

ISSN: 0331-6017



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**OGBOMOSO
JOURNAL
OF THEOLOGY**

THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY

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OGBOMOSO JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME XI, 2008

Ogbomoso Journal of Theology Vol. XI, 2006

OGBOMOSO JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

**THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY
VOLUME 11, 2006**

PUBLISHED BY
**THE NIGERIAN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY,
OGBOMOSO**

Vol. XI, DECEMBER, 2006

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A DISCOURSE OF CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN NIGERIA CHURCH MUSIC

M. Samuel Kayode

Introduction

Since its advent in the fourth decade of the nineteenth century through the efforts of Western missionaries, Church music has witnessed significant growth and development in so many dimensions and directions¹. To date, it remains an integral part of worship both within and outside the church, based on the definition ‘church music’ which covers any music used as part of the liturgical service of the Christian church, including hymns, psalms and canticles, special choir renditions in form of anthems – native or Western, localized or imported gospel music “Native airs” used by faithfuls or bands at socio-religious activities outside church². In other words, what constitutes church music is mainly the theme or the theological background of a musical composition as well as the tuneful nature of the instrumentals used. However, the fact is that non-Christian popular musicians have been adopting Christian melodies and songs in their performances, thus raising some fundamental questions on what should constitute the parameter for determining ‘authentic’ church music.

The objective of this paper is to examine the state of church music in Nigeria and stimulate a discourse on some contemporary issues bordering on the Christian music ministry. Attempts are made to draw specific examples from the gospel music genre as dictated by current practices within church music.

Theological Basis of Music in Christian Worship

Man was made to worship (Deuteronomy 6: 13 and Revelation 4: 11) and music has always been one of the means whereby man fulfills his act of spiritual worship to God. The Christian worship in particular is subsumed in worship experience through music. In other words, music in particular is central to Christian worship. Miller asserts that the Bible itself magnifies music with 44 out of the sixty-six (66) books that make up the Bible or two-thirds comprising of psalms, hymns or spiritual songs or making reference to occasions in which music and musicians were used. There are more than five hundred (500) accounts or admonitions for God's people to praise Him with instruments and voice³.

Roots of Church Music in Nigeria

As earlier stated, the roots of church music in Nigeria can be traced back to the advent of Christian missionary activities of the middle of the nineteenth century. What began initially as music strictly reserved for worship purpose later grew and developed to become fluxiative and highly variegated. It began with the pioneering efforts of the Wesleyan missionaries (Methodist) Church Missionaries Society (CMS)/Anglican Churches in the 1940s⁴. The Baptist mission followed in 1850. These and others came with their music, mostly psalms, canticles and hymns.

Congregational hymn singing in the church was accompanied with either the organ or harmonies and initially not condone in the incorporation of Nigeria's traditional musical instruments which, together with all forms of native artwork, were branded as "the work of the devil"; paganistic and consequently not suitable or compatible with the new and true worship experience. Consequently, all forms of drumming and dancing in the church were banned in any case: the hymns and their translations into indigenouse languages which were all imported had beats different from those of most African cultures. A discourse of the various musical disasters that attended the singing of these translated hymns with their Western hymn tunes has been discussed among others by Ekweme⁵.

By the second decade of the 20th century, the inadequacies found in singing the translated hymns, occasioning loss in membership of the various churches had become apparent. The mission churches began to record dwindling attendance because of their uncompromising posture to many African traditions and practices. Consequently, indigenous churches especially the Aladura (Spiritual) churches began to spring up more aligned to African cultural identity and cultural nationalism. Some African clergymen however rose to the challenge by composing "Native Airs" and "Native anthems" for church use. A prominent example was Reverend J.J. Ransome-Kuti, who collected fifty-seven Yoruba sacred songs written in indigenous poetic and musical idioms based on pentatonic scale characteristics of African tuning system⁶. The songs also demonstrate clear evidence of being in strophic form and mostly in the compound duple and quadruple time. This was the situation until the Seventies when the Pentecostal movement emerged and gave rise to the growth, development and spread of gospel music.

The Nigerian Gospel Music

Of all forms of church music, none has provided as much evidence of variegation as the gospel music. It has witnessed significant changes especially in recent times⁷. Gospel music has been defined as that type of church music which primarily aims at preaching the 'good news' of Jesus Christ or simply as 'gospel message' sung and played on musical instrument. It is presently the most popular of all possible forms of church music and a widely accepted musical genre in contemporary Nigeria. As a household name in the country, gospel music is found on the radio, television, audio and video tapes, compact disc and phonograph records, in schools, Christian social gatherings, Christian films, prisons, hospitals and even on the internet⁸.

Some Nigerian church historians have discussed the impact of African independent churches on the origin and development of gospel music in Nigeria⁹. The introduction of traditional music, musical instruments, the

once forbidden dancing and clapping of hands into the liturgy of the Nigerian church is one of the factors identified as being responsible for the growth of Nigerian gospel music¹⁰. In addition, the use of short and cryptic texts as well as syncretic styles such as gospels Fuji and other are also parts of its attributes¹¹.

At this stage there is need to answer the question as to what factors possibly led to the inclusion and adaptation of such musical genres like *Waka* and *Fuji*, in church music, more so when they are clear products of Islamic culture. *Fuji* music is known to have evolved from *Were* music, a regular music among young Muslim boys (e.g. *Ajiwere* singing groups) as they move round homes of Muslim faithfuls during the month of Ramadan to wake them up for the early morning meal (*Saari*). This performance of *Were* later transmuted into *Fuji* music. A similar question can be asked in respect of other traditional or neo-traditional forms such as *Apala*, *Ijala*, and *Senwele*.

