

## **A Literature Review Perspective on Christian music in the context of African cultural complexities**

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**Abstract:** Christian music in African has overtime gained popularity with the rise of various religious groups using music to appeal to the conscience of their audience because of the love of music as part of the African cultural practices. This article seeks to review various literature to understand how to integrate the biblical understanding of Christian music with the complexities of African cultural singing objective. It has been proofed that Africans by nature are socially enriched through entertainment especially through music (Kwabena, 2000) and thus is believed to be one way of reaching many cultures in Africa especially with the gospel. Couple with the influx of modern music trends, religious singing in general is facing a number of issues including temptation to compromise biblical principles in an attempt to appeal to the African cultural mindset. This has led to differing contextualized Christian music approaches that seem to differ from one culture to another dictated by the African traditional singing perspective on one hand and interests of the many religious singing groups and solo artists on the other hand which have sprung up moving masses after them when performing their artistry. They all have divergent approaches to gospel music and trying to outdo one another and competitively changing tact and dynamically in disregard of the principles of Christian singing as embedded in the Bible. This literature review therefore attempts to incorporate cross-cultural theories, Christian music literature and Biblical counsel in the understanding of African music complexities with a view of aligning them with biblically based music guiding principles and approaches with relevant recommendations highlighted

**Key Words:** Music, Christian Music, African Culture, Biblical Counsel, Guiding Principle.

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### **Introduction**

#### **Music Definition**

Music may be defined as that ones or sounds employed, occurring in singleline (melody) or multiplelines (harmony), and sounded or to be sounded by one or more voices or instruments, or both according to dictionary definition. The term music means sounds of instruments or singing. Degmecic defines music as ‘a flexible form of abstract thinking... using all kinds of configurations and schemes in our developmental stages in the creative and interactive purpose’ (Degmecic, 2005). On their part see music as the art of expressing feelings and meanings (Aiello, 1994); while Davies identifies music as the language of emotions (Davies, 1980). In reference to the African Music, Chernoff call it a cultural activity for organized group of people involving themselves with their own communal relationship (Chernoff, 1979). In these definitions, we find a common thing that they all agree that touches on expression of something that is only be well understood through singing and which appeals to the ego of either the participant or the target audience who are culturally connected.

#### **Culture definition**

The Cambridge English Dictionary states that culture is "the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time". According to Hoffstede, Culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others". (Hoffstede, 2011)

#### **Origin of music**

Scholars generally have not come to a conclusion as far as music origin is concern. In his submission to the subject struggles, Merriam states "that there seem to be almost no available accounts of beliefs concerning the ultimate origin of music." (Merriams, 1981)

### **Leadership through music**

According to S. Robin, leadership is "the ability to influence a group towards the achievement of goals" (Stashevsky, 2006). More precisely, Silverstone defines organizational leadership as the "ability to influence, motivate and contribute towards the effectiveness of the organizations of which they are members" (Silverthorne, 2005). In the African culture, people are convinced to a certain direction through a well thoughtful way of influencing them. Music however is one way of leading people to some ideologies which are intentionally acted or dramatized to send the intended message to a target audience. In this sense then music can shape a social order within a culture.

### **Music in the Bible**

The Bible has a lot about music and its use. In the Old Testament, David wrote a number of songs whose messages cover variety of themes. Music was first mentioned in OT in Genesis 4:21 where Jubal was referred to as the father of all those who played harp and flute; Exodus recorded song of victory by Moses and Israelites while Miriam sang and dance with tambourines. Songs of victory of David in 1 Samuel 18 and a large portion of songs recorded in Psalm by David.

New testament record instances of music engagement are seen in various passages for instance songs were sang by Jesus' disciples in Mathew at the institution of the Lord's supper (Mathew 26:30); apostles singing in Acts while in prison (Acts 16:25); songs of victory recorded in Revelation chapter 5 to praise the lamb, chapter 7 singing in worship of God, and chapter 15 are songs sung by the redeemed. The believers are admonished to speak to one another "with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from the heart to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:19).

In the temple during the Levitical system, it is said that about 10% of the Levites were musicians 1 Chronicles 15:16 ; 23:5. This is well illustrated in 2Chronicles 5:11-14; organized musicians led in a dedicatory worship, especially at the dedication of Solomon's temple.

Solomon sang 1,005 other songs [1 Kings 4:32] and many proverbs were spoken by him.

