

Song Melody and Speech Tone Conflict in Translated Yorùbá Christian Hymns

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Abstract

This article engages song melody and speech tone conflict in translated Yorùbá Christian hymns between the late 19th and early 20th century. In their effort to make early Yorùbá Christian converts sing Christian hymns in the church, European missionaries translated English hymns to Yoruba, and sang them to the original European hymn tunes. Yorùbá being a tone language, requires a significant level of correlation between song melody and speech tone, for the words to retain their original meaning when sung. The tripartite constraint of aligning melody, meter, as well as meaning, posed a major problem to the hymn translators. Having given priority to melody and metre, the translators therefore, tend to compromise on meaning, thereby producing Yorùbá hymns that will sound interesting melodically, and correlate metrically with the metre, but producing hardly meaningful words when sung. This study utilized samples from *Iwe Orin Mimo*, being the Yorùbá translation of a range of hymns in *Hymnal Companion*, *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, and some other hymn books popularly used by the Church Missionary Society (CMS). The work presents a graphical illustration of the disparity between the hymn tunes and the speech tone of the Yorùbá language. It also highlights the efforts of indigenous composers in correcting the perceived error through re-composition

of the first stanza of selected hymns, to which they wrote more stanzas that align with the theme of the first stanza. The inappropriately translated Yorùbá hymn books have remained strong institutions within the church and have therefore, continued to promote the use of the translated hymns in the Yoruba church.

Keywords: Translation, Yoruba hymns, speech tone, J. J. Ransome-Kuti, Rev. A. T. Ola Olude.

Introduction

The issues surrounding translation of English hymns to Yorùbá language by the early European missionaries between the late 19th and early 20th century has resulted into various musical events and has also negatively affected Yorùbá church, gospel, and popular music. These issues have continued to generate discussions among scholars, especially in the field of musicology (Jones, 1976; Vidal, 1986; Euba, 1992; Omojola, 2001; Loko, 2011; Owoaje, 2014). However, the issue has not been addressed systematically from the perspective of translation study. The importance of music in Christian liturgy cannot be underplayed. Singing, for instance, is an important part of Christian worship, because it allows worshippers to actively participate in worship. It is upon this, therefore, that the early European missionaries at the inception of Christianity in Yorubaland needed to provide songs for use in the church for liturgical purpose. As noted by Jones (1976), the missionaries were faced with the problem of what the African converts would sing in church. In respect to the missionaries, he further noted that:

The more musical ones naturally desired to hand on to the Africans the riches of our Western Christian musical culture; the less musical would want to teach the hymns and hymn-tunes of which they themselves were found. No one at that time knew anything much about either African music or about the subtler aspects of African languages (1).

Although the missionaries came with their church hymns, chants, anthem, and canticles, they could not be used since the people to whom they wanted to preach the gospel did not understand the English language and could not read and write. It was possible to interpret the sermon and even the prayers to them during worship, but it was not easy to simultaneously translate hymn texts during singing. In their effort to provide the Yoruba church with liturgical music which they would use during Christian worship, the missionaries began the process of translation of English hymns to Yoruba language.

Although several studies have approached the issues that arose due to the translation of English hymns to Yorùbá, which were sung to European tunes, this article intends to build on their works through presentation of graphical illustration of the linguistic blunder in text and tune. It also examines the attempts of indigenous hymn composers at correcting the blunder through a compositional technique which they employed in composing indigenous tunes to the first stanza of selected hymns. This is to present a broader understanding of the issues surrounding hymn translation to Yoruba by the European missionaries and the effort of indigenous composers to correct the perceived errors which came due to the translation.

Selected hymns for this discourse were chosen from two popular hymnbooks – *Iwe Orin Mimo* (I.O.M) of the Christian Missionary Society and *Iwe Orin Mimo* of the Methodist Church. The indigenous hymns adopted for this discourse were selected from two popular Yorùbá hymnbooks – *Yin Oluwa* by G. P. Dopemu (1921-2021) and *M'ayokun* by Rev. A. T. Ola Olude (1908 – 1980). These songs were subjected to content analysis. Musical notations were presented where necessary, while graphical illustration was also employed in presenting their textual and melodic interrelations.

