



# Worship That Moves the Soul

R. King

A conversation with Roberta King  
—Russell G. Shubin

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## **Mission Frontiers: Why should the North American church be passionate about ethno-worship?**

**Roberta King:** The ultimate reason is that it is relevant to our culture today. It is relevant to the global world that we live in.

We don't live in a monocultural situation, even in the States. It's becoming even more multicultural, as we see people coming from many different nations. In addition, in California, for example, we have numerous, large ethnic populations. Ethno-worship recognizes those people. It allows for the differences that are found within each of those people groups—but it also allows Jesus Christ to remain the center focus.

Then you have the global perspective. As we live in a global world and we're interacting with one another, we need to be aware of one another in order to communicate in meaningful ways. As we go out doing mission we need to be aware of how to worship in ways that are meaningful. You have to move into the territory of the people where you are ministering. They will see the world in different ways.

If we expect them, or ask them, to come into the way we worship and they don't understand what we do, they are missing out on the message. What we want to do is get our message across. So, ethnodoxology, in terms of missions and being global, is recognizing people for where they're at and allowing them to be who they are before God.

God knew what He was doing when He made them—and ethno-worship allows them to be released to worship God in meaningful ways, allowing them to connect with God in much the same way we connect. We want the connection. It is not the form of worship that is to be idolized. It is the person of Jesus Christ that we want to worship. Too often we confuse these two.

**MF: Was there a particular defining moment when you recognized the peculiar power of worship in mission?**

**King:** I don't think there was one defining moment. It was a series of moments. About every six months, I found myself saying, "Lord, You mean you want *me* to do this?"

The defining moments are when you see people who are just "ho-hum" in worship, and then you provide an opportunity for them to worship in ways that are meaningful to them. Then the "ah-hah" happens and they come alive. It becomes electric! One early experience was on a Sunday morning in Nairobi, Kenya. We sang "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" at half tempo. Then, Sunday evening we started out with "What a Friend We Have in

## Ethno-What?

Some brief definitions for newcomers to issues of worship and cultural forms.

**Ethnodoxology:** The study of the worship of God in the world's cultures; the theological and practical study of how and why people of other cultures praise and glorify the true and living God.

**Ethnomusicology:** An academic discipline committed to active analysis, documentation and participant-observation of the ever-burgeoning musics of the world's cultures. It is interdisciplinary, drawing from the fields of anthropology, linguistics and musicology.<sup>1</sup>

**Ethno-worship:** A near synonym of ethnodoxology. Frequently used in reference to worship through song in diverse cultures.

1. Adapted from "Ethnomusicology," R. King in the *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, Scott Moreau, Ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000, p. 327.

Jesus" and we moved to more of a chorus of that time 20 years ago—"Heaven Came Down and Glory Filled My Soul." And then out came the Kenyan music with a *kayamba* (a Kenyan shaker-type instrument). Standing beside me was a Kenyan Presbyterian minister. All of a sudden he changed. He switched from being immobile to just being full of light and life and was worshipping wholeheartedly. That's when I started saying, "There's something going on here."

**MF: How have recent efforts to foster indigenous worship contributed to the expansion of the Kingdom?**

**King:** I was working with a small group of Senufo in Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast) called the Nyarafolo. They are an oral people with no translation of the Scriptures. They now have the book of Mark translated into their language. There was a group of 12 believers who wanted to worship in Nyarafolo styles. I've worked with them off and on over the last 9 or 10 years. Two years ago we did a song translation of Genesis 1-4 on cassette. The goal was to answer the question that was on their hearts. They were asking, "What do our mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters need to know about God in order to understand who He is?"

So we made two audio cassette tapes in the indigenous language and musical style. The tapes started going all



**A VISION OF SONG:** Dr. King at Fuller today (above). Survivors widowed in the horrors of 1994 in Rwanda find renewed joy in Christ at a workshop in Kigali, Rhwanda (opposite page).



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over the villages—in an animistic, folk Islamic setting. This took place where believers had witnessed to their families for years. One young man, a translator, found his mother dancing and singing to the songs (a clear sign of listening and responding to the message)—a response that he had long yearned for.

So, indigenous music opens up a willingness to listen. Also, in that group, we found that they were ripe for creating their own church—that they didn't have to be subsumed under another church. This means they can start to reach out to their own people. Indigenous worship gives them an identity.

I originally worked among the Cebaara Senufo. We thought Cebaara songs could work for Nyarafolo people as well. I came, we had some workshops, and they had their first worship songs in Nyarafolo. When the Nyarafolo heard their own songs, the non-believing people said “*Tchieh!* You mean that God is for *us*? We thought He belonged to the Cebaara.”

