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THE 'EYE OF THE NEEDLE' DEBATE: MARKING THE BOUNDARIES OF PROFESSIONALISM IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN GOSPEL MUSIC

Samuel, Kayode M. *Ph.D*

Introduction

The Nigerian gospel music, as an established genre within Nigeria's musical landscape, has received much scholarly attention. Adedeji's (2004) doctoral thesis was a trail blazer on the subject matter as it x-rayed the various styles in practice since its inception. In the same treatise, the author made an attempt to provide a predictive model which would frame the genre within the coming years. As a follow up to his thesis, Adedeji (2005) presented a classic historicized summary of Nigerian gospel music as he discussed the features which characterized each decade (era) from its formative stage in the 1960s (or shortly prior to that period) up to the beginning of the 21st century. In a more holistic sense, gospel music in Nigeria, as a distinctive musical genre, has attracted much discourse from several music scholars including Adegbite (1994), Boyer (1994), Adedeji (2001a, 2004 and 2015), Samuel (2012) and Vidal (2012) to mention but a few. On a broader scope, there has equally been scholarly engagement of the growing popularity of gospel music in several other African countries such as Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Tanzania by Kidula (2000), Chitando (2002) and Sanga (2009) respectively. All the scholars are unanimous that the growth of the genre has largely been attributed to the increased broadcast of the music by television and radio stations, some of which are owned by church organizations, and its growing circulation through recordings such as CDs, DVDs, video and audio cassettes.

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Although some people assume that church music and gospel music are synonymous, the fact is that many forms of music categorized as gospel music today would not be considered as part of church music by both leaders and conservative members of some denominations. Many exponents of gospel music professed they are divinely inspired to compose and perform (sing or play instruments), view their acts of music making as a natural gift or talent from God and most importantly, they are of strong opinion that it is a ministry to which they were called. There is the general notion that the practice of gospel music is a bold attempt at fulfilling the great commission of Jesus to his disciples and later Christians as contained in Matthew 28: 19-20 to go into the whole world and preach the 'good news'. As a result, gospel music practitioners tenaciously hold the view that their music serves as a tool for evangelism through composed songs for the preaching of the gospel to their audience or the general public. To this end, a theory that the evolution of Nigerian gospel music is one of the offshoots of church music subsists. As evidenced in some scholars' have associated the genre to it. A few scholars are of the view that it has a strong link with religious singing, activities and performances among African Americans and other black people who performed the music as an extension of the urban popular culture. One of such scholars is Emielu (2014) who engaged the seemingly conflicting generic boundaries and the definitive framework upon which contemporary African gospel music and its practitioners' social identity is built. He, therefore, came to a conclusion that Nigerian gospel music is a continuum of the African-American popular culture. Adedeji (2005) however contended that the genre was self-originating, completely independent of its American counterpart and received its labeling or coinage from its pioneers, early practitioners, exponents and promoters. In terms of characteristics, it mainly features praise, thanksgiving and adoration of God, admonition, comfort, prayer and entertainment for Christian believers, social and moral values, general Christian

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doctrines and socio-political commentaries (Adedeji, 2001b & 2004; Emielu, 2014).

Whatever may be considered as the 'authentic' source of the genre, it doubtlessly came to the fore due to the patronage it enjoys outside the church and for the fact that it emerged as one of the most independent and well appreciated popular musical genres in the country (Samuel, 2012/2013). Most of the songs adopt catchy tunes, they invariably fulfill the entertainment aspect in terms of presentation thereby sustain the interest of faithful Christians who listen and dance to what they regard as 'acceptable' music in place of any other forms of music tagged 'mundane' or 'worldly' which are often associated with popular/secular musicians. Vidal (2012) noted that such music forms were performed at special occasions such as the Easter, Christmas, Harvest and end-of-year celebrations. They did not form part of any religious worship within the church setting; and secondly, their semi-religious contexts were meant to entertain and amuse members of Christian community. They provided the community with a kind of social outlets for musical expressions in contrast to the religious outlets available at divine services. In this respect, gospel music was largely able to satisfy the social/entertainment needs of devout Christians. This explains why gospel music in Nigeria occupies an ambivalent and paradoxical position within socio-cultural context especially in relation to economic and religious ideologies. Its dual nature in contemporary Nigeria as expressed in its Christian heritage on the one hand, and on the other, as a part and parcel of the urban popular culture. One vital element, however, which distinguishes gospel music in contemporary Nigerian society from its past is its artistes' gravitation towards professionalism. There is no gain saying that more contemporary gospel musicians see the need to act professionally.

