

Oral Expression of African Christianity in Songs and Choruses (A Case Study of African Independent Churches In Calabar-Nigeria)

EMEKA C. EKEKE

Department of Religious/Cultural Studies, University of Calabar, PMB 1115 Calabar

Cross River State, Nigeria

revekekemekus@yahoo.com

Abstract

In a typical African family, the elders would gather the young people and children around the fireplace at night and narrate the stories, histories, and events that made them a proud and memorable people. Through these verbal arts, Africans transmit their beliefs, heritage, values, and other important information. So among the Africans, these forms of verbal arts are extremely important and effective means of communication, which have provided the upcoming generations with wisdom. Therefore, we can conclude that treasures and many opportunities exist in African oral communication, which can help to present the Gospel message and develop an acculturated and contextualized African Christianity. This paper focuses on the importance of oral expression of African Christianity in songs and choruses with special reference to Independent African Churches in Calabar, Nigeria. It considers some songs and choruses sang in these churches and present their theological meaning to Christianity in Africa. The paper concludes that songs and choruses in African Independent Churches in Calabar are not focused on the main theological themes of the Bible such as new birth, resurrection, the second coming of Christ, righteousness, holiness, sanctification, eternity in heaven or hell, but about life here on earth free from the oppression of the powers of witchcraft and other powers such as mermaid spirits that torment human beings.

Key Words: African Christianity; Independent churches; Oral theology

Introduction

African traditional groups are historically oral societies, where verbal modes of communication help people to point to what they meant and say what they could not put into written word. There is a world where sounds carry ideas and images without any other intermediary in the process of communication. Foley (1988) explains that they picture ideas and images vividly in their mind's eyes rather than through letters and written words. This shows that the world of "orality" is a world of talk (19). One strong underlying factor behind the African oral custom has to do with the fact that the origins of most of the African tribal groups are involved in obscurity. As such, the commonly received accounts are for the most part purely legendary. Kolawole (1999) supports this by saying that many of their languages were unwritten and all that is known is from traditions carefully handed down through traditional historians, who

are family members and functioned as historical storage and transmission (21). In a typical African family, the elders would gather the young people and children around the fireplace at night and narrate the stories, histories, and events that made them a proud and memorable people. Through these verbal arts, Africans transmit their beliefs, heritage, values, and other important information. So among the Africans, these forms of verbal arts are extremely important and effective means of communication, which have provided the upcoming generations with wisdom. Therefore, we can conclude that treasures and many opportunities exist in African oral communication, which can help to present the Gospel message and develop an inculturated and contextualized African Christianity. This paper focuses on the importance of oral expression of African Christianity in songs and choruses with special reference to Independent African Churches in Calabar, Nigeria. It considers some songs and choruses sang in these churches and present their theological meaning to Christianity in Africa.

Oral Theology in Efik-Ibibio Songs and Choruses among African Independent Churches in Calabar.

Across Calabar, the capital city of Cross River State, Nigeria in thatch-roofed and tin-roofed and large buildings are where Christians under the auspices of African Independent Churches sing and worship their God. A song may challenge the men, then the women, the young people, the preachers, a different target in each verse, with the same theme. The music is not written down; it is memorized except few hymns. Rhythms and volume are important. No one is paid; everyone is a volunteer. This is a living, local tradition.

The songs are not mere entertainment, even though the singers clearly enjoy themselves. The most common introduction to the time for singing in Efik-speaking African Independent churches during weekly worship is that this is the “*ini ikwo ikwo itoro ino Abasi*”, “a time to sing praises unto God”. Comments and prayers in response afterwards routinely use the same kind of language: these songs speak the word of God to his people just as much as when a senior church leader reads a passage from the Bible and speaks on it. Routinely, one quarter of the time in a worship service is spent by the singing groups, and often substantially more than the time taken by the spoken sermon. On special occasions, when Christians from half a dozen local congregations gather in one place, time for this singing takes an even larger proportion. (Foster, 1988: 2)

