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Church Music in Nigeria: A Historical Trend

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Abstract This paper traced the evolution of church music in Nigeria from the mid nineteenth century to date. It provided evidence that pattern of change within the music terrain in and outside the church is consistent with the theory of continuity and change. The various impacts which church music have made on the society on the one hand and the secularization of church music on the other were discussed. In particular, the gradual erosion of well established church music traditions in form of introduction of popular musical genres as well as consequent commercialization of gospel music were also brought to the fore. The paper, in conclusion, suggested practical steps to be taken by both the leadership of the church as well as all stakeholders in church music ministry in lifting church music in Nigeria to the next level while stressing its dynamic nature as a living art.

Introduction

Throughout the ages, reformation in the church has often succeeded in advancing a deeper worship experience among the masses of professed Christians. Right from Lutheran movement in Germany, followed by Zwingli's breaking away from the church in Switzerland through to treaties of Erasmus' exploits in Holland and Calvin's reformatory works in France, it is clear that progressive men sought for and evolved new modes of Christian worship (Adegbite, 2001: 147). What is quite unmistakable is that Christianity as a living faith has adapted itself to changes within its society. The situation therefore with regard to contemporary Christian practices in

Nigeria cannot and has not been anyway different. Ekwueme (1973/74) provided two major evidences of this fact which are, first, the adoption of indigenous languages understood by the congregation instead of Latin language, which was comprehensible only to a few Roman Catholic monks and nuns, and secondly, employment of familiar tunes (either in form of parody of texts to existing traditional folk tunes), or freshly composed ones for liturgical service. All these point to the fact that Christianity as an integral part of the Nigerian societal gamut continually lends itself to the theory of continuity and change.

A search through the various musical periods in the history of the Western culture also shows no contrary picture. It had been one reactionary movement or the other right from the Medieval to the Renaissance, from Baroque to Classical through the Romantic period, up to the twentieth century period characterized by what is known as pastiche of styles as well as the growth of avant garde music. This is largely due to the fact that music, as noted by Blacking (1976) is a product of human activity and therefore, socially organized sound. Consequently, every new age (as it were), had always attempted to create, recreate, explore and organize sound to suit its philosophy, ethics and morality.

Our definition of church music covers any music used as part of liturgical service. These include hymns, psalms and canticles, special choir renditions in form of "Native" and Western anthems, localized and imported gospel music as well as "Native airs" and choruses. Also included in our definition of church music are vocal and instrumental music used by Christian faithfuls or bands at socio-religious activities outside church divine services. Although there is not a consensus among scholars as to what should delineate the scope and borders of church music, one could safely submit that a vital ingredient which constitutes church music is its theme. The text of a musical composition would largely assist in deciphering its theological background. On the other hand, the tuneful nature of an instrumental piece would also suggest its character and form.

Genesis of Church Music in Nigeria

Musicologists are unanimous in their submissions that the origin of church music in Nigeria can be traced back to the advent of Christian missionary activities of the second half of the nineteenth century. The music, which

initially was strictly reserved for worship purposes later grew, developed, and became fluxiative and highly variegated. Vidal (2012) specifically singles out pioneering efforts of the Wesleyan missionaries (Methodists) and the Church Missionaries Society (CMS) or the Anglican Church, which started in Badagry in 1841 and 1843 respectively. The Baptist mission was soon to follow in 1850. Their numerous proselytizing activities patterned after the three main ministries of Jesus Christ - preaching, teaching and healing - reached Abẹkuta and Lagos and later moved hinterland. Aggressive preaching by the Missionaries along with other incentives such as establishment of health centres to attend to the medical needs of the common people as well as establishment of mission schools where pupils were enrolled and taught how to read, write and do Arithmetic led to the conversion of members of the communities to Christianity. This necessitated the introduction of divine services which included baptism for new converts. All these religious and cultural influences according to Vidal (2012) swept through the Southern parts of Nigeria and bringing with them the importation of Christian religious music from Europe.

