

## Religious Transformation: Some Critical Issues in the Secularization of Gospel Music in Nigeria

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### Abstract

*The paper highlights and discusses the patronage system of the gospel artistes, gate fees, rhythm and dance, amongst other things as parameter. This is because Christian missionaries in Africa introduced hymns, anthems, canticles and other forms of Christian music to the church as early as the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, with the introduction of dance-oriented gospel music since the mid-1970s, the tendency towards secularization has increased progressively over the years. This has led to controversies on what kind of music is appropriate for the church and Christian musicians. Among other findings, we discovered that gospel music has crossed over to the domain of the secular; reflecting the changing trends in popular culture in Nigeria. The paper observes that this secularization was brought by a number of factors such as “openness” of the gospel arena, changing trends in popular culture, quest for quick money and fame. The paper concludes that in contemporary Nigeria the dichotomy between gospel and secular music remains blurred. We therefore recommend that, there should be a clear cut dichotomy between gospel and secular music as this will contribute towards a renewed gospel music.*

### Introduction

Christian missionary incursion into Nigeria brought with it a new type of music called “church music”. This music which is characterised by “serene and...European approach” (Akpabot, 87) failed to appeal to the musical sensibilities of the Africans. However, this phenomenon was

short lived as the new converts were in dire need of cultural identity and singing of Western hymns which had been translated into African languages had become a burden they could no longer cope with. To correct this anomaly created by the translation of Western hymns into African languages which is not in conformity with the Nigerian tonal language, the new converts who had failed to be Europeanised had to rise to the challenges confronting them. Hence, the birth of many indigenous churches and new styles of church music like indigenous hymn, native air, vesicles and responses, anthems and cantata which in turn filled the vacuum created by western hymn; a concept christened as Nigerian hymnody.

However, with the introduction of dance-oriented gospel music since the mid-1970s, there has been a turnaround of events as regards the use of music in churches and Christian musicians. This dance-oriented music mostly used in Pentecostal churches is assumed to have emanated from the Afro-American influence which is a transplantation of 'street music' into the church. Despite the popularity so enjoyed by the dance oriented gospel music, it has been greeted with a lot of controversies. One of such is that contemporary gospel music in Nigeria which is characterised by eclecticism, parody, stylistic promiscuity, popular culture whose bedrock is based on complex rhythm has been secularised. As if that is not enough, the waves of this type of music have blown to some orthodox churches and the impact on their congregations most especially the youths is intriguing. Can we then say that the impact of this music being transported to the orthodox churches is on the positive or negative side?

Furthermore, in times past, when one listened to music, one could effortlessly identify the genre it belonged (whether gospel or secular). This is not the case with some contemporary Christian gospel songs. Except one examines the text, it can easily be given away as secular song. It can therefore be assumed that contemporary Christian gospel music has been secularized. Thus, the assumption that, the hub of the music which was God-centered has been shifted to man.

To this end therefore, the following questions will guide our discourse in this paper. Can gospel music therefore still be considered as sacred? Why the commercialization of contemporary gospel music? Why the transposition of secular music into gospel music? Has the system of patronage enhanced the secularization of gospel music? These questions form the nexus of the issues raised in this paper.

The dawn of Christian faith in Nigeria “is usually identified with the evangelization mission of the Portuguese in the 15<sup>th</sup> century” (Isichei 45). With it came different activities to enhance their mission one of which is the use of music. However, the record of history of Christian music in Nigeria dates back to middle the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the introduction of the Christian missionary who brought along a new type of music called “church music.” (Euba 13) Omojola (455) corroborates this assertion:

The introduction of Christian missionary activities and the British colonial administration of Nigeria in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century both contributed to the emergence of new musical forms in Nigeria. These new forms include indigenous church music, urban syncretic popular idioms, modern folk opera ...

Christian music since then has undergone series of development and witnessed innovation in terms of content, style, context, forms, instruments and instrumentation. Music has grown from hymnody, to native air, hot lyrics (known as choruses) and many more. However, it is important to stress that the series of development witnessed in Christian music is a product of individual perception of Christian music and its usage whether in church or outside the church. That is why it is imminent to explore different opinion about Christians’ music. Dickson (1997) as documented by Adedeji (48) affirms that Christian music as a generic term “should encompass all types of music with Christians text which may or may not be church based and also not necessarily played for church related activities”.