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Objective of the paper

Any meaningful discussion on the subject of professionalism, especially as it relates to contemporary Nigerian gospel music, should be properly situated within the context of current academic debates. To this end, the paper draws attention to the nature of the 'old form of gospel music' on one hand, and its present state of affairs on the other. By so doing, points of convergence and departure (whether minimal or radical) can be brought to the fore. Specific positions of actors such as selected practitioners, clergymen and notable scholars are thereafter examined in the light of prescribed and not so clearly demarcated parameters contained in scriptural passages from the Bible for evaluation before drawing conclusions. To this end, the purpose of this paper is to track the trajectory of professionalism as against commercialization of today's Nigerian gospel music. As a framework to achieve the set objective, a combination of the theory of cultural dynamism and Maslow's human needs theory was adopted. An attempt was made to identify the building blocks of professionalism with which contemporary gospel music practitioners garnished their art and act. A brief re-examination of scholars' submissions about the foundation for new forms of gospel music in Nigeria being erected by the 1980s up and its aggressive transformation at the beginning of the 21st century brought about by Nigeria's harsh economic conditions was done. The paper, however, contends that the extension of the boundaries of professionalism on the part of modern gospel music artistes was largely informed by their assimilation of a new culture of commodification of the gospel symptomatic of the teachings and lifestyles of famous contemporary Nigerian Pentecostal preachers.

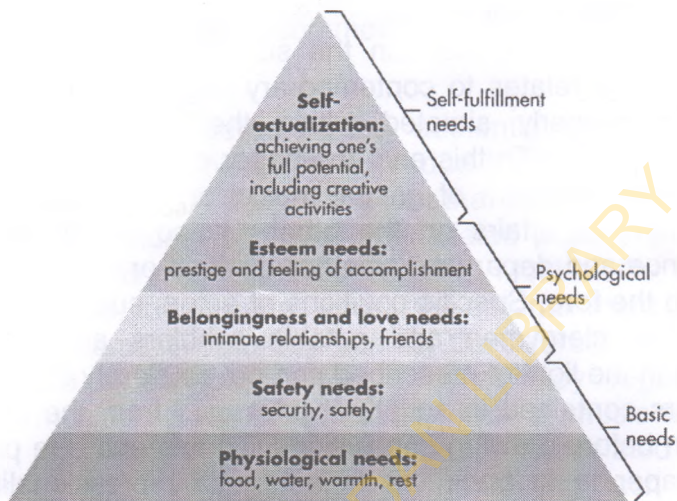


Fig. 1: The Maslow's theory of human needs

According to the foregoing framework, no individual can get to the apex of the pyramid, which is the level of self-actualisation, without starting from the needs at the base of the pyramid and moving up or going through other stages. Consequently, the basic needs are the most crucial and fundamental, without which others remain a mirage and unattainable. In other words, physiological needs, which essentially are required for survival, remain basic; thereafter the individual can experience a gradual upward movement through the psychological needs in form of self esteem and climaxing at self actualization which is at peak of the pyramid. The relevance of the theory and its application to the state of contemporary Nigerian gospel musicians in the context of the "eye of the needle debate" will be undertaken later in this paper.

