highly value this kind of research as the most local and sustainable solution. The intersection of local agency with autogenic research leads to a self-directed, self-motivated, and sustainable localization movement. In several of our songwriting workshops, the most valuable outcome was not the songs or any other product, but rather a renewed interest in the community in learning about themselves, their heritage, and their identity. The best effect was the realization that the community did know much about its arts and song styles anymore, and they left the workshop inspired to seek out experts to (re)learn these art forms. In that case, very little was produced at the workshop, but in the following months the participants learned about themselves and their community.

Our role was to provide tools, ideas, and concepts to help guide them in their research journey. In a few locations where we had the opportunity to return later for a second workshop, we observed a clear difference in style and quality. This was attributed to the informal research completed by the community to renew local musical styles, and their ability to learn how to play local instruments better before applying this knowledge to their songwriting.

4.3. Strengthening vs. Preserving

As we struggled to help local musicians create music that they felt was truly local, we discovered a useful concept in Philip Yampolsky’s article, “Can the Traditional Arts Survive, and Should They?” (Yampolsky 2001, p. 177). Yampolsky is an ethnomusicologist who worked extensively in Indonesia, and he makes the useful distinction between strengthening local arts and preserving them. Recognizing the value of the unique musical treasures in Indonesia, he notices that simply preserving local arts as they are can lead to a stale and often dying art form, whereas strengthening local arts invites new ways of engaging with traditional forms while inviting innovation. Schrag (2005) agrees, showing

how arts communities need a combination of rooted traditions and innovation to truly thrive. Strengthening local arts allows the music to breathe and change naturally while at the same time keeping what makes localized musical expressions feel like they belong to the community. When a community focuses on creating arts that include all the musical influences from their history, their arts are naturally strengthened.

Pyön Namsöp, a Korean ritual musician, is quoted by Mills as saying, “The old teachers have gone and the memories have faded. So to fill in the holes and create old appearances, we have to be creative. For our tradition, preservation goes with restoration, which goes with creation. We must always revitalize—matching the thoughts and ideas of current culture” (Mills 2018, p. 15). If Ambonese songwriters decided to focus on creating *kapata* in the most traditional way (Yampolsky’s preservation focus), it is likely that their music would end up similar to some of the Korean shamanic rituals described by Mills (2018), languishing in increased obscurity and insignificance. Schrag quotes Paul Ricoeur in describing tradition as, “the living transmission of an innovation always being capable of being reactivated by a return to the most creative moments of poetic activity[A] tradition is constituted by the interplay of innovation and sedimentation” (Schrag 2013, p. xix). Therefore, creativity must be grounded in traditions—all the musical traditions that influence a community—but also be open to innovation.

We saw examples of this strengthening happening through local arts groups, such as Peronde and Pontong. The Peronde Arts Group strengthened local arts by using their traditional music in new settings with some new musical instruments. They were not interested in preservation as it would have meant fewer opportunities to perform and less meaningful communication. The Pontong group strengthened their local music by using musical influences from throughout their history to create music that felt very Ambonese. They have generally stopped writing songs in the old Dutch hymn style, but they also do not write songs using traditional Moluccan *kapata*. As we saw earlier in this paper, they created songs that included traditional scales and rhythms, Western harmonies and vocal styles, electronic keyboard sounds, and a number of languages, from colloquial to formal and from old to new. When all these influences are encouraged to interact in the context of song creation, people sense a truly unique Moluccan identity.

Workshop participants often assumed that we were working in their communities to facilitate the preservation of the past. While we valued that and did seek to maintain the unique cultural heritages we encountered through recording and documentation, our workshops were forward-looking and prioritized the ongoing creation of culture. This is critical to a healthy identity, cultural sustainability, and artistic revitalization. Only through a flourishing future can local communities derive deep meaning from their past.