As the Western form of education became firmly entrenched through established missions schools, pupils especially boys were recruited as choir boys to sing the melodic portion (Soprano part), while the Alto, Tenor and Bass parts were sang by a few talented men who had received some rudimentary training in Western music and harmonium playing. According to Omojola (1995), their singing was accompanied strictly with either the Organ or Harmonium because the Christian missionaries would not condone the incorporation of Nigeria's traditional musical instruments into worship in the church. Indigenous instruments and indeed any form of native artwork were branded as 'the work of the devil', paganistic and consequently not suitable or compatible with the new and true Christian worship experience. In order to discourage converts from being tempted to return to idol worship, which could ship wreck their faith, innumerable masterpieces of works of arts including musical instruments especially traditional drums, shrines as well as other religious and social organization centres where these items were kept were burnt down. All forms of drumming and dancing in the church were completely banned.

The singing of Versicles and Responses, chanting of Psalms and Canticles by the choir in four parts (SATB) resulted into gradual replacement of Yoruba-modal scales system with the Western diatonic scale system among the

Christian converts practising European church music (Vidal, 2012). This later spread to other areas of musical practices of the general populace by way of acculturation, highly facilitated by technological explosions especially the growth of the technical media. Few years after Samuel Ajayi Crowther translated the Holy Bible from English to Yoruba language, another opportunity came for congregational participation in worship through singing of hymns. This took the form of importation of numerous hymn books and hymnals of different denominations into the country and the translation of the hymns into indigenous languages. The hymnals, published and used for Sunday services were aimed at aiding active congregational participation in worship. Examples of these published hymn books include *Iwe Orin Mimọ fun Ijọ Enia Ọlọrun ni Ilẹ Yoruba* published by CMS used in Anglican churches and *Iwe Orin ti Ijọ Onitẹbọmi ni Nigeria* used in Baptist churches.

In an attempt by the missionaries and their catechists to ensure adoption of alternate tunes for the hymns, efforts were made to utilize European poetic forms such as Iambic, Trochaic, Dactylic and Anapaestic metres in the translated texts. Thus, it became possible to adopt any tune to sing any hymn as long as they share the same poetic metre. An example is hymn No. 136 of the Yoruba Baptist Hymnbook (YHB), titled: "All hail the power of Jesus name". At least three different tunes (*Diadem, Miles' Lane* and *Coronation*) are interchangeably used to sing the six stanzaic hymn whenever it is rendered during worship service. This is because the hymn is Common Metre (CM) – a four-line verse comprising 8.6.8.6 syllabic formation as its poetic metre.

Ekwueme (1973/74), Euba (1977) and Vidal (2012) are some of the musicologists who have pointed out the catastrophic occurrences in the translated texts of these hymns. They noted the effect of miscommunication arising from superimposition of Western tunes on the indigenous hymn texts. Every hymn by nature is strophic in structure. This means that all the stanzas are sung to the same tune. However, Nigerian languages are tonal in nature, thereby necessitating that the meaning of a word would depend on its inflection. We wish to illustrate this point with an example: The Yoruba disyllabic morpheme / a - ra / is capable of yielding at least five distinct words/meanings, depending on the inflection (intonation) of the syllables.

/ a ra / (mid - mid tones), body

- /a rá / (mid - high tones), brethren
- /a rà / (mid - low tones), name of a town
in Osun state
- /à rà / (low - low tones), awesome or style
- /à rá / (low - high tones), thunder

The conveyed meaning of each of these five is predicated upon the inflection. So also must this inflection be maintained in the melodic contour of any song so as to avoid any miscommunication. This writer still vividly remembers with amusement how greatly confused he used to be as a young boy whenever the congregation sang the third line of the first stanza of YHB 471 after the collection of tithes and offering each Sunday. He was always perplexed and had often sympathised with 'that unfortunate widow whose fowl was stolen by an unknown person' based on the meaning of the intonation of the phrase. The text goes thus: '*iwọ to gba diẹ oṣo*'. The real and intended meaning of the phrase is 'Thou that did not disdain the widow's mite'. However, it sounds like, 'you who stole the widow's fowl'.