Translation of English Hymns to Yorùbá

Translation of English hymns to Yoruba in the early Yorùbá church was carried out without a study into the dynamics of the Yoruba language. Like in other African societies, the European missionaries were only concerned about getting appropriate words from the indigenous languages to represent the ideas in the original hymns and make sure that the translated hymns are worked into the same syllables as the original hymns. These translated hymns are then sung to European set tunes of the English hymns from which they were translated. Describing the process of hymn translation for African churches, Jones noted thus:

Once one had a working knowledge of the local vernacular, the process of hymn-making was comparatively straightforward. You chose a European hymn, counted the syllables in each line, and – neglecting the rhymes at the end of his lines-wrote vernacular verses containing the same number of syllables...Fit the corresponding number of vernacular syllables to each line and there we have a hymn (1).

In the Yorùbá church, the translation of English hymns to Yorùbá was carried out in batches. As noted by Hair (1967), the first set of published hymns (30 hymns) in Yorùbá language was published in 1853. Some of the hymns

were translated while the others were composed. Hair did not provide details of the publisher of this edition of the hymnbook, as well as its title. This was followed by another publication under the title *Iwe orin mimo* in 1857. The hymnbook was published by the Christian Missionary Society (CMS) and contained ninety (90) translated hymns.

A new edition of *Iwe orin mimo* was published in 1863 by the Christian Missionary Society, containing 120 translated hymns. This was followed by another entirely different publication by the CMS in 1865 titled *Iwe orin* (Scriptural texts in Yorùbá). This hymn book contained 106 translated hymns. The Methodist church in Nigeria published her second edition of translated Yorùbá hymns in 1876, under the title *Orin mimo*. The hymn book contained 150 hymns. Records of the earlier version of this hymn book was however, not provided by Hair. The *Enlarged hymnal* with 206 hymns was published in 1879 (publisher unknown), followed by two small hymnals for Sunday schools in 1880. Hair did not provide details about the number of hymns and the publisher of the two hymnals. Although Hair's documentation of publications in Yoruba language covered the period between 1819 and 1966, its limitation is that it does not provide updated information on the hymn publication by the Methodist church, the CMS and the Indigenous African churches that sprang up between the late 19th and early 20th century.

Furthermore, there was a hymn publication among the congregation in Ota which was encouraged by Rev. James White in 1861 titled *Orin mimo*. The hymnbook contained hymns composed in traditional Yorùbá style. This development suggests that there had been issues bordering on appropriate singing of Yoruba texts applied to European tunes within the Yoruba church, concerning the earlier published translated hymns, thereby necessitating the composition of traditionally relevant hymns.

Speech tone conflict in translated Yorùbá hymns

By the time the CMS published the 1923 edition of translated hymns titled *Ìwé Orin Mímó fún Ìjọ Ènìà Olórùn nìllè Yorùbá* (I.O.M), it had an appendix which contained a set of sixty-seven (67) Yoruba hymns which were composed by Rev. Canon J. J. Ransome-Kuti (1855 – 1930). These hymns 'had both texts and melodies in Yorùbá indigenous poetic and musical idioms' (Owoaje, 2014). Vidal (1986) also noted a striking feature of the CMS publication of 1923 and others alike. The translated Yorùbá hymns were forced into European poetic forms such as Trochaic (6565), Dactylic (6464664), Anapaestic (5565), Common meter (8686) and short meter (6686), thereby allowing the use of several hymn tunes for any given Yorùbá hymn text. What the European missionaries did not realize however, was that the translation of English

hymns to Yoruba language demands more than the mere observation of poetic metre. The elements of music include rhythm, melody, and harmony. By giving attention to the poetic meter, they had addressed the question of rhythm. However, they made false assumption on how to address the issue of melody by forcing the European melodies on the Yorùbá texts that they created. To have addressed the melody issue correctly, they needed to observe not only the melodic element of music, but also elements of Yorùbá linguistics as well as elements of translation studies.

