Explore the beauty of languages and cultures through the lens of the Bible

WYCLIFFE SINGAPORE

A Look at Ethnoarts in Missions



What is Ethnoarts?

Ethnoarts is a method of empowering local language communities to use their own traditional and cultural art forms—such as music, drama, dance, visual arts and storytelling—to create and engage with Scripture in a culturally-meaningful way. When marginalised groups realise their cultural expressions matter to God, His love brings them joy, hope and renewed dignity.

Arts as God's Creation and Gift

Creativity is a gift from God. Throughout Scripture, art forms provide a vital way to converse with God, express emotions, and worship our Creator – from the artistry of Bezalel in constructing the tabernacle and the songs of Moses, to the parables of Jesus and the poetry of the Psalms.

Arts as Identity

Art forms are core to cultural identity. Because Christianity is often viewed as a foreign Western religion, turning to Christ can feel like abandoning one's heritage. Ethnoarts addresses this by affirming local artistic expressions, showing people that their unique identity is valued in God's kingdom.

Arts as a Bridge of Communication

The arts offer a personal way to communicate with God and others, proving the Gospel belongs to every culture. Because the arts communicate deep emotions intimately, they serve as a powerful tool to help both believers and non-believers experience Him.

Arts as Cultural Preservation

Ethnoarts revitalises language and culture. When people use their traditions to glorify God, they appreciate their communities more deeply. For example, producing audio Scripture and music in Garrwa and other indigenous languages is actively helping to revive those languages in Australia.[1]

Ethnoarts practitioners serve as facilitators to help communities express biblical truths and identity through their own unique creative heritage.

[1] Taken from: wycliffe.sc/post/preserving-culture-through-ethnoarts



Why Contextualise?

The goal of contextualisation is to help local churches worship God within their own cultures. Because every culture has both positive and negative elements, believers must learn to evaluate their customs in light of their faith.

The challenge is discerning between cultural practices—like clothing, music and traditions—and core Christian beliefs. Some local art forms may have negative spiritual associations and need to be avoided. To prevent confusion, local believers must decide how to use their own arts, a process that takes time and scriptural study.

Rather than blindly accepting or rejecting a culture, we focus on meaning-making through three simple steps:

1. **Understand the Culture:**
   Explore local arts, values, and traditions openly.
2. **Study the Bible:**
   Examine Scripture without cultural biases to see what God teaches.
3. **Compare and Choose:**
   Keep helpful practices, and replace others with Christ-centred alternatives.

Core Principles of Ethnoarts

To serve communities effectively and celebrate God-given cultural identity, we approach Ethnoarts through several defining principles:

Heart Language, Heart Arts

Just as God speaks to a person's heart through their native language, he also speaks through their native art forms.

Community-Led Process

Outside practitioners act as learners rather than experts. They ask open questions to spark the community's own creativity.

Broad Scope of Mediums

It goes beyond music (ethnomusicology) to include verbal arts (poetry, storytelling), performing arts (dance, drama), visual arts, textiles, and even food culture.

What it can look like...

"New believers can keep traditional clothes and food, but they avoid other religious rituals. They can use traditional music in worship with new lyrics. Missionaries can also help them create new traditions for weddings and funerals."

Taken f :
wycliffe.sg/post/contextualisation-culture-in-the-light-of-scripture





Practical Applications

Within global Bible translation movements, Ethnoarts is applied to achieve several practical outcomes:

Scripture Engagement

It prevents translated Bibles from sitting on a shelf as "museum pieces" by weaving scripture into local songs, plays, and festivals so the community naturally adopts it.

Trauma Healing

In areas affected by war, displacement, or injustice, familiar cultural art forms, movements, and symbols provide a safe space for communities to express grief and experience Biblical healing

Cultural Preservation

It validates and protects minority ethnic heritages that may have historically been marginalised, proving that local traditions can be used to honour God.

Voices of the Community

1. Contextualisation Through Songwriting Workshops

In these workshops, Ethnoarts specialists help participants write songs using familiar local styles instead of foreign ones. Chris, an Ethnoarts specialist who worked with the Baka people of Cameroon, shared how God used a new song based on Philippians 2:4-11 to reveal His character.

Local leaders listened and asked, "Do you think we could become servants like Jesus in our own community?" In their culture, humble service was not expected of leaders, but Jesus' example finally made sense through the music. Since then, local women have added new verses to the song, and it has become a staple in their churches.

Taken from: wycliffe.sg/post/trombones-songs-and-ethnoarts



2. Arts is Culture-based



B*, a Matigsalug believer, attended an Ethnoarts workshop and felt inspired to use his traditional kuglung, a boat lute to glorify God. His biggest challenge is convincing his father—who is also a believer—that his musical skill comes from the Holy Spirit rather than an indigenous spirit. B is now encouraging tree-planting projects so more lutes can be crafted for the community to worship God.

Listen to how a kuglung sounds:
facebook.com/share/r/1Hd7Gs3Xc3/

The impact on the community

Chris held a songwriting workshop for the Niku*, an oppressed minority group living in a major city. Fearing retribution, they refused to speak their language or teach it to their children. Community leaders told Chris the workshop was a bad idea, and most attendees left by lunch, leaving only one completed song.