The critical factor is that we assume that if we use something from another close people, they will understand and accept it. Even though they are both Senufo, there are people groups—languages and dialects within that larger group—that, if you don't make a translation for them, then they think that God belongs to somebody else and is not for them. So, ethnic forms of worship music open them up to listen. There is an invisible barrier that we don't know about. I think music has a way of removing such barriers.

## **MF: Are you sensing this is true on a larger scale?**

**King:** Yes. I'm still very fresh from Africa, so I think African. Everywhere I have gone, I have seen people responding to the music. Historically, we have not known how to draw out indigenous worship from people. Once people know that it is possible, then they open up.

There is still a lot of research to be done. In my last

year in Africa I did six workshops all across Africa, using this method in New Song Fellowships and the response was phenomenal. The last workshop was in Bouaké, Côte d'Ivoire. We had six language groups at the workshop (usually I do one language group at a time). Three of the groups were from highly Muslim cultures—I mean 99 percent Muslim. There was one group from Guinea which had less than 50 believers in their unreached people group. Two women from that group who came to the workshop learned they could make worship songs. They went back with two full cassettes of Scripture set to song, confident that the music would speak to their people. Another Senufo group from Mali came down to the conference. When they heard the teaching they said, “We want you to come to our place as well.”

There's a longing for ethno-worship. We have not yet released people to use their own style of worship nor facilitated the opportunity.

## **MF: How has the approach of North Americans to worship (and music) hindered the approach or the perspective we have of worship?**

**King:** Historically, worship leads up to the sacred moment of the sermon. If you look at the Moody revivals of the 19th century, Moody recognized the power of music to prepare people for a message. That is very valid.

What we haven't recognized in the States is that the music itself can carry the message—we think it's something that is on the sidelines or the edges of society. But really it can be at the heart of society. I find in contemporary society, in this postmodern age, music is becoming a major vehicle for communicating a message. We have had a tendency to say there's only one form that is valid for worship. Really, there is only one God whom we worship—and many forms can help us to worship, depending on what our backgrounds are and what our musical language is.

As an ethnomusicologist I look at music as a language.

So, there's not one music that serves as a universal; there are many musics. They speak differently according to the context of where people are coming from. That's why we have so many worship forms.

**MF: In recent years there has been a surge in praise-oriented events in the States (especially among our youth). Do you see anything in these events that is transferable or applicable to the type of worship you are encouraging?**

**King:** At the recent Urbana convention, worship through song was at the heart of the meeting, it was a crucial factor for the meeting; it wasn't a side issue. Young people are responsive to music to such a degree that it's becoming one of their main channels of communication. God is gifting them to do worship, worship that cannot leave you alone. It transforms you. We know that worship is not music only, but in the music part of worship, God can speak in a very real and deep way. It inspires us to go out. So it becomes worship-evangelism, worship-discipleship. I think that's the gift of this generation.

I believe that worship is becoming one of the ways of doing mission.

**MF: You speak and write that God is "receptor-oriented." Would you describe this term?**

**King:** God is receptor-oriented in that He is very concerned about using the language that a receptor knows or a people knows. So, when God comes to speak to me, He would speak to me in American English. He wouldn't speak to me in Arabic. God moves into our cultural milieu and works with us where we are at. It is the message that's important. He uses the principle found in 1 Corinthians 9: "I have become all things to all men so that

by all possible means I might save some." Thus, He uses what is within that cultural context to help people understand who He is so that people might come into a personal relationship with Him. That transfers into the area of ethno-worship and ethnomusicology in that God also knows about the music of a people's culture. He knows very well how to transform that music so that people can understand who He is.

**MF: You write of commissioning the musical instruments. That practice might seem odd to evangelicals here in North America. Explain the significance of it in other cultures.**

**King:** That comes out of my book, *A Time to Sing*, which is written as a manual for the African church. In many of the cultures of the world, instruments are related to the work of spirits. Among the Senufo as they make their instruments there is dedication through a blood sacrifice to the spirits. The blood and the chicken feathers are actually found on the instrument. This is true with their 17-key balafon (which we call a xylophone). So there's allegiance to the spirits who give the balafons. That shows how important it is to the religion in the society as well.

You have to help people understand that God can still use their music while not condoning the spirits. Therefore, you commission a new instrument to bring new meaning to the instrument. In a sense, it would be analogous to baptizing the instrument for the service of the Lord Jesus.

