THAT ALL MAY HEAR: HOW INDIGENOUS CHURCH MUSIC ENCOURAGES CHURCH GROWTH IN AFRICA

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Abstract

This article demonstrates how indigenous church music can be an effective tool in promoting healthy church growth. After defining indigenous church music through the insights of ethnodoxology, the author explains how it engages local hearers through their own conceptual categories. This cognitive interaction is relevant in that it augments comprehension of biblical themes and content. But it also impacts hearers through the various levels of their worldview. The article ends with a case study of how a consortium of African theological institutions and IMB missionaries are developing orality-based indigenous music to teach, refute heresy, and evangelize the continent.

INTRODUCTION

The primary purpose of church music is to extol the glory of God and to proclaim his praises. Yet music, in all of its complexity, has the potential to impact not only congregations but also non-believers in profound ways. In Majority World contexts, indigenous forms of church music can be a powerful tool in accomplishing the Great Commission, namely, "make

disciples of all nations. . .teaching them to observe all that I commanded you." This reality is poignant, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. This article shall explain how indigenous church music may promote healthy church growth in Africa. After a brief definition and an explanation of "indigenous church music," various insights from anthropology and worldview transformation will follow. This interdisciplinary summary should provide broad support to indigenous church music's contribution in gospel proclamation and church planting. And by knowing *how* indigenous church music impacts church planting, we hope that missionaries and church planters will better understand *why* they should consider it in their ministry practice.

ETHNODOXOLOGY AND ITS EFFICACY

We begin with a definition of what we mean by the expression, "indigenous church music." Indigenous church music is far more than Majority World people playing classical Western hymns on their local instruments and in their native dialect. Rather, what we mean by this expression is a development from the discipline known as ethnodoxology. Neely defines ethnodoxology as "the theological and anthropological study, and practical application, of how every cultural group might use its unique and diverse artistic expressions appropriately to worship the God of the Bible" (Paul Neely 2020: https://www.worldofworship.org/what-is-ethnodoxology/). Ethnodoxology applies to many different forms of cultural artistic expression, including carvings and dance. For our discussion in this article, however, we will focus exclusively on ethnodoxologists' contributions to indigenous church music.

Applied in a Sub-Saharan African context, the practice of ethnodoxology would result in indigenous church music that exhibits the following characteristics. The compositions would be performed with indigenous musical instruments and sung in the local dialect. What is more, however, is that the music would consist of original pieces reflecting the artistry and musical forms of the local culture. In addition, the content of culturally appropriate congregational worship music would convey biblical themes in the local culture's conceptual categories. This dynamic contextualization of biblical truth will result in potentially higher comprehension levels and

more effective application of the biblical content by the local population.

Understanding the conceptual categories of the local culture, therefore, is of critical importance for indigenous church music. The difficulty is in identifying and communicating in the appropriate type of cognition. Anthropology can provide some assistance in this endeavor. Hesselgrave and Rommen note that there is more than one way of thinking in any culture. In fact, there are three: conceptual (cognition by postulation, including deductive and inductive logic); psychical (cognition by intuition), and concrete-relational, in which "life and reality are seen pictorially in terms of the active emotional relationships present in a concrete situation" (Hesselgrave and Rommen 2000: 205-206). Anthropologist E. M. Smith insisted that people of all cultures think in these three ways. The cultural differences we experience are the results of the priority given to one or another type of cognition manifested collectively by each community.

Broadly speaking, most cultures throughout Sub-Saharan Africa exhibit a concrete-relational cognitive orientation (Hesselgrave and Rommen 2000: 206). This type of cognition is not familiar with theoretical abstractions or logical propositions. Rather, individuals who manifest concrete-relational thought prefer thinking in concrete terms. The preference for concrete thinking does not at all suggest that concrete-relational cultures are incapable of logic. It does maintain, however, that the type of reasoning employed is image-based, pictorial, and expressive of a concrete situation based on the daily life experiences of the culture.

