

MUSIC IN RELIGIOUS WORSHIP IN NIGERIA

Celestina Amara Onwudiwe

Abstract

Music is very important in life. People all over the universe spend hours listening to music, performing, composing or dancing to it. There are many reasons why music is vital in the lives of people. It gives background accompaniment for activity and provides an environment of sound in the same way that wallpaper provides a visual environment. In religious ceremonies, it has been observed that music is not just for background accompaniment but promotes a feeling of worship. It is designed to encourage an attitude of devotion and commitment to religious beliefs. This paper examines the place of music in the African Traditional Religion, Islamic and Christian Religious worships respectively.

Keywords: Music, religious worship, African traditional religion, Islamic and Christian religious worship

Introduction

Ekwueme (2008) defined music as a phenomenon using the medium of sound which is organized and manipulated into a social pattern that communicates intelligibly and meaningfully verbally or non-verbally ideas, feelings, emotions and events to the people. Blacking cited by Okafor and Okafor (2009) described music as humanly organized sound. This means that there are many sounds in creation both natural sounds and those made by living things, however, it is only sounds which have been deliberately organized by man for a particular purpose such as communication, expression of ideas, worship and so on are qualified to be called music.

The place of music in religion and religious worship is as old as religion. In Africa, the most compelling reason for music-making comes from religious experience. It is generally believed that the spiritual world is responsive to music and deeply affected by it. The gods bring songs or themes of songs to their worshippers. Hence worship always finds its most intense expression in music-making, which can go on for hours or days during major religious festivals. Betchwars (2016) has it that music has a way of filling in the gaps in thought, feeling, and emotion that words cannot do justice, which can be incredibly powerful when accompanied by a spiritual belief. This paper, therefore, examines the relationship between music and religion in African traditional religion, Islamic and Christian religious worship respectively.

Music and African Traditional Religion

Religion is a universal phenomenon found in every human settlement. It is human beings' spontaneous awareness of a living power wholly and infinitely greater than oneself, mysterious, unseen yet present and acceptable reality. In any of the various categories of religion such as animism, fetishism, polytheism and monotheism, music is a functional

element. According to Madum cited by Idolor (2002), this common feature in religious worship, music, is found in instrumental, vocal, dance or a combination of two or all of these forms. It is meant to praise the deity for good things such as provision, protection and redemption. At other times, it invokes the deity into the worship atmosphere, takes control of the sequence in the procedures of worship, blesses and possibly facilitates the possession of the worshippers. The later is achieved with the aid of some music specifics, by which the psyche of the devotees is stimulated to facilitate the readiness of their body for divine habitation of the deity.

Music is used to petition the deity for individual and collective needs in much the same way confession of a misdemeanour committed by devotees are expressed through songs for forgiveness. Through a combination of other arts such as psych-cosmic drama and dance, the evils and misfortunes of a passing year are collectively expunged from the community in traditional African society.

According to Idolor (2002), religious processions be they ritualistic or proclamation are accompanied by suitable kinds of music. In the initiation of new members, not only do music repertoires function as parcels of rules and regulations of the cult, they are scrolls which embody the ideals and practices associated with the deity. In the whole process of praise, requisition, supplication, confession, admonition, initiation and proclamation, the music content and practice in terms of structure, idioms, text, dynamics, tempo, performance gestures and mood synchronize with the theme of the activity to yield the social and spiritual expectations of the devotees. The musical instruments, costume and other non-musical paraphernalia combine to effectuate the symbolic relevance of religious practices to man. Through music, many of the mysteries of life are given explanations. Some of these mysteries include the cosmology, the purpose of man's existence, fortunes and misfortunes in man's endeavours and life after death. Arising from these explanations, souls are consoled, duties are shared and hopes are restored.