Then, when you're making new instruments, you no longer allow blood sacrifices. Some have put little stickers on them, claiming Jesus Christ as the master of the instrument. And then you see how it is used. It starts being played with Christian songs and the whole area

## Two Communication Principles God Uses With Song

—ROBERTA KING

God has two priorities when it comes to using song.

**Principle 1:** When it comes to song, God wants to be understood. God wants most of all that we come into relationship with Him. Thus, His priority in any type of communication is that we understand Him. That means we must use songs that help us to understand what it is He is saying. Songs should use the language that speaks to us. They should also use the

musical sounds that we know and respond to. This leads us to the second communication principle.

**Principle 2:** When it comes to song, God is receptor-oriented. He knows who His listeners are. He also knows the musical language of different communities. God, in fact, is the one who enabled peoples from around the world to create their own different musical styles, so why would He want you to sing in someone else's musical

style? He is free to use the music of a people so that they may understand His life-saving message of salvation. He extends that same freedom to us.

### Beyond One Style

God is not limited to any one style of music. Neither is He limited to only one spoken language. He is the Creator of the world. He knows the music that speaks to us. He works within our musical styles so that we know He cares for us. There is no musical style that is

Christian or non-Christian. He is pleased with His creation, including various musics, and chooses to communicate with us in a loving receptor-oriented manner. He uses our musical languages to speak to us. He is the one and only caring God who is concerned about our needs. He communes with us through the music we know and love.

This selection and "Youth Camp" on page 79 excerpted from Roberta King, *A Time to Sing*, Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1999, pp. 54, 79.

hears it. We have examples of where it actually stopped pagan worship. So the instrument is becoming another voice of God through musical sound. The Senufo Christians want to be sure that people know that the master of the instrument is God. The commissioning makes it clear that it is no longer an instrument that is serving the things of this world and its satanic elements.

**MF: Earlier mission efforts have often been characterized by the use of Western hymns. In your book, you describe a scene where Western missionaries lead a group of Africans in organ-led American songs as the congregation murmurs along in somewhat apathetic participation. Is this a scene that is still common today?**

**King:** Oh, we find it worldwide—people using Western music, saying that it has to be the hymns. The other thing that is now common is to do contemporary worship—songs written in America and the U.K.—worldwide. That seems to be the new mantle for doing worship. Though it is a valid way, we need to be careful, allowing people to express their relationship to God through their own music. Contemporary worship is closer to a lot of non-Western cultures. So, there is some relevance there. Young people around the world respond to contemporary music. But there is this issue of universalism versus particularity. Many argue, essentially, that “music is the universal language and we have the music that is being used in North America. So, we’re going to bring it and bless people with it.” This does happen to a degree. But, we’ve still got to be culture-specific. Certain peoples are going to respond to the contemporary worship. But that doesn’t mean everybody responds to it. We still must seek to be culture-specific by recognizing all cultures.

**MF: It seems that some people wouldn’t find a movement dominated by Western musical styles attractive at all. Is there going to be a need for alternative movements?**

**King:** Ethno-worship can allow you to reach people who won’t listen because we’re doing worship in a Western style. You can have the Western style there. But, you have to recognize that not everybody is going to respond to the

Western style. So, my passion is to help people understand that God is for *them* within their own cultural context. We need to win a hearing. If there are Hindus who will not listen to Western music, why do we think we’re going to reach them with it?

How do we move into their musical territory and work within their culture so that they have a viable opportunity to hear? They are going to respond to what is familiar to them. Sometimes people like novelty, and they like newness. But, that doesn’t necessarily bring you to the deep levels of searching and reasoning where you make a decision for Jesus Christ.

In Uganda, there are young people, professionals who work in the city, running the coffee companies, running the banks. When they get together for worship they use both hymns and contemporary worship. But there comes a moment when they say, “now take me home.” And that means, “Take me back to my roots, so that I can worship God in a holistic way, from the depths of my being.” In fact, the vice chancellor at Daystar University is from Uganda, with the Lusoga language as his mother tongue. He’s an engineer, trained in England where he earned his Ph.D. As vice-chancellor or Daystar University, he is the equivalent of a university president. As a Christian statesman, he is a highly educated, highly influential world-class leader. When we sang Colossians 3 in his language and he heard the song in his own language and his own musical style, his response was “That goes to the very depths of my being and cleanses me from the inside out.”

**MF: Is there any resistance to change on the part of missionaries? If not, what are the new challenges?**

**King:** We’re not dealing with obstinance, we’re dealing with lack of training and lack of information. I think there are a lot of people going out like early missionaries—with the best of intentions, but do not recognize the implications of what they’re doing.