In addition, there is also the emotive component in concrete-relational thought. Essentially, those who exhibit concrete-relational thinking hold strong emotional ties to interpersonal relationships, the daily vicissitudes of life, and sometimes inanimate objects, particularly in nature. These individuals do not experience reality dispassionately or impersonally. Instead, every aspect of life is viewed as existing in complex, dynamic interactions with all that is seen and unseen. All of reality is about relationships.

Concrete-relational thinking, specifically in Sub-Saharan Africa, impacts religious expression. Generally speaking, African religious themes, whether they are from African Traditional Religion (ATR), Christianity, or Islam, are not doctrines or abstractions that the believer must embrace as a

member of a particular religion. Instead, African religious affirmations are concretized or lived out in the day-to-day life experiences of the believer. This concrete expression is not mechanical or rote but manifests relationally. For the African, one must live in a harmonious relationship among both the denizens of the seen world and, for non-believers and those new to Christianity, the unseen world of spirits, deceased ancestors, and divinities. To do so is to experience wellness and wholeness within the community. Thus, many devout Africans (Christian, Muslim, and ATR) will seek the blessings of the spirit world upon their crops, finding a mate, fertility, and finding deliverance from life crises (Lausanne Occasional Paper 18, 5, D, i). The concept of an end-time judgment resulting in either eternal bliss or eternal condemnation is not generally the primary consideration among many Africans. For adherents of ATR, they are hardly considered at all. What matters is obtaining the power to negotiate life's adversities for today.

This manner of thinking presents challenges to ministry practitioners who strive to guard the integrity of the Christian message. To be sure, the concrete-relational cognitive orientation is a cultural feature that the Church should welcome and celebrate. Yet, without strong discipleship, people who exhibit this type of thought may interpret orthodox Christian teaching using conceptual categories that are intrinsically antithetical to the Christian witness. Even sincere, devout African Christians may have a tendency to interpret biblical teachings according to the interpretive framework that they inherited from their indigenous culture. Bourdillon notes:

> It is generally recognized that when religious conversion takes place in Africa, the new religions are understood within the categories of the old. New Christians may still emphasize the need for material well-being, or they may still understand diseases in terms of spirits or witches. Traditional religions fed into each other in a similar way in the past. Understanding necessarily involves fitting what is new to the existing patterns of the mind (Bourdillon 1993: 226).

Indigenous church music, however, is well suited to engage Sub-Saharan Africans at the concrete-relational cognitive orientation at multiple levels. First of all, it aids in the comprehension of biblical content. Indigenous

congregational music has the potential to evoke imagery, picturesque narratives, and colorful descriptions of daily life. This feature of indigenous church music, then, can communicate Scripture truths and biblical doctrines in vivid, concrete examples as opposed to abstractions or logical propositions. When believers proclaim Scripture truth in this manner, the message is thereby more comprehensible not only to the members of the congregation but non-believers as well. But music also communicates at a visceral level.

Music, by its very nature, evokes emotional responses. Traditional African music, regardless of ethnicity or region, is no different. Indigenous church music, then, can elicit emotional responses to its content. These emotive associations, then, promote at least positive inclinations to the gospel message if not outright wholehearted acceptance. What is also clear is that music has a latent capacity to connect with individuals who operate at the concrete-relational orientation of cognition at an emotional level as it conveys biblical content.

But African indigenous church music can also promote gospel transformation beyond mere information transfer. We contend that indigenous church music has the potential to engage Africans at the deepest level of their being, namely, along the categories of worldview. Following Hiebert's Levels of Culture model, indigenous church music can engage Africans at the "implicit level" of culture, involving the cognitive, the affective, and the evaluative dimensions of worldview (Hiebert 2008: 33). Apart from gospel transformation at this "implicit level," evangelism and church planting in Sub-Saharan Africa risks a greater likelihood of abject refusal or, even worse, a syncretistic fusion of Christian truths with traditional beliefs and practices.

