


THE *PAMBIO* AND A NEW MUSICAL INCULTURATION OF THE GOSPEL IN AFRICA

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This essay explores the role of local music in inculturating the gospel in Kenya and throughout Africa. The *pambio* (lit. "chorus") is an example of the role of music in the inculturation process. The use of the *pambio* type of African folk hymn usually democratises the leadership of worship and liberates (and empowers) the laity to lead by spontaneous theologizing. The other aspect of inculturation through the *pambio* is that, in African contexts, music creates community and community creates music. In this role, members of diverse denominations are bonded in their diverse contexts of communal life. Thus, the *pambio* plays a significant role of blurring religious differences and leadership roles in worship and proclamation. This essay, then, wonders what these new ways of inculturating the gospel mean for African Christianity. It engages some African scholars to help discuss some of these implications.

Key words: music, *pambio*, inculturation, translation, mission.

Translating the message: the primary and essential step in inculturation

*Christ has been presented as the answer to questions a white man would ask, the solution to the needs that western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European world-view, the object of the adoration and prayer of historic Christendom. But if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like?*¹
—John V. Taylor

The translation of the gospel into a vernacular language, its inculturation or contextualisation in any locality, and its embodiment in a people's spatial existence are interrelated and inevitable processes that have been noted in mission history. As we reflect on the translation, reception and indigenisation of Christianity in Africa, we need go no further than to begin by reflecting on Paul's experience with the Athenians on one of his missionary journeys. Paul's encounter with the Athenians at worship and, conversely, the Athenian encounter with the radical gospel message, provide a glimpse of the transformative nature of the gospel on world cultures in the history of Christianity (Acts 13:22). Paul noted two things about the worship in the Areopagus in Athens: the nature of Athenian religious zeal and their piety towards an unknown deity. Paul discerned that God had preceded his preaching of the gospel in Athens, and his function then was to point the Athenians to the gospel. God's mission was to cause the gospel to break into the culture, as it had to the first gentiles; being received and embodied into the culture through the language, art, architecture and music of the Greeks and Romans.

Although Christianity was planted in the North African belt during the apostolic era, the gospel remained unknown in most of sub-Saharan Africa until the nineteenth century. Meanwhile, African communities had a deep religious zeal in their diverse cultures and regions. Unlike the Greeks and Romans, African religions were monotheistic (although this was not apparent to early Western missionaries). The African religious experience and devotion was universal, but it was not practised in structured routine; rather it was experienced in every day existence in time and space, whether or not worship shrines existed among certain communities. However, the advent of the gospel through the missionary agencies introduced the knowledge of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, that gospel was couched in Western clothing; in its structure, space, format and practice. The first and most important task of the missionaries was to translate the gospel into the vernacular languages of the Africans. This task was the foundational step to the incarnation of the gospel in the cultures and customs of the African peoples. Thereafter, the gospel went through an inevitably long and slow process of inculturation to become embodied in the transformative experiences of African Christian communities. Thus,

¹ John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence Amid African Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 16.

it began the process of being transformed from the European to the African worldview. For example, I grew up in a Swedish Lutheran mission church in Kisii, in Kenya, and my early experience was of singing slow, tedious hymns without emotion, this being the missionary expectation. A smile, clap, or movement while singing was frowned upon as it was considered profane. Christianity was not embodied or deeply experienced in the local culture until the missionaries left in the 1980s and 90s. Today, children, young people and adults sing *pambio* and dance to their rhythms as a matter of course. They now feel at home in the gradually contextualising worship experiences.²

Africans distinguish between secular and religious dancing in community life. Whereas the purpose of secular dancing is pleasure and entertainment, religious dancing helps to induce a devotional frame of mind.³ This is the reason that dancing in the worship of indigenous African churches nearly always leads to the ecstatic possession of the spirit, an aspect inherited from the customs of religious devotion in African traditions. While these churches initiated and have practised this form of adaptation to music in their Christian worship from their founding, the dancing element has been one of the factors by which mainline Christians have categorised them as syncretic churches. Kenyan mainline churches view this distinction through the prism of Westernised liturgies, which they consider the 'proper' way of worship. But what has happened in African indigenous churches for more than a century has been this innate experience of indigenisation or inculturation of the gospel through music.