The local songs are in fact oral theology. Laryea (2002) writes of “the many ordinary Christians whose reflections on the gospel can be discerned in their prayers, songs, testimonies, thank offerings and sermons. They are the ones who are now beginning to set for us the parameters and framework for doing theology in a new key” (35; cf. Tshela, 2002: 17). Similarly, Bediako (1998) argues that “academic theological discourse will need to connect with the less academic but fundamental reality of the ‘implicit’ and predominantly oral theologies found at the grassroots of many, if not all, African Christian communities” (64-5). As Christians

of Independent African churches speak to each other in their songs, they reveal their understandings of God and his revelation. That understanding is then the starting point for any further reflections on both their own context and the inspired text in which God speaks. This is theology understood as a “hermeneutical spiral” (Osborne, 1991: 6; cf. Shaw, 2003: 23) between text and context.

This paper presents one model for studying oral theology. It summarizes key themes in the author's collection of songs from Efik-Ibibio speaking Independent African churches in Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria. They are traditionally matrilineal and politically decentralized, but today exhibit all the variety and complexity of a people who have experienced the traumas of harsh colonialism in the world. Since then, the relentless forces of urbanization and globalization are leaving their mark. Amid all these changes, the Christian message has had a huge impact, so that now most Efik-Ibibio speakers would claim to belong to a church even though they still maintain their traditional cultural dances such as Ekpe which has become an international festival during the Calabar carnival in December every year.

It is important to note several limitations of the approach taken in this paper. It focuses on public words, not private action. Everywhere in the world those are very distinct spheres, and the links between them can be hard to trace. The songs from five different African independent denominations namely Mount Zion Full Gospel Church, Mount Zion Lighthouse Full Gospel Church, God the Host Deliverance Prayer Temple, Emmanuel Deliverance Ministry and Deliverance Tower of Jehovah are representative, but not in any statistically precise, random-sample way. These songs and choruses shall be examined based on the theological themes they express. They reflect the author's exposure and experience. Conclusions are suggestive and subject to corroboration and correction by other study approaches.

Theological Themes Expressed in Efik-Ibibio Songs and Choruses in African Independent Churches.

The most prominent themes in these songs are judgment and revenge, deliverance, the return of Christ, God's protection, repentance, sins, death and the resurrection. These Efik-Ibibio Christians repeatedly remind each other of their protection by God, while living fragile lives in an uncertain, dangerous world.

a). Theme of Judgment and Revenge. Song after song says this in different ways. Places, people and events from the Old Testament are not particularly prominent. They present these songs and choruses as showing that God will judge their enemies which may not necessarily be Satan but any human being who may serve as an opposition to their progress in life. Such songs are here presented:

*Ererimbot edikop mi,
Council emaebono k'ikpe*

*Obong ono uyo ete eyak unen owo
Eno me andinyene.*

This song is interpreted to mean,

Let the world hear
That council has assembled in judgment
The Lord declares that ones right should be given
To the rightful owner.

This song and others like it shows that members of this Christian organization believe that whether on this earth or in heaven there is going to be judgment where people's right which was taken by others will be restored by the declaration of the word of God.

Another song which portrays God as a God of revenge is:

*Sio usiene nno
Ubok asana Ete, sio usiene nno.*

Interpreted as

Revenge my enemies for me
Father with clean hands
Revenge my enemies for me.

These types of songs are so many among this group. They see God as a God that could fight and avenge their enemies whether real or perceived.

Though many New Testament theologians today may question this view of this group regarding revenge and judgment of their enemies when Jesus Christ said "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven..." (Matthew 5: 44-45 NIV), but a clearer understanding of their theology will reveal that they are not waiting for the final judgment before God will revenge their enemies. They seek for God's revenge and judgment here and now. This theology may look like Liberation theology that seeks deliverance from enemies here and now. The theme of judgment is found in at least 28% of the collected songs. The dominant tone is one of revenge and punishment on their enemies. Judgment is often seen as a hope for vindication, a reassurance that God will put right all that is wrong.

b). Theme of Christ's Victory over Satan: This theme is among the second most prominent theme in these songs. This is a keynote theme that spread throughout the Bible. The Christian faith stands or falls based on this theme. But the theology of this group has a deferent explanation to this theme with a careful study of the songs and choruses that portrays it. Some of the Songs that portray this theme include:

*Satan otop, Obong otop,
Ubok akan ubok, Satan akanaa k'isong osiomkpo,
Obong akan o!*

This is interpreted as:

Satan throws a blow; The Lord (Christ) throws a blow,
Hand is stronger than hand; Satan fell on the ground and shouted,
The Lord (Christ) has overcome O!

