Christian Music In Africa

By J. Nathan Corbitt, © 1994

Introduction
This article is a brief, selective overview of Christian music in Africa. Reflecting a diverse history, culture and heritage, the music of Christians in Africa is an expression of faith and theology wherever people meet to worship, pray and praise. By most accounts, at least 25% of the continent’s population professes to be Christian. This Christian population attends many different western "denominational" churches which were introduced during and after the Colonial Period, e.g. Catholic, Presbyterian, Anglican, Lutheran, Baptist and Pentecostal. Reportedly, today the fastest growing segment of Christianity is the African Independent Churches. Growing from conflicts with western missionaries, these churches sprang into existence during the colonial period between 1880 and 1960. Kimbanguists of the former Zaire, Vapastori of Zimbabwe, Aladura churches of Nigeria, and Zionists of South Africa are among the most frequently studied of these groups. The article is divided into six primary sections as follows:

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1. Brief Historical Overview

Christianity was first introduced on the African continent through Egypt and the Nubian regions soon after the beginnings of the Christianity in the first century. Augustine of Hippo, an early church father, was an African. North of the Sahara, Islam became the predominant religion in the centuries following Muslim Arab entry into Egypt in the seventh century A.D. The Egyptian (Coptic) Church and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church are two remaining churches of the northern region.

South of the Sahara, Catholic missionaries first accompanied Portuguese exploration in the fifteenth century. Christianity did not take hold at this time because most settlements were along the coasts and within highly fortified settlements designed for protection of trade.

It was not until the Great Revivals in Europe and the United States, during the nineteenth century, that western churches began to send missionaries to Africa. It was then that local African people, in greater numbers, began to accept Christianity. Today, many African Christians sing of their faith from rural villages to contemporary cities using multiple musical styles.

2. Ancient Christian Music in Ethiopia

We know little about what music sounded like in the early Christian churches of the Middle East. Except for lyrical writings in the New Testament, musicologists can only conjecture based upon present examples. On the African continent two churches provide some glimpse of this musical practice. The Orthodox Church (Coptic) of Egypt and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Ethiopia provide an excellent music tradition based upon sacred liturgies. Interestingly, this music is also related to the worship music of the Falasha Jews of the Ethiopian region.
The Ethiopian Orthodox Church began in the fourth century when the Ethiopian court accepted Christianity. The Christian faith made its way through Nubia and developed in Aksum (or Axum). (Some traditions give the introduction of Christianity into the region following the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26ff.) The Ethiopian Church has a highly developed liturgy, not too different in form than the High Mass of the Catholic Church. Ethiopian Churches are highly decorated with icons of Jesus, the Madonna and saints of history. One of the most unique features of the church is its music which tradition teaches is a direct gift of God.

**Origins of Sacred Music**

According to an early religious writing of the Ethiopian Church called "The Lives of the Saints," Saint Yared received a divine revelation in the sixth century. Sent by God, three birds visited Yared and took him to heaven. There he was taught both a sacred music and its notation by the priests of heaven. This prescribed music, called Zema, became the church’s liturgical music. Zema is sung or chanted in the sacred worship language of Ge’ez.

**Zema and Dabtaroc**

Zema is sung by a male musician "class" of liturgists called Dabtaroc (pl.). Taught primarily by oral tradition, each Dabtara learns the exact melodies written in special modes or scales. The Dabtara attends elementary school and learns Ge’ez, along with the Old and New Testament and the Psalms. Once completing his studies there, the Dabtara attends a special school for liturgical
dance and musical instruments. Many Dabtaroc assist in the worship of the church.

**Pente Music—Contemporary Music**

During the Colonial period, western missionaries also entered Ethiopia. During this time western missionary churches grew along side the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), working primarily in the southern region of Ethiopia where the EOC had less influence. There has been some tension between the EOC and other denominations. Orthodox religion is very much a part of Ethiopian life and culture. The newer missions, particularly evangelicals, felt that Orthodox believers were not "saved." This originates primarily through the EOC ancient monophysite belief that Jesus was *only* divine.

Following the 1974 communist revolution by Mengistu, evangelical missions were banned from the country. Many evangelical Ethiopian Christians were imprisoned. The evangelical church then went underground meeting secretly in homes. Many mission groups continued to do humanitarian work throughout the country. During this time, a number of Christians began to sing what was called "Pente" music. Pente comes from the word Pentecostal and is an adapted form of the contemporary chorus. Unlike zema, pente is sung in Amharic, the national language.