Too often, what passes as Christian ministry in Sub-Saharan Africa, among expatriate missionaries and local ministry practitioners alike, has not undergone sufficient contextualization. Following Hiebert's model, much Christian ministry merely engages only the sensory and explicit levels of culture. Ministry at these levels frequently produces transformation that is mere assent to biblical truth at best and external change at worst. Healthy church growth, including conversion and discipleship, involves more than what believers wear or what they eat (sensory level). Nor is church growth

mere intellectual assent to a list of creedal formulas on a confession of faith (explicit level). Rather, effective church growth in Africa should engage hearers at the implicit level of worldview.

We now explain how indigenous church music can engage hearers at the cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions according to Heibert's implicit level of worldview (Hiebert 1985: 46). By the cognitive dimension, we refer to how Africans think and reflect upon information, specifically biblical and theological content. The affective dimension refers to the emotional response to ideas or concepts in an individual's worldview. The evaluative dimension is the volitional aspect. And indigenous church music can promote healthy church growth by addressing all three.

Gospel proclamation and biblical instruction, including the redemption of creation, is the way that indigenous church music can engage the cognitive dimension of the African worldview. This method of gospel proclamation has clear objectives: (1) proclamation of the gospel message in a narrative form set to music, (2) use of Scripture narratives as the source material, (3) following the linear progression of redemptive history of creation-fall-redemption-consummation mediated through covenants, and (4) engagement of themes and topics in day-to-day life that are relevant to Africans. Crafting the content of indigenous church music should include the cooperation and participation of pastors and lay leaders from the receptor culture.

Indigenous art, informed by our understanding of orality and transformed by the gospel, also impacts the affective dimension. In fact, indigenous church music has the potential to engage African hearers primarily at this level of implicit worldview. Hearing biblical content that is presented in local African cultural expressions may resonate with hearers in a way that other methods of communication cannot. The implication is that the hearers will absorb the content of the indigenous church music better than they would otherwise. Their capacity to recall content from a positive outlook is also enhanced. Furthermore, the emotive impact of indigenous church music has a greater likelihood of authentic gospel transformation among hearers.

Finally, indigenous church music impacts the evaluative dimension at the implicit level of worldview. By the evaluative dimension, we are referring

to the dynamics of volition, including the categories of correct/incorrect, right/wrong, etc. If the indigenous church music incorporates moral and spiritual exhortations, the content of the music can engage the hearers at some of the deepest reaches of their worldview. If the music has engaged them with meaningful content and emotional fervency, the potential for hearers to consider and follow the ethical-spiritual injunctions within the content is increased. Indigenous church music, therefore, can have a strong gospel presentation in order to make it an effective tool in evangelism as well as discipleship. Indeed, the capacity of indigenous church music to impact worldview transformation at the evaluative dimension underscores the thesis that church music can promote healthy church growth.

CASE STUDY

Having summarized an anthropological explanation for the efficacy of indigenous church music in church growth, a practical example is in order. As a sort of case study, we will demonstrate how indigenous church music can be a means of engaging false teaching both within and outside the church. Perhaps one of the greatest challenges facing the African church today is that of the "prosperity gospel," and "Neo-Pentecostalism" (Arnett, 2017: 1-4). While space does not permit a lengthy definition, a brief description of this movement is in order.

Broadly speaking, both movements represent a heretical movement within Christianity that has historical ties to Pentecostalism but differs from it in certain essential features. Both the prosperity gospel and Neo-Pentecostalism can be described as (1) being mass international movements as opposed to remaining within denominational lines; (2) having an emphasis on wealth and prosperity as opposed to disdain for wealth and worldliness; (3) possessing "deliverance theology," in which the Holy Spirit provides salvation from demonic ties to the past, which frequently involves ancestor spirits; (4) stressing "restitution" or making amends for past sins, even ancestral sins; and (5) emphasizing electronic and print media (Spiegel 2013: https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/ant-presentations/1).