Later, Chris visited a remote Niku village far from the city's influence. Here, the people were proud of their language and travelled for days to meet the team. Chris and his colleagues spent the night recording their music.

Months later, Chris received a surprising call. When the city Niku heard that outsiders had travelled to record village music, they realised people actually cared about their language. They started a Thursday night Bible study to write songs, and soon had four new pieces to record.

Through this simple act of valuing their music, the Niku community began exploring Scripture and rediscovering the worth of their language and culture.

*Name changed.

Imagine you are an Ethnoarts Specialist...



As an Ethnoarts specialist, you will encounter many different artistic styles and cultures in the course of your work. You are uniquely placed to empower communities to use their cultural art forms to develop Scripture-based content.

Showing interest in a community's art is a direct way to show God's love. When you enter the field with openness, humility, and sincerity, your posture reflects who God is to the people.

You and your fellow-Ethonoarts team have helped communities...

- Heal from trauma that accompanies war, displacement, trafficking, and other parts of life in a groaning world.
- Identify song genres that inform the translation of stories, Psalms, parables, and other types of Scripture, making the translations immediately clear and singable.
- Think about the way they use colour, shape, and perspective, so that literacy materials can be accepted as familiar.
- Explore the genres they use to tell stories, making oral Bible story telling more natural and memorable.

*Source: ethnoarts.sil.org/what-we-do

Building Local Ownership

Your role is to collaborate with the community to set their own Kingdom goals. Community ownership is essential so the people can continue creating art independently after you leave. Once goals are set, you use practical tools like research, workshops, and recordings to help them weave Scripture into their cultural traditions.



3 Core Values of Ethnoarts:

1. **Be with the community:**
Our first task in mission is to live with people in community and make meaningful relationships.

2. **Learn from the community:**
Researching, asking, and listening to understand a culture's unique artistic traditions, history, and values.

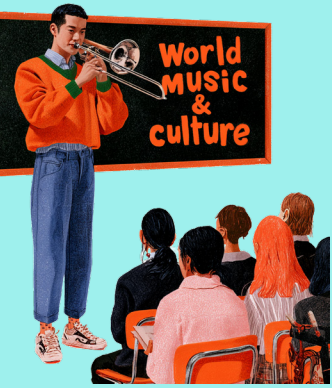
3. **Work together toward Kingdom and community goals:**
Collaborating alongside local artists to encourage the community to achieve its self-defined Kingdom goals for how to use their arts.

So... what are some role pathways of people who join Ethnoarts work?

Arts Specialist or Arts Consultant



- Went to college for music, communications or something in the arts
- Joined Wycliffe
- Served as an Arts Specialist for a few years in one language project (or a cluster) before moving on to serve more broadly
- After some years of field experience, becomes an Arts Consultant and serves an entire country or region.



Trombone Player Chris' Journey:

Chris started off playing the trombone professionally and teaching it at the university level. He ....

- took short-term overseas missions trips with his church, →
- started thinking about how he could use his skills and education in missions,
- researched different missions organisations' websites and came across Wycliffe Singapore's, →
- saw that there were needs for ethnomusicology and Ethnoarts (jumped out at him as he was teaching a class on World Music & Culture at that time), and
- got in touch with Wycliffe's Ethnoarts programme.

"Seeing that job was the first revelation that people use world music as a platform for cross-cultural missions."

"It's pretty easy to understand [why] translating [the Bible] into a person's language is important. Arts is another form of communication. When I saw that connection, it suddenly made sense. ... And that's how I made my career change." – Chris

Taken from: wycliffe.sg/post/trombones-songs-and-ethnoarts

When the rubber hits the road, what does life in the field actually look like?

Lionel, a Senior Arts Consultant



"Work is extremely varied, and each situation is unique. The most successful Arts personnel are those who can **think outside the box** and come up with new ideas and ways to apply the arts to Bible translation work in varied situations."



"This role is for **creative thinkers** who can **innovate** and **work independently**. Oftentimes, translation projects may not have **a clear vision** for how or why the arts are important, and we need to help them understand how critical the arts are to successful and sustainable Scripture engagement."



"Day-to-day is very hard to define. There are busy seasons of **preparing for and leading arts workshops**, other seasons spent **researching and learning** about local artistic traditions, some seasons spent **advocating** for the arts, and much more."





Want to serve with us?

Offer your talents to God and discover the joy of serving Him in new ways! We're looking for...

Arts Specialists & Consultants

- Training would typically take 1 – 1.5 years at the university level in Linguistics & Anthropology, Arts and/or Application specialities.
- Coursework is followed by a six-month to three-year, supervised field apprenticeship as an Arts Specialist.
- After some years of field experience, an Arts Specialist can become a Consultant and serve an entire country or region.



Examples of qualifications

- MA in World Arts or a Graduate Certificate in World Arts (DIU – Dallas International University); or
- MA in Linguistics (Payap University)

With a basic undergraduate degree, skills can also be picked up through on-the-job training.

Talk to us to explore different service opportunities in Wycliffe.

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