

YOUTH SONGS: A TYPE OF IGBO CHORAL MUSIC IN IGBO CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

by

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This paper is concerned with the birth of the Youth Fellowship, acceptability, and the place of youth songs in Igbo Christian worship; with particular reference to the Niger Diocese of the Anglican Church of Nigeria, whose headquarters are at Onitsha, which is on the left bank of the river Niger in the South Eastern part of Nigeria.

It is important to look into the role of music and its effect on Igbo religion before and after the advent of Christianity. This will lead us to assimilating the circumstances that led to the birth of the Youth Fellowship that brought the Youth Songs.

Music in Igbo society was very much involved in, if not derived from religious life. The Igbo strongly believed in a supreme God, *Chukwu* or *Chineke* who was the creator of mankind and everything in the world, including the lesser gods to whom powers were given by *Chineke* to control the various aspects of nature and the activities of man. Therefore the Igbo worshipped their gods regularly; and no matter how many times this was done, music accompanied most stages of it. Even after the advent of Christianity in Nigeria, Kingslake stated that "every Nigerian gets a kick out of music and puts a kick into it... at any time of the day or night if you listen you can hear singing and the thudding of drums". (Kingslake 1957:17)

One of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria with a population of over ten million people, the Igbo are mainly farmers, traders, and tradesmen. They have always appreciated that through their sacrifices and religious songs they appease their gods into benevolence, since they depend and look upon them for rich harvests and steady progress in their trade and social life. In short, the role of music in Igbo religious life cannot be over-emphasized. This has been cogently outlined by W.W.C. Echezona:

Dances and songs of a religious or ceremonious nature play a large part in religion where they constitute acts of worship or accompaniment to such acts. The extemporized words of songs, the swell of the music, rhythmic motions of dance and the same action heighten the religious sentiment. Other acts of a ritual nature... are largely musical. (Echezona 1956:46).

This explains why music has always played a vital role in the traditional religion of the Igbo. There is no Igbo activity from birth to death and including burial, that is not associated with music-making. In a nutshell, religion and music are the two main folk interests of the Igbo. As a rule, they go hand in hand.

When the C.M.S. (Church Missionary Society) established in Igboland by 1857 with a base at Onitsha, which has remained the seat of the Niger Diocese, many converts were made. The success of the early missionaries was so glaring that "it is true to say that only among the Igbos has there been what could be called a mass movement towards

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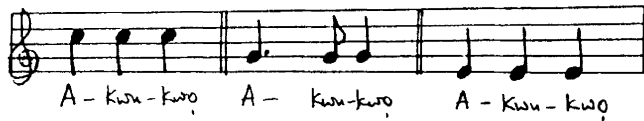
Christianity" (Leith-Ross 1939:297). The missionaries led the converts into abandoning their gods, their religious affiliations and beliefs. They were made to believe that everything associated with their way of life, including their music, was 'heathen' and 'unclean'. This was a sincere attempt on the part of the missionaries to convert them completely to the true worship of the only one God.

The early missionaries in Africa translated hymn-tunes into the vernacular for converts. According to Parrinder, these church hymns "have been sung to the tunes.... which have no kinship with traditional African music. And the tragic result has been that these hymns are utter nonsense (Parrinder 1956:37). In Louw's point of view, they are completely "outside the musical medium that lies closest to their heart" (Louw 1958:50). Shaffer argued that "to the ordinary villager, they are virtually ineffective" (Shaffer 1965:39). It is true that the hymn-tunes lack some emotional feelings because of that taste of foreignness, nevertheless this writer does not share the views of these scholars because they could not be generalized in all parts of Africa. The hymn-tunes truly lacked that kinship with traditional African music but with the early Igbo Christians of the Niger Diocese for example, the hymns were not completely messed up as a result of this. As a matter of fact, these hymns had always been, and are still being performed and well enjoyed in Igbo Christian churches as much as is obtainable in English churches. The missionaries deserve commendation for providing the converts these hymns in vernacular. This was a great achievement. It was aimed at making the hymns emotionally felt. This actually worked to some extent. Although they lacked certain African musical qualities, nevertheless these hymns actually made some impact. After all they were used effectively in converting many souls. It is therefore wrong to dismiss them as having served no useful purpose; or being completely useless to the Christians. A Jesuit writer on mission theory once wrote that it is inconceivable for an African to worship God without dancing. I quite agree that the rhythmic structure of the hymns does not offer any opportunity for such physical expression. This is where the hymns lost much grip on the masses.