‘Translation is a mental activity in which a meaning of a given linguistic discourse is rendered from one language to another. It is the act of transferring the linguistic entities from one language into their equivalent in another language’ (Davis, 2021). This implies that, a translation work cannot be deemed to have been succeeded except the meaning in the source language is reflected in the target language. This was not achieved in the Yorùbá translation of European Christian hymns. By forcing Yorùbá words into European tunes without adequate observation of the effect of the tune on the meanings of the words was a major failure in translation. Hence the debacle that was presented as the translation of European hymns to Yorùbá was an effort in futility. Even though the congregants sang the songs, they were often troubled by some of the things they knew they were saying. It is this discomfort that led to the efforts of James White in Ota in 1861, which culminated in the works of Ransome-Kuti. As earlier mentioned, he contributed sixty-seven (67) Yoruba hymns to the CMS publication of 1923.

The publication of these Yorùbá hymns by Rev. Ransome-Kuti became a significant event in the use of music in the Yorùbá church. Prior to this time, there had been a few events within the church and the political organization. First, the early missionaries had prohibited the use of indigenous musical instruments especially drums in the Yorùbá church, referring to the drums as being paganistic and therefore, unfit for Christian worship. Meanwhile, the early Yorùbá converts had been used to an entirely different music practice in which singing, drumming, and dancing all go hand in hand. Since drumming was prohibited in the church, dancing became a mirage.

Secondly, the movement for cultural nationalism had commenced in the late 19th century after Africa was partitioned and occupied by the colonialists. As noted by Irele (1965), colonial rule accompanied missionary activities in Nigeria, and it imposed a specific social structure for the African’s experience, both of the world and of himself. The manifestation of this was felt in the political domination which although created areas of contact between Africans and Europeans all over the continent, fashioned conditions that constantly emphasized racial and cultural differences. In reaction, the Yorùbá elites who had earlier adopted European names, dresses and cuisine had started to revert from

their aspiration to become African Europeans. The elites within the church broke out of the European churches and founded African Indigenous churches. Indigenous priests and choirmasters also started composing songs which made use of Yoruba musical idiom in text and tunes for use in Christian worship.

The translated Yorùbá hymns when sung to European hymn tunes, constituted linguistic blunder such that they either give distorted meanings or become nonsensical. The Yoruba language uses three tones – low, mid, high; the tone attached to a word therefore, determines its meaning. Different words may share the same consonant and vowels but different tones. They will therefore, not mean the same thing when the various intonations are applied to them in writing, reading, and singing. In Omojola’s (2001: 83) example, the di-syllable Yoruba morpheme /*o-wo*/ could give different meanings depending on how the syllables are intoned. Thus, four words with different meanings can be derived as follows:

- i. /*ò-wò*/ : (low-low tones) means respect
- ii. /*o-wò*/ : (mid-low tones) means broom
- iii. /*ò-wó*/ : (low-high tones) means batch
- iv. /*o-wó*/ : (mid-high tones) means hand

To effectively communicate through song using the Yoruba language as medium of expression, there is need to align the melodic contour with the rising and falling of the intonation of the Yoruba words used as lyrics. This principle, Vidal (1986) referred to as ‘logogenic.’ The European missionaries that translated English hymns to Yoruba were not aware of the logogenic principle and did not apply it as one of the important dimensions in the translation of hymns to tonal languages such as Yoruba. This is demonstrated in the song “*omọ o é ń pé dàgbà*” as given below.



Figure 1: Musical notation of the song *Omọ o, é ń pé dàgbà* (Children grow up in no time)

Ọmọ o, é ń pé dàgbà
 Kékeré jòjòlò màá bí t'èmi
 Ọmọ o, é ń pé dàgbà

Children grow up in no time
 I desire my own tiny little tot
 Children grow up in no time

The graphical illustration below shows the correlation between the melodic and speech-tone contour of the song, which implies that the song effectively communicates the intended meaning of the words.



Figure 2: Graphical illustration of the song *Ọmọ o, é ń pé dàgbà* (Children grow up in no time)

The upper contour of the graph shows the melodic pattern of the song, while the lower contour demonstrates the speech tone pattern of the words that make up the song. The second phrase as represented in the music notation above is a repetition of the first. The phrase is however, not repeated in the graphical illustration. In contrast, the popular Yoruba birthday song “*olojo ibi*” demonstrates improper singing in authentic Yoruba culture.