Besides teaching on health, prosperity, and material success, prosperity gospel groups and Neo-Pentecostal groups exhibit various manifestations

typical of charismatic groups. Among these manifestations are the following: healing, speaking in tongues, being "slain in the Spirit," and revealing prophecies and divine revelations. Typically, both groups feature an influential, charismatic leader who claims to have received some divine revelation as well as supernatural power over evil forces, including demons, ancestral spirits, and witchcraft (Simojoki 2003: 272-80).

The following example is not hypothetical but is part of a comprehensive strategy to combat the prosperity gospel by the African Baptist Theological Education Network (ABTEN) (https://www.abten.org). This consortium of like-minded Baptist theological institutions, spanning over twenty-five countries throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, is taking concrete steps to engage the false teaching in Neo-Pentecostalism and the prosperity gospel. Among these steps is the development of a special task force, AB316, whose current responsibility is the development of teaching materials that can counter these false teachings, as presented at the most recent ABTEN conference (Barnes 2019: https://www.abten.org/2019/ab316/). The example that follows below is part of an orality-based curriculum that AB316 members are in the process of creating. The goal is to engage the heretical teachings promulgated by Neo-Pentecostalism and the prosperity gospel among the twenty-five member African countries of ABTEN member institutions.

Ministry practitioners can engage the false teachings of the prosperity gospel by developing a repertoire of indigenous church music. While such a ministry project is indeed time intensive, the end result would be a contribution to the cultural heritage of the local congregations that would also inoculate them against the false teaching of the prosperity gospel. Because the musical selections would address common concerns of most Africans, their messages would resonate among both Christians and non-Christians. This reality would not only make the finished products a welcome addition to congregational worship but could also make them effective evangelistic tools that can promote healthy church growth among Sub-Saharan Africans.

This repertoire would use Scripture along the narrative trajectory of Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation. One of the primary concerns among Africans raised in traditional beliefs and practices is the attainment

and continuation of material wealth and personal well-being (Simojoki 2003). The lure of Neo-Pentecostal and prosperity gospel preachers is the promise to their followers to satisfy their desired material well-being. An effective counter to these false teachings is the biblical description of authentic human flourishing. Rather than ignoring the felt needs and existential concerns of many Africans, the proposed orality-based curriculum will teach Scriptural content that promotes the well-being of humankind as well as cosmic redemption through a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

The proposed curriculum will propound the biblical vision of authentic human flourishing by following a thematic approach rather than Scripture proof-texting. For our purposes, the biblical themes of the image of God, the Kingdom of God, and the Temple, when developed along the grand narrative arc of Scripture, provide the biblical teachings about authentic human flourishing that unfolds against the panorama of cosmic redemption as Jesus Christ "makes all things new."

The narrative thematic unfolding of the "image of God" in song can provide an example. Beginning with Creation, indigenous songs should explain what the meaning of humankind created "in the image and likeness of God" entails (Gen. 1:26). "Image" and "likeness" (Hebrew: *tselem* and *delûth*; Greek: *eikon* and *homoios)* were well-known expressions among the civilizations of the Ancient Near East. They typically referred to a potentate and his sovereignty over his realm. His authority, likened to that of the image and likeness of the national deity, was therefore unquestioned and absolute (Gentry and Wellum 2012: 193). Only Scripture describes how all humanity, not exclusively royalty, exercises a God-ordained dominion over the created order (Gen. 1:28).

Yet another song or songs would continue the thematic narrative of the image of God by explaining the Fall. Humankind experienced an injury to the image and likeness of God as our parents rebelled against God's good command (Gen. 3). The songs that recount the Fall would also describe its impact on the image of God. Singers could describe the reversal of the created order at the moment the serpent tempted Eve. At the beginning, God created man, then He created the woman from man, and then humanity exercised dominion over the animals. Yet the temptation features

a beast (the serpent) appealing to the woman, who entices her husband, and finally results in God calling out to Adam. The results are curses upon the man and the woman as well as expulsion from the presence of God (Gen. 3:14-24). All creation is subjected to futility (Rom. 8:20).