Mainline churches have been left behind in this respect due to their reluctance to review what they have inherited from the rich body of Western liturgical tradition. It is this reluctance that has engendered the coherence of the centre and the periphery; the centre being controlled by clergy through Western-oriented liturgy, and the periphery being characterised by indigenised art forms. Of course, the *pambio* is an indication of how African Christianity is being embodied through gradual contextualisation or the inculturation

process. It is sung spontaneously, in a "call and response" format, and is free for anyone to lead and to improvise theological lines of commentary as they sing, with body movement, clapping and stomping. This

For five or six decades, many African scholars have reflected systematically and historically on the contextual needs, prospects, and realities of African Christianity. They have expressed their opinions from different standpoints, thereby revealing the diversity of the inculturation process in Africa. A review of the perspectives of three eminent African scholars, namely, John S. Mbiti, Lamin Sanneh, and Kwame Bediako, illustrates the remarkable changes that modern Christianity in Africa has undergone from being a purely Western-clothed religion in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to an African religion since the mid-twentieth century.

The thesis of this paper is that African Christianity – as an African religion – has been in the process of "becoming itself" by its rootedness in the African worldview, and this self-identity is best communicated through the medium of heartfelt church music and folk-theologising. This is further demonstrated in the rapid expansion of a grassroots Christianity characterised by the narrowing primacy of denominationalism even as the denomination remains the basis of the nucleus identity. This process of becoming is discernible in the ongoing embodiment of the gospel as it gets inculturated into the daily life of African communities. The embodiment of the gospel in African communities runs through all aspects of society, both "sacred" and "secular" (as generally, all African life is sacred),⁴ and it is significantly manifested in the new Christian folk musical expressions that encompass generational and intergenerational groups in and out of organised worship. In mainline churches this manifestation is dichotomised into the dominant and controlling Western forms of liturgy, hymnody and instrumentation; and the peripheral forms of folk hymnody, the *pambio*, and youth choral music, which is more popular but generally not based on the liturgical rhythm of worship.

² William O. Obaga, "A History of Church Music in Kenya, Especially 1844-1919" (Luther Seminary, 2014), 9. See also p. 385-86. The term *pambio* (lit. "chorus") is a Kiswahili word for the type of neo-folk hymn of the community that has gained universal utility in all Christian denominations in sacred and secular spaces since the 1980s. This term, therefore, denotes a similar type of hymn commonly found throughout contemporary Africa.

³ Even then, for Africans, the gap between the secular and religious is almost non-existent. For many traditional cultures, dancing, even in secular contexts, is done as a religious act. Henry Weman, *African Music and the Church in Africa* 1960, no 3 (Uppsala, Sweden: Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1960), 74.

⁴ An argument eloquently made by Laurenti Magesa in his *What Is Not Sacred?* See Laurenti Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred?: African Spirituality*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013.

In East Africa, African Pentecostal Christianity has appropriated the *pambio* together with contemporary youth music styles, while African indigenous churches have maintained the typical African hymnody, instrumentation, dance and forms of space-use that have defined their identity for more than a century. Thus, African indigenous churches have always embodied an African folk style of hymnody, the exception being mainline Protestant churches and older Pentecostal churches in Ethiopia, for whom indigenised, folk-like hymnody is universal and has helped give them one of the unique identities in African Christianity. Let us now look at our three key African conversational partners.

John S. Mbiti

John S. Mbiti's pioneering, enduring, and prolific scholarship makes an unequivocal case for the contribution of African religions and indigenous African philosophical worldviews in post-colonial theological discourse. Stated briefly, Mbiti's grand theme has been an argument for the relationship between traditional religions and indigenous African cultures and their importance for making sense of Christianity in an African context. Like other pioneers of his time, Mbiti took the risk of being categorised as heretical in the 1960s and 70s when he undertook an extensive survey of African religions and indigenous thought forms and patterns of life, as well as the lifecycle, which he analysed and simplified to make it accessible to the global reach.

Mbiti's extensive scholarship, which spans over four decades, is sensitive to the priority of African epistemology in understanding both African religiosity and the nature of God; he considers the factors that have led to the appropriation of Christianity in African cultures. As one of the pioneers of inculturation in Africa, Mbiti has developed a seminal case for the efficacy of African religions. He recognises that when early missionaries encountered African religion, they could not comprehend it because it was embedded in everyday life. Thus, they forbade many cultural practices in which, from their standpoint, traditional religion seemed to inhere. It was thus an impediment for the growth of Christianity. However, in Mbiti's view, "African traditional religions should

be regarded as preparation for the Christian Gospel."⁵ They played their primary role as *praeparatio evangelica*. This was an inherent factor for the reception and rapid expansion of Christianity on the continent.