Adedeji (368) in his own opinion construes Christian music as the “agglomeration of music used in Christianity be it in church, Parachurch, non-church organization and other settings”. He stressed further that Christian music in line with Christianity can be music composed by Christians, performed by Christians, used by Christians and Christian’s multi-purpose. All these submissions tend to portray Christian music as music of the Christians by the Christian and for the consumption of all who are ready to live by the tenets of that faith. Christian’s music today comes in different brands and categories. One of such brand is gospel music.

The word “gospel” is derived from the old English word “*Godspel*” and it refers to a narrative, an idea or principle accepted as unquestionable true (Chambers 21<sup>st</sup> century Dictionary). The word

meaning “good news” derives its name from its close connection with the gospel books of the New Testament. Gospel is also the English translation of the Greek word “*evangelion*” of the bible meaning “to announce good news, to declare or bring good and glad tiding. “*Evangelion* originally denotes a reward for good tidings, later the idea of the reward dropped and the word stood for the good news itself (Japheth.1). Gospel can also be viewed from the musical point of view. According to Randel (350) he links gospel to “a passage from the four gospel chanted at mass in Roman Catholic rites.

Definitions of gospel music therefore, have enjoyed academic debate from different scholars. Scholars like Garret (1976), Robert (1973), Boyer (1979), Oludare and Adekunle (1993), Adegbite (1994), Kukoyi (1995), Udensi (1997), Ojo (1998), Adedeji (2001), Ikibe (2002,2010), Emielu (2010) and Japheth (2010) have all contributed to the discourse in question. However, central to these definitions of gospel music is the idea of soul winning and giving succor to a troubled soul, though with different methodology. This is summed up in Japheth’s (2) definition that

Gospel music can be defined as a medium of communicating the life and teaching of Christ ..., with or without musical instruments, with harmonious or melodic sounds, pleasant voices, to praise God, edify oneself and other people”.

The above statement amplifies the essence and magnitude of gospel music. Gospel music in Nigeria which is believed to have started in the 60s had by the 80s become firmly rooted in the country. However, it is in the 1980s that its popularity cut across every nook and cranny of the country with the north inclusive. Today gospel music comes in different styles ranging from *fuji* gospel, high life gospel, juju gospel, reggae gospel, *Senwele* gospel, *dadakuada* gospel and even *baalu*-gospel with many others.

### **Critical Issues in Secularization of Gospel Music in Nigeria**

Gospel music as earlier stated has crossed over to the domain of the secular which therefore has led to the secularization of the music. This will be established using the following variables: song texts, patronage systems, gate fees and rhythmic patterns and dance styles.

#### **Song texts**

Song text in the African setting is an essential part of the song. Akpabot (75) posits that “in the African experience the text of a song is more

important than the tune". Since the discourse in question is located within the African setting, Nigeria to be specific, the use of texts of song should therefore function effectively within the context of the style of the music without an iota of doubt about the genre of the music. One major area in which the contemporary gospel music has been secularized is in the area of song text. As earlier observed by Adedeji (2001) the future he foresees in which both Christian gospel music and popular music may be difficult to be distinguished musically and even in text has already started. The same text used in secular music had crossed over into contemporary gospel music. A typical example of this is the popular secular song by Olu Maintain (Olumide Edward Adegbolu) titled "Maintain Reloaded". The hit track in that album tagged "Yahoozee" which has remained an anthem at Nigerian parties around the world since (news.onlinenigeria.com) has crossed over to Christendom. The slogan 'yahoozee' has some absurdist dance movements which encompasses gyration and trigger sexual orgy movements, has become a household name with the release of the album. Below is an excerpt from the song:

**Secular song**                    *ewo awon boys yi kama kazee on a kentro level*  
    *yahooze e jamisi* Meaning  
    Look at these boys  
    Let's enjoy ourselves on a different level  
    Yahoooze keep me in the loop  
    **Chorus**  
    Oh oh *yahoooo* (3x) Oh  
    oh *yahooze yahoozee*

However, it was a thing of surprise when we, at a Christian-social gathering, where the CAC Choir Canaan-land in Lagos was the host singer started using the same text (yahoozee) and dance style in their performance.

**Contemporary Gospel Song**

Call: *Efi yahoozee yin baba /2ce*  
 Response: *Efi yahoozee yin baba /2ce*

**Meaning**

Call: Let's use *yahoozee* to praise the Father /2ce

Response: Let's use *yahoozee* to praise the  
Father /2ce

The use of the word "*yahoozee*" in that gathering reduces the ministrations or performance as it was, to a mere secular gathering and the essence of the gospel message got lost. This is because it is not just the *yahoozee* music, but the dance that trails the music which is a demonstration of absurdity, sexual orgy which does not attract the required soberness and tranquility in gospel music.