Other songs would develop the narrative theme further by examining the impact of redemption on the image of God. These songs would explain how the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (I Cor. 15:3-4) result in believers' conforming to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29; I Cor. 15:45-49). This conformity to the image of Christ involves a transformation to the nature and character of Jesus Christ, to be sure (2 Cor. 3:18). Yet it also implies a reversal of the curse. The church, as Christ's body and the fullness of Him who fills all in all (Eph. 1:23), participates with Him who is seated at the right hand of the Father (Eph. 1:20; 2:6). Seated at the right hand of the Father, all rule, authority, power, and dominion in this age and in the age to come are now under His feet (Eph. 1:20-22). Seated with Christ, believers share in that victory. Of course, the songs should explain how this victory is not fully realized in this age, yet they should expound on how the battle that people experience day by day is already won in Christ.

The Psalms explain how Christ's rulership and subjugation of all things inaugurate the reversal of the curse and the inversion of the natural order of creation. Psalm 8:4 asks, "What is man that You take thought of him, And the son of man that You care for him?" It then explains in verses 6-8: "You make him to *rule* over the works of Your hands; You have put *all things under his feet*" (italics mine). It then describes all that this rulership encompasses: "All the sheep and the oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea" (Ps. 8:7-8).

This passage recalls Genesis 1:28, when God tells Adam and Eve, "[F]ill the earth and subdue it; and rule over *the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth*" (italics mine). Then Scripture recalls Genesis 1:28 and Psalm 8:4-8 when it says that Jesus "must reign until He has put all things under His feet" (1 Cor. 15:25). The songs would develop this redemptive story from the biblical theme of the image of God. They could expound the biblical connections in artistic ways that show the listeners how Jesus has restored their rightful place as vice-regents over God's creation. They now should anticipate the

day in which Jesus "makes all things new."

This musical repertoire would conclude with the narrative finale of consummation, or the fulfillment of all things at the eschaton. This song set could recount how our conformity to the image of Christ will be complete at the resurrection, when Jesus will "transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory" (Phil. 3:21). At that moment, the reversal of the curse on creation will be complete, extending even to our bodily infirmities and physical frailty. Our resurrection bodies will be like unto Jesus' own resurrection body at Easter. For there will be "new heavens and a new earth, for the old heavens and the old earth had passed away" (Rev. 21:1). And we shall reign with Jesus forever as God had intended from the beginning.

The musical repertoire or portfolio would not only develop the biblical-theological theme of the image of God. These song sets should also develop the biblical themes of the kingdom of God and the Temple, following the grand narrative arc of Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation. While space does not permit a full explanation, these three themes help delineate what Scripture teaches about authentic human flourishing. Following the insights of orality, songwriters could use the following table of story sets as the source material for each of these themes:

Story Sets:

	Image of God	Kingdom of God	Temple
Creation	Gen. 1:26-28	Gen. 1:28-29	Gen. 1-2, 2:15; 3:8; Ezek. 28:13-14 Gen. 2:10, 3:24, Ezek. 28:14-16; Ezek. 47:1-12; Rev. 21:1-2; Ezek. 40:2-43:12; Rev. 21:10; Ezek. 40:6
Fall	Gen. 3:16-19	Gen. 3:16-19	Gen. 2:24
Redemption	I Cor. 15:45-49 Col. 1:15 Eph. 1:20-21 Rom. 8:29 2 Cor. 3:18	Ex. 19:3b, 6 Ps. 8:4, 6-8/ Gen. 1:28/ I Cor. 15:24-25 I Chron. 17:11-14 Dan. 7:13-14 Matt. 4:17;5-7; 28:18 John 3:5 I Cor. 15:20-24 Col. 1:13-14	I Ki. 6-7 Ex. 40:34-35 II Chron. 7:1-2 Ezek. 10:18-19 Jn. 1:14; 32-33 Jn. 2:18-21 Matt. 4:23-25; 11:4-6/ Is. 32:3-4 Is. 35:5-6; Is. 42:7, 16 Acts 2:1-4 Eph. 2:19-22 I Cor. 6:19-20
Consummation	Phil. 3:21 I Cor. 15:25 I Cor. 6:2-3 Rev. 21:1-4; 22:3	Matt. 15:31-40	Rev. 21:1-4; 9b-14