Again, music was also used in the Bible times as an expression of mourning and comforting (Matthew 9:23) and in other places as a sign of excitement in celebrations (Luke 15:25). And on other places to show a cheerful spirit. (James 5:13). Singing is to be sang in Spirit (Colossians 3:16)

Songs in the bible was also used to heal a broken heart. When Saul was moody, his servants suggest a remedy in I Samuel 16:16: ". . . seek out a man who is a skillful player on the harp; and it shall be that he will play it with his hand when the distressing spirit from God is upon you, and you shall be well." "And so it was, whenever the spirit from God was upon Saul, that David would take a harp and play it with his hand. Then Saul would become refreshed and well, and the distressing spirit would depart from him." 1 Samuel 16:23

Solomon on the other hand had this to say about singing; "Like one who takes away a garment in cold weather, and like vinegar on soda, is one who sings songs to a heavy heart" (Proverbs 25:20).

Finally songs in the Bible was recorded for future generations (Deuteronomy 31:19-22). This was meant to be a witness for them to know God's merciful acts in the past. These writings were not only meant to be a singing but a communication plan to convey a very important message to the human race. It was to be taught to the people (verse 19) and to convict them of their sin (verse 20). Songs when they are recorded, taught and sung regularly they can't be forgotten and is like a reminder of the written word of God (verse 21). It can be concluded that recording songs is important for consistency, accuracy of the messages, harmony and to instill a lasting impact on believer's' connection with God.

### **Music and order**

The Bible explains how Ezra recruited more than 200 Levites to serve in the sanctuary (Ezra 8:18-20). The instruments in use were well described and their voices were heard in unison and in harmony with the instruments. Tambourines, usually played by women, are mentioned in connection with dancing at Israelite festivals (Psa. 68:25), but were not used in the sanctuary. When believers come together the aspect of Psalm is part of worship program and thus need to edify the church with the singing but in an orderly way (1 Cor. 14:26)

### **Music in the African context**

Music plays an important role in the African culture at work, in politics, in their socio-economic engagements, in religious worship, integral development, in their moral life etc. Most of the communication medium were through music. (Nwamara, 2009). Because most of African messages were not written, songs became one of the ways to passing messages from one generation to another among others including riddles, wise sayings, proverbs, myths etc. the usage goes beyond just communicating but teaching values and morals. (Asigbo, 2012). Singers on the other hand were acting as agents of change and to warn society reminding them

of their moral obligation to adhere to the agreed set of cultural standards in the community (Soyinka, 1976). While affirming music role in a community (Agordoh, 1985), said that music is used to control social order and some instances as a coordinating tool in times of war. Music was used in seeking divine intervention for the warriors to defeat the enemy (Nettle, 1956). Music is transformational, brings healing to a soul, inspiring and bring one nearer to a divine power in the African religious setup (Achike, 2011).

With this understanding therefore, Africa is rich in traditional way of mentoring generations through singing and although there are diverse cultures with different ways of singing and doing things, one thing is out rightly identified; music was not just sounds and display, it was intentionally educative and informative to build an organized and respectable society. The baseline therefore while integrating the gospel with the dynamics of cultures through gospel music is how best can the gospel message contained in music can be passed and received by any intended culture. It is also worth noting that there was nothing secular in the African context. Cultures differ in many aspects and in some other regions of the continent, they have distinct terms and concepts for religious and secular music, with no common category of "music" to unite them (Shelemay, 1990). In this respect then, what applies in one culture may not necessarily be the same in another culture. Singing styles and performance may differ but one thing comes out clearly that the objective is one; to pass information and values. Secularism was a new term in the traditional African culture (Comaroff, 1991). Differentiating religious music and secular in the traditional African setting is difficult because culture and religion has been one and the same thing. So during the first missionaries' time in Africa, they were careful to call African way of singing secular for there could have been a cultural clash on the new Christian culture based on the bible and the way Africans understood religion and singing. So cross-cultural integration and understanding was inevitable to address emerging issues that come when cultures clash. This is still evident even in the modern scenario where there are emerging serious secular music attracting young people which may conflict with biblical philosophy of singing. The following understanding of some of the cultural theories can help us know how to integrate Christian music in different cultures in Africa and to lead these cultures into the enlightenment of the gospel truth.

