

Origin and Development of Yoruba Native Airs in Christian Liturgy

Abstract

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Yoruba Native Air (YNA) tradition in Christian liturgy evolved as a result of the conflict between European and Yoruba Indigenous music traditions at the inception of Christianity in Yorubaland. The growing body of scholarship on Nigerian music has, so far, partially made reference to YNA in spite of its being the foundation of Yoruba church music. This paper, therefore, explores the origin and development of Yoruba Native Airs in Christian liturgy. The activism and advocacy of the early YNA composers were manifestations of the cultural nationalism of the late 19th/early 20th centuries. They produced works in a danceable style, in which singing in Yoruba, according to the tonal and rhythmic inflections of the words, is accompanied by the organ and drumming in a traditional Yoruba rhythmic style. Hence, YNA developed as a bona fide church music tradition with sizeable number of composers whose compositions satisfied the musical, liturgical and spiritual needs of Yoruba Christians for that period.

Introduction

The origin of church music among the Yorùbá can be traced to the activities of European missionaries in Lagos and its environs which began in the mid-nineteenth century. The immediate result of that endeavour was the establishment of churches and mission schools in the south-western Nigeria, particularly, Abẹ̀òkúta, Badagry, and Lagos (Àjàyí, 2001). In Christian religious practice, music constitutes an integral part of worship. All the worship, prayer, and preaching activities of the church are carried out in the modes of speech and music. Vidal (1986) states that church music was one of the modes through which the various Christian liturgies were handed to believers in Christianity by the various groups of European Missionaries. He adds that the exact liturgical music used for divine services in Europe in the form of hymns, chants, canticles, and anthems, was imported by both the Anglican and the

Methodist missionaries and introduced to the early Yorùbá Christian converts. However, the major musical practice in the early Yorùbá churches was singing of Christian hymns because it involved congregational participation. But hymn singing constituted a new musical experience for the early Yorùbá Christian converts (Vidal, 1986; Euba, 1992). It was in the form of texts of European hymns (commonly in English language), translated into Yorùbá language and sung to European hymn tunes.

This Europeanised style of singing experienced by early Yorùbá Christian converts brought about cultural conflict in the music in two areas. Firstly, unlike singing in English language in which the meaning of words is unaffected by the tune used, the singing of Yorùbá words to European hymn tunes brought about a clash between the speech tone of the Yorùbá texts and the European hymn melodies. Scholars like Vidal (1986), Euba (1992), Dosunmu (2005), and Samuel (2009), have observed that Yorùbá language is tonal; therefore, the meaning of a Yorùbá word depends on the pitch applied to each syllable in the word. Hence, when singing such hymn in Yorùbá, there is a change in its textual meaning because of the change in pitch applied to each syllable as dictated by the European melody of the hymn. Euba (1992) and Samuel (2009) explain that the change from the natural pitch of Yorùbá words occasioned by the European tune applied did not only distort the meaning of the hymn, but more often than not, gave totally different meaning which is contrary to the intended original meaning of the hymn. This type of music was strange to the early Yorùbá Christian converts, and they were not in any way comfortable with this foreign way of singing. Early Yorùbá Christians were therefore dissatisfied with the type of music with which Christianity was introduced to them.

The second area of conflict arose from the fact that early Yorùbá Christians had a traditional musical background which usually combined singing, drumming and dancing as a tripartite musical experience. Yorùbá traditional music which naturally elicited dancing from its musicians and audience was different from European hymns in which there was no dance. Early European missionaries to Yorùbáland, like their counterparts in other parts of Africa, regarded virtually all aspects of African art forms as paganistic. They therefore associated Yorùbá traditional practices, including music and its vigorous drumming, with

paganism. Consequently, drumming and dancing were forbidden in the church.

The pristine musical challenge that confronted the early Yorùbá Christian worshippers therefore, was that of musical acculturation as they had difficulty in coming to terms with two conflicting musical traditions. On the one hand, was music of the church that was based on western literary tradition which was used to dominate Yorùbá Christians while, on the other hand, was the music of their indigenous musical background based on Yorùbá oral traditions which, although was natural to the converts, was disallowed in the church. This was the musical dilemma faced by early Yorùbá Christian converts until the late nineteenth century when the pervading atmosphere of cultural nationalism provided the opportunity for a change.

