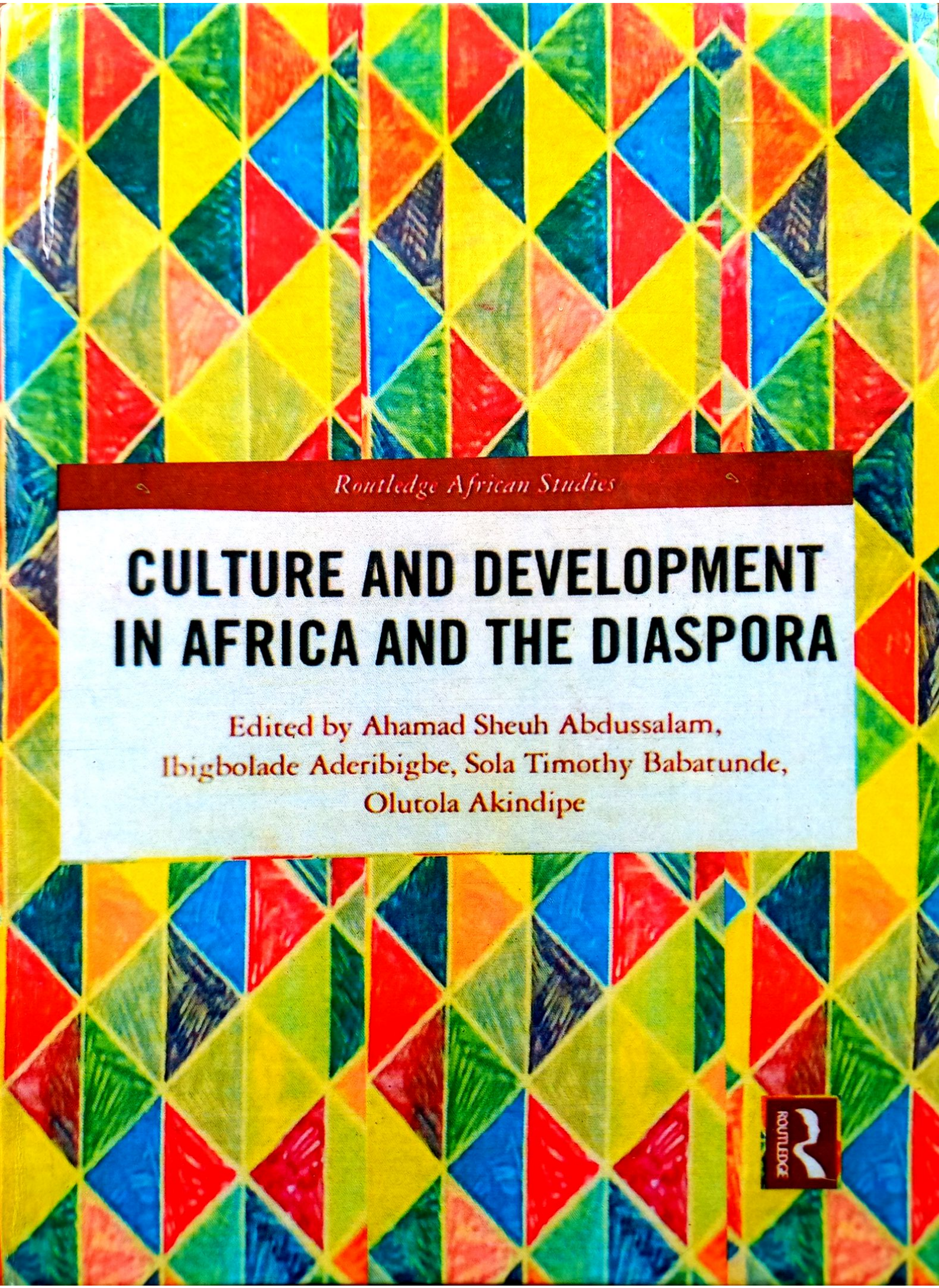

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Edited by Ahamad Sheuh Abdussalam, Ibigbolade Aderibigbe, Sola Timothy Babatunde, Olutola Akindipe
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Edited by Ahamad Sheuh Abdussalam, Ibigbolade Aderibigbe, Sola Timothy Babatunde, Olutola Akindipe

