

ENCOURAGING THE DEVELOPMENT OF INDIGENOUS WORSHIP MUSIC: A CASE STUDY

by PR

PR and her husband have been involved in evangelism, discipleship and CP in Europe and North Africa for more than 20 years.

The Asoumi (a pseudonym) people are one of several major indigenous (i.e. non-Arab) Muslim people groups in North Africa numbering 2-3 million people. Their language is called Tasoumit (a pseudonym). There are about 75-100 believers among this people group.

While there are many forms of Asoumi music, much of it is in a call and response form with a pattern of repetitions. It uses just 3-4 notes often within an interval equivalent of a minor third.¹⁴ Percussion is essential in Asoumi music with a snare drum being the primary percussion instrument. A stringed instrument is also used frequently. Dancing is an integral part of some of these music forms.

In the south of the region, music and singing are a natural part of everyday life. In the north, although music is a part of celebrations and used in epic storytelling by musician/poets, its reputation has been tainted by its use by prostitute dancers. For this reason, believers (most of whom are from the north) were reluctant to write Christian music in traditional Asoumi styles. As children, they were told that music and singing were shameful.

We began this process of developing worship music by praying and proceeded by prayer. We then began to discuss with the believers as to whether Asoumi music can be redeemed for God's glory. This discussion took place off and on over a number of years as the believers wrestled with this idea.

¹⁴ Some precisions on the technical aspects of the music and forms from an ethnomusicologist familiar with Asoumi music: (1) Melody: Asoumi melodies have a stepwise contour that spans a small ambitus of pitches, often within an interval equivalent to a minor third. The term "scale" does not really describe the collection pitches that make up the melodies. Sometimes, there are hints of the Arabic *bayati* or *saba maqamat* (modes). (2) Call and response pattern: In this traditional group singing style, the call and response tend to be between a pair of lead poets/singers and the rest of the troupe. The lead poets lead the sung verses whereas the "Maestro" leads the movements and change in rhythm. The pair of lead poets sings a poetry verse, and then the chorus enters with a repeat of the verse, or a refrain. Many groups are male only. With the male-female groups I have seen, the females do not sing or play the snare drum. Their function, as a friend has said, is to "look pretty." Sometimes, women may sing a prelude but they do not sing again after the group singing has begun.

One advantage we had was that different types and uses of Asoumi music are very well known both among average people as well as among academics. Much research has been done along these lines. Local people use these music styles and instinctively know which type is appropriate for what use. Therefore, it was not necessary to interview numerous people concerning the music, analyze the music or determine appropriate uses for various styles, as is frequently the case in other contexts.

At one point in the past, one believer wrote seven worship songs in Tasoumit, but at the time there were very few believers and the songs never caught on. Another time, someone had commissioned and paid for some worship songs to be written. However, it turned bad when the group wrote many more songs than commissioned and then wanted to be paid for the additional songs, which turned out to be quite a sum of money.

One idea that hindered this project advancing is something that is called 'low cultural esteem.' This is when a people group does not think that their language or traditional music is worthy and in this case, worthy to be used in worship of God. This is often found with languages and cultures of indigenous groups where there is a dominant trade language or culture. These Asoumi believers had a double cultural jump when it came to worship music. They were used to worshipping in classical Arabic and Middle Eastern style, which is one-step removed from the national style and even another step removed from Asoumi style. This low cultural esteem combined with the association of music with prostitution created a reluctance even to try to create worship music in Asoumi language and style.

This is also why I resisted the suggestions that some made that we send some believers to the summer music workshops that are held in the country. They do great work and have been effective in getting nationals writing songs, but the songs are mostly in a Middle Eastern style. I kept saying that I did not want the Asoumi believers to learn to write Middle Eastern songs or even Arabic songs in our country's style. I wanted to find a way to encourage them to write traditional Asoumi songs—indigenous worship music that touches people's hearts and moves their bodies.

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This topic of Asoumi worship music would come up and be discussed from time to time, and often between my husband and one of the believers whom I will call Z. Once Z. decided that yes, Asoumi music could be redeemed for God's glory, he began jotting down the words to songs that would come to him at night when he could not sleep. He kept a notebook of these and would share them with

my husband from time to time. Some were in a traditional group singing and dancing style with a lot of repetition and some in a long epic storytelling style. Z. soon began to put melodies to the words, and he continued to share these with my husband. After he had about ten songs ready, he and my husband worked on typing them up so that those who were literate could follow. Together we then set up a time to get some believers together for Z. to teach them these songs. Z. brought his family and some other friends, and God providentially brought two believers who were in the city for another meeting and heard about our gathering. The older of these men was thrilled with this music and has become a true partner with Z. in producing (though not writing) and promoting this music. They make a great team singing these long epic story songs!

The little worship team, as I call them, met monthly for about 6 months to learn, practice and refine the songs. In each practice session, we recorded the songs on a decent quality hand-held cassette recorder, so we could have a record of what we did. (At the end of the practice times, there was often spontaneous singing and trying new things. We were sure to record this as well so that these creative moments would not be forgotten. Sometimes it takes a few hours of getting into the mood for spontaneous creativity to come out.) We worked as a team with each one giving input and making suggestions. We hosted the meetings at our home since we made a lot of noise (singing and drums) and we live in a building where that is not a problem with the neighbours.

