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The Influence of Music in Theologizing in African Churches

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Abstract

The African society has always used music to convey messages for various occasions. The message of the gospel should not be an exception. This research seeks to critically examine the role music plays in the communication of Christian theology focusing on the effects of musical theology, music as a medium of communication, dynamic interaction between artistic theology and other faiths and, benefits of music to theology. Because music has a greater audience than the other mediums of communication, it is a viable medium to effectively reach the masses with the Christian theology. Thus, provide a framework in which the authorship and practice of music can be based to ensure effective dissemination of Christian theology in rhythmic melodious manner.

Introduction

Music is a powerful medium to disseminate information whether positive messages or negative messages. Over the years, the art in general especially music has been employed to convey messages to people. Art is part of a people's culture. In African communities, music has been and still is part of everyday life. They sang as they worked, sang to rejoice in cultural ceremonies, sang at funerals, sang as they offered sacrifices to their gods, and sang for their political leaders. The people would sing as they sowed seeds, weeded and harvested. The African communities sing over everything; it is a singing society.

The question that begs an answer is the purpose of music in all these ceremonies. Is the singing and the celebration done just to pass time or is there a message it communicates to the participants? Is there a deeper meaning of the art especially the music than meets the eye? Basic analysis of the actions and reactions of people when music is performed to them brings some thoughts. Music seems to move the whole person and makes him/her alive

to the facts presented in the music. Alexis Abernethy (2008) asserts that, “the emotions created in artistic productions help people to think and respond, opening the way to the agogic moment (moment of change)” (p.66). There is a transformation, which occurs in a person when he/she interacts with an art that speaks to him/her. The art leads the person to gravitate towards changes, he/she reacts to fulfill the messages as presented by the art, though not all art demands a transformation but there will be a response to the art.

Looking at the evidence, it is important that the African church rethinks the way of evangelization and theologizing in general for music can be a great medium, a tool that can be employed with great discretion in theologizing. As Begbei notes, “it is clear *that* music is one of the most powerful communicative media we have” (p.4). It can be a powerful tool for dissemination of theology as it voices the church or individuals’ experience and perception of God and His word. The African society has always used music to convey messages for various occasions. When a particular type of music is played, the community(s) automatically understands the message(s) being conveyed to them. At the sound of the drumbeat a particular community can know that the king is dead, or a certain ceremony has started or ended. The art of music was used to communicate to the society.

The message of the gospel should not be an exception. What if a community designates particular drum beatings to send the Christian messages abroad? What would be the impact? What if the theologian could sing people into his theology? We as the African church need to formulate ways through which music can be effectively employed in disseminating theology. If the theologian was a musician or if the musician was a theologian, what effects would this fact bring in the dissemination of the gospel? As Jeremy Begbei puts it, we should be asking not what theology can do for music but what music can do for theology. It is paramount to note that there is a lot that music can do for theology and the theologians in general in the quest to propagate the word of God.

In this paper, we will examine the art of music and how it affects theologizing following the idea that music can be used to disseminate theology in the African context. Music is not just a tool for conveying or passing on information but it invites the listener for a response for musicology affects the mind of the listener cognitively. Music is a powerful tool of theologizing that the African church has not fully embraced and employed. The sooner the African church wakes up to this fact the better the engagement she will have with her members.

Working Definitions

Aesthetics is one broad and complex subject that must be approached with awareness of the enormity of the kinds of art involved. Art can simply be defined as the activity or skill of producing things such as paintings, designs, etc or the activities which involve creating things such as paintings, literature or music. This essay cannot cover the subject of art in its entirety. I therefore will only restrict my study to the art of producing music and how the music can be used to convey messages of theology and impact the lives of the hearers. When we talk about music, we are not only talking about singing but all the accompaniments that go with singing. Music is arrangement of sounds into a pattern to produce a harmonious piece. Music is the art of combining sounds in a certain order for aesthetic effect (Oxford Dictionary, 598). Music is the art and science of combining vocal or instrumental sounds or tones in varying melody, harmony, rhythm, and timbre, especially so as to form structurally complete and emotionally expressive compositions (Webster Dictionary, 558). Music simply is the arrangement of sounds to bring melody.