Figure 3: Musical notation of the song *Olojó ibí* (The birthday celebrant)

Olojoibijokan e o
Se were ko da wal'ohun

Birthday celebrant, it is your turn to dance
 Come quickly and show us your dancing steps

Below is the illustration of the lack of correlation between the song melody and speech tone. The last phrase of the texts of the song when sung to the tune above, could be perceived as 'display madness and do it quickly.'



Figure 4: Graphical illustration of the song *Olojó ibí* (The birthday celebrant)

Having cited the above examples, the followings are excerpts which demonstrate the linguistic mistakes that emanated because of the translation of English hymns to Yoruba language without consideration to the rise and fall of the tones attached to each word which determine their meaning.

1. Pleasant are thy courts above (*Àwon àfin re l'ẹ̀wà*)

Maidstone



Figure 5: Musical notation of the song *Àwon àfin rẹ l'ẹwà* (Pleasant are thy courts above)

Àwon àfin rẹ l'ẹwà
N'ilẹ 'mólẹ àt'ifẹ
Àwon àfin rẹ l'ẹwà
L'áyé ẹşẹ àt'òşì
Ẹmí mí tí ñ pòngbẹ tó
Fún ìdàpò ènià rẹ
Fún ìmólẹ ojú rẹ
F'ór '-ofẹ rẹ, Ọlórún

Pleasant are thy courts above
 In the land of light and love
 Pleasant are thy courts below
 In this land of sin and woe
 O my spirit longs and faints
 For the converse of thy saints
 For the brightness of thy face
 For thy fulness, God of grace!

Below is a graphical illustration of the conflict between the hymn text and the hymn tune applied to the hymn. The difference is clear when compared to that of “*Ọmọ o é í pẹ dàgbà*” which was demonstrated earlier.



Figure 6: Graphical illustration of the song *Àwọn àfín rẹ̀ l'èwà* (Pleasant are thy courts above)



Figure 7: Musical notation of the song *Wá bá mi gbé* (Abide with me)

Wá bá mi gbé, alẹ̀ fẹ̀rẹ̀ lẹ̀ tán
Òkùnkùn sù, Olúwa bá mi gbé
Bí olùrànlọ́wọ̀ m̀ìràn bá yẹ
Ìrànwọ̀ aláìní, wá bá mi gbé

Abide with me, fast falls the eventide
 The darkness deepens, Lord, with me abide
 When other helpers fail, and comforts flee
 Help of the helpless, O abide with me

The melodic/speech tone relationship of the hymn is shown in the graphical illustration below.

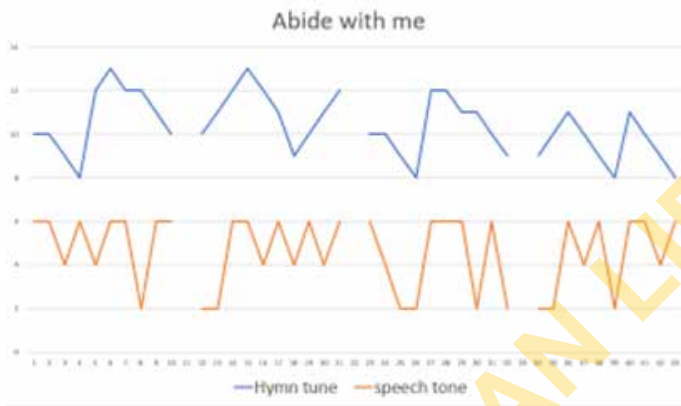


Figure 8: Graphical illustration of the song *Wá bá mi gbé* (Abide with me)

The first line of the translated hymn above when sung to the hymn tune *Eventide*, could translate to ‘come and let of putrefy together.’ A careful interpreter that is aware and takes account of the logogenic principle could have tried alternative lines such as “*Je ká jo wa*” which shares the same tonal contour as the first line of the tune ‘*eventide*’ and conveys a meaning of request for communion or togetherness.