### **Music and theories about communication and change**

Anthropologist Edward T. Hall in his submission of high and context theory when analyzing engagement with divergent cultures argues that communication is an important element in bringing about interaction with other cultures and is the beginning of initiating change on how other cultures can feel, behave and do (Hall, 1990). Traditionally, Africa is rich in implicit and coveted way of communicating and to that extend used different ways to express a message to the public or intended group or individual. One most commonly used is through songs in a poetic way to convey some information to a particular audience. According to Hall, high context cultures tend to rely much on non-verbal communication. It is also committed to a long term relationship which is considered as more important than task. Consequently, high context cultures focus on processes rather than end results.

In music, it has a lot of implicit messages in the statements being sang and the authors had intentions to pass this information in a special way whereby the hearers will understand very well especially in the African setting. Therefore in the gospel dispensation, it is key to understand how cultures communicate the most important social information in order to have a most productive way of evangelizing different cultures in context. Singing in the African context carries a lot of emotions and influence and especially when one have understood the culture in question, getting to know how they communicate important information. Thus it is not only performance of a task, but how the song has related with the cultural environment and what message have been received matters immensely.

### **Music institutionalization concept**

In most cases, music is intended to reach masses of people and therefore it is a quicker way of passing information to many people in a minimum time possible. Again music can address individual challenges. In his theory of individualistic versus communitarianism cultures, Hofstede alluded that individualism is where people believe in personal decision to believe or act the way you see best while in the communitarianism, people consider group or collective action as important than individual. Again the later see identity and organizational system as key to social wellbeing of a people group. They embrace institutionalized way of doing things than individualized system. He further categorized most of sub-Saharan African cultures religiously as polytheistic hence collectivism is supreme. In this case then, music guidelines, principles and philosophy will be much acceptable when it is systemized into a particular culture for it be acceptable. The other theories by Hofstede are summarized below (Hofstede, 2000) with the perspective of using music to reach diverse cultures with the gospel.

### **Music and relationships**

The theory of specific versus diffusion states that on one hand (specific), in some cultures, people separate personal lives and work, while on other cultures (diffusion) people see a connection between their personal lives and work. In the event of cross cultural interactions, there is need to understand whether there is a connection between the songs and the daily lives of the people. In some where songs are just sang for just entertainment and not necessarily to affect the lives of the people, the specific theory apply while on the other hand, when music is entrenched as part of the cultural event to define how a culture conduct itself, then diffusion model applies.

### **Music and emotions**

Cultures differ in expression of emotion and one need to be careful on language to use as well building trust with cultures so as to be able to know those with neutral tendencies of controlling their reactions while also learning how to manage revealed emotions which sometimes may be spontaneous. Music performances have to mind language and of the differing cultures so that words being heard in the singing cannot offend the cultures hearing it. Mood should also be a key factor while singing to take care of the divergent nature of emotional reactions among cultures.

### **Music and appearance**

Hofstede's other dimension is that of achievement versus ascription. On achievement, some cultures never bother with status of appearance but focus on performance while those for ascription you are valued based on how you appear, no matter how you excel, your behavior is gauged on what is seen. In this regard then, music and musicians are key components in determining the acceptability and impact of the singing itself. For cultures that see only performance not appearance, the gospel music may create an impressive impact; but for the ascription, there must be integration of both singers' outward appearance and habits with the singing itself to realize a desired outcome.

### **Music and orderliness**

The other dimension is that of sequential time and synchronous time. The former is keen on order, priorities and timeframes of doing things; while the latter is more flexible and accommodative as long as objectives and tasks are met whichever way. For purposes of fulfilling the gospel matters, both can be applied in context. Music hence need to be done in an orderly and organized manner while taking care of the message it is being given through song so that it meets the expected objective.

### **Music and context**

Internal locus of control and external locus of control depending on the environment one is exposed to. Internal seem to take control of the environment while external is being dictated by the environment. Singing carries with it emotional and influential capabilities either to influence or to be influenced by cultures they are exposed to. Cultures that seek to control are better placed to be guided to probably to internalize the Christian music on principles acceptable to their culture as well as not compromising bible concepts. On the other hand, cultures that easily accept to be controlled by environment are fully integrated into the singing guidelines as stipulated by faith community and the message that come through singing will have a better reception in the culture.