We must also note that this definition may not include all music for some music is not pleasing to the ear but is just meant to convey a message. Bebey (1975) states that the concept of music in black Africa is very different from the western concept of sound that is pleasing to the ear. The westerners believe that the major keys are meant to express joy while the minor keys or notes are meant to convey sorrow. However, this is not the case with the black African music for their music is not always meant to be pleasing to the ear. Some black African music rocks the ear instead of offering a soothing sound pleasing to the ear. Bebey claims that African musicians do not seek to combine sounds in a manner pleasing to the ear. Their aim is simply to express life in all its aspects through the medium of sound (1975, 3). The concept of music in Africa is very different from the western concept as attested by Ruth Stone.

Honest observers are hard pressed to find a single indigenous group in Africa that has a term congruent with the usual Western notion of "music." There are terms for more specific acts like singing, playing instruments, and more broadly performing (dance, games, music), but the isolation of musical sound from other arts proves a Western abstraction, of which we should be aware when we approach the study of performance in Africa. The arts maintain a close link to the rest of social and political life. In performance, they both reflect upon that life and create it. Highlife songs are famous for having been employed in political campaigns in Ghana; poetry in Somalia has influenced

political history; and work is both coordinated and enhanced as bush-clearers follow the accompaniment of an instrumental ensemble. The arts are not an extra or separate expression to be enjoyed apart from the social and political ebb and flow. They emerge centrally in the course of life, vital to normal conduct. (Stone, 2008, 28).

We are therefore going to look at music as an art not only in the western concept of melodious sounds but particularly in the context of Africa where it is a means of expressing life in its entirety. For in Africa, it seems like virtually nothing escapes the involvement of music.

Nature of Music as an Artistic Piece

The nature of African music is a question that can simply be answered with the word diversity. The African music is as diverse as its people. Every community has its own ways of making music though there are basics in making music. In the African continent, music is dramatic, involving singing, dancing, ululations, beating and playing of instruments according to the cultural community the music is being made. Every community has their own style of singing. Some would sing long unresponsive songs while others involve the singing of responsive parts as the soloist leads the main part. Stone, talking about the concepts of performance in African music, says that motion and action are central to the aesthetic principles of many African groups. The most charitable assessment is that European misperceptions came from a lack of appreciation of African musical subtleties, including the language of performance (Stone, 2008, 33). The African songs are not to be sung seated for most of communities are dramatic in musical art and their singing involves vigorous dance to express the emotions elicited by the song. Unlike the western songs that can be sung while seated, Africa sings at the drumbeat and the beating of the drum invites expression in terms of dance, ululations, chants, etc.

The African church should be allowed to express their worship in a way that is appropriate to their context and relevant to the audience they serve. Roberta King calls the African church to allow a freedom that helps the African saints speak to one another in a language and expression that is appropriate to their culture inspired by worship of God. He says the freedom to worship in ways that profoundly communicate the work of God in their lives nourishes and strengthens them for the tasks before them. Though their church heritage is the hymns, they love to be “taken home” as they sing songs drawn from

their cultural roots. Only then is their music in worship complete (King, 2008, 22). The point being made here is that a people or a community will express true spiritual worship to God when they express it in an art they are used to or a manner that is naturally theirs. When worshippers are transported to familiar grounds, they are free to run deep in the currents of heaven and convey, with most sincere hearts and expression, their feelings towards the object of their faith. The familiar ground allows for total surrender and release that otherwise would not be possible.

The nature of the music of Africa is quite different from others, for example the hymns that were translated from the western world would not be able to represent the African style of music able to naturally inspire worship of God without much ado. "If the gospel is to be witnessed to, the art form itself must effectively reflect it. The theology and the music must match ... the general category of gospel witness needs music that can effectively personify general theological truth" (Johansson, 1984, 42). For Africa, music is part of life and must be allowed to affect every part of it. Johansson argues further that "the African music mostly falls into the category of folk music. It is music that arises from a particular culture, often without known composers ... transmitted through aural tradition. The aesthetic quality is blended into the unity of man's daily life. It is not music to eat or to be listened to in a concert hall. It is music to participate in" (1984, 59). The African church should therefore participate in making music that not only invites its people to performance but also guides them in the manner to perform and to offer true worship to God. The art of music should inform the African saint about the tenets of the Christian faith and teach them to follow God in a most expressive way according to their musical artistic theology. Through music, the Christian church should be able to instruct its members on both the faith of Christianity and the standard rules in which Christianity should be lived. The music that speaks to the soul is a music comprising the word of God and skillful artistry expressed in a beautiful soothing manner.