In this song, Satan is depicted as throwing punches on Christ in a battle or contest, which Christ retaliated with a stronger punch and Satan, fell on the ground and shouted "The Lord has overcome o!"

Another song that also portrays Christ as a victor over Satan is:

*Akan enye o, Akan enye
Satan akanwan ekong
Jesus akan enye o*

Interpreted as:

He overcome him, He overcome him
Satan fought war but
Jesus overcame him

The war depicted in this song is supposed to be the battle fought on the cross against Satan which is written in Colossians 2: 14-15

Having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross (NIV)

According to Pastor Monday Umoh of Emmanuel Deliverance Ministry in Calabar the victory depicted in this song is not only of Christ victory over Satan on the cross but Christ victory over their enemies which includes witches and wizards who perpetrate evil against them.

c). Themes of Divine Protection: The African Independent Churches in Calabar have many songs that show God's protection to them. Deaconess Titi Eno explains that these songs

show their fear of shame and reproach which may come as a result of attack by forces of darkness or witches and wizards. Some of these songs include:

Obong kuyak ami ndi owo oro (3x)
Ererimbot ekamade enim nkpo nsakimam.

This song is interpreted as:

Lord may I not be someone (3x)
Whom the world makes an object of scorn and reproach.

This song reveals the fear being shown by members of these Christian organizations. They sing of God protecting them from being object of scorn. This scorn expressed in this song is not eternal scorn of being thrown into the lake of fire as written in the Bible “Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev. 20: 14-15 NIV), but a materialistic shame and disgrace which comes as a result of witchcraft attach on an individual in the form of lack of children, poverty, sickness and dying early without accomplishing anything in life.

Another song which conveys almost the same meaning above is:

Obong kuyak ami ndi owo oro (3x)
Mmen owo nwut usung,
Ntuaknda nta nkarafang

This means:

Lord let me not be someone (3x)
Who shows others road
Then I standstill and rust

African Independent Churches in Calabar sings this song to express the fact that they should not help others to progress but standstill in their own life journey. The theology behind this song could be seen as meaning that while they help others, God should also help them to progress in their life’s journey. Another song which further reveals and expresses the oral theology of this group is:

Me mmo ekpe wak akan mi O
Obong k’uyak mmo enyene unen
K’idem mi O

This is interpreted as:

Even if they are more than me in number

Lord may they not have right over me.

Deacon Ubong Udoh of Mount Zion Full Gospel Church, Calabar explains that God's protection keeps them from the hands of the enemy. They therefore pray and sing about this protection despite the number of enemies that confront them anywhere, they hope and trust God for victory.

d). Theme of God's Miracles and Testimonies: The songs under this theme are so many because it shows their joy and celebration of God's power in their lives. In this paper we shall consider only a few of them:

*Ekondo edikop mi
Nyeda Obong mi mbure mbure O
Ami nyeda Obong mi nta ese k'anwa.*

This song is interpreted as:

Everybody come and hear
I will boast with my Lord (Jesus)
I will testify of his greatness in the public.

In this song or chorus, the theme of boast of God's greatness is expressed. This boasting is as a result of one miracle, healing or deliverance God gives them. Furthermore, they sing asking God to give them testimony either in deliverance from one witchcraft attack or healing from one sickness or the other.