The rise of nationalist agitations towards the last decade of the 19th century led to the development of the ideology of cultural nationalism. The agitations increased within the colonial establishments comprising the church, schools and the colonial civil service (Lynn, 1967). Within the church, it eventually led to the formation of Independent African Churches (IACs) which provided a platform for Yorùbá Christians to react against the unsatisfactory musical practices in which English texts were translated into Yorùbá and sung to English hymn tunes that were devoid of drumming and dancing. The emergence of IACs therefore, provided the enabling environment for the development of an alternative African musical idiom for worship (Vidal, 2002: 13).

Within the Yorùbá IACs and the older mission churches, this development has been attributed to the works of catechists, choirmasters and organists who were composing a type of liturgical music referred to as *native airs* (Vidal, 1986 and 2002; Euba, 1989; Omíbíyì-Obidike, 2002). These composers could be regarded as representing a movement or school of church musicians whose compositions resulted from their exposure to common religious, social, cultural and political experiences. The works of *native air* composers showed basic commonalities in melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, textual and instrumental organisation. Although, they differ in their individual styles of

composition, by and large, their compositions generally reflect features that identify them as a 'school of composers' whose activities have coalesced into a distinctive musical tradition.

The process of their evolution and activities gained momentum in the early 20th century resulting in the emergence of *Yorùbá Native Airs* (YNAs) as an alternative indigenous idiom of church music and spreading widely among Yorùbá churches. It eventually culminated in the genre attaining the status of a definitive Yorùbá church music tradition in the 1950s. The attainment of this distinctive status was particularly noticeable in the publication of *M'áyòkún* by A. T. Olá Olúdé, who was then a Reverend Minister in the Nigerian Methodist Mission. The definitive style of YNAs tradition in Christian liturgy, therefore, derives mainly from the melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, textual and instrumental accompaniment idiom of Yorùbá songs, in combination with those of elements of European church music.

Several church musicians contributed to the development of Yorùbá church music. Notable among them were J. J. Ransome-Kútì, T. K. E. Phillips, and Fẹ́lá Šówándé. One of the pioneer composers of the YNA tradition was A. K. Ajíṣafẹ́, whose composition, titled *E Je KaJumo F'ope F'Olorun*, among several others, was included in the African Church Hymn Book (1957), which, to this researcher, could be regarded as the YNA 'national anthem'. This song has since become so popular that it is still being sung and enjoyed throughout the length and breadth of Yorùbáland up till this day. Ajisafe, who was a historian, published the history of Abẹ̀òkúta in a book titled, *Iwe Itan Abẹ̀òkúta*. Among other notable YNA composers were A. Abóyadé-Cole, Mójolá Àgbẹ́bí, Bólá Fádẹ́yí, Akin Oṣin, as well as Akin George. Others include, Èbùn Akinosó, A. B. David and T. A. Bánkólé. Also worthy of note are Èbùn Ogúnmẹ́fun, J. O. Ajíbólá, and E. Ola. Christopher. We must also mention T. A. Odédínà, E. Ayò Sandey, H. O. Akínjóbí, Oláolú Omídẹ́yí, Olúyẹ́mí Oláníyan, Dayo Dedeké, and G. P. Dopemu among many others.

YNA in the Post-Colonial Era

By the time Nigeria attained political independence from the British government in 1960, the atmosphere of cultural nationalism had reached a peak and there was a general quest for cultural identity which presented an environment within which YNA thrived

in Yorùbá churches. One of the significant manifestations of this era which symbolised cultural identity in Yorùbá churches was the publication of hymn books by several composers of the *YNA* tradition. The post-colonial period of *YNA* as a tradition of choral music in Christian liturgy could, therefore, be regarded as an era within which the publication of *YNAs* in form of hymn books became popular.