A brief review of the nature of Nigerian gospel music

Some distinctive characteristic features of Nigerian gospel music at inception up to about 1980s include:

- a) Conviction of gospel music artistes' call to ministry

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- b) Adherence to biblical injunctions such as: 'freely you have received, freely give; and warning against love of money described as the root of all evil.
- c) Meaningful and clear messages, largely driven by sole propagation of 'undiluted' gospel
- d) Sobriety in rendition as evident in simple delivery aided by light instrumental accompaniments, and
- e) Christ-like personality as expressed in contentment, simplicity and modesty in dressing and comportment in general.

Even with the introduction of new versions such as ethnic-based styles, assorted, oratorios and the so called gospel-highlife variants, as well as the expansion of instrumentation, the stage was not ruptured. According to Adedeji (2005), the texts, styles and packaging remained largely the same and did not extend beyond scope of ministration as they were still devoid of ulterior motives. Although he identified three distinctive elements, namely, western education, modernity and technological advancement as being responsible for radicalizing the Nigerian gospel music, it can also be safely contended that there are more issues (push and pull factors) which tend to set the tone for the spectacular changes noticeable about the genre from the 1980s. One of such 'push' factors is the constant gravitation of the younger gospel music artistes towards professionalism.

Professionalism and music ministry

The term or subject 'professionalism' invariably raises the issue of mediocrity and quackery. As long as there are professionals (in the real sense of the word), then there is the possibility of having non-professionals and persons pretending to be what they are not. In addition, there is the likelihood that an individual may act in either a professional or non-professional manner. Another fact is that just because someone has a job (sometimes erroneously referred to as profession) which pays or provides

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some form of income is certainly not a conclusive proof that such an individual is a professional.

By way of simple definition, a professional is a well-trained and qualified individual who possesses special skills and displays high standards in the discharge of his/her job. It goes without saying, therefore, that there are certain criteria or attributes that distinguishes a professional from a quack. Also, there are certain expectations required of any person so described as a 'professional'. I shall now proceed to briefly highlight some of the attributes of a professional gospel music artiste particularly as they relate to contemporary Nigerian artistes.

Expertise: The first feature is expertise. Nigerian gospel musicians exude a high level of professionalism by the display of in-depth knowledge and special skills in their performances. This, by any standard, was a feat that turned them into authorities with a highly respected opinion in the workings of the entertainment industry as a whole.

Eagerness for development. It is commonly expressed: 'an amateur practises until he gets it right, but a professional practises until he never gets it wrong. Another feature of professional gospel musicians of today is eagerness for improvement. Omibiyi (1975) observed that more often than not, society's expectation of musicians is very high. Consequently, training may take several years an individual could attain mastery on his/her instrument (including the human voice), or accorded due recognition as a professional by members of the public. To this end, striving for excellence and willingness to continue to learn until mastery is gained are twin marks of professionalism which many contemporary gospel musicians display. It is such curiosity that prevents their fountain of knowledge from running dry.

High quality product. It cannot be gainsaid that quality is a *sine qua non* to earning the title of a 'professional'. To live up to

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whatever title s/he must have acquired, much hard work is required. Indeed, re-work is often the worst nightmare of any project. Nevertheless a professional must have a clear understanding that the prize exceeds the trouble. This perhaps explains why many of the professional contemporary Nigerian gospel musicians know how to translate instructions quickly, without getting frustrated, and make their client(s) happy.

Well organized: The Nigerian music industry in the contemporary time is highly competitive; a field which has little room for tardiness. One remarkable difference between a professional and everyone else is preparation. More often than not, the practitioners of contemporary NGM keep regular calendar and learn how to tell time. Many of them have learnt how to take their craft to the next level.

Business-oriented: Evidence abounds to assert that Nigerian gospel musicians in the contemporary times have been able to effectively convert their musical talents/gifts into business, and thereby raised the benchmark in terms of remuneration. The business acumen of a number of them is sometimes remarkable. Indeed, the yardstick for measuring professionalism appears skewed in favour of its business-oriented angle than other aspects. It is against this background that the next section attempted a situation analysis by evaluating the extent to which the claims of personnel on both sides of the divide (protagonists and antagonists) are justified.

