

“When I heard these songs, tears came to my eyes.”

by Sue Hall and Paul Neeley

Sitting expectantly inside the building in Ghana, West Africa, were representatives from various churches in the Vagla area. As ethnomusicologists, we were here to coach them to develop indigenous hymnody — Christian music that would affirm their dual heritage as Vagla people and children of God. We were praying for songs that would be scriptural, acceptable and exciting both to unbelievers and Christians (the minority). Our job as “musical midwives” was to do preparations (musical research), encourage them to “push” (compose new songs), and help in the final delivery (recording the new songs on cassette so they can be copied and distributed). Since not everyone at the workshop was literate, we asked someone to read aloud a chosen passage from the Vagla New Testament.

Only the roar of a passing truck disturbed the moment of silence in the church. The men and women waited expectantly following the reading, while we wondered for a moment if this approach to making new Christian songs with nonreaders could really work. Then, hesitantly at first, but with growing confidence, one old woman began to sing out loud the song which was in her heart:

*“He who is carrying a heavy load
and is getting tired,*



*bring it to Jesus. He will save you.
You who labor hard, come to Jesus
because He has peace.”*

The 2000-year-old words tumbled out of her mouth, carried by a new melody composed in a traditional Vagla song type. Immediately the other women responded with the chorus. One of them picked up a rattle to provide the accompaniment. Suddenly the dream in our minds of seeing Vaglas free to worship the true God through their own musical heritage became reality.

As the singer moved deeper into worshipping her Lord she fell to her knees: *“Let’s give Him glory, because He is my Father.”* As she finished, another woman took up the theme in a different style of song. Then it was the men’s turn, and soon everyone was up on their feet dancing in a circle or improvising an accompaniment on any rattles or drums available. They were so eager to sing and dance as people who were uniquely both Christians and Vaglas.



Up until that day in 1997, the believers’ cultural identity as Vaglas had always been left in the shadow of being Christians. Their worship music had been borrowed from other ethnic groups and was not rooted in Vagla culture, which only emphasized the foreignness of their Christian expression. Now they had the musical resources to demonstrate how to sing as Christians and how to express it in a beautiful way that was natural for Vagla people, a way that would gain a hearing for the Gospel from non-Christians. As guests, we were so privileged to be “midwives” at the exciting birth of a culturally-appropriate ‘heart music’ to be used in worship and evangelism by this people group.

Pastor Phillip, a Vagla blind man skilled in music of all kinds, testified to the power of these new songs made in traditional styles. "You can't see my eyes because of these dark glasses, but when I started hearing these new songs, tears came to my eyes. For many years, we could have used our music to worship God and reach our people. Instead, the music has been used by the devil. But now we can sing Bible verses!"

Now, the Vagla musical types of Maara, Zungo, Dugu and others are being used to communicate the content of the Gospel in a form that all Vagla people instinctively recognize as their own. And it certainly sounds unique to our ears!



John 3:16 was accompanied by an ensemble of seven antelope horns played in intricate interlocking patterns. To the uninitiated, it sounds rather like a traffic jam; but to the Vagla people, it's one of the sweetest sounds on earth—especially when coupled with those life-changing words.

The 7,000 Vagla people of Ghana have had the New Testament (translated by a Wycliffe team) in their language for 20 years, yet the church has been slow to grow. "But now," said Pastor Phillip, "I really hear God's words in these songs." So will many other Vaglas through the two hour-long cassettes of Scripture songs and readings recorded over 3 days in an improvised studio at the church.

Late that evening, we met outside to eat pounded yam by the light of stars. After supper more songs started pouring out. The two old women who were lead singers composed song after song as the night went on, extemporizing



lyrics as their thoughts took them from the foundation of the initial Bible verse to other scriptural truths they knew. The excitement spilled over in dancing and eagerness to be the next to sing.

That night it felt like floodwaters breaking through a dam. It felt like accelerating from 0 to 80 in 5 seconds. It felt like the joy that fills our hearts when seeing someone we love who has been away a long time. It felt like a prelude to the joy of heaven. And all the angels joined the crowd in singing:

*"God loved the world so much
that He gave His Son Jesus,
so let us believe in Him, bow down before Him
and worship Him.
The Lord Jesus has called me
and I have come."*

And the stars added their shining voices to the praise of God's glory.



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