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7 Intersections of popular culture and Nigerian gospel music

Adeola Taiye Shola

Introduction

Music does not exist in vacuum. Rather it influences and is influenced by a variety of factors within its sociopolitical and geographical context. As an element of culture, music connects people among whom it evolves. The association of music with social and ritual ceremonies has been observed to be central to African music by Akpabot, (1986: 1). The association of the music culture with religious activities and festivals within a society makes the influence of religion on music almost inevitable. Mbiti (1980: 262) asserted that it is religion, more than anything else which colors the African's understanding of the universe and their empirical participation in that universe, making life a profoundly religious phenomenon. Agbo and Keke (2013: 259) also submitted that to say that music influences the religion of Africa or vice versa is merely an isomorphic statement because religion and music are two indivisible superstructures that constitute the culture of the Africans. Music derives strength from the culture that regulates its emergence, performance, patronage and continuity. This is so because according to Blacking (1973: 60), music is a product of human behavior.

The Nigerian gospel musicians and the popular musicians operate within the same Transcultural field and are therefore both affected and influenced by the same realities of existence. These two equally influence each other in some ways that become manifested in their arts, acts and activities. The impact of popular culture on musical activities including gospel music can therefore not be ignored. This impact is evident in the use of media, the execution of gospel music as an art form greatly influenced by secular art especially music and fashion, and the sociopolitical and economic realities of the society. This chapter therefore examines the intersections of popular culture and the Nigerian gospel music with particular reference to areas of influence on each other.

Nigerian gospel music

The music scene in Nigeria is permeated by both secular and religious musical types and the performance and patronage of music in Nigeria reveal that religious music has become a force to reckon with. The popularity of various

forms of religious music in Nigeria grows by the day. The religious affiliation of individual musician is reflected in their performance as references are made at one point or the other to their religion in form of invocation and prayer at the beginning of their renditions, expression of religious belief and admonition. Even secular musicians infuse religious themes into their songs as much as they can to appeal to their listeners either Christians, Muslims or African religion practitioners.

According to Vidal (2012: 2), the Nigerian contemporary music scene today is characterized by such musical types as *fuji*, *ibaka*, highlife, *juju*, Afrobeat, African pop, African reggae, African jazz, gospel music, native-airs and contemporary art music. He states further that the extent of these diverse forms of musical expression becomes more obvious when one considers the vast array of creative expressions within the various ethnic groups in Nigeria, inspired and influenced by the multiplicity of musical instruments, language and cultural values.

Gospel music is one of such musical types that have developed over the years in Nigeria and has become popular, engaging various styles and themes on contemporary issues as they find relevant from time to time. Gospel music is a branch of Christian music employed essentially for the proclamation of the Christian message and the singing to the praise of God. Agbo (2013: 196) defines Christian music as all music meant for worship and the glory of God ranging from purely liturgical to general spiritual/sacred music. As a branch of Christian music, gospel music is not restricted to the formal Christian liturgy but adaptable to Christian activities outside the strict liturgical settings such as social functions.

Samuel (2013: 32–45) posited that gospel music is one of the most widely accepted musical genres in contemporary Nigeria and above all incontrovertibly the most contentious. Gospel music is popular, and because of its enviable status, it is highly variegated, and has witnessed a lot of revolutionary changes especially in recent times. This observation has earlier been made by Ojo (1998: 210) when he states that there is a continuous adaptation of Gospel music to the changing circumstances of the performers and the audience within a historical milieu. The popularity of gospel music and musicians have become so much that several of them are household names and have become common features on the radio, television stations and in print media in Nigeria.

