
TOWARDS THE INDIGENIZATION/ ACCULTURATION OF CHRISTIAN HYMNODY IN THE 21ST CENTURY LOCAL CHURCH IN AFRICA: A CASE OF THE YORUBA HYMNS

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Introduction

Music is an essential part of any people group and culture including their religions and social life. There is no culture without its music. There is a popular saying that “music is the food for the soul of man” (anonymous).¹

The place of Christian hymnody or hymns and their uses in the life of the church cannot be taken lightly, because music is an integral part of the church’s life and congregational singing (which hymns singing is a major part) is an integral part of the church’s worship life.

And when we talk about the church, gospel and culture or the place of culture in the church’s life and its gospel ministry, Christian hymnody has a major role to play and a lot of issues related to that, but in this paper the writer will focus on the indigenization and the acculturation of our hymns by incorporating the use of indigenous musical instruments and dance styles to accompany the western translated indigenous hymns.

The writer is suggesting that we keep the original beautiful tunes but only add indigenous instruments, beats and dance styles, focusing only on Yoruba hymns of Nigeria.

The author acknowledges the fact that there has been some African musicians, authors who has written to promote indigenization of church

music in Africa, people like T.K.E. Philips, Kwabena Nketia, Fela Sowande, etc.²

The writer is focusing on Yoruba hymns because “each language represents at least one culture, and each culture sings and defines music according to its own standards. The meaning of music resides in people and their culture, not just in sounds. In general sense, our evaluation of music has more to do with the people.”³

History of Christian Hymnody in Nigeria

Though Christianity was found in Africa in the Ethiopian Coptic Church as early as the 4th century A.D., the second half of the 19th century witnessed significant religious as well as socio-cultural changes in Nigeria through the efforts of European and American missionaries. “At the early stage it was a tough time for the Ibos and Yorubas to adapt foreign religion before Christianity could stand in Nigeria.”⁴

In the North, there were great obstacles to Christianity due to Islamic revolution, “which led to the conversion of the northern states of Nigeria to exclusively Islam religion around 1804 and 1831. Islam integrated and assimilated indigenous social aspects of the northerners (polygamy, slavery and traditional musical practices).”⁵

Nigerian Church Hymns

The role that the traditional culture played on Nigerian Christianity cannot be overemphasized. According to Akin Euba: Music is a major feature of Yoruba traditional religion and divinities such as *Obatala* (god of creation), *Sango* (god of thunder and lightning), *Ogun* (god of war and iron implements) and *Orunmila* (god of divination) have their own special types of music. Yoruba traditional religious culture and Christianity have at least one thing in common; that is, both make use of good music. It is likely that music was an important factor in the conversion of Yoruba Christians.

Indeed Nigerians were first exposed to western church hymns, anthems, and musical instruments such as the harmonium, organ, and piano through the church. However, this exposure was at the expense of indigenous cultural practice. Followers of Christian faith were restricted from all forms of traditional practices, including the playing of traditional musical instruments both inside and outside church worship. The missionaries feared that the traditional music could lead the Christian new converts back to “pagan” (traditional) worship.⁶

Translation of Hymns

The earliest Yoruba hymns were simply translations of European hymn tunes. Most Nigerian languages, like Yoruba, are tonal and, therefore, the meaning of a particular word depends on its intonation. Euba points out that Nigerian tone language usually had its own “inherent melodic structure of the text, thereby distorting its meaning.” For example, the word *Baba* has several meaning, *Bàbá* (Father), *Bàbà* (millet or guinea corn), *Baba* (the head of a lineage or a big compound or extended family). The tonal inflexions placed on these words determine their real meanings.

In spite of all these efforts, European church hymns alienated Nigerian church congregations because they were unsuitable for dancing, partly due to the prohibition of traditional musical instruments, which could have provided the natural rhythmic background for movement.⁷

Local Indigenous Hymns

Due to the fact that translated church hymns affect tonal inflections and dissatisfy educated Nigerians, therefore, Nigerian musicians in the church started to experiment the writing of indigenous hymns using indigenous melodies with local texts paying careful attention to tonal inflexions, this happened around 1902. These new hymns employed a rhythmic style that was closer to that of traditional music.⁸

Among the early composers of Yoruba church hymns were the late J. J. Ransome Kuti, the late A. T. Ola Olude, the Late T.K.E. Philips, and the late T. A. Bankole.

