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Where is Your Tradition?

On the Problematics of an African Ethnomusicologist Research on Christian Musics

Jean Kidula
University of Georgia

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Christian music in Africa is a recent development whose impact is largely underestimated. The music itself has a short history in Africa but studying it can shed light on recent historical and cultural trends and perceptions not just in modern African societies but on compositional directions by African musicians. African and Africanist musicologists have traditionally focused on indigenous musics. Often, this translates as musics unrelated to those introduced by non-African secular or religious sources. More recently secular popular musical trends in Africa have become subjects of inquiry as they clearly show cultural dynamism and processing due to urbanization, interethnic interaction as well as pan-African and intercontinental contact. These musics affirm that culture, tradition and music are vitalized in time through sedimentation and layering.

Contemporary European Christianization of Africa elicits rather ambivalent reactions as does its musics. Because of Christianity's association with colonialism and western art aesthetics, African initiatives and appropriations of the music are largely sidelined. Yet like its secular popular music counterparts, Christian musics in Africa indicate cultural dynamism and processing as well as musician creativity. Apart from theological universities' interest and study, mainstream secular academia largely ignores this music. This gross oversight becomes more critical as recently as in the 1998 [Garland Encyclopedia of World Music V. 1: Africa](#) when it is not even mentioned in the analysis of issues and processes in African music.

With this ambivalent background, in this presentation, I will discuss my efforts in researching gospel music in Kenya in an institution that clearly sidelines the genre and its immense influence. This music is part of the wide range of contemporary Kenyan music styles. In order to justify the importance and impact of Christian musics, I will reiterate definitions of tradition, musicianship and creativity and how these play out on this subject. I will also discuss some of the effects of my fieldwork on musicians, music educators, Christian missionaries and the industry.

I contend that modern Western Christianity is historicized, interpreted and manifested in tandem with western cultural, political and social bases. In many ways, it is a religious belief system that was imposed in Africa as part of another civilization's philosophical, political and social domination. From its religious perspective, Christianity was presented as the way to relate to God. Africans were required to abandon other ways in its favor. It was not perceived as another religious/political layer on an already established base. It was implicit that Africans would automatically assimilate the underlying socio-cultural base/baggage that accompanied Western Christianity when they adopted this belief system. How adults within another cultural/social system could suddenly transform and conform was not considered. No wonder Africans were treated as children! Nonetheless the ideology has since been sown and new socio-political systems introduced.

The proprietorship of Western Christianity as African therefore obviously poses political, social and religious dilemmas. Yet people on the continent have willingly or otherwise appropriated Western Christianity in its

various representations with its accompanying musical presentations. It is part of Africa's contemporary creative, academic, social, political and popular space. Christianity in Africa has become an alternative belief system. It is adopted and practiced in its Euro-American framework in denominational affiliation as a fruit of missions departments. African Christianity is sometimes layered on and /or incorporated in indigenous belief systems. Other times it reflects the people's ways of creating order in the face of a fast paced and abruptly changing contemporary world climate that was instigated through Christian missionary efforts. Many Africans however are positioned in this philosophical religious melange as their traditional backdrop. The associated musics accompany and reinforce the belief systems.

As an African student in a USA University Ethnomusicology Department, my research interests were instigated when my fellow students found out that I had studied western musicology in Africa. They were upset to learn that the African village where I grew up had a Christian mission and I had been Christianized. They were then amazed that I had a strong ethnic identity. The question of my traditional base was debated.

I also found out that there were certain expectations regarding the music native Africans should listen to and the kinds of music and music instruments I was supposed to appreciate and study. It seems that I was really not seen as a graduate student and a musician with certain choices, academic and artistic desires and preferences. I felt like I was a non-person. While I really had no problem, it was clear to my colleagues that I should explain the seeming contradictions of who I am by birth, by profession and by faith.

To this end, I set out to examine how contemporary African musicians and musicianship are perceived. This in turn led to an examination of the formation of contemporary African musicians in their educational institutions. I looked at their background against other types of musicians in their societies. I also investigated how Christianization of Africans is reported and how African ethnicity is presented.