Emergence and Growth of New Forms

Native Airs Tradition

By the second decade of the 20th Century, the inadequacies highlighted in the foregoing section of this paper had become apparent and some African clergymen rose to address the challenges through composition of Native Airs for church use. A prominent figure in this movement was Reverend J.J. Ransome-Kuti, who collected 57 Yoruba sacred songs written in indigenous poetic and musical idioms. His compositions were either fresh (original) or parody of religious texts to existing Yoruba ritual melodies. The compositions were included as an appendix to the Yoruba Hymn Book of the Anglican Church that was published in 1923. Vidal (2012) observes that Rev. Kuti derived the melodies for his songs from various sources including ritual, ceremonial and folk. It is not unlikely that the advantage provided by Rev. Kuti's bi-musicality must have assisted him in this experiment since he grew up as a traditional drummer boy before acquiring knowledge on the Organ and later proceeded to become a church priest. Although the drums were still left out as accompaniment to the Native Airs in the church, no objection was raised to the adoption of ritual melodies in liturgical services. This was

probably because the primary concern of faithfuls was how to derive real worship experience within one's cultural environment through the use of appropriate music. An overview of the melodic features of Native Airs in the church shows the predominant use of Western tuning system, but based on pentatonic scale characteristics of the Africans.

The Airs were also in strophic form and mostly in the compound duple and quadruple time. Besides Kuti, other notable names associated with the Native Air tradition include A.T. Olude, whose compositions were published as a book titled *M'ayọ kun*, Lufadeju whose compositions were compiled in a volume titled *Imọle Ọkan* and B.G. Oriere whose work came as *Oniruuru Orin fun Igba ati Akoko*. Below is an example of a common Yoruba ritual song performed by members of twin cult: *Epo mbẹ, ẹwa mbẹ o* (There is palm oil, there is beans), which Rev. Kuti parodied to form a Native Air.

Words by Revd. J.J. Kuti
Music adapted from Yoruba folksong

E, t'Ọ-lo - run fa-wa o se o. E, t'Ọ-lo - run fa-wa o se o. E, t'Ọ-lo - run fa-wa o se o. E, t'Ọ-lo - run fa-wa o se o. E - su n se sa. o ye. E - su n se sa, ko ri pa kan sa, E, t'Ọ - lo - run fa-wa o se o.

It should be noted at this juncture that membership in the church at that time had dwindle considerably because of the 'uncompromising posture' of its leadership particularly the clergy to some traditional African practices by new converts. Consequently, Indigenous African Churches (IAC) especially the Aladura also known as Spiritual churches sprang up. This new movement was largely precipitated by awareness of cultural identity and spirit of cultural nationalism (Loko, 2011). More understanding was shown to the plight and dilemma of worshippers and a sort of 'marriage of convenience' resulted. This proved beneficial and accounted for the growth of hybrid practices not just in terms of music, but the entire lifestyle of the people. For instance, it was not considered abnormal in Aladura church for polygamists to hold special offices in the church and take part in special ordinances such

as the Holy Communion, which the orthodox denominations kicked against. As a matter of fact, certain clergymen in Aladura churches had more than one wife.

Nigerian Art Music

One major offshoot of the “Native Airs” is Nigerian contemplative music, also known as Art music. It constitutes primarily music composed by Africans who were Western-trained (Omojola, 1995). Their compositions were written in the Western European classical idiom. As a distinct music genre, it has received considerable attention and discourse from scholars; hence it would suffice to just mention it as one of the genres which developed partly from the church. Although there many Nigerian Art composers composed Christian/church music (such as TKE Phillips, Fẹla Sowande, Ayọ Bankole, Debọ Akinwumi, Bode Omojola, Christian Onyeji and this writer among others), many other works written in Western European classical idiom by the above mentioned composers cannot be properly placed within the scope of our definition of church music.