*Obong no mi ikot ntiense
Ererimbot oyom iko ntiense (2x)*

This song means:

Lord give me testimony,
The world needs testimony (2x)

Another song that belongs to this theme is

*Inyang baghare yak'mi mbe inyang,
Baghare yak'mi mbe, Inyang ufok ete yak'mi mbe, Inyang
Baghare yak'mi mbe Inyang ufok ika yak mi mbe, Inyang*

This is interpreted as:

Seas open for me to cross
Sea from father's house open for me to cross
Sea from mother's house open for me to cross.

The theme expressed in this song is that of the Red Sea which stood on the way of the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt. But suddenly God intervened for them causing the sea to open "...and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land.

The waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left” (Exodus 14: 21, 22 NIV). These Christians see this miracle as needed to be replicated in their families where various powers of witches and wizards are standing as hindrances to their passing into their earthly promised land which includes divine health, financial prosperity and success in life’s endeavors.

Appraisal of These Songs and Choruses Sang in African Independent Churches

Besides listing their most prominent themes, another way to analyze these songs is to look for their underlying narrative. Narrative is a fundamental component of worldview. Missiologist Steffen (1998) argues that “symbol-based narrative (story) serves as the primal foundation of worldview and social structure” (477). Facts and symbols only ‘make sense’ when placed, either implicitly or explicitly, within a narrative (480). Similarly, cultural anthropologist Bohannan (1995) declares: “People live by stories—they use stories to organize and store cultural traditions” (150). New Testament scholar Wright (1992) contends that “worldviews are at the deepest level shorthand formulae to express stories” (77). Narrative is basic to human life, not a substitute for some more abstract ‘real thing’ (38; cf. Carson, 1996: 193-314, Satterthwaite, 1997: 125).

There is no established methodology for distilling a narrative from a body of songs, so that any attempt is merely suggestive. It develops from noting recurrent, strong contrasts both between the present and the future, and this world below and God's world above. It also tries to incorporate the themes already noted.

Another factor to be included when articulating the underlying narrative of these songs is a double contrast: insiders with outsiders, and group with individuals. The group is much more prominent than the individual. It is not some individual self that stands out against all others. Rather the self blends in to a group where it belongs. The individual’s obligation is to fit in, particularly by the appropriate behavior that marks the insider group. The group is more defined by this behavior than it is by opposition to other, outsider groups (Foster, 2005: 8).

It should also be noted that this underlying narrative in the Efik-Ibibio songs does not clearly envision a mission on earth besides escape. Biblical themes of evangelism, transformation, new creation and resurrection are neglected. But the emphasis is far from escapist or passive. There is a relentless challenge to human effort, more vigorous than God’s activity. People remind themselves, repeatedly, that there are strong forces attacking them in the world which they must be delivered from. These forces are seen as the forces of witchcrafts. The salvation which they sing about is from these evil powers and not from sin. The journey to heaven is fraught with deep uncertainty. People do not know when their journey will end. In their worship songs they concentrate more on earthly blessings than eternal blessings that come from new birth in Christ which is completely absent from their oral theology. Morality in the society is not their focus but victory over enemies that fight against them.

Conclusion

This paper has explained some of the various theological themes expressed in the songs and choruses of some African Independent Churches popularly called Christian Spiritual Churches or Christian Prayer Churches of Efik-Ibibio speakers in Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria. It has shown that these songs as presented are representative in nature and not a systematic random sampling kind of presentation. Since these churches emphasize more on deliverance and healing, their songs seem to tilt towards overcoming forces of darkness and witchcraft powers. We therefore conclude this paper by saying that songs and choruses in African Independent Churches in Calabar are not about the main theological themes of the Bible such as new birth, resurrection, the second coming of Christ, righteousness, holiness, sanctification, eternity in heaven or hell, but about life here on earth free from the oppression of the powers of witchcraft and other powers such as mermaid spirits that torment human beings.

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Name	Occupation	Age	Date & Time of Interview	Place of Interview
Pastor Monday Umoh	Clergy	52	Sunday 14 August, 2011 2.35PM	Calabar
Deacon Ubong Udoh	Civil Servant	45	Sunday 14 August, 2011 4.20PM	Calabar
Deaconess Titi Eno	Fashion Designer	40	Sunday 21 August, 2011 3.30PM	Calabar

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