The 'eye of the needle' debate

Many clergymen have raised much concern about what they regard as the negative turn of events and the 'worldly nature' of contemporary gospel music in Nigeria. It is also not uncommon for some of them to criticize the seeming bastardization of the musical genre by the younger set of gospel musicians. In similar vein, there have been recurrent hue and cry of the 'old school brigade' (veteran gospel musicians) against the 'gospellessness' in the message of the younger generation. The greatest criticism,

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however, seems to be the constant accusations of 'the love of money' levelled against the new crop of gospel music artistes by both sets of critics. According to them, a majority of the present day gospel musicians was motivated to enter the work of the ministry for pecuniary gain and therefore, have removed the ancient landmark of 'freely you have received, freely give'. Consequently, it will much easier for the camel to pass through the eye of the needle than for such gospel artistes to enter the kingdom of God, which in this case amounts to misrepresentation of what the gospel of Christ is.

The crux of the matter

In recent times, Nigeria's highly competitive music industry has been made worse by the country's dwindling economic fortunes and created a 'survival of the fittest' environment. It is logical, therefore, that gospel musicians would devise any means, first to make ends meet, and thereafter seek to improve their quality of life or attend to other needs. The following questions are, therefore, pertinent: First, at what point would a professional gospel music minister be said to have crossed the rubicon and failed the 'eye of the needle' test? In other words, what choices are available to a 'godly-minded minister' of the gospel who is hungry, nearly homeless, financially hard pressed and unable to pay her/his dues? What sort of minister of the gospel is a gospel musician who is unable to procure qualitative education for her/his children because s/he cannot afford to send them to good schools? What options are pragmatically available to that anointed gospel musician who fails to provide for his family in the context of 1 Timothy 5: 8? It is evident from the above-listed questions that the issue is not quite simple after all.

Secondly, the spectacle provided by the teachings and lifestyles of famous contemporary Nigerian Pentecostal preachers has not helped the matter. The new culture of commodification of the gospel has become so attractive to many of their members, including modern gospel music artistes, who also subscribed to

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the notion of “those who minister should be the first partakers at the altar” (2 Timothy 2:6). Such teachings and the flamboyant lifestyle of these preachers have further reinforced the quest for alternatives. The combinatory effect of these movements became the major ‘pull’ factor that drew gospel musicians towards the precipice of secular popular music styles with their attendant baggage. Here lies the crux of the matter. The rhetoric remains that modern gospel musicians are being professionals in their dealings. However, it is important to draw attention to a piece of advice, warning and admonitions contained in Adedeji’s (2015) recent publication on the subject matter entitled: *The making of a gospel musician - Theological and Pragmatic perspectives*.

Ineffective superintendent professional bodies

Registered professional bodies to which gospel musicians belong such as the Gospel Musicians Association of Nigeria (GOMAN) and NAMA are grossly handicapped. The responsibilities of these bodies include supervising and regulating the conducts of members as well as maintaining high standards. For instance the operations of GOMAN have been greatly hampered because it remains a sub-set of the Performing Musicians Association of Nigeria (PMAN), which by design, is a body of secular musicians. It is high time GOMAN reviewed her membership status and got affiliated to any of the well known envisioned Christian bodies such as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) or the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), in order to reclaim her true identity. In this way, the parent body could reposition her to serve as role model with renewed mandate to enforce professionalism in line with biblical injunctions.

Break up of gospel music groups

One indicator by which the older gospel musicians tend to measure lack of commitment to ‘real gospel’ and therefore, justify their accusations against their younger counterparts is the propensity for their groups to break up. Indeed, the rate at which many ‘gifted’ gospel singers come together to form gospel music groups, but disintegrate, especially after the release of their