### **Contextualization of Christian music**

During the inception of Christianity in Africa, contextualizing biblical concepts in the local culture has been both smoothly a struggle. However due to divergent views of various religious groups of missionaries, they each took seemingly different approaches to have their messages accepted in the African cultures. One of which is through music performance. In reference to complexities in the African music display, Alan P. Merriam (1981) cautioned that we could impose our own prejudices which African languages have no preferred terms. Therefore before initiating religious system, there is need to study a culture, to consider a comparative view of music as one of the fundamental way of human interaction, communication and organization, whether or not the culture understands it that way or otherwise. Most of African musical performances are done by dancing and other dramatically explicit form. In essence the intended purpose is not to entertain but to pass some information through this entertainments. Therefore in the African context it was somehow difficult to differentiate a religious performance from the traditional or 'secular' performance because religion and culture in the traditional African context was seen as one and the same thing.

What then was the implication of music in the African context? The main purpose as in other form of traditional way of education was to bring up a responsive personality as Fafunwa puts it: to “produce an individual who is co-operative and conforming to the social order of the day” (Fafunwa, 1983). One way of education in the traditional African context is through cultural activities such as music. There was no formal education system though. Therefore understanding music as a way of educating people is key in contextualizing Christian philosophy of singing. Kneller noted that culture include modes of thinking, acting, and feeling, which are expressed, for instance, in religion, Language, art, and so on (Kneller, 1971).

### **Biblical perspective and cross-cultural dynamics**

In the New Testament, the Bible has two key texts that talk of a relationship between the believers and the world. In John 17:14-15, Jesus Christ said His people are simply in the world, physically present, but not of it, nor are partakers of its values. As it has been noted earlier, most valuable messages are passed through songs which are embraced by all persons across generations and cultures. Believers are called upon to not to conform themselves and their minds to the patterns of this world. (Romans 12:1-2). Knowing the dangers of encounter with worldliness, Paul could advise especially the new believers to not to align their spiritual dealings and processes as those patterns within their cultures which are not in line with the the doctrine.

Living, thinking and acting like those who do not know God will be doing Him a great disservice. Even non-believers knows that “by their fruits you shall know them,” (Mathew 7:16) and Christians are called upon to exhibit the fruit of the Spirit within them. By not being of the world means not to immerse ourselves in what the world values. Pleasure is not to take us away from the true worship of God.

### **Music and charisma**

In the music world there seem to be the focus on the presenter rather than the message in the presentation. To be charismatic means to have an ecstatic experience through speaking or any performance. (Dictionary). Paul in his letter to the Corinthians while addressing them on reconciliation that the most important thing is that Christ died for us to connect us with God and we live thus not for ourselves and therefore this should be our boast not our outward appearance (2Corinthians 5:12-15). Again on his physical body weakness and contemptible speech when he appeared before them but his letters are weighty and powerful (2Corinthians 10:7-11), Paul appeals not to judge by outward appearance (verse 7) and again he counselled against abusive practices that people may be expecting presenters to perform instead he referred to the power of the word that the weakness of the person should not overshadow the written word which is the supreme message from God to all cultures regardless of how they are (verse 10-11) . This therefore means that the most important part in public function is the power behind the message being given and thus should be the case in singing. That those whom we serve or listen to our singing should not glory us nor our art of performance but glory God in heaven (Mathew 5:16) and are attracted to the message of salvation through the blood of His son. Paul explained the source of power from God (Ephesians 6:10-20) which make believers strong and use it to defeat the enemy. The concern therefore is not to fight on the best performing or trying to show a cultural might over another or one Christian music performance over a cultural presentation. The motive of singing is to lift up Christ and by doing so we are fighting the powers of darkness which take hostage humanity. So when considering integration of Christian music, our most important element is to fight the effect of sin among the human race and not the personalities themselves. It should not be seen as fighting a culture. Again this can only be done by putting the whole armor of God to be able to overcome. On the other hand, singing is a sign of cheerfulness. (James 5:13). A cheerful heart is to sing unto the Lord.

### **Music and the patterns of the world**

One of the most vital verses concerning a relationship scenario between a Christian convert and the world he live in is found in Romans 12:2, which tells us that we are not to conform to the pattern of the world any longer, but rather we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” The words “conform...to the pattern” are in Greek word, *suschematizo*, meaning, “to form according to a pattern or mold.” (Walter Bauer, 2001). The word used is ‘*aion*’ (age) and not ‘*cosmos*’ (world). Richard Trench explains thus: “*Aion* came to mean all that exists in the world under conditions of time.... *Aion* includes all the thoughts, opinions, maxims, speculations, impulses, and aspirations present in the world at any given time, which may be impossible to accurately define but which still constitute a real and effective power—the moral or immoral atmosphere we breathe.”(Trench, 1989). In John 12:31-33 Jesus referred the ruler of this world as the devil the deceiver and father those who love worldly pleasure and lies (John 8:44-47) having created ungodly environment to mislead the people into

conformity to it. Instead when the people whether they are singing or doing anything lift Jesus up, many will be drawn to Him.