There’s a lack of understanding the culture and how to work relevantly within that culture. I just taught a course and had a number of very fine students. One fellow who has worked in India for years and had a vision of going around doing Christian rock, now says, “You know, it doesn’t reach everyone.” So, he’s now going through a



**A NEW SONG:** The workshop in Bouaké, Côte d’Ivoire turned into a time of celebration, a call to praise Jesus in the language and cadence close to the hearts of the peoples.

paradigm shift, realizing there's more to using music well. It's a lack of training and a lack of opportunity to think through the issues.

Music is not seen as the first element or the first tool that we use for communicating the Gospel. But, with the upcoming generations I think we're going to see that changing.

**MF: While not limiting worship to music, let us recognize that music is a key means for worshiping. How does the growth in appreciation for and practice of ethnodoxology serve as a powerful tool for the fulfillment of the Great Commission?**

**King:** What I see is a broader scope of how we do mission. Our approach will be more holistic. We won't base it predominately on literacy. In other words, we're opening up all of our signal systems and all our symbols to be able to communicate Christ. There's this big gap in doing mission where we need to recognize music as being more than a time filler. When you fill in this gap with a powerful means of communication, viewing it as a vehicle of communication, it changes your whole strategy. You can have people contemplating the Gospel message all night long as they sing and dance to it in an African village. But if you go and sit and listen to a sermon, maybe you could go for two hours, but you're not going to go all night long for 8 to 10 hours and consider the claims of Jesus Christ as you can through song. So, you have a much greater opportunity in terms of exposure to the Gospel through music. You could be playing it in the courtyard of the church and the person across the way who's a neighbor hears the music "jump" the wall. All of a sudden, he's hearing something and you see him coming and asking the pastor "What was that about?" It's expanding our means of doing mission, of reaching out to nonbelievers beyond the walls of our churches.

**MF: A missionary that's adversarial to the charismatic movement might have a hard time doing ministry in this fashion. Dancing, worship throughout the night ... Is the charismatic movement the primary one that's growing in areas of Africa you're familiar with?**

## When the Youth Camp Rang Out in Praise

The youth camp was going very well. Ngana Josef loved teaching the sermon series about the life of David to the 125 young people. Now they had come to the end of their time together. What more was there to say? He was just beginning to wind up his talk when, suddenly, from the back of the room, a lone voice began to sing. The young mother, with a baby wrapped on her back, was singing about David and all that God had done in his life. Excitement pulsed in the air as the young people spontaneously sang back the

**King:** Most of what I am telling you about is work among Baptists. That's one of our problems: we attach cultural traditions to different denominational groups. When you move cross-culturally, you can't do that. To dance and clap among the Senuso is to give your testimony for Christ—to do it in terms of a Christian shuffle. There's a distinction that you have to know within the culture. A lot of charismatic worship is closer to the Two-Thirds World and how they approach worship. So, there's a natural relationship there. When you move across cultures you have to be much more open to various alternative vehicles of worship.

**MF: In regard to African Independent Churches, some would argue they are non-Christian, some would argue they're aberrant, some would argue they're just excessive. But many would argue they're more indigenous. How do you view them, especially in this context of worship?**

**King:** Well, part of their reason for being is because worship wasn't relevant to them. So, they didn't wait for a missionary to find out that there might be ethno-worship. They went and developed means of worshipping that were closer to their traditions and their hearts.

Every group will have some sort of excess. They will be more obvious in their differences than missions from mainline churches, traditional mission churches or the different denominations. Some of them are clearly aberrant in terms of doctrine. But some churches that we've planted in mission could be off in other respects.

response to the lead singer. The song captured the essence of the teaching and formed a good summary. Within very little time, the whole group was on their feet—moving, clapping, rejoicing, and reviewing what they had learned about

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God through the life of David. It was a prime time for Christian music communication. God was at work in the hearts of the young people. Glory was given to Him! ☉

We all err at different points. But, I see them as being quite relevant. In a very real sense, the reluctance of missionaries to embrace indigenous forms of music has fueled the growth of movements that are not theologically sound (though they are sincere in their desire to worship the living God).

I did a workshop with an African Independent Church in Kenya. We used it as an opportunity to get them looking at the Scriptures more directly, to get them not just singing songs with, say, "Alleluia" in them, but to get them actually interacting with the Scriptures. So, you're doing discipleship, helping them to grow theologically through the song-composing process. ☉