Our definition of Nigerian gospel music is that Christian branch of religious music employed for the purpose of propagating the gospel of Christ to non-Christians and edifying the believers through its performance in both strict religious context (in the church) and social/entertainment context (outside the church) which has been made popular by the electronic media, technology and its performance.

This definition emphasizes the two pronged nature of gospel music as both spiritual and social commodity. This is exhibited in the use of gospel music in the church setting and outside of the church, its relevance to the believers

and unbelievers alike. Gospel music is neither a commodity utilized only by the church nor is it only targeted at those outside of the church, it is for both. The focus of gospel music which is essentially to proclaim the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the unbelievers outside of the church is captured in this definition as well as the function of gospel music within the church and the Christian circle. It is greatly utilized by those within the church for their spiritual growth, praise and worship of God.

The origin of gospel music in Nigeria has been put in the 1960s by scholar like Adedeji (2004). According to him, the term 'gospel music' was first used in Nigeria by the pioneers in the same period though it had its antecedents as from thirty years earlier. He explains that:

> Various names attached to it were *'orin ìgbàgbó' (Christian Song), 'gospel'*, 'indigenous sacred songs' and 'Spiritual Songs'. Although there were contacts with American gospel music before then, there is no evidence to suggest that the origin of Nigerian gospel music had any link with American gospel music. Thus one might conclude that it originated independently but named as deemed fit by its pioneers and promoters.
>
> (Adédèjì, 2005: 145–152)

The specific date for the origin of gospel music in Nigeria is not certain but speculative as observed by Adedeji, but it is probably between 1964 and 1965 because of the musical activities that form the antecedents of gospel music in Nigeria. Adedeji (2004) discussed some antecedents of Nigeria gospel music first of which is the music used by the Nigerian Indigenous Pentecostal Churches on evangelistic parades between 1930 and 1960s, and is of the opinion that it is the philosophy and practice of the music on one part that developed into gospel music.

This position is supported by Emielu (2014: 114–115) when in his attempt to distinguish between Church, Gospel, Christian and Popular music he traced the origin of gospel music in the West to the famous camp meetings and street revivals as seen in Azuza street mission revivals of the early 1900s. He noted that Africans that have been introduced to Christianity in the Diaspora found European religious music very boring and devoid of the ecstasy and hot rhythm of African music and this made them to seek opportunity to redefine European religious music in African terms and they found this opportunity in the Azuza street mission revivals which became the melting pot of Pentecostalism worldwide. The connection between the two submissions is the contribution of Pentecostalism to the development of gospel music at different ends – America and Nigeria about the same period experienced different episodes that culminated into latter development of gospel music.

Other antecedents that contributed to the origin of gospel music in Nigeria discussed by Adedeji (2004: 64) are the non-liturgical music of Nigerian indigenous churches used at Christian social functions such as naming and

wedding ceremonies and other festal occasions and the music performed by missionary school bands during colonial era. Another musical activity that contributed to the development of gospel music in Nigeria according to Adedeji (2004: 65) is the renditions by invited talented individuals, choirs and independent church musical groups that performed on Radio ELWA, Igbaja, which was broadcast from the 1950s. This led to the release of the first popularly known Christian religious album in 1965 by Prince S.A. Adeosun of Christ Apostolic Church, Yaba. The title of the album is "Kristì mo fara mi fun ó" (To you o Christ I give myself) followed by another album entitled 'T'èjè Rẹ Ni Kóo Rò' (Consider Your Blood) by S.O. Akinpelu of Christ Apostolic Church, Oke Ayo, Opopo Yemoja, Ibadan in the same year. Adedeji (2004: 66) noted also that the choir of St. Peter's and Paul's Catholic Church, Ibadan led by Rev. Fr. T.M. Ilesanmi in 1967 released an album titled *'Mo Ti Kólé Mi Sórí Àpáta'* (I Have Built My House on The Rock).