The workings of the enemy who is the prince of the air and a spirit who use sons of disobedience to incline to lust of flesh and fulfil the desires of flesh and mind. (Ephesians 2:1-3)

In these texts, there is a connection between what should entail in the Christian behavior and in worshipping God in relation to the environment they live in. John the revelator was shown the redeemed in heaven who did not conform to the worldly pattern and defeated the devil by the blood of the lamb singing a new song of victory over sin (Revelation 15). This was like a replica of what happened when the Israelites were delivered from the hand of pharaoh in now takes up another element of the Exodus story in the time of Moses, those who were delivered from Pharaoh in Egypt (Exodus 15).

Through singing people may still remain in the world and thus our music may be darkened by the world instead of our music enlightening the world about Christ and the great plan of salvation. The best integration thus is where the Christian music convict the world of sin and giving hope to all cultures; carrying a united message and bringing harmony and into one flock as Christ stated in John 10:16 that He have others who should be brought in to the flock. If this is missing in our singing, then Christian singing is as good as any other secular songs which purpose only to entertain.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Integration is not to have cultures realize their goodness to God but instead is to realize God's goodness to them. Christian music is not singing to see its beauty but to express the beauty of God and His plan to all human race through music. Theories on cross-cultural matters are thus meant to make us understand how to relate with divergent culture in context. In the secular world as also in the African culture, music is sang to the comfort of the hearers. But the church singing is different from the secular world. Christians meet to build each other up by encouraging one another by studying the gospel, reminding themselves of God's covenant promises, confessing their sins, practicing their spiritual gifts which include songs and much more. "To each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor. 12:7). The word 'common' here is key in a religious congregation. It means what benefits the whole congregants and uplift their souls to God is what is important and part of that aspect in worship is through singing out the best insightful passages of the Bible which addresses the spiritual needs of the people and give them a hope for eternal life.

Songs speak both through lyrics and the associations people making the music. Care should be taken on the use of popular songs, and our motive should be to communicate the much needed truth. Music should not be used to make one relevant or to emotionally make a following.

In this regard then, the purpose of songs is to speak to the hearts of people, to bring healing to those who are affected emotionally and this fittingly apply to the human sin situation and the challenges of life like illnesses and many others. Jesus told the disciples, "And into whatsoever city ye enter, and they receive you, eat such things as are set before you" (Luke 10:8). Jesus was advising His disciples on matters more than just diet. They were to be sensitive when engaging different culture. . They were to adapt to local customs and culture but only when those practices do not violate biblical principle (Warren, 1996).

From the literature studied, it is evident that for music in any Christian organization to be relevant to the contemporary African social setting contextualizing Biblical principles are key for an effective receptivity of their mission plan. It is also explicit that African music was not merely sound, dance and display but educative and ethical value transmission agency. It is therefore prudent for the Christian performers and composers to underscore the purpose of singing to achieve not merely entertainment to attract and appeal to the emotion but to shape character and social norms. This is where the African motive of singing and the Biblical teaching of edification meet but what is needed only is to redirect the divine inclination to the Biblical God. On contextualization, all literature and the Biblical writings agree on unity in diversity when applying any guiding principles including music but same principles used so that compromise cannot be incurred instead cautionary accepting those African practices that does not negate Christian standards as entailed in the Bible.

Finally, as much as the world is changing, the word of God never changes thus are the words used when singing. They are drawn from the Holy Bible whose source is the transcendent, infinite and unchanging God. This means that what we do in music if we referenced the bible, then we are treading beyond us, we are talking about God Himself and His dealings with the universe. Hence this makes religious music a humbling experience where actors are communicating God's message to the people. Secular music are dictated by circumstances in a particular culture but for Christian music is guided by the Biblical principles which is the supreme culture above all cultures on this planet. And this is in line with the great commission in Mathew 28:19 calling His people to Go and make disciples of all nations preaching the everlasting gospel to every nation ,tribe , tongue and people (Revelation 14:6). When we transform our mind, we will draw them to Jesus and transform

the world; but when we capitalize on changing the outward appearance, we will be tempted to conform to the patterns of the world.

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