In a study conducted among members of staff in three tertiary institutions in Oyo town, over 70 percent (71.31%) showed preference for gospel music compared to other musical genre such as Nigerian traditional music, shown on Table 1¹². Among commercial transporters in Oyo township, preference for gospel music ranked almost equally with Islamized musical form such as *Fuji* and *Apala*. This is probably due to fact that most of the commercial transporters are Muslims. Even then, the result from this latter study showed that many respondents (including Muslims) who often buy the recorded tapes of Nigerian gospel musicians do so mainly because of the belief that the central theme of their songs possesses spiritual power to rekindle hope for their hopeless economic situations, motivate them to offer quality praises to God; thereby attracting blessings on their lives and that of that families.

The findings of both studies also suggest that one of the most important reasons for purchasing gospel music tapes is because many of the songs contain words and prayers directed to God to decisively deal with all presumed enemies of their lives. As ardent listeners of gospel music

scramble to purchase the 'latest music' released by renowned gospel musicians, the artistes and their producers smile to the bank, especially if they have not been shortchanged or cheated by the recording companies or distributing agents responsible for the sales of their products.

If it is agreed that music is a living art, then the present trend, which seems to promote the development of syncretic musical forms in and outside the church, is likely going to endure for a long time. This is evidenced by the constant adaptation of melodies and rhythmic beats associated with popular secular musical styles even in Christian worship.

Challenges Facing Church Music in Contemporary Nigeria

The first challenge is that facing singing of church hymns. This important legacies of Christian missionaries is being seriously neglected, such that denominations which embraced hymn singing into their worship programmes at an appreciable level are finding it difficult to sustain the tradition. Most churches now include fewer hymns and more praise songs, special numbers etc, while others have introduced African beats to traditional church hymns, tunes which facilitate drumming and dancing.

Another challenge is reduced efforts at new composition. Many of the 'so-called' Christian musical compositions have little to offer in terms of theological meaning and divine inspirations. With the constant bombardment of church music by hip hop, avant garde, rap etc, one of the three basic qualities that should distinguish church music from secular meaningful text is being thrown overboard.

Yet another challenge facing church music today is the steady disappearance of sobriety which used to be the hallmark of worship in the church. This is most evident in Pentecostal and Charismatic groups. The level of noise pollution from both singers and instrumentalists alike, spontaneous shouts of "Hallelujah", jumping and neogymnastic displays, especially by restless youths, gallivanting clergies and uncontrollable worship leaders are causing unrest among some adherents who fear

that the worship atmosphere is being turned to something else is yet another major challenge. Closely tied to this is the influence of the technical media, which has greatly aided popularization of church music with the added advantage of pecuniary gains. Yet total reliance of this method has the tendency of 'killing' creativity in so many ways. The high level of sophistication of musical instrument such as the electronic keyboards and synthesizers (with their computerized nature) as well as the computerized/digital sound recording system has since replaced analog recording. A music recording and production that would have required the inputs and expertise of other components and highly skilled members of a band is now left solely for a multi-instrumentalist denying the audience opportunity of listening to and appreciating a potentially much better production.

Finally, there is the rampant lack of proper training for church musicians: it is a very common practice to find an individual who perceives 'God's call' upon his/her life and who possess a good voice to hurriedly venture into the music ministry nowadays. This is in sharp contrast to the practice in the past where singers, composers, organists, choirmasters and instrumentalists of whatever kind received thorough training whether formally or semi-formally as a chorister. Many of the renowned Christian and Art composers were mentored by notable names of the yesterdays in the field of music.

The Way Forward

Having examined some of the factors militating against the proper development of church music in Nigeria, the following suggestions are hereby proffered:

Firstly, each denomination through its leadership should accord church music and its ministry their rightful place in worship. This could be done by ensuring that only Spirit-filled and heart-lifting songs/music are encouraged in church worship.

Secondly, systematic programmes for training and retraining music ministers should be practiced by all denominations while churches are encouraged to engage such trained music ministers. A good example is the annual Nationwide Baptist Music Workshop (BMW) which has produced numerous competent and practicing church musicians. The positive effects of this annual workshop on the growth and development of music ministry in the Nigerian Baptist Convention cannot be overstressed. Many of the products of this initiative are now benefiting other denominations especially the Pentecostals.

Unfortunately, a recent assessment of the workshop especially since its initiator and coordinator (Chief) Alma Rohm returned to the United States showed a decline in the quality of programme, lack of zeal on the part of instructors and a downward drop in the number of participants. There is therefore the need to do a total overhauling as well as reforms in order to reposition the programme and restore its past glory.

Finally, to address the problems of new compositions, composers' and writers' workshops or meetings should be organized periodically where specially gifted Christian poets and trained musicians could exchange ideals and practice composing new music in the tradition for which the church had hitherto been known. The Christian Associations of Nigeria (CAN) can facilitate such workshops with the help of notable Christian philanthropists within the society who would provide sponsorship and other necessary logistics.

Conclusion

The situation with regard to contemporary Christian music practices in Nigeria definitely needs revisiting. This is because music is a product of human activity and so needs to be seen to be socially relevant, meaning that contemporary Nigeria church need to work earnestly to create, recreate, explore and organize sound to suit its philosophy, ethics and morality of the time.