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TONAL INFLECTION: ITS' IMPLICATION TO LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH, EAST OF THE NIGER

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ABSTRACT

One of the resulting affects of the Reformation in the Christian Church has been the making of worship more relevant to the masses of professed Christians. It means the employment of a vernacular which will be understood by the congregation instead of a dead language comprehensible only to a few initiates who have spent years of apprenticeship in monasteries Ekwueme (1973). Although the petition by Martin Luther in 1517 was not intended to divide the church. As a monk, he wanted the authorities of the church to consider the issues rose in the petition for possible reform. It may be considered as unfortunate that despite all that eventually led to separation, the issues still persisted till today; if we consider that the problem of language and communication in liturgical singing still stirs on our faces in Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The relevant key words in this topic are Tonal Inflection, Language, Communication and Christian Church. The scope of this presentation is limited to the Christian Church in Igbo Land East of the Niger with particular reference to the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches.

Tonal inflection as applied in musical art is the rise and fall of language text reflecting the speech contour of words. This is common with most African languages, which are tonal in character.

Language may be defined as an instrument of communication, a means through which people can understand each other. It is considered as the most important and readily available aspect of culture through which people interact with each other. It is that aspect of the culture, which children acquire by imitation. According to the concise Oxford Dictionary of current

English, language is the method of human communication either spoken or written, consisting in the use of words in an agreed way, the language of a particular community or country. The emphasis here, in this definition is on "*The Use of Words in an Agreed Way*". What this implies is that if in the process of communicating with the language, but the use of words are not applied in agreed way, the language will not be functional. The agreed way, according to the dictionary is only in the context of the culture that owns the language, otherwise it is meaningless.

Communication, according to the same dictionary, is the act of imparting, especially news or instances of it, the science and practice of transmitting information especially by electronic and mechanical means.

In the parlance of music, particularly church music, language and communication are interwoven since much of church music is vocal and based on the language of a culture. Texts, songs and speeches are essential components or combinations in oral communication arts of which choral music is a part. Christian songs are prayers packaged and put together in various sound forms that involve a combination of sounds in melody and harmony that, often with words centrally dominate the communication role.

There had been heated argument among scholars of African music on issues of tonal language making strict impact on musical composition. Some scholars argue that melodic contour must follow language intonation strictly, for it to communicate meaningfully. The writer as an Igbo composer believes strongly in this premise. Obielozie (2005:60) argues that the Igbo language is well known to be tonal: therefore the tonality of the language governs the pitches and compass of the music. Mokuwunyei (2005:45) argues that melody is also a function of text due to the inflectional nature of the Igbo language; therefore particular notes assigned to each syllable are determined by the speech contour, to ensure that meaning is not altered. Onwuekwe (2004:35) asserts that "Any vocal composition of Nigerian music must therefore follow and obey the melodic contour of the words for meaning; since tonal inflection is indispensable in tonal language.

All the foregoing suggestions show that the views of many Nigerian scholars are the same on the issue of tonal inflection. Therefore, for effective transmission or communication of music, appropriate use of language must be applied. Church music is the spiritual uplifting kind of music used in liturgical worship of the Christian church. It consists mostly of praise singing in honour of God Almighty, Jesus Christ and the heavenly Saints, in keeping

with the Christian belief system. With the influx of Christianity into Africa in the 19th and 20th centuries, many African countries including Nigeria absorbed the Christian religion resulting to much acculturation in religious worship. Today different African languages play prominent roles in the liturgical music compositions of the Christian churches.

THE EARLY PERIOD

The dominant denominations of the Christian church that came to Nigeria were the Roman Catholic Church and the protestant churches all of which came with their types of religious music. The Catholic Church music was dominated by Latin songs while the Protestants were dominated by English songs, each maintaining the tradition of her founding base in Europe.

The Catholic Church stacked rigidly to her Latin worship tradition till the late 20th-century when the Vatican city after due consideration of the changing world allowed Africans to do it their own way, but without much deviation from the basic concepts of Catholicism. An aspect of such liberalization is the use of African languages in liturgical singing as well as African musical instruments. Only then those African musical elements were gradually introduced in the Catholic worship. Even then the language texts were only allowed to be set to existing European melodies whether they were understood or not. This trend continued until in recent times when musically educated Africans began to frown on the bastardization of African Languages arising from utter disregard of the tonal inflection, which African songs should possess as a tonal language.