We can conclude that antecedents of gospel music culminated into the emergence of a new form eventually classified as gospel music in Nigeria. The gospel music was influenced by Pentecostalism, non-liturgical music at social functions and the activities of talented individuals originally resident in the church. The talented individuals later took the bold step of forming independent groups within the church and later as autonomous bodies to perform and venture into recording of albums. Putting the origin of gospel music in Nigeria as 1960s and more precisely at 1965 because of the earliest known recorded Christian indigenous religious album may therefore be right.

It can be observed that the social influence on gospel music is a strong factor right from its origin. It is our opinion that, whereas Nigerian gospel music is conceived and presented by some musicians as the music other than or different from the secular which focuses solely on the proclamation of the gospel of Christ, the musical type performs dual roles as the examination of its style, structure, content and performance reveal a strong secular social influence. This is however not equating the Nigerian gospel music with the secular forms which have existed side by side with it; neither are we classifying the musicians as secular artists. However, we are pointing out the factor of secular influence on the Nigerian gospel music just as Christian music influence can be seen in some contemporary popular secular music genres in Nigeria. Nigerian gospel music may therefore not be defined in absolute term but can be defined from different perspectives.

It is observed that from its formative stage in the 1960s to its developed stage in the 1990s, the different stages of the development of Nigerian gospel music present characteristic features that are peculiar to the period of development. Gospel music in its formative stage was purely church based with the predominant use of hymns and native airs. At this stage it was purely spiritual devoid of any economic determinism. By the 1970s use of oratorios became a feature in Yoruba gospel songs and the use of native styles of the 1960s. 1980s marked a revolutionary trend in the Nigerian gospel music. Gospel music as entertainment due to its social functions began and the commercialization

of the music also started at this time. The themes of the gospel music also started to include social-political issues. By the 1990s gospel music fully has gone out of its religious confines and became highly commercialized and competitive. Elaborate use of choreography and drama sketches, recording of video tapes and the use of secular popular styles became a feature. Today, Nigerian gospel music is also characterized by the use of different styles of performance which according to Adedeji (2004) have resulted in the evolving of different branches of Nigerian gospel music such as Gospel Waka and Gospel Fuji which according to Ojo (1998: 215) have the same rhythm as the popular secular Waka and Fuji, except that their text is essentially Christian.

The use of code switching in rendition and fusion of styles is a recent trend in the Nigerian gospel music. It is a common thing to find a blend of English or Pidgin English with Yoruba and Hausa languages in order to appeal to the major ethnic groups in Nigeria. Many Nigerian gospel artists now render songs in their various dialects in order to minister to people in local languages who may not understand English language. Blending of styles in performance is a new trend in the performance of the Nigerian gospel music. It is a case where a musician blends the western and traditional styles or fuses popular traditional styles like Fuji with Hip Hop as exemplified by the Midnight Crew. Ajirire and Alabi (1992: 74) observe that apart from entertainment, churches have found in gospel music a means to elevate the audience's spirit making it in tune with the Spirit of God. Loaded with heavy spiritual message, gospel music ministers to the audience and admonish them to turn from their sinful ways of life and at the same time offer eternal life to repentant souls.

Popular culture

Popular culture refers to cultural activities or commercial products reflecting, suited to, or aimed at the tastes of the general masses of people. According to Ackley (2001: 227), broadly speaking, popular culture refers to the music, literature, arts and media of a particular society and the ways in which those things reflect its people's current tastes, interest, and talents. Thus, popular culture includes not only television, film and music but also advertising, cartoons, newspapers, magazines, books and virtually any other product you can think of that reveals something about people in a particular time and place.

The gospel musicians being members of the society themselves express their views and run commentaries on happenings in their environment and as such one is able to have insights into the prevailing situations in the society as issues of social concern feature prominently in the Nigerian Gospel music. Martin (1995: 11) puts it more succinctly when he wrote that:

> Music is a social product, social resources and social practice. As such, it is not autonomous but it is created and performed by real people in particular times and places. In doing so, they reveal much about themselves

and their societies. He states further that the form and character of music somehow reflect or echo the nature of the society in which it is produced.