The reception and indigenisation of the Christian faith was accelerated by an avid religious attitude already prevalent among the African peoples. In this regard, Mbiti states, "Africans are notoriously religious," elaborating further, "religion permeates all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it."⁶ In other words, the innate religious piety of people in sub-Saharan African societies had prepared them to receive and interact with Christianity when it finally came. Furthermore, in every African society, religion is entirely embedded in a people's local language so that to properly understand their religious life, one has to know their language.⁷ Furthermore, Mbiti argues, "We can add nothing to the gospel, for this is an eternal gift of God; but Christianity is always a beggar seeking food and drink, cover and shelter from the cultures."⁸ Here, Mbiti is sensitive to the differentiation of the gospel as gift and Christianity as the form in which the gospel is diffused and experienced in its journey throughout history. This quest of the gospel for food, drink, cover and shelter from the cultures is what Lamin Sanneh expounds under the seminal theme of "translating the gospel" into the vernacular from which it is further absorbed into the culture. It should be noted that once the gospel had been translated and received, its wanderings did not end. This is why I believe that inculturation is an on-going phenomenon.

Moreover, by "cover and shelter," Mbiti seeks to refer to the reality of the incarnation of the gospel in all cultures through inculturation, contextualisation and embodiment. Futher suggests that while the catholicity of Christianity must not be negated for the sake of making an exaggerated effort to indigenise Christianity in Africa, the African religious character does indeed provide a basis for the rooting of Christianity in African cultures.⁹ In culture, the gospel acquires an indigenous imprint and appeal because God speaks to all people through their languages and customs without discrimination.

⁵ John S. Mbiti, "Christianity and Traditional Religions in Africa," *International Review of Mission* 59, no. 236 (1970): 432.

⁶ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, England: Heinemann Educational Books, 1969), 1.

⁷ Mbiti, *African Religions*, 30.

⁸ John S. Mbiti, "Christianity and Traditional Religions in Africa," *International Review of Mission* 59, no. 236 (1970): 438.

⁹ John W. Kinney, "The Theology of John Mbiti: His Sources, Norms, and Method," *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 3, no. 2 (1979).

Lamin Sanneh

Lamin Sanneh, an erudite and influential scholar, has made a profound perspectival analysis of the nature of the missionary movement throughout the centuries, especially its key role in the *vernacularization* of the gospel since the beginning of Christianity.¹⁰ Sanneh's analysis has helped to illuminate the power inherent in the gospel once translated into a people's mother tongue. Sanneh's analysis of this theme is not entirely new but it is a wake-up call. Martin Luther, the reformer, and others before him, were keenly aware of the significance of translating the gospel into the vernacular language despite the risks that went with doing so during the Middle Ages.

Sanneh points out that a missionary engaged in vernacular translation began from a vantage point as the custodian of the Christian religion but soon relinquished that status once the people hearing the translated message began "operating in a medium in which they have the first and last advantage."¹¹ They interpreted the message for themselves during the inculturation processes that ensued. For Sanneh, translating the message is not a mechanical exercise but something of the genius of a people which reflected their spirit and sense of values.¹² As we will notice later, this vulnerability is today being experienced, perhaps imperceptibly, by African clergy who have become the new "orthodox" custodians of the Christian religion. This means that these African clergy are gradually having to relinquish control to the laity in the embodiment of the gospel. The indigenous domestication of the gospel has been enabled by its strategic alliance with the local conceptions of religion, which explains the reason that those in the peripheries of churchmanship have become the subjects of the inculturation process despite the clergy's power and their instruments of control.¹³

Among his many thoughtful observations, Lamin Sanneh has echoed Mbiti in asserting that missionaries found a pervasive religious climate in Africa, which proves that God had already set the paradigm for translating the message into the mother tongue. Sanneh also echoes Oliver Wendell

Holmes' and Edwin Smith's suggestion that the Bible in a people's mother tongue is "the shrine of the people's soul."¹⁴ Hence, the concepts of God expressed in a people's culture provide an entry for the gospel.