“Native” (Indigenous) Anthems

Another tradition of composing “Native” anthems was later established in the church by choirmasters and organists for special occasions. These included wedding, funeral, harvest thanksgiving and other socio-religious programmes among others. They were usually written in through-composed form fully accompanied with traditional musical instruments such as local drums. For example, Samuel (2000) reported that Duro Ladipo was a son of an Anglican priest who grew up in the vicarage and became a major exponent of 'native anthems' tradition. As a choirmaster and lay reader, Ladipo composed several anthems and cantatas for the church. An event however made the leadership of the church to ban the performance of one of his compositions because he introduced *bata-koto* (traditional drums) into his Easter cantata. He was suspended and subsequently prevented from officiating as a lay reader in the church; an action that led him to seek a more secular setting for his compositions. His quest to utilize African traditional forms into his compositions invariably was a push factor that made him opt out of the church and he turned to writing folk operas

based on Yoruba myths and legends. All these served as a pull factor which gradually led him into deeper Yoruba traditional activities until he became a Sango (Yoruba god of lightning and thunder) priest.

Special occasions for composing and performing new native anthems provided opportunities for synchronizing Nigerian traditional practices with Christian traditions. A good example of this was the use of palm fronds to decorate the church entrance during *Qdun ikore* (annual harvest thanksgiving programme). This was evidently a carry over from the normal practice of devotees who often use palm fronds to markedly demarcate the groove from the 'outer court' meant for the general populace during traditional festivals. If one may ask: Is this not one of African traditional religious practices that have filtered into the church?

Gospel Music

Out of the various musical forms practised as church music today, the genre labelled 'gospel music' can be singled out as most popular with the general public. It is one of the most widely accepted musical genre in contemporary Nigeria; and above all incontrovertibly the most controversial. Indeed, because of its popular status, it is highly variegated, and has also witnessed a lot of revolutionary changes especially in recent times. Adedeji (2004) notes that gospel music, as a household name in the country, is found on the radio, television, audio and video tapes, compact discs and phonograph records as well as in schools, among other places including the Internet. Based on the notion of gospel music practitioners that the purpose of their music is to 'win souls' for Christ, Adedeji provides a much encompassing definition of gospel music as that type of church music, which primarily aims at preaching the 'good news' of Jesus Christ, or simply as 'gospel message' sung and accompanied by musical instruments. Adegbite (2001) identifies two types of the gospel music genre, namely, the one popularized by the Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches and Christian organizations like the Scripture Union, and secondly, the one whose roots can be traced to the United States of America. Adedeji (2004) however appropriately makes a clear distinction of the latter from the one with Nigerian flavour, in that, it exhibited differential evidences in the area of language, cultural traits and some other peculiar stylistic features.

Alokan (1991) as well as Ayegboyin and Ishola (1997) are among Nigerian church historians who had discussed the impact of African independent churches on the origin and development of gospel music in Nigeria. The latter had discussed how African independent churches made use of music for evangelism both at liturgical and non-liturgical settings. They had noted that the introduction of traditional music, indigenous musical instruments and the once forbidden dancing and clapping of hands into the liturgy of the Nigerian church were some of the factors responsible for the growth of Nigerian gospel music especially at its formative stage. Ojo (1995) had earlier mentioned the use of danceable rhythm adapted from popular music, use of call and response style of performance, and the combination of both indigenous and Western musical elements as some of the characteristics features of gospel music in Nigeria. In addition, he also identified the use of short and cryptic texts as well as syncretic styles such as *gospel-waka*, *gospel-fuji* and others as part of its attributes.

As a proof that gospel music is quite popular, the results of two separate studies carried out on musical preference among some classes of individuals in Oyo metropolis are hereby presented. The first was undertaken by Samuel and Abiiba (2004). It was carried out among members of staff in three tertiary institutions in Oyo town. Findings revealed that preference for gospel music among all members of staff (teaching and non-teaching) was 61.3% compared to other musical genres such as Nigerian traditional music, Westernized popular forms and Nigerian Art music, which received 4.2%, 30.8% and 4.7% respectively. In a similar study conducted by Samuel and Mayaki (2004), this time among commercial transporters in Oyo, the preference for gospel music dropped only in favour of Islamized musical forms such as *fuji* and *apala*. This is probably due to the fact that most of the commercial transporters are muslims. Even then, the result from this latter study shows that the reasons many respondents (including muslims) often buy recorded tapes by Nigerian gospel musicians are mainly because of their belief that the central themes of the songs possess 'anointed power' to rekindle hope for their hopeless economic situations, motivate them to offer qualitative high praises to God and thereby attract great blessings on their lives and that of their families.