It can be said that religious music has become a popular culture in Nigeria. According to a write up on 'Pop Culture' posted on free base (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freebase)

> Popular culture is the entirety of ideas, perspectives, attitudes, memes, images and other phenomena that are preferred by an informal consensus within the mainstream of a given culture... Heavily influenced by mass media, this collection of ideas permeates the everyday lives of the society.

The influence of the mass media on popular culture is evident in the impact on Nigerian gospel music especially in the area of disseminating the music. The same write up draws a distinction between popular culture and pop culture as follows:

> Although the terms popular culture and pop culture are in some cases used interchangeably, and their meanings partially overlap, the term "pop", which dates from the late 1950s, belongs to a particular society and historical period. Pop refers more specifically to something containing qualities of mass appeal, while "popular" refers to what has gained popularity, regardless of its style.

Barber (1987: 715) commenting generally on popular arts states as follows:

> Popular arts are seen as a hybrid, distinguishable from traditional arts by their syncretism. They are located in the cities, the centers, both of technological change and rapidly growing 20th century transport network; they are endowed with an unprecedented mobility; they can be transmitted by radio, television, and record or cassette tape. The audiences to which they are addressed in the first instance are drawn from the city; they are often heterogeneous crowds.

According to Lucie-Smith (1988: 232) pop culture is a product of the industrial revolution and the series of technological revolutions which succeeded it. "It bears the marks of a specifically urban sensitivity at war almost with nature; its aesthetics lies in the young, witty, sexy, glamorous, mass – produced, transient, popular and gimmicky" (237)

A common feature of the various submissions on popular culture is the acceptability by the people because of popularity and the capacity of its influence on the various aspects of the life and existence of the people because of the interrelatedness and interdependence of the popular culture on each other. The factor of urbanization and technology is also germane to popular culture.

Intersections of popular culture and Nigerian gospel music

In the Nigerian society, gospel music occupies a centre stage in the drive of popular culture. Gospel music as an art form exists and survives in the context of other generally acceptable cultural entities and has come to influence and is being influenced by those entities.

The musical tastes of the society have greatly influenced the development of gospel music at different stages because of the desire to remain relevant and maintain appeal to the audience. This has reflected in the styles of performance, contexts of performance, use of costumes, musical instruments, dance and the increased interaction with the secular terrain. The submissions of Omojola (2014: 3-4) in his discourse about modern Nigerian popular music is quite instructive on the extent of influence of the modern Nigerian popular music as an art form and popular culture on the Nigerian gospel music. According to him:

> Modern Nigerian popular music refers to musical performances that are strongly associated with modern social spaces like nightclubs, discos, and western-type concert settings. Like their western equivalents, Nigerian popular music genres combine commercial, socio-political, and artistic objectives, and are disseminated through the electronic media in such formats as cassettes, CDs, MP3 files and the internet. In their strong emphasis on the elements of dance, they tend to feature extensive use of percussion instruments as well as the electronic guitar, synthesizer, and computer-generated sounds.

Omojola's submission that the Nigerian popular music genres combine commercial, sociopolitical and artistic objectives is worthy of note as a parallel of these can also be drawn in the Nigerian gospel music. The performance of Nigerian gospel music reveals a blend of proclamation of the gospel and entertainment which we have classified as *gospeltainment* in our proposal of "Gospel entertainment" concept and theory for the Nigerian gospel music (as we have observed (Adeola, 2016: 67)). The characteristic features of *gospeltainment* are subsumed in three primary intentions of the Nigerian gospel musician which are spiritual, aesthetic and commercial.