A fine collection of Nigerian indigenous hymns, *Orin Yoruba (Yoruba Songs)* was compiled by J. O. Ajibola. It consists of 38 sacred songs written in one, two, three or four parts with piano accompaniments. It is a revision and an enlargement of an edition first published by the Oxford University Press, London in 1947, which contained about forty songs and featured melody only without harmonic parts or keyboard accompaniment.⁹

The Nature of African Music

Nketia (1974), describes African textual rhythm by identifying strict and free vocal rhythm. Strict vocal rhythm refers to the setting of song texts to regular basic pulses, while in free vocal rhythm, there is no feeling of a regular basic pulse, free/irregular poetic rhythm, however, exists in the Yoruba variant of the traditional 'classical' styles.¹⁰

Vidal (2003), mention the difference in the schematization of Yoruba texts. Characteristically, most of the verses are short, although the number of lines varies.¹¹

Popular Nigerian Musical Forms

In spite of the efforts of the above named Nigerian church musicians, history has shown that the western hymn tune sung to translated Yoruba text has stood the test of times. It is from this background that the writer of this paper is suggesting the indigenization of Yoruba translated hymn through the incorporation of indigenous musical instruments, dance and beat styles to accompany the hymn singing without necessarily changing the tune, because a hymn by definition is stanzaic or strophic (i.e. singing each stanza with same tune), there is no way we can do this without altering the tonal inflexion of indigenous languages like Yoruba. Thus, the reason for the following indigenous musical forms:

1. *Highlife Beat*

Highlife music is principally an instrumental dance form that is accompanied with the voice.¹² This beat style will go well with most of the hymns in 4/4 time signature e.g. "What a friend we have in Jesus" translated as (Ore wo lani bi Jesu) and this tune could also be used with any hymn shearing same meter (8.7.8.7.D).

2. *Reggae Beat*

Reggae is a Jamaican popular music style filtered into Nigeria in the mid 1960s. It is characterized by pulsating accented rhythm. The instrumental texture of reggae used in the church is lighter when compared with proper reggae of the Rasta Farran, Majek Fashek and Ras Kimono, etc.¹³

This beat style will also go well with most of the songs in 4/4 time signature like, "Nothing but the blood of Jesus" translated (Ko si lehin eje Jesu) and this tune could be used with any hymn sharing same tune or meter (PLAINFIELD 7.8.7.8 with Refrain).

There are other beat/dance forms like fuji, waka and juju, these three has Islamic origin and background, as much as possible should not be used for singing hymns in the church worship although a lot of gospel singers today use these forms for evangelistic reasons in their cassette and CD recordings to reach the lover of these styles for Christ.

Some Indigenous Musical Instruments

Indigenous musical instruments could be placed under the four major categories of African instruments: (1) Idiophones (2) Chordophones (3) Membranophones and (4) Aerophones.

1. *Idiophones*: are musical instruments made of wood or metals like Gong or slit drums. The gong is used throughout Nigeria but the slit drum is common in the Eastern Nigeria.¹⁴

2. *Chordophones*: are musical instruments that are made of wood or metal and strings. An example is the Goje which is popular in the Northern part of Nigeria.¹⁵
3. *Membranophones*: are musical instruments made with wood and animal skin. This is common among the Northern and Western part of Nigeria e.g. *Gangan* among the Yorubas.¹⁶
4. *Aerophones*: are musical instruments that produce sounds through the blowing of air with mouth. It could be made of wood or metal. This is common in the Eastern and Northern Nigeria e.g. Kakaki of the Hausa.¹⁷

CAUTION: Care should be taken in how we use these instruments to accompany hymns singing. Special attention should be given to text and mood of each hymn and instruments used appropriately and sensitively so that the hymn message is not lost, as we dance and enjoy the sound of the instruments.

Towards Indigenicity of Nigerian Church Music

There is serious needs for us to appreciate with joy and gratitude the work of the early foreign European Missionaries in Africa. But due to different challenges they faced, especially difference in language, culture, customs, music etc. instead of taking time to study and appreciate the differences, the missionaries thought that the easiest route is to abandon the indigenous culture, by counting it as “pagan” and impose their own culture, language, customs and music on the African converts.¹⁸

But since the second Vatican Council of 1962-1965 a new note has been sounded. As a result of this note, the spirit of indigenous church music has now begun to revive noticeably. The church has responded by encouraging and harnessing making use of whatever can be carefully collected, tested and found suitable out of the wealth of materials now available, not only for special occasions, but also in the regular worship of the church. A new freedom of expression of the faith has already

begun to manifest itself in hymns and lyrics composed and sung in indigenous idiom and music, with such indigenous musical instruments as drums and songs augmented by handclapping and dancing. Naturally, such hymns spread easily and widely and become sources of encouragement and inspiration; they make Africans feel at home in worship, deeply stirred, attracted and touched at emotional depths which foreign liturgies cannot reach.¹⁹