Efforts of Indigenous Composers

It is for this reason and the need to accompany hymns with drumming and dancing, that the Yoruba hymnbook *Orin Mimo* was published by the Ota congregation in 1861. The second attempt at correcting the problem created through the inappropriate translation of English hymns to Yoruba, which were sung to European hymn tunes, was the sixty-seven (67) songs composed by Rev. J. J. Ransome-Kuti and published in the 1923 edition of *I.O.M.* This further gave rise to various experimentations by Yoruba indigenous composers and itinerant musicians who later published several Yoruba hymnbooks which were used in several Yorubá congregations. Majority of Rev. Kuti’s compositions were a parody of existing traditional and ritual songs which he had learned while attending traditional rituals with his father who was a traditional drummer. However, an entirely innovative approach was employed by other indigenous hymn composers who rose after him.

To make the translated hymns easy to sing, indigenous composers such as Rev. A. T. Ola Olude and G. P. Dopemu took the first stanza of some popular inappropriately translated hymns and composed indigenous tunes to them. They went ahead and composed new stanzas based on the theme of the first stanza. For instance, Rev. Olude’s “N óò sún mó Olórun” and “Má kojá mi Olùgbàlà” were composed to correct the error in the singing of the hymns translated from ‘Nearer my God, to thee’ and ‘Pass me not, O gentle savior.’ In his recomposition of the songs, Rev. Olude employed indigenous tunes and rhythm which allow the songs to be accompanied with drumming. In addition, the hymns were composed to appropriately represent the Yoruba singing culture in which song tune correlates with speech tone pattern.

Figure 9: Musical notation of the song *N óò sún mó Olórun* (Nearer, my God, to thee)

Nearer, my God, to thee
 Nearer, to thee
 E'en tho it be a cross that raiseth me
 Still all my song shall be
 Nearer, my God, to thee
 Nearer, to thee

The correlation between the hymn tune and the speech tone of the texts of the hymn is demonstrated in the graph below.



Figure 10: Graphical illustration of the correlation between hymn melody and speech tone of the song *N òò sùn mò Ọlórún* (Nearer, my God, to thee)

The graphical illustration of the correlation between hymn melody and speech tone in the inappropriately translated version of the same hymn when sung to the European tune ‘St Bede’ is shown below.



Figure 11: Graphical illustration of the correlation between hymn melody and speech tone of the song *N ò sun mo Olorun* (Nearer, my God, to thee when sung to the tune of ‘St Bede’)

Rev. Olude’s re-composition of the hymn ‘Pass me not, O gentle saviour’ which is translated as “Ma koja mi Olugbala” is shown below.

1. Ma ko ja mi O lu gba la, Gbo a du ra mi,
 2. M'o mi je mi gbe, se 'wo san, F'e se, f'a run mi;
 3. Fun mi l'o kun, O lu gba la, Fun e ri ai ku;

Gba 'ti O ba npe e lo mi ran, Ma se ko ja mi o;
 Ka mi ye b'e - ni 'wo i ba gba S'I jo ba nla Re ni.
 Yo 'fe ai ye yi ku ro l'o kan; Da kun, gba 'ru mi la.

Gb'e be mi, O lu wa, Ran mi l'o wo O lu gba la,
 Wo ba nu je o kan mi san, I wo O ri sun gbo gbo 're.

Figure 12: Musical notation of the song *Ma koja mi Olugbala* (Pass me not, O gentle savior)

Pass me not, O gentle saviour
 Hear my humble cry
 While on others thou art calling
 Do not pass me by
 Saviour! Saviour!
 Hear my humble cry
 While on others thou art calling
 Do not pass me by

Shown below is the evidence of correlation between the hymn tune and the Yoruba hymn text composed by Rev. Olude.