Younger composers learnt from the efforts of James White in 1861 and those of the CMS in the production of *Iwe Orin Mimo* in 1923; *Orin Yorùbá* by J.O. Ajibola in 1947 (later revised in 1974), and *M'áyòkún* in 1954 by Olúdé. Individual *YNA* composers went on to compile and publish their *YNA* compositions in form of hymn books through which they popularised their works in their local churches in particular, as well as among other churches in Yorùbáland. Some examples of these *YNA* hymn books are P.O. Ògùnbòwálé's *Àkójopò Orin Ìbílẹ̀ Yorùbá* (1960), B.G. Oriere's *Ìwé Orin Ìtùnú* (1968), J.O. Ajibola's *Orin Yoruba – Yoruba Songs* (1974), Olúyemí Olàniyan's *Orin Ìjòsìn* (1969), E.A. Lúfadéjù's *Ìmólẹ̀ Okàn* (1987). In the year 2004, G. P. Dòpè mú eventually compiled some of his compositions and published them under the title, *Yin Olúwa*.

Some significant events took place among the *YNA* circle of composers within this period. One of the most significant of these events was the Conference of the Association of Yorùbá Church Musicians which took place in Immanuel College of Theology, Ìbàdàn in 1967. It was convened by Rev. Adéolú Adégbolá (a close associate of Rev. A. T. Olá Olúdé) who was then the Principal of Immanuel College. The conference was a gathering of several prominent composers of *YNAs*, Yorùbá music scholars and theologians. Among them were Fela Sówándé, Rev. Olúdé, Oláolú Omídèyí, Lékan Táíwò and several other choirmasters, as well as some church choirs. George Ajibowu's gospel *Apala* Band from Igan Okoto of the present Yewa North Local Government Area of Ogun State also performed in one of the workshop sessions of the conference. The conference featured plenary sessions, workshops and seminars. One of the plenary sessions was taken by Prof. Fela Sówándé. Reports from Dr. Olúyemí Olàniyan and Mr. Egbèwùmí, who were participants at the conference, made it clear

that the theme of the conference centred on the importance of the use of the five pentatonic notes of the western diatonic scale system in composing melodies for *YNAs* in order to achieve the tonal inflection that will be meaningful and consistent with Yorùbá speech tone pattern.

Although the post-colonial period, as earlier noted, presented an atmosphere within which *YNAs* thrived, nonetheless, from the 1970s and onwards, with over a century of continued singing of European hymns whose texts were translated to Yorùbá and sung to European hymn tunes in Yorùbá churches, Yorùbá Christians had got used to this practice. By this time, a new generation born into Christianity had not been exposed to Yorùbá traditional music in its original form. This new generation had become acculturated into the European style of hymn singing and so did not see the maintenance of Yorùbá speech tonal inflection through pentatonism as an issue that should warrant the level of attention that the *YNA* composers attached to it. On this phenomenon, Euba (1992) comments that the use of the pentatonic scale and the insistence on adherence to Yorùbá speech tonal inflection by *YNA* composers was merely an academic exercise by the early *YNA* composers. Euba comments further:

Although the composing and arranging of music with correct intonation by pioneers such as J.J. Ransome-Kúti, T.K.E. Phillips, A.T. OláOlúde and J.O. Ajíbôlá was a necessary intellectual exercise to precede the real Africanisation of the Yorùbá church, the efforts of these composers did not attract Yorùbá converts. For one thing, the church remained staid and genteel. Secondly, and ironically, the songs which today appeal most popularly to the grassroots of the Christian community and, indeed, to non-Christian Yorùbá as well, are songs in which the intonation of the words is often distorted, as if they were European hymns translated into Yorùbá and sung to European tunes (Euba, 1992:49).

Vidal (1986) also comments in the same vein as follows:

Since the seventies, however, there seems to have been some movement away from the use of Yorùbá musical idioms and back to Westernization. This may be due to

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the various evangelical movements that have suddenly, become very powerful and have succeeded in drawing their membership from the traditional orthodox churches. Such movements often use evangelical and gospel songs in their modes of services with little regard for the traditional idiom. Even when Yorùbá texts are used, they are often sung to Western melodic forms. Examples are "*Emi ban'egberunahon*," "*Ori rere lori mi O*", "*Ore wa bami kalo*", and "*Mo yin Jesu logo*" (Vidal, 1986: 76).