I examined definitions of tradition; how it is invented, acquired, maintained, preserved and possessed. This was the most problematic issue for my colleagues and professors. In looking at any given tradition, apart from items that have been historicized, folklorized and copyrighted rightly or wrongly, tradition is dynamic, just as is culture and the people who form and transform it. It is a human construct and configuration, altered through time to create meaning for its adherents and in their world. The best working model for me is in the work of Savage (1994:30) and other students of hermeneutics. Tradition is a "dialectic between the reality of culture and the forming of its identity. The identity of a culture is tied to its self-representations in signs and works... which belong to the creation, transmission and preservation of values, meanings and practices... Tradition is the primary phenomenon in which sedimented practices and cultural values also hold the promise of continuing meaning and relevance of a way of life..." Tradition therefore consists of sedimentation through reinforcement of those values that affirm coherence and meaningfulness, constantly layered with new values etc brought about by new people and experiences.

Contemporary formal education in Kenya was initiated largely by Christian missionaries from the beginning of the 20th century, thus implanting a new tradition. To secure this process, students went to boarding schools, separated and isolated from their ethnic communities. The formation of a different type of person and musician in a new tradition was therefore instigated away from other influences allowing no layering on the part of the recipient. Literacy in western musicianship became a definitive trait for the African musician. As such, one had to understand and interpret western music, posit and embrace it in its historical and theoretical framework, then use it as a basis for defining him/herself. In essence this system reinforced a colonial misconception that wisdom and knowledge was commensurate with reading and writing, using western bases of thoughts for arguments. Western definitions of music and musicians were imposed on Kenyans already having their own cultural systems. Such a foundation on already formed individuals was flawed from the onset since most of the students went to boarding school in their teen years. In other attempts to restructure the people, indigenous musicians with different cultural systems were encouraged to standardize their diverse tuning and playing techniques in an effort to facilitate transcribing the pieces into western notation and standardizing the melodies (Hyslop 1958) thus creating "real" music. Undoubtedly, the character of the pieces changed and the musicians could no longer play them in their proper system, in which case, they were then dismissed as unable to really understand music. But whose music was it?

Indigenous musicianship though not based on literacy as understood in western academia, nonetheless exists. Kenyan music is not defined merely by its sonic organization, structures and elements; it is a multimedia event. Its definition includes interaction with what is felt, seen by not just players of instruments and singers, but also body movement. Some body movement define a separate dance while others consist in a "conversation" among the participants that has to occur for the event to be considered a complete musical composition. In fact some of the movement is part of the musical structure in that whether it sounds or not, it interlocks with the sounds from the singers and instruments to initiate or complete musical phrases. (*Lullaby mama atsiye wavo mugolova*).

Each culture defines and critiques its own music and musicians. A different culture therefore should not prescribe a standard for the musicians and musicianship of another. But if there are some points of negotiation that allow one culture to appreciate the music of another, then these should be taken into account.

I set out to find a group of Kenyan musicians who had not been trained as per the western definition of music. They were however recognized by their public (culture) as generators and performers of a musical product. They also had to be positioned in contemporary society and its education system. I sought a group that worked in a contemporary genre, implying that the global culture could identify the product as music. Between popular secular musicians and those working with religious genres, I chose the latter. I based my inquiry on hermeneutic approaches: methodological principles of interpretation one of the bases being that in interpreting a text (culture, people, genre), I would take into account physical, historical, social, cultural, geographical features. What is proper in relation to the particular situation.

Since I was dealing with an artistic expression, issues of aesthetics and value systems were of uttermost importance. I decided to investigate musicians who worked with a Christian commercialized genre, gospel. The general public recognized these individuals as musicians even though it was not according to western academia.

Though the religious and philosophical system that the musicians were informed by had been introduced by the west, it had been appropriated such that the musicians as individuals, though well grounded in their ethnic, cultural and social heritage, believed it to be their own. I chose musicians who used Swahili language lyrics. This language is representative of Kenya's national identity. While I perform gospel music, I disqualified myself since I was seriously consciously and unconsciously polluted by rather ethnocentric western academic biases.

The rationale for the African identity of the musical product was rooted in this understanding. Music is a cultural sign/work that reiterates a sense of identity and defines membership into a group. It is sedimented into the collective memory through performances of works but also rejuvenated by the incorporation of new compositions. New works are sometimes subtly assimilated into a cultural system. Other times, they are so different that they are forcibly imposed on a culture and can become historical markers of new events or the creativity of musicians that slowly matures on their audiences. Initial rejection gradually changes to acceptance through forced participation of the cultures' members or the constant performance of a work until the public becomes used to it. Musicians are creative individuals who act both as repositories of old works and creators of new works that historicize current events, experiences, values.