Sanneh observes that once the gospel had been translated into the vernacular, missionaries found themselves disarmed and somewhat marginalised, as the African converts began to operate in a medium in which the missionaries were disadvantaged. The radical nature of the translated message created limitations for the missionaries as Christianity took root and developed at the hands of the people. The missionaries found themselves at the periphery of indigenous claims on Christianity and were gradually forced to relinquish this control into local hands. The translation of the message into vernacular languages set in motion the revolutionary process of inculturation, which, in turn, triggered the process of the embodiment of the gospel in African cultures.

Kwame Bediako

Bediako is a renowned scholar of the history of African Christianity. His legacy is that of a brilliant historical synthesis of African Christianity and African theological thought anchored in an African worldview. Carefully informed by hindsight, Bediako has examined how contemporary African Christian reality is informed by its beginnings as a colonial missionary Christianity in an encounter with African religions and customs.¹⁵ Whereas Mbiti's early scholarship was an apology for the inevitable role of African religions and thought in the appropriation of the Christian faith into the African life-world, Bediako argues that the translation of the gospel, probably the single most important missionary legacy, was the necessary precursor to the appropriation of the gospel.¹⁶ For Bediako, the assimilation of the gospel in the mother tongue was the root of the vitality with which the faith has remained an influential force throughout Africa while the initial grip of Western dominance and influence has continued to decline. He suggests that when African converts began interacting with the translated message, which created the

¹⁰ The term "vernacularization" is hereby borrowed from Kwame Bediako who uses it to refer to "appropriation" and "inculturation."

¹¹ Lamin O. Sanneh, *Encountering the West: Christianity and the Global Cultural Process: The African Dimension* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 152.

¹² Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* no 42, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2009), 165.

¹³ Lamin O. Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?: The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 11.

¹⁴ Lamin O. Sanneh, *Religion and the Variety of Culture: A Study in Origin and Practice* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 66. Also Edwin William Smith, *The Shrine of a People's Soul*. London: Edinburgh House Press, 1929.

¹⁵ Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 59ff and 109-25.

¹⁶ Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience* (New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 58. See also 81.

awareness that God spoke their language too, they made sense of and laid claims on Christianity as Africans rather than simply accepting it as a Western religion.

Like Sanneh, Bediako's work synthesises the processes of translation, appropriation, and inculturation which had led to the diminishing of missionary authority,¹⁷ and the resurgence of the faith in Africa during the 20th century played a key role in the renewal of the faith as a non-Western religion.¹⁸ He makes a critical appraisal of prejudiced nineteenth-century missionary attitudes and approaches while endeavouring to minimise the negative aspects of mission history – and these need not be exaggerated beyond the existing criticisms – in order to make the case for Christianity as an African religion. This view reinforces Sanneh's analysis of how Christianity evolved in Africa from the beginning as the converts accessed and internalised the message in their vernaculars. It also lays the ground for my argument that the translated message and appropriated Christianity continues to undergo a third process, which is the embodiment of the message into the forms of ongoing Africanisation.

Bediako argues for a positive reassessment of missionary history since the gospel was communicated through them as a human agency. He emphasises that translating the message was a first step in the vernacularisation of the gospel. He maintains that the Holy Spirit interpreted the Word as it was being "heard" in the vernacular so that Africans could hear God's mercy and providence as God's gift revealed in and through Christ. There was, therefore, a convergence of processes to the reception of the message and its inculturation and indigenisation of Christianity. It is in this light that we should recognise the gradual and ongoing embodiment of the gospel in various aspects of the African worldview, which, historically, began at the gospel's point of entry.

Continuing Inculturation through African church music

Apart from the Orthodox churches of Egypt and Ethiopia, most of the churches in Africa have their

music rooted in and influenced by Western music traditions. During the missionary era (from the mid-nineteenth century up to the Second World War), missionaries translated hymns and liturgies into vernacular languages alongside the Scriptures.¹⁹ The singing of those hymns was the first practical experience African converts had of interacting with the teachings of the Christian faith. For over one and a half centuries now, much has happened to the church's song in the context of African Christianity. While many Western hymns are still popular, many other types of hymnody that define an African worldview have emerged.

