

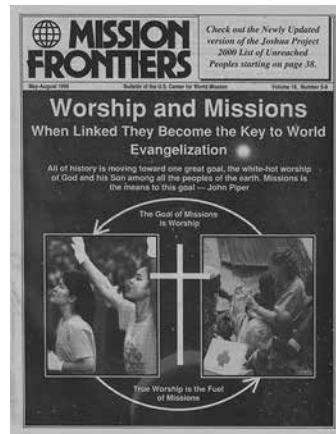
## Why Is Indigenous Worship Essential?

By RICK WOOD, Editor

**H**ave you ever wondered about the impact *Mission Frontiers* makes in missions? Our May–August 1996 issue of *Mission Frontiers* was the first time we featured the topic of Worship and Missions. Like every issue of *MF*, we trust God to take what we do and multiply it to change the course of world evangelization so all the unreached peoples may have access to the Gospel. In the case of this May–August 1996 issue, God has done far more than we could have asked or imagined. Unbeknownst to me for many years, people like Dr. Robin Harris and Jo-Ann Richards Goffe were reading this issue—and it greatly impacted their lives. They in turn have changed the course of mission history.

Dr. Robin Harris was the guest editor of our Sept/Oct 2014 issue, and she stated in her editorial at that time:

This issue of *Mission Frontiers* holds extraordinary meaning for me. Not only do I love featuring some of my favorite articles from the *Ethnodoxology Handbook and Manual*, but God launched my personal journey into ethnodoxology with the 1996 July/August edition of *MF*. In the late 90s I was beginning a decade of cross-cultural service with my husband and family in Siberia, and that *MF* issue, hand-carried to us on the field, rocked my world. Its seminal articles by pioneers in arts and mission served as a clarion call to service for me and others in this movement. The issue presented a vision for combining worship and local arts in ministry—an idea that changed our lives forever.



Jo-Ann Richards Goffe tells her story, starting on page 11, by saying, “I remember that 1996 July/August *Mission Frontiers* issue like it was yesterday. When I read Tom Avery and Jack Popje’s articles, light bulbs went off in my head. I immediately said to myself: “That’s what I want to do!” I had already accepted God’s invitation to join Him in global mission, but I had no idea specifically what my role was until I read those two articles.”

This new vision imparted to people like Robin and Jo-Ann led to the creation of what is now called the Global Ethnodoxology Network. With this current issue we celebrate their 20 years as a vital network of hundreds of practitioners who are working tirelessly to bring meaningful, heartfelt, indigenous worship to all peoples. This network has literally changed the course of world evangelization—and they are just getting started. At *MF*, we are overjoyed to have played a small part in the creation of this essential network. We look forward to seeing what God will do through GEN in the coming years.

Over the last 27 years since 1996, we have featured this topic two other times: Sept/Oct 2014 on “Ethnodoxology,” as mentioned above, and June 2001, “Worship that Moves the Soul.” Check them out and be inspired. Go to [www.missionfrontiers.org](http://www.missionfrontiers.org) and click on Past Issues to access these editions.

### Should Everyone Worship Like Us?

As followers of Jesus, it is tempting to think that everyone should worship like we do. Because after

all, we do it the right way, right? And so, shouldn't missions be about taking that right way of doing things to every people? This is not just a western phenomenon. Every mission worker from every culture is prone to teach new believers to believe and do things the way the mission worker thinks it should be done. Certainly, there are basic doctrines of biblical faith that must be maintained. But the problem is we often confuse our culture with biblical truth. As we go to the unreached peoples, we often bring our "cultural baggage" as we are trying to bring the Gospel.

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The classic example of this problem is the missionaries of past centuries who sincerely went out to bring the Gospel to the lost but taught the people to do church exactly as they did back home in the U.S. or Britain. Oh yes, they translated the hymns into the local language, but the music was still foreign to the people. But the people accepted it anyway, because that is what you had to do in order to be truly Godly. They built church buildings like the ones back home and the men were taught to wear suits and ties in the stifling heat. Women were taught to wear the style of long dresses that the women back home wore. No wonder some in these unreached people groups got the idea that the Gospel was a tool of colonialism and a "foreign import." To this day, you can go to places in Africa and around the world on Sunday morning and see the tragic results of these practices play out in real time.

As we seek to obey Jesus and bring the biblical essence of the Gospel to every people, we must understand that we need to de-culturate the Gospel before it can become truly indigenous (normal and natural) to a people. This is the essence of the missionary task and *ethnodoxology* is a critical part of the process of making the Gospel indigenous to a people.

When new Jesus followers in an unreached people are permitted to use their indigenous arts and music, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, to worship Jesus, not only are the believers able to worship in a passionate, heartfelt way, but unbelievers are much

more likely to be interested in learning more about Jesus and the Gospel. Evangelism is empowered and not hindered by foreign customs and music.

Regardless of the background culture of the mission worker, this process of de-culturalization must take place. When it does not, the Gospel is seen as foreign, and the Gospel does not spread virally as it should. Even worse, the people we are trying to reach can become hostile and resistant to the message of the Gospel. Our job is not to go into all the world and make every people worship like us. It is our job to enable every people to discover a normal and natural way for them to worship Jesus in a way that is meaningful to them.

This can be an uncomfortable process for us because an unreached people's indigenous forms of worship are not natural for us—but they are for them, and that is what is important. Whether in our own culture or in the culture of an unreached people, we must all trust the Holy Spirit to guide us into the styles of worship that are pleasing to Him. New believers will sometimes have to make tough choices as to which form of worship is acceptable or not, but it is their choice to make—not ours.

## Giving Jesus the Worship He Desires

In the familiar passages of Rev. 5:9 and 7:9, we see people from every tribe, language, people, and nation are worshiping Jesus. He is worthy of all our worship and praise, but what will that worship look like? Is there a standard hymnal for heaven? Will we all sing the same songs? Will all the distinctive cultures of the world's peoples, their arts and music, etc. dissolve into a homogenous heavenly "culture" and worship? We can't be certain, but it seems clear from Scripture the creation of the diverse languages and peoples of the world was God's idea—and thousands of different tribes, languages, peoples and nations bring God more glory than if there was just one. Each people offers God something unique and special in terms of their worship. I believe the ethnodoxologists represented in this issue are helping prepare a symphony of worship and praise for Jesus that all of us will be able to enjoy for all eternity. 