Christian music for most Kenyan society was at the onset forcibly imposed onto the people at a fast rate. Through repeated performances, it became part of the people's collective memory. Kenyan Christian adherents modeled their initial compositions on missionary styles although the performance delivery differed somewhat from that of their European counterparts. Eventually with changes in Christian doctrines for some e.g. the onset of Pentecostalism, spontaneous songs sprang from Christians who had not been to segregated mission schools. These songs were rooted in part in the adherents' music cultures leading to alternative sonic arrangements and musical presentations. A third musical type was the indigenous sound not eliminated with Christianization. All these types are the backdrop against which modern Kenyans with contemporary formal education were positioned and layered. This is their tradition.

Observations During and Regarding My Research Work

On the Musical Product

There has been a lack of research regarding the history of the development of the various Christian music genres in Africa in general. It became necessary to identify the cultural and religious backgrounds of the mission organizations that informed the musicians with whom I worked. The broad spectrum of Euro-American cultures and denominations in Kenya provided a dense and diverse historical study. I was able to trace Germanic, French, Scandinavian or US roots as well as protestant high church, evangelical, Pentecostal, ecumenical; and roman catholic influences both in the theology/text and musical structures. These foreign ways of making music and the musical structures had been introduced to and reinforced in the cultures of the musicians I worked with, thereby beginning another traditional layer.

Christian radio broadcasting was introduced in Kenya in the early 1950s. In studying the local and other music aired on these programs, it was possible to trace changes in theology and in musical styles. By examining missionary reports in their newsletters, journals as well as scouring national Kenyan newspapers and interviewing foreign and local Christian broadcasters, I garnered information on the musical directions that church musicians were encouraged to take.

The directions included using songs for biblical literacy, or story telling so chant/recitation type pieces became stylistic. Regarding the use of instruments, while instruments were initially not permitted by many denominations, gradually the guitar became the most widely used instrument. Musicians made local prototypes before their congregations could afford the "real" guitars. There was also a gradual introduction of percussion and drums as people began to understand the missionary reaction to drumming and separate it from biblical teaching. Initially missionary hymns were translated into local languages. Composers adopted the style for hymns in local languages with better textual/poetic configuration than translated hymns (Yesu Mhonyi, mwami wange). Other changes included the transformation of the performance of missionary hymns so that they incorporated cultural musical practices. This did not mean an abandonment of the "missionary" performance aesthetic, rather it provided an alternative (My hope is built). The Holy Spirit movements led to compositions using indigenous musical structures, since these begun as spontaneous songs so the composers first drew on their own heritage and the sounds around them.

All the above resources were available for local musicians' creativity. However musicians were yet to affirm that they were producing a music reflecting their time and philosophy and looking ahead to the future.

On Kenyan Gospel Musicians

The individuals I worked with acknowledged that they created music but they did not regard themselves as musicians. They felt they did not fit the definition of a musician according to the prevailing contemporary local understanding. As we defined and discussed what a musician is and does, they began to appropriate this title as they realized that music systems are defined and bounded by the cultures that birth them.

Most musicians were unaware of the way their heritage formed and informed their works. They had been made to believe that Christian music is acultural. As such it should in no way be seen to reflect ethnic musical structures and elements. Composers also sought to work in and with what they considered neutral languages (like English or Swahili), instruments (like guitars and keyboards/synthesizers), and neutral text (like word for word Biblical text instead of their interpretation and application of it). Musicians who addressed local social and political issues were seen as being biased and "tribalistic." Many musicians did not realize that the uniqueness of their works stemmed from their ability to negotiate and be music brokers on behalf of their cultures in their time. They needed to incorporate local metaphors to make the gospel accessible to their public. They also had to find practical ways of applying biblical text to daily living, since traditional systems were interacting with other systems at such a rate that there was a constant flux but no stability regarding how to survive in the new world order.