4.4. Fusion and Signposts of Authenticity

In our context, localized music was almost always expressed in some kind of fusion genre. Elsen Portugal (2020), in his recent dissertation on Xerente fusion genres in Brazil, considers the concept of authenticity as an integral part of fusion music. He describes the Xerente community as idiomatic of the ongoing hybridization and fusion process for all of Brazil over the last five centuries (Portugal 2020, p. 7). He encountered a complex, nuanced cultural situation with a history of colonialism and exploitation, not unlike the cultural and artistic milieu of Indonesia where we worked. For Portugal, authenticity is not “a slave of a society’s past but . . . a fluid or dynamic feature.” He suggests using the following four signposts to determine authenticity in any given fusion genre:

1. Meaning—the presence of significance for individuals and the community, including associated emotional content and the potential to help form identities through the practice of the genres;
2. Function—the presence of roles for a music genre integrated into the life of the community (or church) in indispensable ways (or so perceived by the community);

3. Competence—the ability of local musicians to envision a combination of features that fuse as a genre, as well as the competence to compose and reproduce music in this genre;
4. Agency (Control or Administration)—the local community’s decision-making practices concerning the local genre’s performance within church services; the presence of local administration of a genre (Portugal 2020, p. 180).

Portugal reminded us of the complexity we encountered in local communities. With increasing globalization and the lingering effects of colonization, we rarely entered a situation in which genres could be clearly defined as local or foreign. Instead, his signposts create an evaluative framework built around the community’s ideas of authenticity:

The authenticity of musical and artistic genres are not dependent on the timespan of a tradition or its documented origin, but on connections involving emotional, contextual, practical, and spiritual meanings perceived by present-day participants. [This dissertation] conceives of authenticity, in its relationship to ethnic identity, not as a slave of a society’s past but as fluid or dynamic, attaining local—and at times indispensable—functions within the community . . . Choices made by the people . . . give evidence of their genuine Xerente character. (Portugal 2020, p. 11)

We found these ideas refreshing and they aligned with our experiences in Indonesia. These practical signposts guided us toward community-defined genre concepts, not only in determining key aspects of the genres but also in assigning them value and functionality. In our workshops we intentionally created a challenging environment in which participants wrestled with their beliefs, culture, and arts. In that space, we observed Portugal’s four Signposts naturally discussed and defined by participants. Meaning was determined as songwriters decided what they wanted to communicate, chose genres, and created new music. Function solidified through conversations with local church leaders: where might the new songs fit into the church’s worship or liturgy? Competence was often determined through who was invited to the workshop—the local community or church decided, not us. If the right musicians were present, they were qualified to not only compose but also to define the genre. Agency enveloped the entire process.

Combining the insights from these authors led to our methodology. When workshop participants began the creative process, often without all the needed musical and cultural information, we observed a natural movement towards an exploration of what was local and authentic. The CLAT method gave us the research tools we needed, ideas for community conversations, and a framework for sparking creativity. Following Darby and Lang we let workshop participants—and by extension their communities—wrestle with localization before they had all the answers in order to drive them towards empowered learning that would last. Saurman reminds us of the importance of local agency. It is more sustainable and empowering when autogenic research occurs and communities learn about themselves. Yampolsky takes a forward-looking stance to encourage the strengthening of the local arts. Finally, Portugal tells us that ultimately communities should decide what is authentic for them.

5. Local Agency

The process of musical localization, autogenic research, strengthening local arts, and authentic fusion genres all rely heavily on strong local agency. We have seen that those from outside the community, such as ourselves, can help this process if we continue to prioritize local agency. We are not the only ethnodoxologists that prioritize this—one of the core values of the Global Ethnodoxology Network (GEN) is locally grounded methods:

“We encourage the development of a wide variety of arts in the life and worship of the church, acknowledging the importance of local decision-making in the choice of art forms. Given our emphasis on individual and community agency, we choose participatory methods like appreciative inquiry in ethnographic research

and sparking creativity. We esteem local categories and practices of artistry as primary, rooting our analyses in the practitioners' worldview. This affirms the communicative, motivational, identity-strengthening power of locally-created expressive arts" ("Core Values" 2021).

We agree with Rievan when he states, "The outsider comes at the invitation of a local church or agency. Local leaders set the terms and conditions, and the outsider reports to them" (Rievan 2021). We only conducted workshops at the community's invitation, and we carefully respected local agency in the planning and implementation of any activity. We found that the success of the workshops was largely dependent upon these planning stages, where local agency was more important than ever.

As we look back on workshops that were not optimal, we can point to a lack of local agency at this early stage as a determining factor. We discovered through experience that making mistakes is useful for learning if local agency is respected throughout the process. The following story is an example of such an experience.