A close study of the translated hymns revealed that there is not much correlation between the melodic contour of these hymns and the Igbo tonal reflexion of words. But not a "total disregard for the semantic tone-patterns" (Lenherr 1968:34). In support of the findings of eminent scholars like Blacking (1967:116), Bright (1963:26), Herzog (1934:465), Weman (1960:204), von Hornbostel (1928:55), List (1961:30, 1963:2), Jones (1959:246), and Schneider (1961:204); on the relationship between speech and song, this writer wishes to contend that Igbo speech-tone not only has considerable influence on the melodic line, but makes the melody more authentic, acceptable and gives it that aesthetic value in the folk concept of a model or a standard melody. Nettl rightly pointed out that "music is something like a language. It must be understood to be appreciated" (Nettl 1973:18). Because of this lack of correlation between speech tone and the melodic contour of the hymns, tonal pitches of words were effaced in some cases. The majority of the congregation could not therefore easily make out the meanings of many hymns sung at services without contemplation.

In Igbo language, a word could have many meanings depending on its intonation, and of course its function in a sentence. For example, the word *akwa* has about four unrelated

meanings. Spoken on low-low pitch, a/kwa; it means a bed or bridge. In this particular



Ex. 1

case, the intended meaning depends on the context of usage and the function of the word in a phrase or sentence. Spoken on high-low pitch, it means cloth. And spoken on mid-high pitch, it means an egg. Spoken on high-high pitch, it means cry. This implies that a melodic line should correlate as much as possible with the speech tone melody for intelligibility of the song text.

In the above example, the word A/kwu/kwo, which means book, is intoned mid-mid in Igbo language. The melodies written as examples did correlate as much as possible with the tonal inflexion of the word. The single word speech-tone limit is not strictly adhered to at certain points in Igbo language because when words are used in sentences, phrases or statements, they attach themselves to the preceding ones. This results in loss of some vowels in preference to fluency. For example:

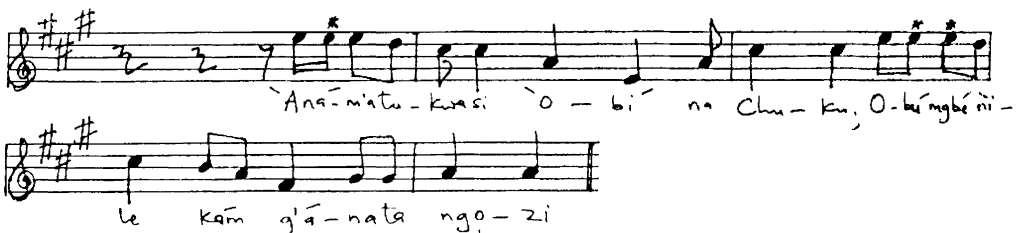
- 1 Ndi na amaro Chukwu ka ebere ha na eme mu (Words spoken singly.)
- Ndi n'amaro Chukwu k'ebere ha n'emem'. (Words combined in a sentence)
- 2. O walu achicha di nime afere. (Words spoken singly)
- O wal'achicha di nim'afere' (Words combined in a sentence)

The English translations of both sentences are as follows:

- 1. I sympathise with those who do not know God.
- 2. He cut the bread which is inside the plate.

In all cases, the loss of vowels is usually indicated with the use of apostrophes. This situation creates a link for the tonal combination of the affected words. This applies equally to the melody lines.

It is common to see musical pitch remaining at the same level while tonal speech moves either upwards or downwards. It is however rare for melodic contour to move contrary to speech contour. When it does, the melody as a whole usually sets the final point of the speech movement in such circumstance. The points marked with asterisks in Ex. 2 indicate places where the musical pitches remained at the same levels while the speech contour moved.



Ex. 2



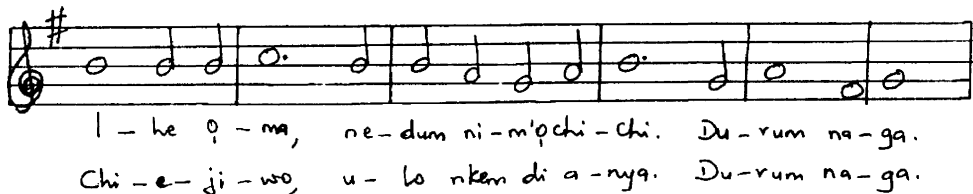
Ex. 3

Example 3 followed speech contour strictly. The English translation is "I put my trust in God; it is forever I will be blessed".