Music as a Medium

We earlier defined music as an arrangement of sounds to form a melodious piece. The music can consist of different parts including the vocal and instrumental music. The vocal music can be both consisting of words or noises made to bring about the melodious harmony in the arrangement. The words have meaning that they are intended to send to the hearers of the music. The African society has long used music as a form of media in

conveying messages to the community. It makes a powerful tool as a medium of sending the message to the ears of the listener musically. In Africa, where most communities are still orally oriented, music plays an important role in conveying new messages to people as the news arrives. In music, people get to hear the new philosophies, new occurrences, and new thoughts artistically. King says that, "In mostly non-literate societies, orality dominates the transmission of information, serving like a daily newspaper. When a new song is sung, for example, other activities stop because people seek to listen to the news—the message being communicated in song. In this way, oral traditions remain strong, vigorous, and essential, forming a common means of dynamic interaction for readers and non-readers alike" (2008, 29). It is only in music that the message reaches everyone's ear, whether literate or non-literate, old or young, men of 'great importance' and of 'no importance' in the society.

Music is a media that does not select its audience. It has the ability to speak to all calibers of people. In some African societies, musical instruments are considered bearers of a message. They are equated to a man messenger who bears messages to the community. Bebey reports that in the *Adiukru* community of the Ivory Coast the women are prohibited to play drums.

Because the drum is, in certain circumstances, equated with a man (and a rather exceptional man, at that, whose powerful voice is capable of sending messages far and wide), women must constantly treat it with the same respect that they show towards their menfolk. No woman would dream of beating her husband in public (even though she may occasionally do so in private!), nor may she beat the drum in the village square. In some African societies, women are not even permitted to touch a drum under any circumstance (Bebey, 1975, 14).

The drum for this society represents a message and conveys it in a voice that cannot be denied. The instruments of music in the African church should bear the message of the gospel clearly told in a language that is common to all people. What if a drum was made to represent the worship of God that every time it is beaten to give a certain sound, the sound will send men to worship God? What if the sight of a harp would propel men to meditate deeply on the intrinsic worth of the Almighty God? If only the sight of the pipe would inspire a desire to get to the holy of holies and worship at the beauty of his holiness. The same reverence that was accorded the instruments of music in the traditional religion should be accorded the same instruments but in reverence to the Almighty God.

As Begbie asserts, “music is one of the most powerful communicative media we have” (2003, 4). Webber also affirms the communicative power of music saying it is the wheel upon which the Word and the Eucharist ride. It proclaims the scriptures in a heavenly language and provides the means through which the mystery of God in Christ is approachable (1994, 195). It means that if the word of God was presented musically, there would be a change in the way people respond to it.

The listeners not only get the meaning of the words and expression as given by the artist, but interprets the meaning according to their cultural norm, the meaning of the word in that particular context. Lonergan presents meaning as embodied in language and incarnate meaning as found in artistic expressions. Meaning, by its embodiment in language, in a set of conventional signs finds its greatest liberation. The signs can be employed to analyze and control the linguistic meaning of a thing. A name represents the worth of a person or thing. The meaning of the particular thing is constantly developed and molded. He says that, “Ordinary language is the vehicle in which the human community conducts its collaboration in the day-to-day pursuit of the human good” (Lonergan, 1972, 71). Music is part of this ordinary language that the human community employs in pursuit of its welfare. Different things mean differently to different communities. The meaning can be limited to just one person, a group or for a whole national, social or cultural tradition (Lonergan, 1972, 73). It therefore means that the message of the gospel can be passed across using culturally viable mediums that help the people to deduce easily the meaning of the message sent abroad unto them.

The Christian community in Africa must realize that theology is wider than scholarship, and various cultures have other preferred ways of articulating their faith, e.g. works of art, hymns, stories, dramas, comic books, cinema etc. All these media can become valid forms for theology in particular cultures (Bevans, 1992, 13). There is a meaning that is only found in the artistic, symbolic expressions; it is an innate meaning that must be deduced from the expression of art. This is why music is a powerful medium which theology can adopt to propagate its tenets.

Webber says during the ancient church period, “the most interesting feature was the rise of syllabic tendencies of hymnody. This gave music a more popular character and emphasized the text rather than the sound itself. As a result, many hymns were written to spread teaching, both heretical and orthodox. This was particularly true of Arianism which spread its heresy by

matching through the streets singing its viewpoint in a popularized form of music” (1994, 198).