The findings of both studies suggested that the most important reason respondents purchase gospel music tapes was because many of the songs contain texts and prayers directed to God to 'decisively deal with all enemies

(real and imaginary) of their lives'. It is interesting to note that while adherent listeners of gospel music scramble to purchase available 'latest anointed music' released by renowned gospel musicians, the artistes and their producers smile to the bank, especially if they have not been so seriously shortchanged by recording companies or distributing agents responsible for the sales and marketing of their products.

Many church leaders have often criticised the rendition of popular gospel music most especially by young gospel artistes in the church. The major axe they have to grind with them has being that such music is a clear manifestation of 'worldliness' in the present day church. The pertinent poser however is whether this position is justifiable, especially considering the dynamic nature of the society and its impacts on the church over the ages. There is no doubt that music is a living art. It therefore, implies that the present trend, which seems to promote the development of syncretism in musical forms in and outside the church, has come to stay. This is evidenced by the constant adoption of melodies and *funkified* rhythmic beats associated with popular secular musical styles in worship by many contemporary Nigerian church musicians. Two musical examples are hereby cited to further buttress the point. The first is the rendition of the chorus titled: 'O se o, Jesu; A o ma yin O':

Anonymous

O se o Je - su, A o maa yin O, O se o Je - su, O - lo - run a - yo wa. O se o, Je - su,
 6 A o maa yin O, Ba - ba, gbo - pe ta mi wa fun O. O seun, O seun. B'e-mi ba l'e - gbe - run a - hon. O se Je - su, O
 11 Fun yin O - lu - gba - a - la, O - go O - lo - run O -
 14 se, O se, Je - su, o se;
 ba mi, O se, Je - su, O se, I - se - gun o - re e re. O se - un o.

The foregoing chorus is very popular and has been rendered in the church by choirs and entire congregations for more than two decades without any inhibitions from church leaders. Unknown to most people, the chorus is a

parody to a famous composition titled: *'Brown girl in the ring'* by a notable Western European pop musical band 'Boney M'. The popular portion in the song is 'Show me your motion, tra la la la la'.

The second example is a famous chorus of thanksgiving which is an adaptation of a *gelede* cult festival tune (author unknown): *Eni Oluwa se l'oore'*:

Tune: *Gelede* traditional festival song

E-ni O-lu-wa se lo o-re o, ko n'la - wo s'o-ke. O se mi o o o, O se mi o, Mo
 9
 du-pe lo-wo -o, Je - su, O - lu - gba - la, Ha - lle-lu-yah, mo wa du-pe, E - ni - yan lo ko
 17
 le a - la - ja me - fa, to ja - de fa - ye, Mo du-pe lo-wo -o Je - su, O - lu - gba - la

It is noteworthy that both the leadership and entire membership of many churches' congregation gladly sing and dance to both songs above, but would never tolerate and even condemn in its entirety the performance or rendition of parodied texts by Popular gospel artistes such as Topç Alabi to a pop song titled *'Premiere Gaou'* by a Congolese musical group known as Magic system. Another question which arises then is should the church leadership be seen as operating double standards in this regard?

From the foregoing, it becomes imperative to examine some of the challenges confronting contemporary church music in Nigeria, their possible implications for the future as well as suggestions as to the way forward.