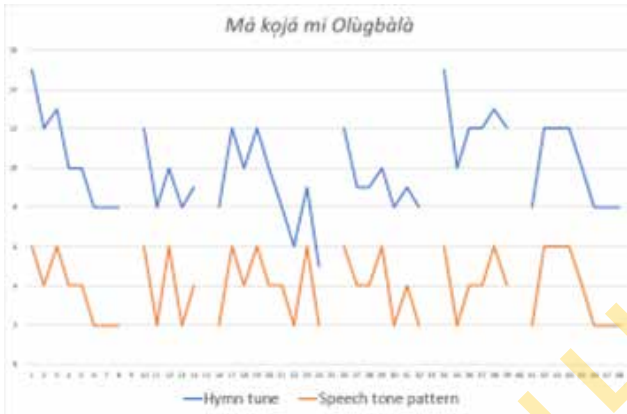


Figure 13: Graphical illustration of the correlation between the hymn tune and the speech tone of the texts of the hymn of the song *Ma kojá mi Olùgbàlà* (Pass me not, O gentle savior)

Presented below is the inappropriately translated European version of the hymn as sung to the European hymn tune ‘Pass me not’?



Figure 14: Graphical illustration of the correlation between hymn melody and speech tone of the song *Ma kojá mi Olùgbàlà* (Pass me not, O gentle savior)

G. P. Dopemu also employed the same compositional technique in recomposing “Wá bá mi gbé, E je k’a finu didun” and “Feru re f’afefe” to demonstrate appropriate approach in the singing of Yoruba texts, especially as it pertains to Yoruba hymnody.

Wa Bami Gbe

♩ = 57 G. P. Dopemu

SOPRANO
ALTO

Wa ba mi gbe, a-le fe-re le tan. O- kun - kun. su,___

TENOR
BASS

O - lu___ wa ba mi gbe. Bi o - lu - ran - lo - wo

mi_ran ba ye,___ l - ran wo a - la-i- ni, wa___ ba mi gbe.

Figure 15: Musical notation of the song *Wá bá mi gbé* (Abide with me)



Figure 16: Graphical illustration of the song *Wá bá mi gbé* (Abide with me)

The inappropriately translated European version of the hymn as sung to the European hymn tune 'Eventide' is shown earlier in the discourse.

Although the cultural nationalism movement of the late 19th and early 20th century witnessed various attempts at correcting the error in Yoruba singing culture occasioned by the age-long inappropriate hymn transcription, it has remained insignificant to current realities. The inappropriately translated Yoruba hymn books have remained strong institutions within the church and have therefore, continued to promote the use of the translated hymns in the Yorùbá church. This translation failing now manifests in a tendency to compromise the tonality of the Yorùbá language. Many Christians as well as consumers of Yorùbá popular music have adjusted to the atonality, thereby manifesting numbed sensibility towards inappropriateness of singing seeming nonsense. The impact of this linguistic error has remained obvious within the wider Yoruba sound scape. The distorted singing style has continued to permeate Yoruba vocal music in the 21st century, such that artistes sometimes do not realize the fault in their distorted singing style until their attention is called to it. While artistes such as Sola Allyson-Obaniyi, Bukola Elemide (Asa), Adekunle Kosoko (Adekunle Gold), Yinka Davis, Segun Akinlolu (Beautiful Nubia) and Bisade Ologunde have taken it upon themselves to promote the appropriate Yorùbá singing culture, several other popular artistes such as Yinka Ayefele have continued to follow the inappropriate singing trend through adoption of inappropriately translated Yorùbá hymns which form basic part of their repertory.

Conclusion

The translation of European hymns to Yorùbá for singing in the Yoruba church was as a result of a liturgical exigency. The problem was that of creating hymns for the Yoruba church to sing. The solution of translating European hymns to Yorùbá required taking account of the musical elements of rhythm, melody, and harmony, as well as core translation issues. By taking proper account of the rhythm, but assuming the European melodies, they failed in the dimension of the translation because the use of the European tunes for Yoruba words did not guarantee the transmission of the meaning from one language to the other. The inadequate awareness of the logogenic principle of the side of the translators ended up manifesting as a failure in the translation process. The effect of this failure has now become institutionalized in the continued use of these Yorùbá hymnbooks in every Yoruba Christian congregation every Sunday over the last one and half centuries. Like a little leaven that leavens the whole lump, this inappropriate method of singing Yoruba songs has spread into the wider Yorùbá vocal sound scape.

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