Music has been employed by both friends and enemies of Christianity to further their viewpoint on issues. Christians over the years have employed music to propagate the teachings of the word of God. During the reformation time, Martin Luther and John Calvin encouraged the use of hymns and psalms in dissemination of the message of scripture by themselves composing hymns and putting music to the Psalms.

The use of music in gospel propagation is not a new thing. Music as an art has been employed in the past to carry what can be termed as artistic theology with the ability to not only impact the mind and the spirit but goes to the unconsciousness of the human mind.

Just like the New Testament time when they spoke to one another with Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19-20), the African church must continue speaking one to another through their music for music is a language that is easily understood by people. As Roberta King puts it, “they (Africa) are bringing their worship to Yahweh, the creator God they have longed to know, and they are doing much of it through their music” (2008, 17).

When the Ephesians’ church was filled with the Holy Spirit, they spoke to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. It was a musical conversation after receiving the infilling of the Holy Spirit. The book of Colossians further instructs, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:16-17). The exhortation here is to disseminate God’s word musically. Whatever is found within the saints as a deposit of God’s word should be expressed through song and dance to converse one to another for the church’s gratification. Music should be employed to encourage forth telling as Christians gather in unity for worship. “Christian music in the life of the worldwide church plays a central role for gathering faith communities in worship and witness. The church in sub-Saharan Africa excels in providing music a prominent place in its life of faith” (King, 2008, 24).

This demonstrates that, “to facilitate similar beliefs, ideologies and unity in theology, music is the most appropriate means the church should use to convey

the message. Music proclaims the Scriptures in a language comprehensible to all because it opens the heart to the mysteries of God in Christ Jesus. Music is the means by which all members of a congregation unite in one spirit without consideration of race, ethnicity or language. It brings people together for one purpose, to worship the God of all creations. In music, the congregation fellowship together at par one with another” (extract from Thesis, Mbede, 2011, 77).

Dynamic Interaction between Artistic Theology and Other Faiths

The introduction of the Christian faith in Africa altered many things in history. The Christian faith came with the hymns discarding the culturally styled music, dance and instruments. The western hymns were translated to offer the African church music that was considered sacred but in outright rejection of the African music and its practice. This rejection of African music for the hymns translated from the west derailed the propagation of the gospel owing to the fact that contextualization is the mother of effectiveness in gospel presentation. The dynamic interaction between artistic theology and other faiths whether sacred or secular, in this case the Christian faith, produces effects on both. It is observed that in “the encounter between Christianity and another religion, the latter cannot expect to remain unaffected. The truth of the matter is that, similarly, the Christian faith cannot expect to come out of the encounter unaffected” (Kwesi, 2000, 110). When faiths rub shoulders there are frictions that result into change of one of the faiths. The Christian faith always exerts forceful transformation on other faiths courtesy of the power of God behind the Christian faith. The argument here will be that if the Christian faith is put in music, this music will produce results as it rubs shoulders with men in their daily activities. It will influence their philosophy of life, affect their thought forms and transform them as they embrace the message of the Christian music, which is presented in a culturally appropriate tune. The music will affect their thinking about God and influence their daily practice as they go about their businesses. “The global church needs to continually strive to make the gospel more relevant to particular cultural contexts in ways that encourage authentic interaction with the living God” (King, 2008, 15). Music is one way that the church and her faith interact with the world outside. In the interaction, the Christian faith can be made to engage with the daily life of the people.

King gives us some information in the way faiths have interacted before. He says;

In the history of mission, for example, the introduction of foreign Christian music has most often contributed to a truncated understanding of the gospel. Thus, the development of culturally appropriate and authentic music for local churches is of critical importance in fostering Christian faith. One of the goals of this volume is to highlight issues and guidelines that promote the creation of authentic music for worship in spirit and truth (John 4), which foster making Jesus Christ known and worshipped in ways that are understood. The missional question, how the gospel can be communicated cross-culturally in meaningful ways through music (2008, 24-5).