As mentioned previously, the objective is much more than mere information transfer. If Christians are going to address the existential fear that many Africans experience in their daily lives, they must seek transformation that touches Africans' innermost beings. Through the proposed story sets, per Hiebert's Levels of Worldview, the intention is to engage the cognitive, affective, and evaluative implicit worldview dimensions. The content and scriptural exposition within the songs, set to verse, would impact listeners at the cognitive dimension. The evocative quality of the words set to indigenous musical forms would engage the affective dimension. And the ethical/spiritual exhortations in the words set to music would intersect with the evaluative dimension.

If the musical repertoire successfully engages local hearers at the implicit level of worldview, through the Holy Spirit, it would inoculate them against the virus of the prosperity gospel heresy. Those who have heard and memorized the songs would hear the message of prosperity preachers through the narrative interpretive matrix of the image of God, the kingdom of God, and the Temple. Doing so would give them the biblical resources necessary to refuse the appeal of Neo-Pentecostalism and the prosperity gospel. And the Church in Sub-Saharan Africa would remain resilient against the current pestilent wind of doctrine. It could even proclaim these songs, thereby expanding the kingdom and encouraging healthy growth of the Church on the continent.

It is not enough, however, to do the work of biblical theology and to organize the story sets that would provide needed instruction against the prosperity gospel. In fact, the development of indigenous music would require the collaborative efforts of a ministry team. This group of co-laborers should be comprised of a diverse gathering of local pastors, musicians and songwriters, as well as perhaps missionaries. If possible, the group should consider enlisting the services of an ethnodoxologist (one trained in the composition of indigenous church music) who could serve as a coach and a consultant for the process. One may research the ethnodoxologists in various parts of the world at the Global Ethnodoxology Network website (https://www.worldofworship.org).

Together, the ministry team would create indigenous church music. For the earlier example, they would use the story sets incorporating the biblical

themes of the image of God, the kingdom of God, and the Temple as their source material. The local songwriters and musicians would provide the creative impetus. The local pastors, who presumably would also know the local language, could provide feedback about the content and help ensure doctrinal fidelity. Missionaries, if present, would interact at every stage in the creative process. And the ethnodoxologist could serve as a coach and an advisor for the ministry team. Schrag has written a manual that explains the various steps of the ethnodoxology process (Schrag and Krabill 2013:). A list for the creative process is below:

Ethnodoxology process:

Step 1: Meet a Community and Its Arts

Step 2: Specify Kingdom Goals

Step 3: Select Effects, Contents, Genre, and Events

Step 4: Analyze an Event Containing the Chosen Genre

      4A: Describe the Event and Its Genre(s) as a Whole
      4B: Explore the Event's Genre through
          Artistic Domain Categories
      4C: Relate the Event's Genre(s) to Its Broader Cultural Context
      4D: Explore how a Christian community relates artistically to its
          broader church and cultural context

Step 5: Spark Creativity

Step 6: Improve New Works

Step 7: Integrate and Celebrate for Continuity

CONCLUSION

Indigenous church music has the potential to make a positive impact on healthy church growth. It not only aids in the comprehension of the content of the music but also reaches the innermost being of the listeners. The Apostle Paul understood this truth when he wrote in Colossians 3:16, "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God." May the church of Jesus Christ do likewise to the uttermost parts of the earth.

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