**3. The Coming of the Missionaries**

People south of the Sahara did not have a Christian heritage. Their religious music was part of what is called today "African Traditional Religion". An integral part of daily life and cultural heritage, music served to compliment all aspects of religious belief. The Africans holistic worldview would come in direct conflict with the sacred/secular mechanistic worldview of the west.

The first European mission society was formed on October 2, 1792. William Carey, the first "missionary," was sent to India. In 1804, The Church Missionary Society sent the first missionaries to Africa in Sierra Leone. From this time to the present, waves of missionaries have traversed disease and hardship to bring the gospel to Africa. Along with the gospel they also brought western culture. A major part of western culture is its music.

**Beginnings—Book Music**
One major impact of western missions on African life was the introduction of the "hymn" as an appropriate form of song for Christian worship. There are some practical reasons for this. One, it was difficult for early missionaries to learn a new music so foreign to their own. African polyrhythms were complex and African tonal languages varied from region to region. Two, missionaries like all people loved their own music. They found it expressed a "reverent" form of worship; a reverence they could not find in African sounds. However, a greater theological concern was that African music so encapsulated African religion that associations with traditional practices could not be shed, in the view of many missionaries. Therefore, in most cases, missionaries preferred to teach their western hymns most often in translated form. This practice caused grave practical problems. Because music and language are so closely bound, hymns translated into tonal languages often did not carry an intelligible meaning when being sung.

A further step by many missionaries, and new converts following their lead, was to burn the drums of African culture upon acceptance of Christianity. While today we may consider this rather drastic, it had a profound effect on new believers. The implications were that African culture was inherently bad and African music was evil and could not be "redeemed." [This is not much different than present-day Christian groups in the west who burn tapes and CD’s of rock music associated with the drug culture.] Thus African music, with several exceptions, was not used in Christian worship forms imported from the west by the early missionaries.
Hymns were often taught by rote. Early on, missionaries published hymnbooks along with translated editions of the Bible. At first, these hymnbooks were only text editions. Soon missionaries used a notation system to teach western melodies and harmonies. Often called “people of the book,” western Christians in Africa promoted their "book" music.

**Tonic Sol-Fa**

Missionaries learned that it would be difficult to teach and share many new songs without some form of music literacy. Again they turned to their own culture. In the early nineteenth century, John Curwen wanted to help Sunday School teachers in England teach new songs to the children of the industrial revolution. He developed a system of notation based upon and ancient symbol system of Guido d’Arezzo. Using the alphabet, periods and commas, he developed an intermediate note reading system called "Tonic Sol-Fa." Missionaries brought this system to Africa and in many early printed "book music" text editions of hymnals, tonic sol-fa also appears to provide a clue to the sound.

Tonic sol-fa became important especially for the training of choirs. Many churches with developed liturgies, particularly Catholic and Anglican, trained choirs to lead in the singing of the liturgy. Choirs were also developed as part of missionary school education. The choir tradition still holds very strong in sub-Saharan Africa. Today choirs participate in school and church music festivals in many countries, singing both western and African anthems.

**Adaptation**

It should not be assumed that a transplanted worship is totally assimilated by local congregations in its original form. From the outset, small adaptations grew into alterations. Western musical scales did not fit into African scales. Africans often, and automatically, adjusted the western melodies to fit within their own musical frame-of-reference (often a pentatonic scale). A few western hymns have remained popular in the contemporary African church—even to the point that African Christian would claim ownership of the hymns as a valid expression of their faith. Some of these include *Amazing Grace* and *What a Friend We Have in Jesus.*
4. African Independent Christianity

David Barrett, scholar and writer on Christianity in Africa, believes that there are more than 6,000 schismatic Christian groups in Africa. Beginning as early as 1819 in Sierra Leone, the majority of these started because of a "failure of love" by missionaries who unilaterally determined the role and meaning of Christ for African people. Some were in direct conflict with mission churches that refused to give Africans leadership. Armed with the Bible, African Independent Churches (AIC) sprang from African soil in the visions and callings of Black prophets. They proclaimed Christ for Africans in African culture and used the Bible to defend polygamy, loud simultaneous prayers, faith healing and African music. Just as significant are the beliefs that God is ever-present, and the Holy Spirit is directly involved in the lives of believers. One such AIC movement was in Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe).