Omojola submits further that:

> The music also often employs a variety of wind, stringed and brass instruments. In addition, popular music forms in Nigeria are distinct for their intercultural instrumentation (combining Western and African instruments), and the use of indigenous Nigerian languages, including Nigerian Pidgin (a syncretic mode that draws on words derived from English and Indigenous languages) as well as the English language.

It must be observed that every description of modern Nigerian popular music by Omojola is applicable to the Nigerian gospel music which resonate the intersection of popular culture on the musical type. The use of the mass media

to propagate the musical activities of the gospel musician is an intersection with the popular culture. Today gospel musicians popularize themselves through their releases of audio and video compact discs which also serve the dual purpose of generating income and documenting their works. The audio and video recordings also reveal the influence of popular culture on the musicians and their works. It must be observed that the video recordings by many of the Nigerian gospel musicians try to satisfy the taste of the society greatly influenced by what obtains in the secular music especially in the use of dance and costumes which in some cases can be mistaken for secular video clips but for the texts of the music that are about God, Jesus or the gospel.

Popular and secular styles have become an identity in Nigerian gospel music performance. It has been observed that the 1980s mark the emergence of the use of popular styles in the Nigeria gospel music because of the influence of popular culture on the one hand and the desire to commercialize gospel music on the other hand. Ajirire and Alabi (1992: 21) agreeing with Adedeji (2004: 66) and they suggest that '*gos-pop*' style was formed in this period and Carol Bridi, a soloist was probably the first to '*funkify*' Nigerian gospel music in 1984 with the release of her debut titled 'One Family' in 1984. This, in Emielu's (2006: 105) opinion, is a product of the steady cross-current of musical ideas and cultural exchanges between Africa and the Diaspora which is very evident in popular and gospel music. The Nigerian gospel musicians use various musical styles in their performance. The use of traditional and contemporary popular styles like Waka, Senwele, Apala, Ijala, Fuji, Hip Hop, Rock, Afro beat and so on are influences of popular culture. The use of traditional musical instruments and the performance of such styles exactly the way it is done in the secular but for the text usually generate dance steps, movements and interactions that are entertaining.

Another intersection of Nigerian gospel music with popular culture especially with popular secular music culture is the use of musical instruments. One of the main features of the Nigerian gospel music is the elaborate use of musical instruments. A blend of the western with the Nigerian musical instruments especially the percussions is also a feature. The submission by Omojola (2014: 35) that Christian churches across Yoruba land now commonly feature dundun drummers, both during worship services and at Christian social gatherings outside the church is quite true and evident in Nigerian gospel music. The choice and use of musical instruments is always determined by the style of performance peculiar to individual musician. However, some musical instruments such as the western keyboard, guitars, drum set, saxophones, trumpets, congas and the traditional talking drums – *Dundun, Bata, Sekere, Agogo*, seem to be generally employed by the gospel musicians.

The number of each of the musical instruments also vary from one musician to another depending on how large the band is and the style of performance, but the basic combination of the instrument in the small band is at least one each of the keyboard, bass guitar, drum set and talking drum. Some gospel musicians use multiples of each of the musical instruments and the dominant instrument

whether western or traditional is also a function of the style of the musician. There are categories of gospel musicians who because of their style of performance use either only the western musical instruments or strictly the traditional Nigerian musical instruments. Musicians like Frank Edward and 'Bois Olorun' fall into this category. While Frank Edward because of his Hip Hop style uses western and computer simulated musical instruments like the Keyboard, Synthesizers, electric drums and western guitars, 'Bois Olorun' use only the Nigerian traditional musical instruments because they sing 'Apala' hence, their use of *Sekere* (Gourd Rattle), Set of *Gangan* (Yoruba Hour Glass) drums and *Agogo* (Gong).

It must be observed that the manner in which the *Gangan* (Yoruba Hour Glass) talking drums are employed in the Nigerian gospel music performance is not different from how they are used in the popular secular music performance especially in the speeches that the drums make and styles of playing. In fact in most cases the secular ideas are replicated verbatim in gospel music performances.