VII. The Future of Christian Hymnody in Nigeria

The following guidelines are similar in some way with that of the western hymnody but there are some differences:

1. It should be in short phrases
2. African music is narrative, therefore the thoughts should be expounded stanza by stanza in order of flow of thought.
3. There may be slight melodic alterations due to tonal inflexions, but this must be few,
4. Remember that hymns are in stanzas not through-composed.
5. African hymns should have refrains (choruses).
6. The use of familiar objects and figure of speech should be incorporated.
7. As a hymn, there should be a meter.
8. At least, the hymn must be slightly danceable and rhythmic.²⁰

With the current trend of events one could “prognosticate into the future” of Nigerian Christian hymnody.

Firstly, this genre is bound to experience changes in the future. As we know that the church which serves as the training/preparatory ground for Nigerian church music, continues to witness inventions on a daily basis.

Secondly, new styles are bound to emerge in the future, as long as new forms of musical expressions continue to develop in other genres. For example Ekiti dance style, makossa, senwele, rap styles are already

in the making to accompany congregational hymn singing. Any of them might be developed into a fully established style in future.

“The current computer and information technology advancement is going to boost the globalization of Nigerian indigenous hymn singing and consequently enhance cross-fertilization of ideas between national styles from different countries.”

Presently, indigenized hymn recording are on sales all over places on cassette, CDs and on the internets, most do not change the original tunes of the hymns but slightly alter their rhythms to allow for the easy incorporation of indigenous musical instruments, dance and beat styles.²¹

Lastly, another factor that is very likely to boost the quality and creativity of indigenization of Christian hymnody in future is the more participation of trained musicians in this genre of music who will be able to add some discipline to this indigeneity and add more professional touch to it.

These reveal clearly that “the future of Nigerian Christian hymnody promises more diverse styles, creative changes and a lot of improvement.”²²

Endnotes

1. Samuel O. Onimisi Auda, *Music and Missions in a Cross-Cultural Context*. (Ibadan: Heavensway Publisher, 2010).
2. Godwin Sadoh, “A Historical Survey of Congregational Singing and Hymnody in Nigeria,” *The Hymn*, Vol. 56, No. 3, (Fort-Worth, Texas: The Hymn Society, Summer 2005), 32-33.
3. Nathan J. Corbitt, *The Sound of the Harvest – Music’s Mission in Church and Culture*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1998), 33.
4. Godwin Sadoh, “A Historical Survey of Congregational Singing and Hymnody in Nigeria,” *The Hymn*, Vol. 56, No. 3, 31-32.
5. *Ibid.*, 32.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, 33.
8. *Ibid.*, 33-34.
9. *Ibid.*, 34.
10. Kwabena Nketia, *The Music of Africa*. (London: Mgbo Publications Ltd., 1974).
11. Tunji Vidal, “Rhythm and Metre in Yoruba Songs,” in *Nigerian Music Review*, No. 4 (Ile-Ife: Timade Ventures, 2003), 1-16.

12. Femi Adedeji, 'Classification of Nigerian Gospel Music Styles,' *Nigerian Music Review*, No. 5 (Ile-Ife: Timade Ventures, 2004), 71.
13. *Ibid*, 72.
14. Taiwo Ogunade, *Nigeria Musical Styles – African Rhythm of Unity*. (New York: Oluweri Publications, 1992), 3.
15. *Ibid*, 35
16. *Ibid*, 55, 58.
17. *Ibid*, 41.
18. Peter Falk, *The Growth of the Church in Africa*. (Kaduna: Baraka Press & Publishers Ltd., 1997), 239-240.
19. *Ibid*, 261.
20. Samuel Auda, 'Guidelines for Writing African Indigenous Hymnody,' *Christian Hymnody Lecture Note*. (Ogbomoso: Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, 2000), 26.
21. Femi Adedeji, 'Definitive and Conceptual Issues in Nigerian Gospel Music,' in *Nigerian Music Review*, Vol. 2 (Ile-Ife: Timade Ventures, 2001), 46-55.
22. _____, 'Classification of Nigerian Gospel Music Styles,' *Nigerian Music Review*, No. 5 (Ile-Ife: Timade Ventures, 2004), 74-75.



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