The first is lack of systematic programme for training Church musicians. There is a sharp contrast in the mode of training of contemporary church musicians compared to what used to obtain in the past. Formerly, singers, instrumentalists (especially organists), and composers were all thoroughly bred through sustainable mentoring system. Indeed, many of the renowned composers of church and Art music of yesteryears such as Fela Sowande, Sam Akpabot and Ayç Bankçle, to mention just a few, started their training in the church. They were all mentored by renowned and reputable Organists/Choirmasters at one time or the other. However, this is rarely the case nowadays. It is quite common to find many half-baked gospel musicians

whose only credential is possession of potentially good, but 'unrefined' voice, to hurriedly venture into the music ministry with the claim that they are heeding 'God's call' upon their lives. The effect of this cannot be overemphasised; the greatest being, composition of theologically bankrupt songs. Many of the contemporary gospel music compositions are devoid of spiritually uplifting lyrics.

Secondly, hymnody and the art of hymn singing especially at church services have been relegated to the background by many church leaders to the extent that they are fast becoming endangered specie. The fact is that hymns have earned a place as invaluable legacy and hallmark of Christianity. The neglect is not limited to the Pentecostal assemblies, but has also extended to orthodox and evangelical denominations, such that if no action is taken to reverse the trend, it is likely that hymn books would soon become historical artifacts for the upcoming generation of worshippers.

In a similar vein, there has been heavy adoption of the lifestyle and practices of American gospel hip hop artistes by many Nigerian gospel artistes both on and off stage. These actions often cause distraction for members of the congregations as the Nigerian church musicians are willing to sacrifice sobriety and reverence for mere entertainment. Closely related to this is the fact that there is, at present, a thin line demarcating Nigerian gospel music and commercialization. This has been greatly influenced by inadvertent exposure of gospel music artistes to modern technical media especially for recording and production of their albums, with which they have popularized their music and brought it closer to the general public. Total reliance on sophisticated equipment such as digital keyboards and synthesizers has annihilated musical creativity in many ways. A good music recording and production requiring the inputs and expertise of competent and highly skilled members of a band is now left solely to the whim and caprices of just a multi-instrumentalist. This has often made many gospel music boring and lacking in variety.

Suggestions for a Better Tomorrow

Having examined how it was and how it is, we hereby put forward some suggestions on how to promote and secure a better tomorrow for church music in Nigeria. The church leadership should be alert to its responsibility of promoting and encouraging church music and ministry which are firmly

based on the scriptures. This could be achieved through organization of sustainable systematic programmes for training and retraining music ministers at various levels. A good example is the annual Nationwide Baptist Music Workshop (BMW) organized by the Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC), which has successfully raised numerous competent and practising musicians in the field. The workshop has remained a melting point for professional and non-professional musicians to interact; choristers from different churches converged to learn new pieces with which they expanded their music repertoires and most importantly is the formation of the Baptist Music Workshop Orchestra at its annual event. Secondly, the church leadership needs to regulate the actions of church musicians with a view to curtailing any excesses, but provide sound biblical basis for all actions and corrections.

In addressing the issue of development of new compositions, composers' and writers' workshops/meetings should be organized periodically during when gifted Christian poets and trained musicians could converge to exchange ideas and compose new music not just for special occasions, but also as prototype of true Christian music. It is suggested that the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in conjunction with the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) should facilitate such workshops and assisted by notable Christian organizations and philanthropists within the society.

Conclusion

This paper examined some changes which have taken place within the premise of Nigerian church music from its inception to date and attempted to prognosticate its future based on the current trend of events. It posits that Christianity as a living faith, has adapted itself to changes within its society, and therefore, stresses the need to maintain the much desired level of equilibrium within the church. The paper contended that the church through her leadership has great responsibility to check certain excesses within the rank and file of music radicals in the church. Nevertheless, it stresses the futility in attempting to stifle human spirit with its attendant quest to explore new ways and expression. In doing this, reference was made to the practices of the forefathers of the "Native airs" traditions who adapted tunes from traditional rituals for their compositions, as clearly manifested in contemporary gospel music nowadays. Finally, the paper

suggested that as long as the actions and practices of church music practitioners are not completely at variance with well known values, they should be encouraged to create and explore various possibilities with musical sounds since the essence of music in worship is to deepen and enrich human experience of God.

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