Once the songs and the group were ready, the group went to a recording studio in a nearby town and recorded the songs. We provided transportation (and in one case paid for someone's transportation each practice time, since the person was poor and had to come from far away) and funded the recording, editing and production. The costs were \$600 for a day of studio recording plus 20 hours of mastering time and then an additional \$120 for 4 hours of additional mastering time after an editing process. Producing the CDs cost about \$0.42 each (including the CD, a soft CD pocket, and designing and printing a colour CD label). We also created a small booklet ('hymnal' if you like) to be used in singing the songs. Quite a lot of work went into transcribing the songs and putting them into readable format.

A couple of national church groups have begun using these songs in worship. We also had a worship gathering (at our home but led by nationals) and invited people from other towns to come and worship in Tasoumit. The idea was that they would catch the vision and take it back to their house churches. (The entire worship time was done in Tasoumit: prayer, singing, Scripture reading, message and testimonies.) It was beautiful to see people radiating joy, singing and dancing in their traditional styles, ululating (a yodel-like sound women make here on occasions of

joy) with happiness in worshipping Jesus. These instances are probably the first time in history that God is being worshiped with Christian music in the Asoumi language and culture. We initially thought we would do the worship gathering without using the song booklets. We did not want to impose a literate setting on the worship time. But only some of the folks present were illiterate, and the ones who were literate really wanted to use the booklets and then to have a copy later. The people who could not read still learned and sang the songs with no problem.

In addition to being used in some house churches, the music is being used evangelistically. The songs are on the evangelistic website geared to this people group. They are also being used in outreach to populations of Asoumi living in Europe.

So, where do we go from here? We hope to see more people writing/composing music. One man expressed the need for contemplative, prayerful songs. He plays a traditional guitar-like instrument, so we would like to spend some time with him developing this idea. It would also be good to have more songs—more evangelistic songs, more scripture songs, more teaching songs, more story songs as well as more worship songs.

Some Further Thoughts

- It is often beliefs that hinder the development of indigenous worship music more than the lack of technical expertise. Beliefs such as my culture and language are not worthy or belief that my music style is shameful, etc. I tell people to begin to discuss the issue with believers and keep discussing. It may take time. From the time we started praying about this until the CD was produced was about six years.
- Be wary of using indigenous music of other people as examples or you may end up having them write songs in those styles. You can use it as an encouragement: 'They did this, so can you' but not as 'listen to this and do the same.' For instance, people kept telling me to have the Asoumi imitate the indigenous group to the south of our region. Well, that group uses a completely different musical scale, a pentatonic scale. We did not want the Asoumi writing music in the style of their neighbours rather than in their own style!
- Often all that is needed is someone to come along side and be a sounding board giving encouragement and direction. Z. had an idea but lacked confidence, direction and a framework in which to move forward.
- I feel that it was helpful that I am a musician, but it was not essential. My husband speaks the language of Tasoumit fluently, which was very helpful. He perhaps could have done the facilitating just in colloquial Arabic, but he would

not have been as effective as a catalyst without also having the ability to speak in Tasoumit. Knowing Tasoumit was extremely helpful for transcribing the songs and putting them together in booklet form.

I have some materials from SIL on this subject that I can send to anyone who is interested. Just contact the SEEDBED editor (seedbed.editor@sent.com) and he will forward on your request.

A SUNNI WOMAN'S HEART PART 7—A SENSE OF VULNERABILITY AND A NEED FOR SECURITY

by Tahira

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Editor's Note: This is the final instalment in the seven-part series entitled 'A Sunni Woman's Heart' begun in SEEDBED 2008, no 1. Tahira is happy to discuss these issues and ideas with you. She can be contacted through the editor (seedbed.editor@sent.com).

'I seek refuge in Allah from the accursed Satan.' The attentive listener in my neighbourhood will hear this phrase, known as the *isti'adha*, repeated many times daily. One needs protection because Satan is devious and has many agents in the world. He tries to drag the faithful off the Straight Path to the everlasting fire. He uses one's enemies to curse one through envy, magic and violent action. I have heard my Muslim friends talk about their need for God's protection from all sort of things, including: Satan, evil angels, the eye of the Jinn, the malice of the Jews, the deceptions of the Christians, the Antichrist, false charges, punishment, God's anger, the heat of the Last Day, judgment and torture, hell, the evil eye, temptations, poverty, war, pride, evil influences on their children, getting into trouble, getting lost in a crowd, being hit by another person, enemies, malicious gossip, an abusive or unfaithful husband, being hurt by fellow Muslims, divisive people, illness and sudden death. It is a scary world.

Ever since the Fall, it is normal for human beings to be afraid. We are vulnerable. God has a habit of drawing to Himself those who recognize their vulnerability and turn to Him. The need for security that Muslim women feel could be an opening for the gospel, but Islam makes it very difficult for women to find their security in Christ.