From the above comments, it can be deduced that the musical crusade of the early *YNA* composers was not sustained after its main proponents had reduced in their militancy, perhaps due to ageing and death of some of the *YNA* composers, but also because of the influence of new evangelical churches who did not experience the work and activities of the *YNA* composers. It is also significant to note that the new evangelical composers of Yorùbá gospel music of the post-independence era substituted existing European hymn tunes with newly composed tunes for singing translated European hymn texts. They also adopted some translated European hymn texts by giving them new tunes in which notes of European diatonic scale system were freely used (Lókò, 2011). Ironically, while the pioneers of the *YNA* parodied Yorùbá folk songs in order to make church music relevant to Yorùbá Christians, the new Yorùbá evangelical gospel music composers chose to parody European hymns. Not only did they parody European hymns, they also parodied European popular music. An example is Abba's "*Brown Girl in the Rain, tralalalala*" which was used as the tune for the popular chorus "*O sé o Jésù a ó ma yìn ọ*" in Yorùbá churches.

However, it will not be true to conclude that the work of the early *YNA* composers was totally wasted. Today, in churches in Yorùbáland and beyond, Yorùbá folk music-inspired choruses are popularly sung. Choruses such as *Kí lo ọ lẹ̀sẹ̀ Ọlórún mi*; *Ohungbogbotímoní*; *Óyígiyigì o alágbàwíèdá*; *Ọ̀sùbà rẹ̀ rée o* and very many others, are examples of choruses that manifest features that characterise the melodic idiom of Yorùbá folk music which is the foundation of the *YNA* tradition. True to one of the

characteristics of folk music, the composers of many of these choruses remain unknown. This is an eloquent testimony to the success of the work of the pioneering YNA composers whose ideas have continued to influence the use of Yorùbá folk musical idioms in the composition of church music.

Furthermore, some new composers such as Yínká Oyèsànyà, the former music director of CAC Ebute Meta, Lagos, as well as his son, Bídèmi Oyèsànyà, and a number of other Yorùbá composers, have continued to maintain the pentatonic compositional tradition of the early YNA composers. Their compositions can be said to be the closest to the style of the early YNA composers, even though some of their compositions manifest some other elements in musical development, such as modulation and use of chromatic harmonies.

On another level are composers such as Ayódámopé Olúrántí and Dòtun Oláyemí whose compositions are in the form of elaborate anthems. Such compositions maintain adherence to the pentatonic melodic feature of the YNA tradition but, in addition, they also manifest other structural features such as the extended binary and ternary forms in a classical style, characteristic of European symphonic works.

On yet another level are composers like Şolá Allison, whose works manifest characteristics that serve to further the Yorùbá folk song tradition. This type of music now features popularly in various secular settings particularly as sound tracks of Yorùbá home videos. Even though these composers cannot be said to be involved in the composition of strictly Christian liturgical music, most of them started by singing in church choirs and have, therefore, been influenced, directly or indirectly, by the pioneering efforts of the early YNA composers.

Conclusion

We have been able to establish in this paper that dissatisfaction with Yoruba translations of European hymns fuelled cultural nationalism in the church, which in turn catalysed the development of the YNA tradition. YNA is a danceable musical genre in which singing according to the tonal and rhythmic inflections of Yoruba text is accompanied by the organ and drumming in the traditional Yoruba style. The development of the YNA tradition served to underscore the importance of drumming and dancing as essential

ingredients of Yoruba music, and hence integrated traditional Yoruba music elements into the music of the Yoruba church, thereby helping to re-admit the soul of the Yoruba worshipper which was inadvertently barred by the European missionaries at the onset. The atmosphere of cultural nationalism that reached its peak in the early 20th century gave expression to the musical dissatisfaction that arose from the use of European hymn tunes in singing Yoruba texts. This problem was addressed and solved by a school of Yoruba composers, who developed the YNA as an acceptable intercultural music tradition.

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