Citing the Christmas carol 'O come all ye faithful', sung to the tune of *Adeste Fideles*, as an example where hymn-tunes distorted the meanings of words, Ekwueme pointed out that in the second verse, the fourth and fifth lines *Ezi Chineke* and *Nke Anekegh eke* were not properly intoned. When they are sung to the melodic line, "they become intoned to a meaning which can only be 'God's pig, which is never shared', with the implication that pigs presented as thanks offerings by parishioners were never shared with the lay-men". (Ekwueme 1973:14)

As a result of similar pit-falls in many of the hymns, there is often the unconscious manipulation of pitches by a great number of the congregation to match the tonal inflexion of words. This equally affects the melodies adversely, giving the melodic lines different shapes and patterns. In some big churches where well trained choirs are in attendance, it is a common thing to hear two or more different melodies for the same tune going on at the same time; the choir abiding strictly to the correct melody while some members of the congregation, in an attempt to adhere to the tonal inflexion of the words, reshape the melody.

Besides this, the problem created by the differences between the syllabic patterns of words and the musical intervals is equally glaring. For example, listening to the first verse of the song 'Lead kindly light', sung to the tune of 'Sandon', it is easily observed that the first word of the first line *Ihe* is allocated three musical beats equal to three syllables instead of two beats equal to the two syllables of which the word consists: I/he. As a two syllabic word, it would definitely sound much better and more articulate with two musical beats assigned to it. *Chi*, the first word of the third line of the same song, is a one-syllabic word, but assigned two musical beats equivalent to two syllables.



Ex. 4.

The birth of the Youth Fellowship

As the congregation was battling with these problems, hymn-singing started facing a downward trend in many churches. Membership started thinning down, especially among the young men and women. It became apparent that either a change or modification or variation is very much needed in church singing to sustain people's interest in Sunday services. The present Archdeacon of Onitsha, the Ven. C.A. Mbonu, described

the situation in the following words:

In the 1940s and early 1950s when Church attendances were running down the scale and only a few youths were in the church, the Niger Diocese which included the present Delta Diocese, Owerri Diocese, Enugu Diocese, Aba Diocese, Benin Diocese, and Warri Diocese, was faced with the problem of what to do to save the Church from total collapse. (Mbonu, C.A.)

And again, the majority of the congregation in most churches could not read fluently, and many had bad eyesight, which was even worsened by the use of spectacles with the wrong lenses. Combined with the fact that the hymns did not offer members opportunity for physical expression of emotional feelings, hymn singing was usually left to untrained, ill-trained and inexperienced choirs to battle with.

This was the situation when the Youth Fellowship was founded on Wednesday, 8th October, 1953, through the initiative of the Reverend W.R.G. Willet, an English clergyman. As a result, he was appointed the first Youth Organiser in the Niger Diocese. Soon after the founding of this Fellowship, it rapidly spread to other Protestant Churches and to the Roman Catholic Church.

Both age and education were considered before grouping young people for activities in the Igbo community. This principle was probably borne in mind in drawing the age limit to membership. The age limit at the time of the founding of the Fellowship was between 15 and 35 years, but as it became more popular with its songs, membership was thrown open as a result of much pressure from aspirants above the upper age limit.

The Youth Fellowship was established for the following purposes:

- (i) As a militant wing of the church designed to revamp, stabilize, solidify, and ensure the growth of the church.
- (ii) As a medium for entertainment and evangelism. For the motto of the Youth Fellowship reads thus: 'To be diligent in study, faithful in witness, willing in service and singing songs through worship'.
- (iii) As a vehicle for social interaction.
- (iv) As a medium for involving the young men and women in active participation in church activities and development.
- (v) As a channel for bringing up well organised and disciplined future leaders.

As a medium for entertainment and evangelism, the Youth Fellowship not only encourages human relationships through singing, drumming and dancing, but essentially comes with messages embedded in the religious texts of their songs.

As a vehicle for social interaction the Youth Organisation could be viewed as an "organisation of social systems, in groups and identity relationship" which comprises its social structure (Keesing 1981:74).

As a channel for bringing about stability and solidarity in the church, the Youth Fellowship functions as a militant wing of the church, whose basic responsibility is to preach the gospel, convert more souls for Christ, uplift the down-trodden spirits, and to pull back the drop-outs, if possible.

As a channel for bringing up well-organised and disciplined future leaders, the Youth Fellowship, through its constitution, organisation, and religious activities, instills discipline into members. Moreover, many of the youth songs not only serve religious purposes but function as an important mechanism of social and moral control. In short,

the Youth Fellowship came 'at the fullness of time'.