In the early nineteenth century John Masowe attended a local mission church in what is now Zimbabwe. Not finding adequate leadership, he withdrew. At one point he went to a mountain to pray. When he descended he was dressed in a white robe, carrying a staff and was singing “Hallelujah.” He proclaimed himself to be the Black Christ for Black Africa. He developed a strong following among the Shona people of Zimbabwe who now call themselves Vapastori, or "the Apostles of John." Believers shave their heads, greet each other with a holy kiss, and dress in white robes. The men carry a staff and women must cover their heads. In many ways they seek to follow adherence to biblical commands. As well, polygamy is common and they have no church buildings, preferring...
to worship in the open air. This is often done, as one follower stated, "to keep ourselves from relying on property."

Music is important to Vapastori worship. "Hallelujah" songs are an important part of the worshippers who sit on opposing sides of the worship area—men and women separated. Following the service healing and laying on of hands takes place. A unique feature of their music is the group of singers who seem to imitate the pipe organ.

Missionaries who loved African music

Though rarely stated in African Christian music history, there were a number of missionaries who attempted to incorporate African music in Christian liturgy. The earliest of these were the Scottish Presbyterians, about the turn of the twentieth century, who placed Christian words in traditional African melodies. By and large, however, these
Attempts did not take hold until Africans themselves made the gospel real in their own melodies. With Vatican II in 1964, the Catholic Church began to incorporate local languages and music in the liturgy. A number of African Masses were developed around the continent. With the growth of independence, African Christians began to seek authentic worship. Much of this, particularly in former mission churches, came with the introduction of Pentecostalism in the mid-twentieth century and the introduction of choruses, hand-clapping, and instruments. This movement fit African culture much closer than other denominations, and these outward expressions “spread like yeast” into many conservative denominations such as Baptists and Presbyterians. Today there is a virtual harvest of new music.

Spontaneous Christian Song

![Akamba rural choir in Kenya](image)

Why did African music using African idiomatic expression eventually take hold? Often it was a very practical reason. Many new believers received the gospel in their own language away from the influence of the missionary—especially under the preaching of African "missionaries" and evangelists. As a result of healing or other miraculous events, they would begin to spontaneously sing of Jesus and his healing power. Not knowing western musical languages, they sang in their heart language, using traditional forms in new ways. These songs were shared in worship as part of personal testimony and began to spread from church to church by musical "pollinators" who used oral means. These pollinators were "church musicians" valued for their ability to memorize many songs and lead congregations in exciting worship. Christian "Heart music" can be found in many African communities where Christianity is present.

5. Christian Music and Freedom
The Diaspora—Taking music abroad

Slavery was a common practice in Africa long before it was institutionalized as commercial trade in human life by Europeans. By and large, slaves were captured in wars and used as soldiers and common laborers. It was not uncommon for these people to become part of their new society, by gaining their freedom, marrying and bearing children. However, in 1441 a Portuguese sea captain introduced into Europe the possibility for trade in human flesh. Between 1450-1900 over eleven and a half million Africans were sold into slavery across Atlantic routes. Torn completely from their homeland and transplanted into their new and unfamiliar "homes" of suffering, these African slaves would not "settle" without a struggle for their independence throughout the world. This dispersion of African peoples is commonly referred to as the African Diaspora.

As Africans were dispersed into the New World, music maintained its function as a mode of solidarity and communication. Songs both sacred and secular (though this dichotomy is primarily western) were sung in the fields to lighten work (known as “communal labor” or work songs), in times of death, and in new forms of worship. The 'Negro' spiritual, while used in building solidarity in worship, also served as a means for communicating themes and geographical routes of independence. This cultural love and reliance on music led Dr. Martin Luther King centuries later to declare that "music is the soul of the [civil rights] movement." Much of this music takes its deliverance themes from the Bible, particularly the Exodus where God brought people out of slavery into "The Promised Land" of freedom – and used music to celebrate their deliverance.

Outside the continental United States, African-influenced musical styles, separate for work and worship, were developing in the Caribbean. Particularly noteworthy is the *Rhumba* of Cuba, which eventually found its way back to the Congo. During the same period people on the African continent were equally concerned with liberation. We have already discussed the independent church movement. In the mid-nineteenth century Africans began to fight openly for political freedom.