I analyzed lyrics in Swahili, the national language that for many was a neutral space. Most musicians felt the language reached the widest possible public in Eastern Africa. Neutral lyrical formats included using missionary hymn styles and Swahili poetic structures. While many musicians originally composed in missionary hymn styles (lyrics and form), their own socio-cultural and political sounds and musical texts filtered into their works

at first unconsciously. Instrumental and harmonic textures had so subverted the resultant music that cultural influences were not acknowledged. In the course of my research, as musicians became confident and comfortable with their techniques and styles, they ventured into their own languages. Swahili works that followed this process were often better grounded and worked out according to the musicians' traditional, contemporary and compositional theory. The works were no longer tentative but bold. Stylistics that identified the musician's ethnic and other space and background were unashamedly incorporated. There was also a new understanding of working with Swahili language. As more musicians worked in this language, they listened to each other's works and this in turn added to their compositional resources.

The musicians then moved away from the purely sonic definitions of western music configuration, acknowledged and adopted other aspects of their cultural musicianship that included interlocking structures with the human body. The spectacle and visual aspects of musicking became critical to the performances. Performers now looked at avenues and venues for live concerts to promote their products, and also to educate the public on the visual and motive aspects of musical performance.

Musicians have only very recently begun to explore their traditional instruments. This is the most controversial issue. They have yet to move away from "primitive," "pagan" and secular associations. Discussions often became tense regarding acceptable church instruments from the West which are also used in "secular" spaces. On the other hand, many of the musicians do not know how to play traditional instruments. Musicians who had initially done so, abandoned it as a sign of becoming a Christian. Historically, these instruments were inappropriate for playing Christian music. The kinds of sounds that were introduced with Christian music had a different tonality from some indigenous systems. When layering onto western Christian traditions, a different route had to be taken. Re-negotiation and re-education regarding this issue is essential.

There is a misconception regarding contemporary instruments. Labeling every contemporary instrument as western wrongly negates the input of other continents and cultures. Many contemporary instruments draw on global resources. Composers recognize elements here that are convertible since they embrace sounds that musicians can identify and want to work with. As creative individuals, musicians must explore these different instruments and sounds. There are instruments developed in the west but some of them are contemporary instruments that borrow from every possible culture available.

Because of Western domination and control of the industry, religious-based and other sounds coming from the West are still posited as the best compositional and performance models. On one hand, western and other models can provide alternative resources that have to be mediated in order to meet various needs of a diverse Kenyan population. However there is increased awareness of the unique theological trends, social needs and cultural directions in Kenya that musicians anticipate or respond to in their works.

On the Academy, the Industry and Missions

My contemporary Kenyan colleagues had already begun to examine other genres that originated as adaptations of African pieces into western performance models and to situate them in their cultural contexts and performance practices. This has diversified and altered compositional and performance techniques and practices. In addition, there is increased recognition of different styles and types of music and musicians.

Some of my USA colleagues recognize that Christianity and its music are a part of many African traditions. Its manifestations may and may not mirror the directions taken by Euro-Americans. Other music traditions exist in Africa, informed by non-indigenous religions and sources that sometimes intersect with the Christian-based musics and continue the process of creating and preserving identities.

The definition of music and musicianship remains controversial since the needs and desires of musicians and the industry converge on a small scale and conflict on a larger one. Sales of the religious product in Kenya superceded any other genre to the bafflement of international recording companies. The public has strong opinions about who makes good music in spite of industrial promotion. The international criteria for what is

music and what is good music can be perceived differently by local populations. A culture critiques and judges its own works and signs.

Some missions recognize that any Christian musical expression has a cultural source. Today some missions study and encourage indigenous African musical systems. Musicians, as creative individuals, experiment with different instruments and styles. African musicians are often expected to perform on their indigenous instruments and in their indigenous styles. While this is not bad, it denies and curtails a musician's creativity, abilities and choices. On the other hand Kenyan musicians are yet to overcome the mentality that their rich indigenous instrumental and theoretical musical heritage cannot be explored and expanded. While this mentality is rooted in the history of colonialism and Christianity in Kenya and in the industrialization of the genre, I believe the re-education of the public will create added awareness to explore these resources.

Tradition, while having a base, is constantly affirmed and rejuvenated by the cultures that birth them. Music though a part of this process is tradition and culture. It cannot stay static and remain vibrant and dynamic. An analysis of the creators and negotiators of markers, signs and works of tradition such as music can shed light on the history of a people and their current state. The future is as unpredictable as attempting to know the minds of those not yet born.

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