In the protestant churches in Nigeria, the situation was almost the same, though far earlier and more than the Catholic faith, the Protestants had the instinct to adapt to Nigerian languages and traditions. In the Eastern Region, the Anglican Communion of the Niger Dioceses in the early 1940s encouraged musical practices in the church. This brought about the emergence of many young musical talents with little or no formal musical training, but this encouragement made it possible to discover these talents. According to Okafor (1976:63) "They had no musical training as such apart from what they learnt in the school and in the teachers training colleges. Their success depended to a very large extent on their interests in music".

These early composers from the Igbo areas drew their melodies from folk tunes and merge them with texts drawn from the bible or already existing tunes from Europe. One inspiring observation is that some of these early

talents saw that music is the best medium through which the gospel could be spread. But they could not yet see the problem of language and communication inherent in their songs - as a result of non application of tonal inflection in the songs. Another problem as observed by Agu (2002:83) is "the inability of these pioneers to develop their compositions to appreciable lengths".

MODERN TRENDS

With the establishment of music department at the university of Nigeria in 1960, a new breed of modern educated composers emerged who developed the literary music genre to an appreciable level of sophistication. Agu (2002: 84). This class of musicians who are well trained in African music theory and composition stand better chances of composing in African idiom, Western and African harmonic principles and techniques. This is the class that is in the position to ensure the adherence of their music to the tonal inflection of the words. Idolor in Agu (2002) further observed:

The Igbo literary choral music, which possessed the Igbo traditional music qualities, naturally appeals to the contemporary Igbo audience right from the onset. This is because of what the new genre meant to the audience in terms of its socio-cultural qualities, which touches each individual's feelings (p. 86).

These musical qualities referred to include the tonal inflection which makes it easy even for the most illiterate in the society to understand and assimilate the content of the music resulting to the expected spiritual upliftment in the church.

THE TASK AHEAD

The great Zik of Africa - a founding father of Nigerian nationalism once said:

Whatever you are, try and be the best. If you are a grass, aspire to be the best grass by the valley bed. In whatever profession you find yourself, try to make an impact, for by so doing that you become a man or woman of substance (p.).

The educated musicians of our time, individually and collectively should take advantage of their education to play their roles in the improvement of society, to make the much need impact in the parlance of music which we are told is a powerful instrument of group solidarity. As the Christian Church

constitutes an integral part of the society, it is very easy for a musician to emerge as the hero of the people by feeding the society with good music. This body of musical scholars should meditate on this question, "Why do we appear to be nonchalant when church music is still suffering from the same problem of communication and language as it was when Martin Luther petitioned for reform. It is high time for professionals of music to come together to resolve and tackle once and for all the problems of tonal inflection facing liturgical singing in our society. In fairness to the church in Igbo Land, there are some efforts made but much is still left to be done.

In the Catholic Church, some efforts have been made towards dropping those songs that use Western melodies fixed to African texts. To site an example, in the Enugu Diocese of the Catholic Church, a small group of music scholars got together and pressurized the church authorities towards the improvement of liturgical singing in line with the modern demands of music in the liturgy. In compliance to this, the Bishop set up a liturgical music commission which was charged with the responsibility of improving liturgical music in such a way that would improve the spiritual upliftment of the faithful. The group was made up of Dorothy Ipere, Richard Okafor and Joe. Onyekwelu all products of the University of Nigeria, then some other non-professionals but music enthusiasts like the Iwobis, John Ibekwe etc were included and together they took active part in the exercise. The first task was to drop as much as possible all the Western melodies with which Igbo texts were set to music, and re-arrange them using Igbo idioms and elements of music. To practicalise the effort, the commission began an annual singing competition tagged "composition competition" for all the parishes and zones in the Diocese. The texts were selected from the old Igbo hymnbook with a view to recomposing and modernizing the songs in the hymnbook. The competition this time was for composers both trained and untrained who were capable of setting the texts to music as specified by the music commission. The texts as selected from the Igbo hymnbook cover the liturgical seasons of the year, which include Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Ascension, and Assumption. Others are based on the important parts of the *mass-introit*, *kyrie*, *Gloria*, *credo*, *sanctus* and *agnus dei*. The judges for the competitions were carefully selected among the well know educated musicians of African music irrespective of denomination. The area of emphasis was on tonal inflection of music in relation to the language text, then harmony, phrasing and chord progression. Through this competition, a good number of talented but untrained composers were spotted and encouraged to study music as a profession. From this period, composers like