**Independence on The Continent**

During the World Wars, many African people served in the military and fought for European powers against a number of aggressors. This was in spite of the fact that they were under oppression themselves. Many tell of their fighting alongside of whites in the trenches of war. They learned that "whites" bleed and die just like other men. From
these and other experiences within their own country, they returned with an interest in independence from colonial rule. Many openly fought in armed combat. But the masses also fought for independence at home. Music became a tool of encouragement and communication. Here are two of many examples where music is an "agent of political expression" that grows from the church.

**Mau Mau**

In the 1950’s the Kikuyu people (Kenya) became outright hostile toward the British colonial powers. When the resurgence was driven underground, and given the name of Mau Mau, religious music became political music. African Historian Bethwell Ogot tells it this way:

Like the Negro spirituals which were apparently adopted from songs sung at camp meetings of white evangelical sects, Mau Mau hymns were written to the old familiar tunes of *Hymns, Ancient and Modern*. When meetings were apparently swaying in religious fervor to the strains of "Abide with Me" or "Onward Christian Soldiers" the congregation was in reality being exhorted to fight for independence or regain their stolen land. (p. 276)

**South Africa**

Enoch Sontonga, a mission school teacher, composed a song called “Nkosi Sikelel’ I Africa” (God Bless Africa) in 1899. First sung at the ordination of a Methodist Minister Rev. M. Boweni, it was later adopted as the official song of the African National Congress, and is now the national anthem of the new South Africa. In this song we find a thoroughly African mix of politics and religion.

6. Globalization and the Music Market Place—From Village to City
As Ali Mazrui has pointed out, Africa is a marketplace of ideas. It would be wrong to expect Africa to return or maintain a culture from the time of pre-colonialism. Like people everywhere, African people adopt, adapt and synthesize the elements of culture from their past and present realities. They maintain those elements that are relevant to contemporary life and culture. They may also discard those things that no longer apply to new realities. This marketplace can be observed in music.

**The Village: African traditional music origins and styles**

At the root of African music is the music of the African village. Call and response singing, complex rhythms and spontaneous expression mark this often lively music as unique to Africa. The drum, often scourged by early Christians, undergirds the participatory nature
when everyone sings, and dance is performed in complementary circles of unity. African music is often cyclical. The repetition complements and fosters participatory dance and reflective thought. Indigenous Christians often used this music as self-expression in the absence of western musical influence. Today, the traditional African music heritage is reflected in many monolingual rural Christian communities.

The Town: Blended Music

Athi River Baptist Church Choir in 1988, Limuru, Kenya

When confronted with the simple hymns of the European and American Great Awakening Africans often adapted the hymn form into what Joyce Scott has called "town music". Though simple harmonic structures and hymn forms are present, African Christians often added syncopated rhythms and guitars in a unique African sound which they could call their own. Texts, always a prime consideration in African music, were written within the context of African town life and spiritual realities. Popular since the 1960s and 70s, town music continues to be heard in village, town and urban dwellings. Christian musicians continue to visit the global marketplace and even purchase recordings of African sounds recycled into new hybrid musical styles and utilize them in their own creative endeavors.

Globalization: "Africa Come Back" Music—technology and synthesis

Following World War II, the British Broadcasting Service and Voice of America would broadcast African Radio Services. For the first time, rural African people would hear firsthand musics of the world. With invention of vinyl phonograph records, cassette tapes and now CD’s and satellite TV, African is part of the global communication village. Rhythm, a core element of African music, was now reintroduced into Africa first through the music of Elvis Presley and through popular western artists of later decades including Michael Jackson. Even earlier, however, African musical elements would come back through a South Africa tour of the USA Fisk University Singers (who sang Black Gospel music) in the late nineteenth century and international exchanges of jazz musicians. Cuban railroad workers would bring African-influenced *Rhumba* to Zaire. Missionaries
began to import electronic synthesizers (earlier it was accordions). Innovative African musicians would seize old and new instruments, and "baptize" them in the name of Jesus. Truly, this vibrant continent makes use of every resource from mouth bows and gourd-resonated xylophones to MIDI keyboards and guitars to "make music to the Lord."

References


FURTHER NOTES:
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