Music should be able to communicate the message of the gospel in the language of the people and in the way they best understand. Music that speaks to the soul and heart is music that communicates, and if it communicates it can disseminate messages that otherwise would not get to the heart of man. Begbie talking about how music can benefit theology says that, “the reader is invited to engage with music in such a way that central doctrinal loci are explored, interpreted, re-conceived and articulated. It will be found that unfamiliar themes are opened up, familiar topics exposed and negotiated in fresh and telling ways, obscure matters resistant to some modes of understanding are clarified, and distortions of theological truth avoided and even corrected” (2003, 5). The African concept of music is performance of songs in dance and all kinds of expression. For the African mind, music is supposed to be performed and this is how they interact with the music and the message in the music. For the saint to perform the music it is prerequisite that he understands the message expressed by the music to inspire a performance that is appropriate to the music. I submit that music will enter the subconscious of the person first before he can perform it.

King articulates, “Indeed, a major distinctive feature of the church in Africa is its expressive means of worship and witness through music in song, dance and drama. This multiplex of inextricably linked artistic forms serves as a vital means to integrating faith within the lives of African Christians for whom to sing is to theologize (to talk about God), to dance is to witness to his goodness and testify to one’s relationship with him, and to dramatize is to make the message clear and understandable. Music is integral to a dynamic church as practised in Christian faith communities” (2008, 26). Music is the way to talk about the issues that disturb the community, or issues that make them rejoice. Music is the manner in which issues of life are discussed by the common person in their daily conversation. It is the accompaniment for work so their music provides the rhythm of work. Music should therefore play an important part in theologizing in Africa because it speaks to people on daily basis.

Benefits of Music to Theology

In both the western and African cultures, “music plays similar role in life, as lullabies, battle songs, religious music, and so on. It is important in education; it is common knowledge that songs make memorizing easier and can be used to instill in people important rules of conduct or hygiene” (Bebey, 1975, 2). Music is crucial in education as it enhances memorizing making it easier to retain verses in the case of Christianity. A verse that is sung stays in memory compared to a verse that is just recited. The sung verse goes deep into the sub-conscious mind and can be retained without much struggle as in the case of verses committed to memory by repetition. Music has been used in the African and western culture to instill important rules and conduct in people.

An example to note are Rose Muhando’s (Tanzanian gospel singer) songs that present deep facts of the gospel in rhythms beautifully constructed that even serious messages that warn people against grave sins are listened to. The same messages, when spoken during a public preaching meeting, would cause some people to walk away. Music has power to gather people, a fact that has been used by many preachers whether in concerts, public meetings or church. The message of the gospel committed to music will powerfully influence people in a manner other mediums will not be able to do. People have made use of music for advertisement, political parties employ music to propagate their policies and philosophies, etc. Music is so powerful that a bus or bar for example where music is played will entice customers more than those without music. It therefore should speak volumes to the African church that they can theologize through music. The benefit of music to theology cannot be overemphasized. It is the best way in which Christianity can engage the outside world with its theology.

Music is a divine art that God has provided for the Christian church to be a medium by which she can theologize and pass information to the church. Music is a means of pedagogy. In fact, we can say that music is not only pedagogical but itself a tutor. The power of music in academics cannot be overemphasized. Music is a powerful medium with the ability to penetrate everywhere. It goes to peoples’ bedrooms, offices, schools, public transport vehicles, entertainment joints, etc. Music has the ability to penetrate the sub-conscious mind of every being by its rhythmic, melodious nature that appeals to the inner man. With music, a person does not have to consent; it catches the heart with a sweet appeal or pricks it to great irritation depending on the message of the music.

Music therefore can be a powerful tool, a medium that the African church should be keen to employ in the process of theologizing. African theologians should seek to use music as a means of disseminating their theology because Africa is a singing or musical community. Music occupies a big place in the African community.

Conclusion

Considering the power of music in disseminating information, I submit that if the theologian was to use music in propagating the message of the gospel and his theology, the African church will be deeply rooted in the things of God. The church will be impacted positively by the theology of God and practice the word of God for the betterment of the society. If the African church was to compose songs with great theological messages in their quest to propagate the word of God, then it will take less time to reach out to the unreached groups in society. If the music is done with relevancy to the context, if the Christian music will speak the language of the people and theology done in the language and idioms of the people, then we are soon seeing the return of the Lord. The church can fulfill the great commission and mature the saints in faith through music, which expresses the true theology of God. I challenge the African church to theologize through music by putting the word of God into music. The composers of songs must put to consideration the messages they are sending across to the world. If the church is to theologize effectively, musicians should be trained theologians and theologians should be trained musicians.

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