The birth of African indigenous churches with no connection to Western missions brought forth authentic indigenous African hymnody, performance styles, and appropriate spatial contexts of performance.²⁰ These indigenous churches ushered in the process of the inculturation of Christianity by creating music for worship that met their needs and enabled African Christians to feel at home in the church. This new type of song was based on African folk tunes accompanied by African instruments and dance. It continues to characterise the hymnody of the indigenous independent churches in East Africa and practically all churches in Ethiopia (apart from the Orthodox church). Towards the middle of the twentieth century, the *kwaya* (pl. *makwaya*, a translation of "choir") music emerged, a type of choral singing that began with the translated hymns and then modelled new forms based on Western hymns but with a significant African flavour. This music has since evolved into a folk choral anthem, composed, arranged, and taught by ear. Its music uses the ideas of Western harmony, but in an African polyphonic structure. More importantly, it frequently employs the African call-and-response form. These varied forms of African church music have become the most powerful vehicle for the indigenisation of Christianity in Africa.

In one generation, a newer type of church song has emerged; the *pambio*, as it is known in East Africa. This type of song has an African folk-like character with a stimulating African rhythm based on a simple text sung in a call-and-response pattern. It has become the hymn of the masses for all occasions,

¹⁷ Ibid., 94.

¹⁸ *Christianity in Africa*, ix.

¹⁹ Matthias Ittameier, "Aus Ostafrika," *Nürnberger Missionsblatt* (1888): 85

²⁰ Indigenous African churches spectacularly inculturated the worship space by freeing themselves from the type of sanctuaries that had evolved for centuries in a Western European context. Missionary or mainline churches throughout Africa today have maintained the European type of sanctuary along with the liturgical rituals it was always intended for. A contextualised sanctuary could provide for contextualised methods of worship ritual, which for the most part can be found in the indigenous churches.

sacred and secular, transcending the religious devotional context. This type of hymn can trace some influence from Western hymnody, but it is characteristically African. East Africa's *pambio* hymns and their counterpart *choruses* of Southern, Central and West Africa are now popularly found in Western hymnbooks around the world. In addition, in many countries, such as Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, and all southern and central Africa, a typical Anglo-African anthem is popular, which is African in melody and rhythm but is modelled on the English anthem in theoretical respects. These and other developments illustrate how music continues to embody the gospel, whether through official inculturation processes like that of the post-Vatican II African Synod of the Roman Catholic Church or through the natural processes in the wider social environment of African Christianity in general.

The inculturation of the gospel through music in the African church has not evolved solely through doctrinal discourse in the academy even though this has been an important aspect of African Christianity. Instead, it has happened through the creative intercultural engagement that begins with translating the message. The received message in written Scripture was also embodied in Western hymnody. It was introduced in what appeared to the missionary as a perfect, unchangeable art form, and the Africans embraced the message but rejected "unsingable" tunes.²¹ However, these hymns provided the raw material for creativity whereby a new type of heart-music emerged that lifted the gospel into the community's soul in a familiar form. Singing in a call-and-response form, dancing to the rhythm of the music, and expressing a poetry that utilised African linguistic expressions, such as metaphor and story-telling, took the gospel into a new translation process; the translation of form into the African heart and soul.²² This is what I call the embodiment of the gospel in its wider context.

In African societies, body and soul were not dichotomised and divided, even though this dualism was present in their consciousness. In everyday life, they did not distinguish between sacred and secular; but they distinguished evil from good and impure from pure. Religion and music were, therefore, part and parcel of a person's and a community's being. For the African, religion and music were a daily-lived experience in each cycle of

life and in all activities of human existence. The people were conscious of the need for God's unbroken presence. In this light, conversion into the Christian faith was embraced, but its Western form and routine separated the secular from the sacred. Christianity was highlighted in a structured Sunday/Sabbath worship but without bridges into the daily events of community life. This challenged their understanding of how the Christian religion functioned in the totality of their life-world. As they made efforts to make sense of the Christian religion, some African converts kept their old religion side by side with their new faith.²³

Before the advent of the missionaries community life was dominated by what could be considered "secular" events, such as economic activities, commemorations, birthing of children, marriages, death and funerals, leisure, and education. But these events could not happen without music. The people could not stop singing lullabies to their infants, or while planting and harvesting, or singing dirges at the death of a loved one, and so forth. The music of these events included texts that carried religious connotations or references to the Superior Being. In this way, secular life and religion were intertwined. The reception of the gospel practised in the European format required re-translation into community life. An effort to reconfigure Christian living in the light of community life called for the retranslation of the message in an embodied form of inculturation; and the failure to recognise this made Christianity a foreign religion.

Today, the use of music in the total life of a Christian community has made some progress. In Kenya, the ways in which the gospel has continued to be inculturated can be observed in its embodiment partly through the *pambio*. In fact, the *pambio* is a pan-African phenomenon that has empowered communities to freely express their ideas about God in various contexts of their lived community experience. The embodiment of the gospel as a lived experience springs from the quest of the incarnation of the gospel in the cultural context of a people. It is the result of intercultural connections bridged by a new medium expressed from the hearts of the people.