For eight years I (Author 1) worked under the Protestant Church of Maluku (GPM), a large, fully autonomous Indonesian denomination, with little outside funding or influence. For my first three years with GPM, I met with church leaders across the province to discuss how they wanted to use local languages in church activities. It became abundantly clear that Moluccan Christians wanted to sing liturgical songs in their own languages. As a result, the GPM leadership asked me to lead two hymn translation workshops for several languages. I would have preferred to start with songwriting, but I conducted the hymn translation workshops anyway. Concepts of singability (Low 2003; Franzon 2008) were helpful in both workshops as the teams struggled through hymn translation, but shortly after these difficult experiences, the GPM leadership approached me to lead some songwriting workshops instead. Had I initially refused to conduct the song translation workshops, I would have lost the opportunity to respect local agency and learn together with GPM. Often, respecting local agency means that we assist communities even when we believe we have better ideas. Rievan (2021) captures this idea well when he suggests that rather than asking how we can hand over a project to the local community, it would be better if it had been theirs from the start.

In his dissertation on music revitalization in Cambodia, Todd Saurman identifies three "essential intergenerational components" for music revitalization (Saurman 2013, p. 2):

1. Community ownership of the process;
2. Transmission of music knowledge;
3. Active use of music as communication.

We observed a consistent correlation between increasing levels of local agency (community ownership) and the acceptability of local scripture songs (active use), leading toward a stronger, localized Christian identity. Fusion genres bridged the gap of intergenerational transmission as younger generations found new ways of creating authentic music for communication. This correlation informed everything we completed and led us to our "process" focus as discussed above and our emphasis on the fundamental importance of local agency. Figure 1 below illustrates how we see our place in increasing local agency, blending our own concepts with those of Saurman and Portugal:

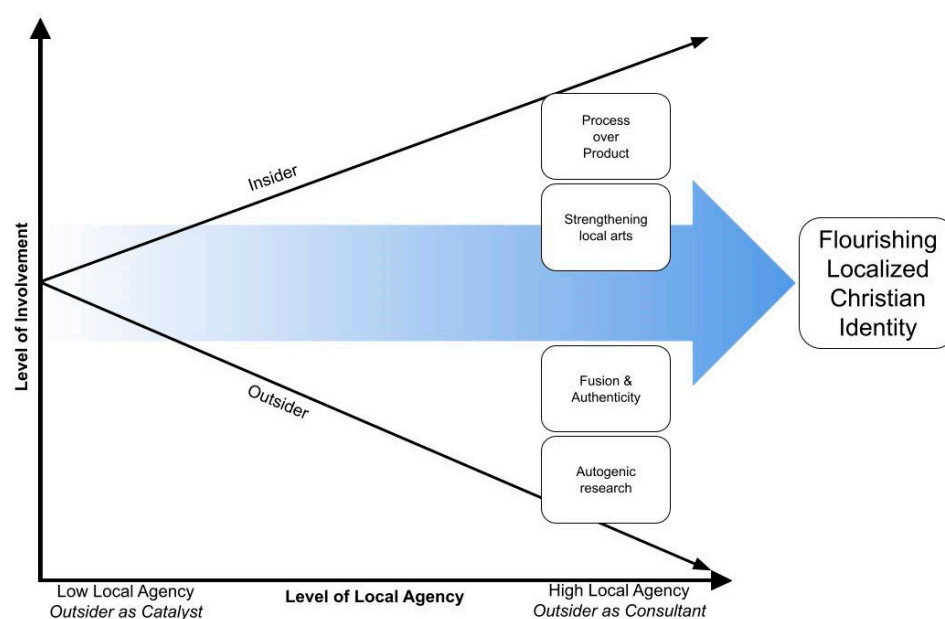


Figure 1. As local agency increases, the outsider role moves from catalyst to consultant.

Catalyst to Consultant

As we worked and lived with local communities for extended periods, our identities changed as well, as we adapted to the local environment. We also knew that we would never be fully local in the same way as those who have grown up in these communities, so we constantly reevaluated how we could best encourage more local agency. We often started out in a community as a catalyst to musical localization, but we were always trying to move to become more of a consultant—learning together with local facilitators. Because of this movement, we did not repeat the same activities, but we innovated and changed.