Dorothy Ipere, Joe Onyekwelu, Jude Nnam, the Iwobis, Basil Okeke, Thony Egbo and Jim Madu have arranged, composed and published liturgical music books in the Catholic Church including Psalms.

Although the battle has not yet been fully won especially in the rural areas, yet much improvements have been achieved especially with the cooperation of the Priests and the Bishops who have the authority to stop or ban any song considered unfit for liturgy. Today it is very rare to come across the old Igbo hymn books and their songs in the church.

Jude Nnam - a product of the University of Nigeria carried this crusade to the Northern Part of the Country in recent years. He is one of those talents spotted in the Enugu Diocese composition competitions in the 1980s. In the north, he was in this millennium appointed the music director of Abuja Diocese by the Bishop. Jude took advantage of the challenges that faced him to research into Hausa tonality, which yielded abundant results. Today he has to his credit many liturgical compositions in Hausa language, which have made waves not only in the north but other parts of the country.

In the Anglican Church, there is little progress towards the improvement of liturgical singing in Igbo dialect. Even though some music scholars like Sam Ojukwu, Dan-Agu, David Okongwu and others have made tremendous contributions in the improvement of Igbo tonality in church hymns, yet much is left to be done towards effective use of tonal inflection in the songs.

The Ancient and modern hymnbook is the official hymnbook used on daily basis for English service. But the translated Igbo text of the hymnbook "*Abu Oma*" has the music directly set from the Ancient and modern hymnbook. That is, the melodies and harmonies bearing the Igbo texts are direct superimposition of the English version - Ancient and modern, thereby making the meaning of the Igbo text incomprehensible and meaningless. There is no consideration or application of the tonal language of Igbo in these settlements resulting to very awful expressions to the listening Igbo audience. It is only the few initiates of the church who can comprehend the meaning behind the songs. This agrees with Ekwueme's (1973) view -

One of the resulting effects of the Reformation in the Christian Church has been the making of worship more relevant to the masses of professed Christians. It means the employment of a vernacular, which will be understood by the congregation, instead of a deed language comprehensible only to a few initiates who have spent years of apprenticeship in monasteries ().

In other words, the vernacular, which will be understood by the congregation, is not yet there in "Abu Oma" until the required tonal inflection of Igbo Language is reflected in the songs. Only then can the spiritual upliftment of the music manifest in the worshipers. In this picture one can see how the communicative effect of music and language can jointly play their required role in church worship. This is another problem, which the music professionals in the Anglican Church should tackle seriously.

In recent times, Adeogun - a Yoruba music scholar took advantage of his long stay in Igbo land to research into Igbo tonality in church singing. It is very impressive to observe that Ade has come up with some beautiful compositions and arrangements using Igbo texts with a fine degree of accuracy in the tonal inflection of Igbo Language. This is a challenge to my fellow Igbo scholars in the church, and I link this with an Igbo adage, which say, "When an egg cracks a palm nut, the stone should be ashamed". So Igbo music scholars should work hard to eradicate as much as possible the problem facing the use of tonal inflection in all aspects of Igbo liturgical singing. This onerous task when achieved is in the interests of Nigerian culture in the service of God. Definitely God will reward you, our ancestors will be happy to bless you. Above all, you have made an impact in your profession as the great Zik advised.

IMPORTANCE OF SOLFA NOTATION

Sol-fa notation as an important aspect of music rudiments is disregarded or neglected in the official curriculum of most institutions of high learning in Nigeria, yet it is the first and most readily available challenge that faces the young graduates of music as soon as they get into the world of reality. The Christian Churches are the first that provide job opportunities for our young graduates where they face the same problem of language and communication in church music - compositions, arrangements, translations, teaching and conducting using sol-fa notation which is very popular in our rural and urban societies of today.