I contend, therefore, that in African, the gospel has been embodied in thought and deed through the inculturation of music more than any other way. In

²¹ Tunes that were derived from the Gregorian chants, and most tunes in the minor key as well as those with jerky rhythms or heavy melodic curves were generally unappealing.

²² A transition from European to African forms and, in many other respects, in hybrid form.

²³ John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, England: Heinemann Educational Books, 1991), 32.

turn, music has played a key role in the growth and consolidation of a grassroots Christian communion that is relationally ecumenical and functionally missional. This is notable in the life-world of the Christian community beyond church officialdom and the controlled formal worship space. The clergy now find themselves responding in their affirmations to the extemporised proclamations of the lay leaders through the new hymns and body movement that goes with its rendition. But the response and participation of the clergy from the mainline churches of sub-Saharan Africa, including the Catholic Church, are based on the assumption that this genre of song remains peripheral, rather than being an integral part of worship; the chief domain of liturgical rites is usually still essentially missionary-inherited or Western-oriented.

A community gathered at a church or in a para-church or non-church event often sings the *pambio*. The clergy may be in the community, but the laity lead in singing this type of hymn from beginning to end. Since the text is not written, it is improvised, starting with familiar lines. Here the lay leader takes full control of the key, tempo and length of the song, as well as the proclamatory word carried in the music. If, as Lamin Sanneh argues, the translation of the message in early missionary Christianity subverted the authority of the missionary/messenger, the rise of grassroots Christian music today has created room for universal, mass participation and lay leadership, including children, young people, women, and men, and thus somewhat subverts the authority of the clergy. This has also affirmed Martin Luther's idea of the universal priesthood of all believers and thereby radically undermined or challenged the privileged and controlling church hierarchies whether protestant or Roman Catholic. Through these types of grassroots music, the marginalised groups, such as children, young people and women, find a voice to lead the masses, frequently an ecumenical composition, without hindrance.

In denominational and inter-denominational contexts, the clergy find themselves swaying to the music of the laity and appreciating their extemporised sermons. Members of the clergy today usually join the response part of the "call-and-response" —responding to the message being proclaimed by the laity through the *pambio*. Here, the typical and historical liturgical call of the clergy, "the Lord be with you" is reversed. This symbolises the ongoing inculturation of the gospel processed by the ordinary folk, which is thus embodied in and

communicated through their heart music regardless of social rank or denomination. This is an important aspect of an ongoing process of Africanisation or indigenisation, a yet-to-be-defined process of the reconfiguration of African Christianity, as today's dominant religious expression makes the community feel at home.

While the *pambio* has developed rapidly in Kenya during the past four decades and has now spread throughout Tanzania and other East African countries—Uganda, Rwanda, Congo, for instance—in Ghana there is a different but related type of folk hymnody, the *ebibindwom*.²⁴ This type of hymn is common in the Methodist Church in Ghana. It functions in ways similar to the East African *pambio* but with more folk-like melodies inherited from folktale songs. The epistemic characteristics of the *ebibindwom*, which is traceable to Akan secular traditions, include spontaneous interruption and the offering of affirmations to the preacher during sermons, a practice also inherited from folktales. Unlike Kenya's *pambio*, this type of hymn, sung with dance and procession, has been officially permitted and promoted in Ghana's Methodist Church since about 1940.²⁵ This was perhaps the earliest protestant church in Africa to permit the use of an African type of hymn in a formal process of inculturating the gospel.

The lyrics of the sacred *ebibindwom* convey orally the biblical message as narrative, and a homiletic exhortation as reflection. Overall, the hymn transcends theological doctrine, theses, and definitions. Thus, it creates room for worship to be experienced in fellowship, devotion, oral biblical knowledge, and reflection. It also permits active audience participation. The verses of the *ebibindwom* are repeated and as it is sung its call-and-response structure builds upon constant improvisations by the song leaders who are biblically well-informed, whether literate or illiterate.

The formal acceptance of the *ebibindwom* in the Ghanaian Methodist worship space contrasts with the peripheral *pambio* of mainline church worship in Kenya. But both types of hymnody are similar in their African characteristics of spontaneity, galvanisation of community, call and response, offering of a fellowship experience, room for lay oral proclamation, and space for lay gender-sensitive leadership. These indigenous forms of music-making with proclamation in Christian worship have been the most public of the processes of indigenisation of Christianity in Africa.