Acceptability of the youth songs.

Just before the establishment of the Youth Fellowship, Igbo Christians were battling with two musical genres; that of indigenous music which is inherent in them and which the church forbade them from performing, and that of hymn-tunes which did not make sufficient emotional impact on them. It was a common sight to see some members of the congregation peeping through the windows to have a glimpse of a traditional orchestra passing by the church during worship. Children normally ran out to have a full view and if given the chance, joined the orchestral group for the rest of the day. This attitude portrays the grip traditional music had on the people, and goes further to prove that African music has always been rooted in the religious and spiritual life of the people. This is perhaps why the musical revolution initiated by youth songs was accepted by all and sundry.

From the onset, youth songs were not used for Sunday worship proper. They were only sung on special occasions like during the harvest, or special thanksgiving, evangelism, carols, labour, wedding, and burial. They were sung a capella with enough foot-tapping to add more vigour and maintain strict tempo. Later on, the use of instruments was introduced.

The significant thing about the youth songs is that the composers were conscious of the ardent commitment of the Igbo to active participation in music and dance. They saw this as the only way of making impact. They therefore came up with institutional music completely affiliated to the church in terms of its texts and functions. And to the cultural tradition in terms of its mode and performance style. All youth songs are based on either biblical texts, or on religion and moral teaching, or stories gathered from the Bible. (See Exs. 5, 6, and 7.)

$\text{♩} = 110$

So - num mee ka Je ho - va' d'u - ku.

So - num mee ka Je ho - va' d'u - ku.

Ex. 5. 'Sonum mee ka Jehova di uku', O magnify the Lord with me, Psalm 34, 3

These qualities made them easily acceptable and afforded the organisation that blessing and full support of the Church right from its inception. Conversely, the youth songs were structurally related to Igbo traditional music and social life. They were vibrant, new, and different from the hymns and canticles. They had certain characteristics peculiar to them. They had communicative powers because their language and form were quite familiar to the people. They were short and aurally transmitted. And what is more, they were easily committed to memory. They were characterized by lively tempo, instrumentation and dancing. They came with a motion which triggered all kinds

$\text{♩} = 110$

Sọ- púvú Jé-hà- va, si-te n'aku gi.
 Ọ-ba gi g'e- jù- pú- ta n'ike vi- jua- fọ.

Ex. 6. 'Sopuru Jehova site n'aku gi', Honour the Lord with your substance, Proverbs 3, 9-10.

$\text{♩} = 130$

Ọnyá - jí n'è - fè - di n - ma -
 Ọnyá - jí n'è - fè - di n - ma -
 N - di M'ọ - zì n'è - to - ja -
 En'ụ - wa ná - jà - ja nma Onyayi n'è -
 fe - di n - ma -

Ex. 7. 'Onye ayi na-efe di nma', He whom we worship is good.

of responses in people's bodies. The songs are usually intoned by a cantor or soloist. At the end of the cantor's/soloist's phrase, everybody joins in a chorus or refrain. The congregation usually seems to have been injected with new life which spurs it into action. This is because indigenous songs help people to respond more appropriately in musical situations.

According to the Archdeacon of Onitsha, Ven. C.A. Mbonu, the first indigenous Youth Organiser in the Niger Diocese: "indigenous airs appeal to the taste of the masses more". Youth songs generate a tremendous motor behaviour on both the singers and the listeners, no matter their age. This motor behavioural response "intensifies one's enjoyment of music through the feelings of increased involvement and the propulsion that articulating the beat by physical movement generates" (Nketia 1975:206). The effect of the youth songs on Igbo Christians is generated by the social experiences inherent in

Igbo cultural tradition which goes deep because "people's responses to music cannot be fully explained without some reference to their experiences in culture of which the notes are signs and symbols" (Blacking 1973:52). And "because the form speaks directly to the consciousness of the singer's race, the participation is total and unforced....." (Ekwueme 1973:18). Like every African music, the verbal texts of the youth songs "express the African's attitude to life, his hopes and fears, his thoughts and beliefs" (Nketia 1963:4).

Youth songs captivate almost everybody because of their performance styles. The question of standing still with hymn book in one hand does not arise. Both performers and listeners are easily possessed by these songs "because of what the form means to each listener in terms of human experience" (Blacking 1973:52).

The place of youth songs in Igbo Christian worship.