The symbiotic relationship between music and dance makes it more or less inevitable not to refer to dance while talking about musical performances. It is a general trend in the Nigerian music scene to have dance accompanying music performances. Music being a product of the society reflecting patterns of human behaviors is often employed in the conveyance of motives and intentions and used as a means to convict and convince the society by appealing to their conscience and emotions. At various levels of human existence, the culture as expressed through the arts gives a strong impression upon the recipients and with particular reference to Africa the performing arts have always been integrated and employed as powerful tools of communication to affect social control. The relationship between music and dance evident in the interdependence of the duo on each other at different levels of performance can therefore not be downplayed as it is evident in the Nigerian gospel music performance. Omojola (2014: 24) observes that the close relationship between music and dance is a feature that even the newest observer of African performances will not miss. Citing Ugolo (1997: 181) Omojola states further that the social conditions that motivate music and dance are principally the same: the forms overlap, and the compositional and choreographic techniques use basically the same principles, thus giving a keen observer the impression that the two are inseparable.

Choreographed dance and use of popular dance steps to generate amusement is a common feature with Nigerian gospel musicians. In this regard there is no dichotomy between sacred and secular dance in performance. The body movements are deliberately used to heighten performance appeal. Ugolo (2001: 144) had observed that the need to express music in movement has always led to the creation of dance styles to go along with such music. There are instances in Nigerian gospel music performance that the lead singer takes time to teach the audience some dance movements to go along with some songs to heighten the meaning and carry the audience along. There can be solo dance by the leader or another member of the band; there can be group dance that are choreographed as well as free dances. Dance moments are created in performance

as interludes to display the performer's dance prowess and the audience is also encouraged to "dance unto the Lord". Entertainment is inevitable when dance is infused and employed in this manner. Some gospel musicians also engage professional dancers either to choreograph their group or actually employ them to do the dancing especially for the release of video clips.

Popular dances like *Macassa, Yahoozee, Etighi, Sekem, Shakiti Bobo* and so on which are also employed by secular musicians now feature prominently in gospel music performances. An examination of video clips released by gospel musicians reveals this reality. They deliberately use the dances to entertain during the performances as they try to capture the attention of their audience and appeal to them. It is observed that in performance contexts dominated by the youths, the gospel musicians especially the younger ones venture into experimenting with various dance steps in order to appeal to the youths. Even the older ones deliberately infuse such dance steps occasionally in their performance and when they do the youths are excited and they shout and join the musician in the dance.

The use of costumes and the handling of such costumes by the gospel musicians at performances add aesthetic values to the performance as it generates a level of entertainment. It is common to have group uniform for the musicians which can be determined by the roles played by them in the performance. There can be a general costume won by all members of the band except the leader who is usually costumed in a manner that makes him or her stand out. The group of instrumentalists can also be costumed differently from the group of singers. Of particular relevance is the design or styles of the costumes won by these gospel musicians especially the females which reflect what is in vogue and popular in the world of fashion in the society. Most musicians seem to have particular ways of dressing for performance and some have been identified with special designs of costumes or how they tie their head gear or put on their cap. The costumes won by the musicians influences their movements and carriage at performances and have turned out to be a mark of identity for some gospel musicians.

Conclusion

The intersection of popular culture and the Nigerian gospel music have been discussed in this chapter focusing principally on the areas of influence of the popular culture on the Nigerian gospel music. The same Transcultural fields within which the Nigerian gospel musicians and the popular musicians operate have made these influences inevitable since they are both affected by the same realities of existence. We have observed that these two influence each other in specific ways that manifests in their arts, acts and activities. The influence of popular culture on musical activities including gospel music is evident in the use of media and technology driven performances, the execution of gospel music as an art form greatly influenced by secular art especially music, dance and fashion. These manifest in the use of popular secular styles in music and dance by gospel musicians, the use of musical instruments and the use of popular styles in fashion designs.

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