Furthermore, Aluede (2006) writing on the uses of music in the African traditional society said that music is used as curative or healing therapy; this is the act of using musical sounds in person's life by native doctors, herbalists and faith healers. Examples of faith healing therapy are the ones carried out by traditional religious groups among the Igbeukeu and Iyayi cults of southern Nigeria. According to Aluede (2006), faith healers base their strength on religious prayers and confessions of sins to release the mentally sick people from their low dejected emotional spirit which are responsible for their physical ailments. According to him, faith healing has serious reliance on music which is a major vehicle in the healing process.

Music in Islamic Religious Worship

Ekwueme (2008), Islamic and oriental ways of life have been imbibed by many African people that in many situations it is difficult, if not impossible to distinguish between the original African traditional cultural ways and those which have been introduced as part of Islamic practice. Koranic chanting and other forms of African singing common especially in

the Northern parts of the country no doubt stem from the deep influence of Islam. He also observed that in the same way many string instruments especially in the bowed type, the voils and fiddles might have become much more in use as a result of Islamic and other oriental influences.

In Islamic worships, chants are used for all rituals during prayers and worship in the mosque and elsewhere. According to Ekeueme (2008), the chants are intoned and sung in the Arabic language with texts from the Koran. The chants are sung by one soloist, the chief Imam and reechoed by the Muadh dhin, who is a great vocalist and who can sing about two octaves comfortably producing such forceful, commanding and compelling music. The Imam does all the recitations and chanting and at every posture- bending, standing and sitting while the Muadh dhin assists. Though there is no congregational participation in the chanting, it calls the people to prayer and draws their attention to the invisible presence of the almighty Allah. From the Islamic chants came several songs among the Yorubas- sakara, fuji, dadakwada. These can be used for both prayers and social entertainments.

Music in Christian Religious Worship

Irrespective of denomination, Christian worship cannot be complete without music. Music is the bedrock of the Christian liturgy. There are very wide repertoires of music among the various Christian denominations such as hymns, chants, cantata, psalms, carols, oratorio, choruses, praises and anthems both in native languages, English and other languages.

For Christian worship, music is used to invoke divine presence, divine action and atmosphere for worship through hymns, anthems, mass, cantatas, praises and so on. Music is a way of honouring God in majesty and holiness and as a way of showing respect and thanksgiving to God. According to Hablitzel (2010), inspired writers recognize music's ability to turn the thoughts of worshipers toward God. Within the school of the prophets, "Music was made to serve a holy purpose, to lift the thoughts to that which is pure, noble, and elevating, and to awaken in the soul devotion and gratitude to God". The psalmist purposed to sing praises to God, praising Him as long as he lived with all his being (Ps. 9:2; 104:33). Isaiah entreats us to "praise the Lord in song, for He has done excellent things" (Isa. 12:5, NASB.) As a response to the Lord's healing, Hezekiah declares his intent to have songs played on stringed instruments at the house of the Lord all the days of his life (Isa. 38:20). Paul invites us to sing and make melody with our hearts to the Lord (Eph. 5:19). The use of music to declare one's adoration to God for who He is and what He has done is deeply rooted in Scripture.

According to Brewer (2016), music allows worshippers to express their love to God with their whole being. Singing is one of the ways in which Christians express their love towards God with their whole being. They engage every part of their being in worship to God. Worshipping through music changes and transforms the worshippers. It inclines their hearts to God in ways other forms can't accomplish. Worship strengthens worshippers, convicts, builds up, and even restores them. In other words, when we sing and devote our whole selves

to God, something godly happens within us.

Again for Christians, the purpose of music goes beyond mere instruction, however. In many ways, it allows for a direct connection with God in ways sermons can't or don't. Singing allows a part of our hearts to speak to God in a way that doesn't happen as we hear the spoken word. Have you ever noticed that something incredible happens when we sing? You can feel it when you sing alone, but most especially when you sing as part of a community, a congregation in worship. Something awakens not only in the heart of each person but also in the collective heart of the body of Christ, connecting us and to God in the deepest part of who we are. Singing as a part of Christian worship is so much more than a mere mental exercise. God created us to communicate with the very depths of our spirit, and singing is a way we can accomplish this in a profound and meaningful way.