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debut album, is alarming. Notable examples of such groups are the Kinetically Ushering Salvation into Hearts and Homes (*KUSH*) and *Infinity*, just to mention but a few. It was often difficult for members of these groups to maintain synergy and similar value systems after attaining fame or popularity through the collaborative efforts. The failure of members to carefully manage their differences made them to fall apart. When careful interrogation into the cause of this anomaly is conducted, it is revealed that at the heart of most of the conflicts before their eventual break up are sharp disagreements on how to arrive at equitable sharing formula and discontentment on how proceeds from the sales of their products (albums) was being distributed among members. Sometimes, the issue became intractable that the lead singer or major composer in a group would prefer to explore the music industry alone by going solo in order to become the sole beneficiary of sales of her/his newly released hit single album. At other times, when a group does not break up, its members come to an understanding to allow any interested member of the group to collaborate with another artiste on a different project or feature on such an artiste's album when invited to perform elsewhere without recourse to the group. In such instances, a much flexible internal mechanism is put in place to ensure that each member pursues her/his individual agenda, as long as the overall interest of the group is not in jeopardy. An example of the foregoing arrangement currently exists among members of a group known as the *Midnight Crew*, where two members had either released albums individually or featured on other Christian artistes' albums as special invited guest singer.

Although it is incontestable that contemporary gospel music groups have the preponderance to disintegrate more than their older counterparts, it is equally uncharitable to conclude that the break up is always motivated by 'love of money'. We may play the devil's advocate by flipping the argument in order to seek to know if the criticism against them is justified, especially judging

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by the past experiences of the much older generation. There is no gain saying that gospel musicians in contemporary times seemed to have learnt some lessons from the negative experiences of the old brigades on how not to become victims of exploitation by different sets of people including their clients, producers/promoters and counterpart word ministers. From key informant interviews conducted with two gospel musicians - Evangelists Toun Soetan and Tope Alabi - representing the old and new generation respectively, the 'push factor' relating to self-preservation becomes evident as discussed below. Many gospel musicians who belong to the older generation have in the past received numerous invitations to minister (perform) at various outings and programmes such as outreaches, revivals, crusades, annual conventions and so forth organized by different churches to propagate the gospel. What is unmistakable however is that many of such programmes were partly designed to aid membership drive. As a result, organizers of the programmes often capitalize on popularity of invited guest ministers including household names in the gospel music ministry in their vigorous and wide publicity aimed at drawing a large patronage from members of the audience/congregation. Many of these older gospel artistes ended up incurring huge financial debts since they had to engage the services of professional instrumentalists, rented modern equipment including musical instruments as well as made arrangements for fairly comfortable transportation (especially when travelling is involved) in order to ensure excellent ministerial production in an holistic sense. The most regrettable aspect is that after honouring such invitations and discharging their duties as expected, the amount (token) offered by host/organizing churches as honoraria to such invited gospel musicians on most occasions were mere peanuts and grossly inadequate to cover their running costs. More painful is the fact that, in line with normal practice and biblical injunctions that true ministers of the gospel, including music, are not expected to make demands or raise any complaint about the inadequacy of their honoraria. This often became big issues especially when

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their basic needs could not be met at such times. An online publication once reported an interview conducted by the *Daily Sun* with a famous contemporary gospel artiste - Lara George, a member of the defunct KUSH.

In its August 19, 2011 edition, the publication reported that Lara George is one female gospel artiste who is dissatisfied. The reason being that churches in Nigeria do not see the need to pay gospel artistes what they are worth because they feel there is no need for such payment. She was reported to have further noted:

What most people do not know is that it costs the gospel artiste the same to produce their work as do the secular artistes who get paid a very healthy lump of money for their efforts at the end of the day. It's sad that although the church in Nigeria is able to afford it, most of them do not see the need to pay gospel artistes appropriately. The attitude is almost as though we are being done a favour. I hope that someday in the very near future, we will begin to invest in human capital rather than on less important things (Daily Sun, 2011, n.p.).

When further asked if music pays some of her bills in spite of her passion for the art, her reply was not encouraging. She stated:

At the moment, no, it does not. The way gospel artistes are remunerated is so poor that the average one can even barely return to studio for another album after the first one. The truth is that until millions become matter of course at least for A-list gospel artistes, it simply will not be sustainable to continue to do gospel music unless we are expected to steal or beg which would be terribly sad. The labourer deserves his wages. You simple cannot put a price on intellectual property and because the artiste is a limited resource and is unique, we must be paid

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premium for what we do especially when the means are there (Daily Sun, 2011, n.p.).

