

STORY AND SONG: AN INNOVATIVE CHURCH PLANTING MODEL

Harmattan winds have hovered over desert Africa for weeks, picking up Saharan sands and filling the sky of the Paga Na village with a brown haze. In this sand-gray dusk, the hushed, unnatural silence of the windswept, sub-Saharan village is spellbinding and disconcerting. Only a subtle breeze invades the soundless, palm-lined footpaths and the swept earth patios. But the silence of this southern Togolese village is about to end; the storyteller is coming!

And into the quiet hamlet the clear, resonant voice of his recitation will emerge, startling and powerful, heralded by drums. And when the departing flamingo sun finally sets, shirtless men leave their game of *adi* (mancala), the baguette sellers disburse, the tailors close up their makeshift stands, cranky bicycles are abandoned hastily, and yawning children resting on outdoor cots under coconut trees are wrestled from sleep. As the pulse of the drums intensifies and the storyteller takes his place on the low, carved bench, the village is mobilized and excitement permeates the air. The elders arrive in regal togas made of the wild, leaping colors of African cloth. Antoine, the animated storyteller–church planter exchanges ritual, formalized greetings with his audience. The fetish priestess, clothed in white and waving her horsehair amulet, acknowledges Antoine with penetrating eyes that speak of a past immersed in *juju* and prayer to the fetish. Night falls, the burning log crackles. They are ready for the story.

The listeners are electrified as the biblical story of creation begins: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” The poetic, melodious pattern of the story flows from Antoine’s lips. When he reaches the repeating phrase “and God saw that it was good,” he sings a song in call-and-response style. The song was written by Antoine’s friend Timothée, a believer gifted in music with a vision to reach out to his people. This song is designed to reinforce the story; the words of the song are: “In the beginning God created heaven and earth. It was empty, and darkness was over the surface of the deep.” The call and response is choreographed by the composer in a traditional style that glorifies God the Creator. As the villagers quickly memorize the song response and join Antoine, their voices become a chorus of blissful harmony.

Then dancing intercepts the story. The headman dances as well, thus placing his approval on the story and the event. The drum language continues. Amidst the steaming equatorial heat sitting stiffly in the air, the pulsating rhythm of the drum reaches to the stars and sounds deep into the tropical night. The storytelling and singing continue in this way. As the fire dims, the story ends. There is not one villager who wishes to leave that place. The story in this setting has connected them to the Word and to their history. It has involved and inspired them as they interact with the story through song and dance.¹ 

¹ This article was condensed and reprinted with permission from Krabill, James R. et al, eds. 2013 *Worship and Mission for the Global Church: An Ethnodoxology Handbook*. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 229–231.

JIM AND CARLA BOWMAN

Jim & Carla Bowman are the founders of Scriptures in Use. SIU is dedicated to training grass roots church planters to effectively plant churches through communicating the Scriptures in their mother tongue among traditional oral cultures through Scripture storytelling, music and drama. SIU holds hundreds of training events each year in over 30 countries. Jim and his wife Carla served as missionaries among the Native people of Latin America, and subsequently extended their training courses worldwide.

jimbowman@siutraining.org. www.siutraining.org