Whether we appreciate it or not, the fact remains that the popularity of sol-fa notation of music cannot be over-emphasized, yet many of our educated musicians cannot correctly write or interpret a line of sol-fa notation or a correct translation of staff to sol-fa. How can our young graduates face these immediate challenges since sol-fa notation officially

has no place in the curriculum of music departments of our high institution in Nigeria.

Those early musicians of Igbo origin like Harcourt white, Nelson Ikoli, Daniel Ojukwu, David Okongwu and others achieved their musical missions using sol-fa notation only. Even some contemporary composers like Sam Ojukwu, Dan Agu and others excelled with sol-fa notation before their university education. Today when these composers want to deal with the church, they go down to sol-fa notation which is the popular language the masses can understand. Statistical research has revealed that in Nigeria today, particularly Igbo land, more than 90% of people who can read music in the Christian Church are inclined to sol-fa notation only, which means that any publication of a church hymn book must make use of sol-fa notation, otherwise the book will not be purchased for congregational consumption.

Based on the above, what the researcher is advocating is thus: - while we study staff notation as the major international notation or language of music in the world, we should as well study sol-fa notation as the most immediate and popular challenge that faces our young professionals in the field after graduation. Equal attention should be given to them because both are internationally relevant in musical communication and language.

CONCLUSION

As a conclusion to this discussion, let us look at this short story which the writer was experienced some years gone by. Perhaps this might help us appreciate more the charismatic and therapeutic power of language and communication through effective use of tonal inflection in church music.

About fifteen years ago on a bright "Oye" market day, my town's local market was in full swing around mid day, when a Sabbath Church group stormed the market on a conversion mission. It was a large group numbering about five hundred people all dressed in immaculate white gowns and yelling in thunderous vocal expression at the background of bouncing instrumental music that no African can resist the temptation of making some body movement. Their captivating variations of body movement as they sang and danced round the market square attracted many indigenes -men, women, children etc who joined them in the procession. The vocal music was in a form of chorused refrain where one group sang a phrase and the other repeated. The musical phrases or statements were so simple that the indigenes captured them at once and joined in the singing and dancing. One aspect of the music apart from the bouncing rhythm was the vocal statements in

alternation which were very meaningful statements of appeal regarding the health, peace of mind, joy and the salvation that awaits those that would join them. In this appeal, the effective use and application of Igbo tonal inflection reduced the language and communication to the easiest level of peoples understanding and appreciation.

After demonstrating round the market square, the procession finally settled round the *iroko* tree for a moment of preaching. It was then time for conversion. The leader of the group, probably the bishop, mounted on an elevation. His gown was a special design decorated with silk of various colours and a special cap to match. He told the crowd that they were there on a healing mission, and that was why their form of music was called "*egwu mgbachapu oya*" meaning "music that drives sickness". Shortly after wards, he called for testimonies. There and then, a good number of people trouped out and gave their testimonies. Some claimed that they were cured of arthritis, some waste pain, chest pain and so on. The strange and fascinating of all the testimonies came from three women who were indigenes of the town, not members of the church. They claimed that when they joined in the dance, they were released of their various ailments ranging from arthritis, headache and waste pain. There came a thunderous ovation.

The Sabbath Church won many convert on that memorable day. Even some people from other denominations changed as a good number of the indigenes were seen in white overall after some days. This is the first experience of the researcher to witness the healing and therapeutic power of music through effective use of language and communication.

The importance and use of tonal inflection of Igbo language in church music cannot be overemphasized. It is the most of effective approach to the spiritual upliftment of the faithful or congregation in the Christian church service.

What does it entail?

It is simply the meticulous use or careful selection of the musical notes within the scale, which are appropriate to the rise and fall of Igbo Language. With the place of ethnomusicology in the academic world and the emergence of reputable scholars in the field, it is time overdue for these professionals to tackle once and for all the problems of language and communication arising from tonal inflection in all aspects of church music in Igbo land. *That time is now.*

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