Soon after the founding of the Youth Fellowship, youth songs came into prominence. These utility purpose borne songs became so popular that they spread like wild-fire and became communal household property. It is no surprise that youth songs are often heard at informal gatherings and outside the church. Individuals equally formed the habit of singing these songs while trekking, working, relaxing, shopping, cooking, bathing, and so on. This confirms Blacking's statement that "if the value of music in society and culture is to be assessed, it must be described in terms of the attitude and cognitive processes involved in its creation, and the functions and effect of the musical product in society" (Blacking 1973:53). The clergy observed the popularity of the youth songs and their effective grip on the masses, and used them effectively in revamping and multiplying the Church population. The effect of youth songs on the masses worked like magic. People appeared to have been awakened from deep slumber and injected with new life. Ever since then, the youth songs have attained a remarkable place in Igbo Christian worship. It is now quite inconceivable to conduct a special church service without youth songs playing a very active role. As a matter of fact, the congregation usually anxiously looks forward to the introduction of the youth songs which when they come, are received with zeal and gladdened hearts. Without them, special church services appear unimaginably dull due to lack of active participation and freedom of physical expression by the congregation.

With their popularity and firm grip on the masses, youth songs stand a good chance of displacing the translated hymn-tunes in the future.

Conclusion

The youth songs are a new musical genre which developed freely without strings attached to the hymn-tune modes. They have their own imagery and a different line of thought. They are almost completely free from Western influence and therefore purely indigenous. They serve as a stepping stone towards making a dream a reality — the desire to indigenise hymn-singing in Christian worship. It is clear that religious music plays a vital role in communication with God. No doubt communication will become more realistic and effective when the music is indigenized. For Nash observed that the "most valued form of music in some societies is that which follows tradition perfectly" (Nash 1961:8). And "all the music produced by the wedding of Christianity to Nigerian idioms is musically interesting" (Edet 1964:112). The youth songs possess these qualities and therefore could stand the test of time. Since it is clear that "the historical movement of

events in Africa is on the side of more African music in the Church" (Kauffman 1964:110) the youth songs could not be displaced by a non-indigenous music.

So far, these songs are not yet fully permitted to challenge the pre-eminence of the hymn-tunes in Sunday worship proper. At the moment, they are used alternately so to say. The problem is that some very keen and ardent Igbo Christians who are so used to the hymn-tunes may not only argue against, but strongly oppose the idea of youth songs taking the place of the hymns in Sunday worship. To them it is unthinkable to part with a well established system. They still regard the hymns as the most suitable medium for communication with a meek and gentle God who to their understanding or assumption may be frowning at the youthful exuberance exhibited in youth songs performance. They feel convinced that there could never be a substitute to the hymns. But to the vast majority of the Igbo Christians who love and sing tunes based on the traditional folk melodies, nothing could match popular indigenous songs like the youth songs.

In the writer's view, both musical genres have so far played vital roles in Igbo Christian worship. The hymns were effectively used in laying the church foundations. The early converts, who had no choice then, sang, enjoyed and valued them. The hymn singing markedly distinguished them from the non-believers and was more or less a thing of pride to them. Later on, however, it became clear that the monotonous and rigid nature of the Sunday worship started boring the congregation. There was undoubtedly need for a change or at least a variation in the system, to add more life to worship. The yearning for departure from the restrictions of the old order grew so rapidly and strong that by 1950 there was a noticeable downward trend in responses to Sunday worship and other church activities by a good number of the congregation. After the establishment of the Anglican Youth Fellowship which created the youth songs in 1953 there was a remarkable improvement in both Church attendance and the masses' participation and devotion to worship and development.

The emotional effect of the youth songs on the masses was so great and could neither be hidden nor suppressed. It was so openly shown that one need not doubt the fact that they not only belong to the people who sing them but actually reflect the spirit and personalities of the singers. The mere fact that the youth songs belong to the people makes them more authentic.

Meanwhile they have been effectively utilized in combination with the hymns to make worship more lively. If a complete change is desired, it should be gradual and systematic. Youth songs should be given more chances at worship but with caution. Gradually, with increasing demand, more and more of them could be squeezed in. With this approach, it will become pertinent to adopt the youth songs completely in Sunday worship proper when the few members who may have opposed the move will no longer be reticent about accepting the idea.

So far, the youth songs have found a comfortable place at the hub of affairs in Igbo Christian worship. When eventually they are given the chance with fuller attention devoted to them, they will develop into new congregational singing. It will not end there. They will be effectively used for different church activities and services, getting the masses fully involved and committed to worship and to the church with better and quicker results.

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