Another song to justify the secularization of gospel music in the area of text is the popular secular song by Prince Nico Mbarga recorded with his band Rocafil Jazz titled "Sweet Mother". This song which was a popular secular song in the late 70s and early 80s had crossed over to Christendom. The text goes thus:

**Secular song**

*Sweet mother  
I no go forget you  
For the suffer wey you suffer for me...*

**Contemporary gospel's song**

*Sweet Jesus  
I no go forget u  
For the suffer wey u suffer for me...*

From the above song the only difference is the word mother substituted for Jesus with other text still the same. This simply reflects gospel artistes' ingenuity in terms of composition because if "secular music is what appeals more to the current generation of youths, then, the gospel artistes should be encouraged to make music that can stand the test of time and glorify their creator (God)" (Amaga, 56) and not duplicate or ride on the back of existing secular songs.

**Patronage System**

The level of patronage gospel musicians have enjoyed has contributed immensely to the secularization of the music. Today they feature prominently on the social and political arena such as marriage ceremony and funeral, house warming and political rally whereby they charge

“heavily” before they can perform. However it must be stressed that our argument on the issue of secularization is not connected with the fees charged because the “*gospeller* must live for the gospel to survive” (Adedeji, 49) but what transpires during the performance. By this we mean the gospel musicians following the dictates of the patron who wants to be eulogized when they are not God whose message is to be preached, which in turn will invoke the spraying of money on the musician or to sing certain songs which are secularly inclined to cater for the heterogeneous audience. Adeola, a gospel music practitioner and producer, attests to it that when a gospel musician is invited for a ceremony against a secular musician and on the floor of performance, the patron is expecting the gospel musicians to do some things like secular musicians would do, eulogizing and singing the praise of the patrons in order to spray them with currency notes like any secular musician. A gospel artiste who is not disciplined would and in fact definitely follow their dictates<sup>2</sup>.

Another issue mentioned is patrons asking for specific songs and artiste who see this as a means of survival would want to follow the dictates of the patron because if he does not “he will not enjoy the appreciation of the patron in terms of money”. Evangelist Florence<sup>3</sup> and Pastor Ojo<sup>4</sup> the president of the Perfected Praise Singers, a ministry under the Redeemed Christian Church of (RCCG) in separate interviews subscribe to this assertion that, for some gospel musicians to be in “business” and enjoy the same platform with the secular musician, the gospel musicians need to cross over to secular performance styles occasionally. This development, according to Adedeji, *is not gospel*<sup>5</sup>. This phenomenon, we want to stress, appears indecorous because what is gospel should be gospel and secular should be secular unless they want to create a new genre called: “secular-gospel music or gospel-secular music or *“gospsec music”*”

### **Gate Fees**

Gate fees in times past are synonymous to cinema houses, night clubs, film shows, and theatre houses where the audience is expected to pay certain amount of money to watch theatrical performances. Its application on the gospel scene shows the extent to which gospel music has been secularized. The gospel which is free is now being monetized. Emielu, a Studio Engineer and producer of gospel music for over a decade, submits that the use of gate fees in gospel music is one area that

gospel music has been secularized. According to him the aesthetic value of the music in terms of packaging and performance is given high preference since the audience is paying for the “*show*”. Adeola corroborates this assertion that this is a semblance with what is obtainable in the secular setting. He stressed further that “there are business people who run gospel musical shows to make money’ not necessarily for gospel... they put their money on it and want to make their money back – that is secularization” a situation which, according to Pastor Ojo, is “totally wrong”<sup>8</sup>

### **Rhythm and Dance**

Moving on to the rhythm and dance, it should be emphasized that “musically speaking there seems to be no difference between Nigeria gospel music and secular music, especially in the stylistic beats employed” (Adedeji, 49). Gospel artistes have advanced their trade from ‘*Awilo*’ style song and dance (*soukkous*) to ‘*yahoozee*’, to even the sensuous ‘*mapouka*’ dance style. These multifarious secular dance styles and ‘*alanta*’ the latest secular movement is the order of the day in the house of God and Christian social gatherings. These dances are considered idiosyncratic in nature, particularly within the dictates of Christian worship, be it the church or outside it. The dances most times are imbued with different motifs which mean nothing other than vague means of expressing happiness.