In the light of Maslow's theory of human needs, not only did many of them devise means to make ends meet, they also perfected tactics to ensure they break even. After all, 'a hireling is worthy of his wages.' Their strategy paid off as some radicalized older ministers and many of the younger music artistes saw the need to set up a more systematic and enduring framework with clearly defined organizational structure for their ministries, including appointing managers to take care of the commercial aspect of their business, and thereby safeguard possible insolvency. The next section presents a brief but typical example a notable professional contemporary gospel musician who adopted this strategy.

Tope Alabi: An epitome of a professional gospel musician cum entertainer

Tope Alabi is a household name in contemporary gospel music scene in Nigeria. She perceives her performances as Christian ministration. Going by the title of an Evangelist, she believes her music is designed to save sinners from their sins and liberate the oppressed through various messages about Jesus Christ. In a way, these are some of the parameters to suggest her status as a gospel musician. Her mode of dressing, including costumes and make ups, could be described as moderate, and these have also been extended to her band members. Her unique musical style, dance movements and forms, and stage craftsmanship in general, can however, be described as conforming to popular art forms and not strictly customized to the 'churchy' or gospel style. The sound reinforcement equipment used by her band was mainly sourced from professional audio rental companies and selection largely determined by many considerations such as the nature of performance, clients' budget and the size of venue. Her performances are mainly facilitated by Nigerian as well as African based churches and promoters abroad responsible for packaging her performances as the case may be. Tope Alabi has performed

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in the many countries including the United Kingdom, United States of America and Canada, while her performances in Nigeria have taken her to the nooks and crannies of the country as well as other African nations.

As an astute music entrepreneur, Tope Alabi ventured into gospel music album production. From a little beginning as a singer who sought after a few marketers and promoters to ensure wide circulation of her debut hit album entitled: '*Baba Mimo*' (Holy Father), she steadily moved up the ladder in the music industry on her own and at present, has several marketers across the country who used their versatility and marketing network to push her products to the nooks and crannies of Nigeria. It is also a well known fact that Tope Alabi has composed and recorded numerous sound tracks for many Yoruba movies without much consideration for what the themes of such movies sought to promote. In other words, she produces music with secular themes.

Her business initiative produced an audio studio, named Johnpat studio, located in Abule-Egba, Lagos, where all her albums are being recorded and produced. This move proved cost effective. First, it saves her the regular stress of seeking for available and ideal recording studios along with their associated cost of booking for several recording sessions when working on any music project. Secondly, it assisted her to be in total control of her album production in order to ensure satisfactory sound production, including final mix down and related activities. To this end, Tope Alabi's entrepreneurial skills have generated a new venture in form of marketing of her products. Mr Soji Alabi (her husband who also doubles as her manager) recently registered a company that takes care of all her music products marketing. With this new development, the music artiste has successfully taken charge of all her professional needs from production, to management and marketing.

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Conclusion

Nigerian gospel musicians have, in recent times, assimilated part of a new culture of commodification of the gospel in their arts and ministry. This is partly informed by the need to break even in an ever-increasingly competitive marketing environment they have found themselves, and the teachings and lifestyles of famous contemporary Nigerian Pentecostal preachers. There is a need for better understanding by critics of contemporary Nigerian gospel musicians with regards to the dilemma they are going through. The price they pay to attain and maintain excellence, and also to continue to act professionally, especially against the backdrop of the socio-musical space in which they operate is also noteworthy. More importantly, the dynamic nature of the contemporary society in which their art is presented remains pivotal to gaining an insight into their ingenuity and how they attempt to navigate through the murky water of identity crisis. The debate surrounding their being labeled as 'real gospel musicians' rightly or wrongly, may not therefore be easy to resolve for a long time to come.

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