²⁴ J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, ed. *Christianity, Mission and Ecumenism in Ghana* (2009), 9-36.

²⁵ Asamoah-Gyadu, *Christianity, Mission and Ecumenism*, 13.

Conclusion

Inculturation in African Christianity has not happened by means of throwing away the Western forms of expression in which the gospel was clothed when it was first initiated. Rather, while the Western clothing in which it came has always stood in tension with the quest for relevance in Africa, the gospel has undergone, and continues to undergo, a creative process of reception, accommodation, and creative intercultural interaction. It has now become apparent that this is the natural, gradual, and enduring process of gospel translation. This process is not unique to Africa; Western Christianity began from Hebrew roots and took on African²⁶ and Hellenistic influences but became inculturated in the same way over the centuries.

Inculturation in Africa today is happening in two ways; first, through academic Catholic-Protestant theological discourse which aims for liturgical transformation in organised worship; and second, its incarnation and rootedness into the culture, customs, life-world, and rhythm of the African societies through grassroots initiated activity from the peripheries over which the regulators of organised liturgical processes have no control. The expression of this latter process is in the rhythm of life and is observable in religious and secular events and practices, churchmanship, and daily Christian living in the sacred and secular events of the communities.

In Kenya, for example, varied forms of Christian piety have become commonplace, such as prayers in many religious and secular activities of everyday life; invocation of scriptural statements and/or Jesus' name to validate views and beliefs in private conversations and arguments; and lay biblical reflections and commentary at all events of the life cycle. Few, if any, of these events escape the use of music as the driving force. Music helps to invite participation, create community, reinforce memory, and to communicate and diffuse biblical ideas. The *pambio* or chorus is therefore effective in mission. Consequently, the continuing transformation of society from a purely non-Christian to a Christian culture has spurred the emergence of this simple form of Christian folk hymn. This type of hymn, because of its location as a substitute to the secular

folk song, feeds the society in its transition from non-Christian to Christian. The *pambio* hymn employs the characteristics found in folk songs (apart from the Christian text) from call and response to a simple text wrapped up in metaphoric language to the sacred dance or body movements that accompany the singing in typical African style.

In hindsight, it has become increasingly clear to scholars that the translation of the gospel into African vernacular languages was the most powerful missionary gift to African Christianity; and translation was not only of the Scriptures but the totality of Christian resources, which included the liturgy, catechisms, and hymnody. In addition, hymns were sung to the accompaniment of Western instruments: flutes, piano, violins, trumpets, harmoniums, and others. Early Christian converts began to interact with the gospel through these resources as they comprehended them, and they endeavoured from the start to make sense of them in order to understand the nature of God as revealed in Scripture through the different ways in which they expressed their response to the gospel. The gospel incarnates into the culture when it is translated and then inculturated. But its high point is its embodiment in the culture when expressed through music and other expressions, including art and the worship space. These are the outward expressions of the embodied gospel which need further reflection; the worship communities continue to make sense of the Western type of worship space and other aspects in lieu of the functioning of African Christian music in such spaces.

The gospel as originally inherited, and now interpreted to reflect its relevance to the African context, is conveyed through the varied indigenous musical expressions of music—in text and music—across the continent. The medium of singing and movement provides room for ordinary Christians to participate universally as gospel commentators, interpreters, composers, leaders and performers. Such universal participation is a typical feature of community in African contexts. African music invites participants “to participate in the making of a community,”²⁷ and in such universal participation “the atmosphere of invitation discards any performer-audience dichotomy.”²⁸

²⁶ The historical theological discourses of early African theologians, such as Tertullian, Athanasius, Augustine, and other African church fathers, laid the foundation of much of later Western thought. Additionally, the founding of monasteries by Egyptian monks and their spread to other North African desert regions influenced the birth of European monasteries that later became the chief centres of theological, musical, educational, scientific, and agricultural advancements. Universities developed from monasteries and, overall, Europe's modernisation cannot be spoken of without considering this basis. The European clothes in which Christianity returned to Africa has its roots in these historical transformations.

²⁷ Claudio Steinert, *Music in Mission: Mission through Music: A South African Case Study* (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2007), 12.

²⁸ Steinert, *Music in Mission*, 12.