The societal embrace of postmodern trends has definitely ignited this obscene dance styles in the church and other Christian gathering. This, according to Ikibe (2010, 207) has made it “difficult to distinguish between disco halls and cathedrals” a situation which has turned the sacred to secular. Our experience with the Choirs of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Kwara Provincial Council on Friday, August 30, 2013 supports our claim. The noisy volume of the performance was like a disco hall. At a time, some of the worshippers carried up their chairs as they applaud the performance. Yet, at another Christian wedding ceremony we witnessed in a Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) at Igarra, Edo State of Nigeria, the way the women rolled their buttocks in seductive manner portray how much of secularization has crept into gospel music. It is expected that the gospel music dancers should be graceful in their dance movements and not in seductive manners.

Our claims on the secularization of gospel music in Nigeria was once again affirmed when we were invited as judges at a praise worship competition among Praise Teams, Choirs, Youth Choristers and Teenage



Choristers of the Redeem Christian Church at Sabo-Oke, Ilorin, Kwara Regional headquarters. The supposed worship hall was having deafening speakers that could be likened to the types in a disco hall. The performance of each of the groups was not less than that of Michael Jackson the thriller. Moreover, one could not hear the soloists well as a result of the background deafening instrumental backups and the shouts from the congregation (or audience?). To crown it all, a soloist came up to entertain the audience with a Yoruba poetic performance known as *Ewi* which is usually made for traditional rulers as their lineages are recounted by the performer. The pictures below will shed more light:





The pictures above were taken from Glorious Covenant Dancers, a group in Glorious Covenant Ministries and Redeemer's University carol programme and at the redeemed Christian Church, Ilorin, Kwara state; they are all Christian gatherings. They showcase the kinetic movements and gesticulations that are associated with secular mode of vague motives that do not represent any form of spiritual worship. It is imminent to stress that some churches and gospel artistes have not imbibed this secularization in their gospel performance. This confirmed Adedeji's (2001) that " radical churches such as the Apostolic Faith, Deeper Life, and the New Testament Christian Mission reject such worldly/secular gospel music in its entirety, claiming that gospel music (especially the danceable ones) stand for the secularity in the church." (53)

### **Recommendation and Conclusion**

We have been able to establish in this paper that gospel music has been secularized – a kind of religious transformation in music – using some variables to drive home our argument in the area of song text, system of patronage, gate fees, rhythmic patterns, dances and beats. It is imperative to stress that gospel music should be susceptible to positive (and not negative) biblical accepted changes. There should be clear dichotomy between gospel and secular music. In as much as we are not propagating staginess of a work of art (music inclusive) the lacuna which it once filled must not be allowed to be eroded by the changing trends in

the popular culture or “the openness of the gospel music arena”. Also, a work of art should not gamble with the emotion of the society which it is to nourish.

### Notes

1. Interview Conducted with Rev.Taiye Adeola in his pastoral office at Emmanuel Baptist Church Sabo Oke Ilorin, Kwara State on August 2<sup>nd</sup> 2012.
2. Interview Conducted with Evangelist Florence at Emmanuel Baptist church Ilorin, Kwara State on August 2012.
3. Interview Conducted with Pastor Ojo in his office at Redemption Camp Mowe, Ogun State on November 6<sup>th</sup> 2012.
4. Interview Conducted with Rev'd 'Femi Adedeji in his office at Obafemi Awolowo University Ile Ife Osun State on October 10<sup>th</sup> 2012.
5. Interview Conducted with Dr. Austin Emielu in his house at 18 Alapa Street, off stadium road Ilorin, Kwara State on August 2<sup>nd</sup> 2012.
6. Interview Conducted with Rev.Taiye Adeola in his pastoral office at Emmanuel Baptist Church Sabo Oke Ilorin, Kwara State on August 2<sup>nd</sup> 2012.
7. Interview Conducted with Pastor Ojo in his office at Redemption Camp Mowe, Ogun State on November 6<sup>th</sup> 2012.
8. The performance and the interview with Pastor (Mrs) Adefila, the Director of Music of the Redeem Christian Church of God, Kwara Regional Headquarters took place on Friday, 30 August, 2013 during the praise worship of the church. The programme began at 8pm on Friday and ended at 4am on Saturday, 31 August, 2013.

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