I (Author 1) no longer live in Maluku, but those who learned with me have continued to fuel the fire of musical localization all over Maluku. Anez Latupeirissa, the composer of the song in the introduction to this article, recently went to a remote GPM church in Maluku to help local strengthen musical localization by teaching congregants to play Moluccan bamboo flutes and electric keyboards. Pontong continues to write songs and promote their use in the GPM church, and they are planning to create a new GPM songbook with all original liturgical music.

I (Author 2) no longer live in Central Sulawesi, but I still coordinate with the Peronde Arts Group from time to time. They are very active and continue to write songs, create videos, and perform. They are thinking critically about the future of their culture and are making decisions to shape fusion genres. Once, they heard the Dayak *sape* performed and decided it would be an interesting addition to their ensemble. A member described to me the important connection he felt with the Dayak as another ethnic minority group in Indonesia, and wanted to add these new sounds out of a sense of solidarity (Sanggar Seni Peronde 2016). Peronde has also founded a children's arts group to pass on cultural knowledge and teach new generations about Tado clothing, dance, and song styles (Sanggar Seni Peronde 2017).

As new fusions are created and musical localization takes root in Christian communities, the Christian faith is translated and retranslated more deeply into the local culture, resulting in a dynamic and fully local Christian identity. Having the ability to innovate their arts allows local Christian communities to flex their identities as well within a rapidly changing world. The past thirty years in Indonesia have seen a renewed interest in traditional language and culture as the pendulum has swung from three decades of intense nationalism under Suharto (Davidson and Henley 2007; Amin 2021). At the same time, increased communication, easier transportation, and Indonesian transmigration programs have spread global and national culture to the far reaches of the archipelago.

In some ways, the situation is similar to the folk revivals of the 1960s and 70s in America. Writing about those events, Schnell states, “Whereas the nationalists were interested in creating a sense of nationhood, a sense of common identity beyond the bounds of the individual’s community, the purpose [of modern folk revivalists] is to break away from the broader national culture and to reconnect with the local” (Schnell 2003, p. 24). In the case of Indonesia, it is not as much to “break away” as it is a movement toward national recognition while celebrating the plurality and diversity of Indonesia. Hall comments, “Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a ‘production,’ which is never complete, always in process” (Hall 1989, p. 222).

6. Conclusions

A healthy local identity is always in motion, as are vibrant local arts. The localization of music is the natural counterpart to scripture translation as a way for Christian communities to strengthen their identities. They consciously use a wide variety of musical resources to do so. We encouraged local agency through discussions about local arts in our workshops, allowing the participants to lead the conversations and research. The creative process naturally leads communities towards musical localization, autogenic research, strengthening local arts, authenticity, and ultimately stronger identities.

Our work as catalysts and consultants in the process of musical localization helped communities to flex and adapt to the constant changes in our world. In our focus on local Christian songwriting alongside scripture translation, we recognized that a flourishing local Christian community has a strong identity as followers of Christ and a clear sense of local identity and agency in shaping their theology, culture, beliefs, and resulting way of being-in-the-world.

That is our goal. We love new songs and the opportunity to participate in that process. However, even as we enjoy local musical traditions from across the vast Indonesian archipelago, our greater desire is to see thriving, vibrant, flourishing local communities who know who they are, and what and in whom they believe.

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Notes

- ¹ Latupeirissa’s song is available on the Global Ethnodoxology Network’s YouTube channel (Latupeirissa 2020).
- ² GPM is *Gereja Protestan Maluku*, the Moluccan Protestant Church. GPID is *Gereja Protestan Indonesia Donggala*, the Indonesian Protestant Church of Donggala. GMIM is *Gereja Masehi Injili di Minahasa*, the Evangelical Church of Minahasa.
- ³ For an example of this, see the song “Minta Tuhan Kasi Unju Antua pung Hati Bae” in the third week liturgy (“Liturgi I ABMA” 2019).
- ⁴ “Mari Gandong Sudara Hatie” (Beay 2015), “Gandonge” (Kaihatu 2015), and “Memuji Tete Manis” (Maelissa 2015) are typical examples of this new fusion style.

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