Music is a way of teaching the gospel.

Hymns and spiritual songs take the Christian faith and compact it. The melody and phrasing of the music make our faith memorable. Before a word from the scripture is read or preached in the service, Christians are believed to have already taken on the page after page through singing. Hymns and other forms of music instruct us in the Good News, touching our hearts as well as our minds.

Christian worship songs also foster learning to praise God amid suffering. Songs like this native Igbo song:

*Onye nwe anyi, ezitewo
Ndi muo ozi ya, ka o nonyere anyi,
Na onodu anyi, nemetu ya n'obi,
Eze m, ezem, eze m na-adi ndu.*

This means that God has sent down his angels to be with us because our condition touches his heart. This encourages Christian to trust and praise God even in the face of obstacles hoping for God to intervene in due course. In this way, music brings great relieve and consolation to those who might have come to Christian gathering with one problem or the other and elevating their spirit above their present situations.

Music is used for confession and propitiation of sins in the Christian religion. The lyrics of the songs, its mood, tempo and bodily expressions of the singer call the worshippers to an understanding of their miserable sinful state and how helpless they are before God. This state of helplessness helps the devotees to confess their sins and seek forgiveness from God as well as obtain mercy and favour from God.

Music equally serves as a tool for healing among the Christian adherents. In 1 Samuel chapter 17 verse 10, the Holy Bible gives a vivid account of how David played the lyre to cure King Saul of his mental problem –it was said that God sent evil spirits upon him. This healing nature of music is still evident among the Christian denominations. Stories of people

who got healed both physically and emotionally during praise and worship sessions in Christian gatherings abound. Many pastors and priests make use of music in conducting deliverance and prayers and testimonies follow most of their ministrations. An example is Rev. Fr. Ejike Mbaka of the Amen Adoration Ministry Enugu, Nigeria who carries out most of his deliverance sessions and prayers mostly with singing and dancing and making melodies to God that are usually followed with lots of testimonies.

Conclusion

The place of music in religious worship cannot be over-emphasized. It plays a vital role in worship both in the African traditional religion, Islamic and Christian religions respectively. From using musical chants for calls for prayers among Muslims, invocation, appeasement, praises, healing, thanksgiving in both ATR and Christianity, it is very clear that music is vital for religious worships and no religious worship would be complete without one form of music or the other.

References

- Aluede, C.O. (2006). *Music therapy in traditional African societies: Origin, basis and application in Nigeria*. Retrieved December 01, 2020 from [https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Music-Therapy-in-Traditional African Societies%3A-and-Aluede/792cd7d13d5e6633d3ab60357dac228596ba6930](https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Music-Therapy-in-Traditional-African-Societies%3A-and-Aluede/792cd7d13d5e6633d3ab60357dac228596ba6930)
- Blacking, J. (1987). *A common sense view of all music*. New York: Cambridge University
- Betchwars, H. (2016). *The desire for music and its impact in religion*. Retrieved December 01, 2020 from <https://pages.stolaf.edu/musicandreligion/2016/09/18/the-desire-for-music-and-its-importance-in-religion/>
- Brewer, G. (2016). *Four purposes of music in worship*. Retrieved December 01, 2020 from <http://www.cfdiocese.org/bishopsblog/4-purposes-of-music-in-worship/>
- Ekwueme, L.U. (2008). *A basic guide to music appreciation*. Lagos: Apex Books
- Hablitzel, R. (2010). *Music in worship-a look at a difficult but important subject*. Retrieved December 01 2020 , from <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2010/09/music-in-worship>
- Idolor, E. (2002). *Music in Africa: Facts and illusions*. Lagos: Stirling-Horden
- Okafor, R. & Okafor, C. (2009). *Music and national development in Nigeria*. Enugu: New generation