The key principles in Christian life outside of organised worship and the liturgical worship space reflect the blurring of denominational boundaries through grassroots ecumenical participation and leadership, de-emphasising hierarchy and gender, and showing a thought-process that is intuitively realised through various other aspects of African epistemology. Spirits and evil forces, for example, are often addressed in the form of metaphors in prayers, sermons and conversations which are often replicated in lyrics, especially of the *pambios*. These ideas are commonly illustrated in simple song texts that feature a cosmic battle between Christ and the evil one, thus providing an important element of assurance. Jesus is depicted by a wide variety of metaphors that signal different themes; the everlasting winner of the cosmic battle; the rider of a car without brakes (Jesus is sovereign and nothing deters his exercise of power over evil), and many others. This is an essential aspect of assurance, not because of fear, but because of the promise of wellbeing. Sometimes, the devil is depicted as placing various weapons of destruction in a Christian's way, but Christ the victor defeats the devil and his evil ways. This folk-theologising provides opportunity for improvisation and the lifting-up of ideas and concepts derived from the sermons, scriptural interpretations, and the life-events. This kind of grassroots theology is packaged in short, simple song texts and extemporisations of scriptural themes and concepts by lead singers, which serve as lay commentaries. Theological ideas also feature commonly in social conversations and in Christian prayers over everything in sacred or secular contexts. These ideas are encapsulated in the songs composed orally, arranged aurally in two, three, or four-part harmony, and taught by ear, often topical and spontaneous.

In these instances, the clergy and professional theologians unwittingly cede to the laity. These teachings transfer into other modes of communication, whether or not some of the ideas might be inadvertently heretical or wrong.²⁹ But this freedom is derived simply from the sense of universal participation, the basis of which is the African worldview. The totality of these manifestations should serve as an epistemological reference for theological study, reflection, and reform in African theological academies; the African worldview from which these emanate needs to be taken seriously. It is thus plausible to suggest that most of these ideas reflect the African worldview and are expressed in the wide

range of African songs, hymns, and music exercised in the margins of African Christianity.

Finally, I submit that the characteristic manifestations of spontaneous gospel inculturation in the creation and use of the post-missionary genres of African song threaten the much-guarded vestiges of liturgical orthodoxy of mainline churches. The evolution of indigenous expression in song continues; *pambio* (Kenya, Tanzania), *ebibindwon* (Ghana), or the African "chorus." In my frequent conversations with church leaders from mainline churches, the *ebibindwon* has been purposefully adopted by the Methodist Church of Ghana; but in East Africa the *pambio* is often maligned by leadership in mainline churches for being theologically shallow and musically simple and repetitive, compared to Western hymns. This attitude plays into the hands of some Westerners, such as Claudio Steinert, who argues that "choruses are "indisciplined" because of their spiritual immaturity and are, therefore, inappropriate for worship."³⁰ What is not appreciated, however, is that the texts, though brief, are often loaded in metaphor, while the simplicity of melody in the call-and-response form allows it to be used as a new kind of folk song for the evolving Christian community culture corresponding to a new social and spiritual order.

These various genres of African church music thrive on the periphery of African mainline churches but are in the hands of the laity. The emergent neo-African genres of choral music, participation, and reconfiguration of worship patterns and spatial contexts promise the eventual collapse of the mainstream denominations, as evidenced in Ethiopia's Lutheran Church, the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, where an authentic African song and dance with a flexible format of the worship rituals now takes precedence. I must emphasise, however, that the song of the periphery in mainline African Christianity has been adopted as the chief repertoire of Pentecostal Christianity. It emanates from the African community in its social life-world, not to mention that African indigenous churches are open to its use even though their chief hymn genre, with the accompanying musical expressions, is to be found in its characteristic African folk tune. Thus, as African societies are transformed into a Christian culture, the gospel is being inculturated or translated from the vernacular text into the whole way of life of the African people in worship contexts and in social life.

²⁹ I have deliberately not highlighted the genre of the music of the African "celebrity gospel singer" for whom music is intended for entertainment and commerce rather than spiritual edification. While the music of this genre fulfils its intended entertainment and commercial purposes, many of the songs carry theologically inaccurate (or heretical) texts. These cannot be analysed in this article; the phenomenon needs a separate study. After all, the purpose of the music is non-liturgical in spite of carrying Christian or biblical themes.

³⁰ Steinert, *Music in Mission*, 89.

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