


RETHINKING THE CONCEPT OF SOLEMNITY IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC LITURGY OF IGBOLAND

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Abstract

Modern research demands in African theology call for a rediscovery of identity in many African churches in the area of language, worship style, dress codes and every other apparatus of culture. As a result, this paper advocates for a reassessment of the notion of solemnity in the liturgical music practiced by Igbo Christian communities under the umbrella of the Roman Catholic Church. It does so through a problematization of the pristine notions of indigenization such as unicity of style, peculiarity of form and new understanding of inculturation especially as predicated by the second Vatican Council. Consequently, it explores the theoretical frameworks for achieving genuine indigenization of liturgical music compositions in Igboland through a compositional research approach. It relies on palpable ethnographic research data in addition to opinion survey for its contentions and makes recommendations for a new perspective of rhythmic expression of freedom in worship. Additionally, it furnishes a compositional example as a pastiche for examining the process of indigenization within the framework of solemnity.

Keywords: Inculturation, Indigenization, Solemnity, Liturgical Music.

Introduction

The Igbo people of Africa came in contact with Christianity for over 150 years and they are today the most Christianized people of Africa (Anizoba & Aande 2021). Yet, arguably, Christianity in Igboland has only but recently begun to assume an autochthonous identity. Igbo language, for example as part of the cultural identity of the Igbo people of the South east geographical zone of Nigeria was only introduced not too long as the *modus loquendi* (mode of language) of worship, thanks to the reforms of the Vatican II (1962 -1965). Nwaigbo (2019) contends that with the recent celebration of the Symposium of Episcopal Conference of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) held 10 April to 8 May 1994 which raised the question of a new identity for African Christianity that identifies with African religion and culture, Christianity in Igboland has come of age. This is because for the first time in history, African liturgical rites were tabled for approval by the universal church. Sundkler (2000) pioneers the study of independent churches in Africa. And quite interestingly, similar exploits have been achieved in South Africa around the period (1980 - 1994) with the ‘Africanist art music’ where indigenous composers have challenged the apartheid doctrine with the emergence of various forms of ‘African art music’ (Pooley, 2011: 65). The process of inculturation is a peculiar experience of this cultural dialogue as it affected the Roman Catholic Church. According to Flannery (ed) (1987: 739), “Nothing in them that is “true and holy” will be rejected by Christianity”. Accordingly, this theological perspective resulted in a new identity of African Christianity in the cultures of Africa through inculturation. For this reason, this question of identity construction, that is, how African Christianity may set about mending the fabric of African identity has become an urgent task (Burgess, 2004). Kanu (1998) identifies three responses to white cultural dominance within the Christian Community: the first he calls “Ethiopianism”, the second response through the Aladura Churches and the third came through Pentecostalism.

Today, I make bold to say that a fourth response has come through Vatican II's embrace of inculturation and its full implementation in the liturgical music of Igboland. Dufy (1997) calls this modernist movement an attempt at demythologizing the doctrine of Post Tridentine Catholicism. It is a far more drastic restructuring and rethinking of the liturgy ever dreamt of that has come to us through the introduction of vernacular into all parts of the Roman Catholic mass and this has culminated into what some scholars have called the "psychologizing of theological concepts" in all aspects of the liturgy (Dufy, 1997: 19). Music is integral to the liturgy and so, inculturation helps us direct the future of the liturgy aright (McGann, 2002). These have given rise to a completely novel understanding of solemnity within the liturgical music of Igboland.

Conceptual Framework

The term 'inculturation' or 'indigenization' is still foreign to many Christian denominations. It is a theological school of thought most popular among the Roman Catholic and mainline churches that connotes the process of adopting the good elements of any cultural area into the Christian practice or worship of that area. It is a process by which the church becomes inserted in a given culture (Nwabeke, 1995, Agbo, 2012). According to Flannery (1982) in a document of the second Vatican Council "Sacrosanctum Concilium",

In certain countries especially in mission lands, there are people who have their own musical tradition, and this plays a great part in their religious and social life. For this reason, their music should be held in proper esteem and a suitable place is to be given to it, not only in forming their religious sense, but also in adapting worship to their native genius (S. C. Art. 119).

These Council Fathers made it clear that the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in other religions and culture. On this framework all the efforts at inculturation or indigenization builds. Inculturation argues that Christian faith is not limited to a particular culture. It can find a home in an African culture. It can transform the host culture without losing its essence (Tihagale, 2010).

The tearing of many local drums and xylophones for example in some churches as a symbol of conversion to Christianity leaves much to be desired since the problem is not in the cultural artefacts but in the unconverted hearts. Pope John Paul II (1982) argues that unless a faith becomes a culture, that faith has not been fully accepted.

Another term that requires clarification is what we call liturgical music as different from the general term "Church music". Udoh (2004) defines Church music as "music composed, adopted or deemed suitable for church use or for Christian worship, prayer, public or private" (p. 165). However, this definition is vague, leaving a critical mind awash with such questions as 'Who deems it suitable and under what parameters of judgment? Okafor and Okafor (2009) have also observed quite correctly that "what is music in one culture may be sheer noise in another and what is noise in one culture may be very meaningful in another" (p. 13). What is adjudged as sheer noise by one church may also be seen as "joyful noise unto the Lord" by another church. To be clear, Umezina (2010) argues that the term 'Liturgical Music' would be more suitable to describe only those musical genres that reserve the sanctity of worship or solemnity. In his view, several new musical genres that have found their ways into the churches lack this identity since they are not written or made up with the liturgy in mind. Agreeing with Deiss (1970) he affirms that liturgical music is an integral part of the liturgical celebration and so does not enjoy an autonomous existence.

Finally, on the concept of solemnity, this researcher argues for both a kinetic and non-kinetic concept of solemnity in the liturgy. What some scholars like Adewale Adeogun¹ has denigratingly referred to as the "sanctity of immobility" is a non-kinetic concept of solemnity in the liturgy where some think that music is only solemn when it is less rhythmically energetic. This researcher has argued elsewhere that the concept of solemnity must reflect the rhythmic sensibilities of the African who could express the highest esoteric mysteries in very hot but solemn rhythms (Agbo, 2012). He adds further insight to the cultic, evangelical and celebrative sense of worship (discussed later).

Features of Indigenous African Musics

To clarify, a melodic or rhythmic line is considered indigenous to Africans (with a focus on the Sub-Saharan regions) when its distinct sonic essence is recognized for the following reasons; Firstly, the melodic structure may be folk like. It could encompass various structural forms such as call and response, call and refrain, solo with chorused refrain, or a combination thereof (Agu, 1999). Additionally, it might exhibit modal characteristics, suggesting a unique tonality distinct from the conventional major and minor tonalities. Furthermore, it might be characterized by tritonic, quadratonic, pentatonic, or hexatonic scales, comprising a smaller set of notes compared to the typical heptatonic scale prevalent in Western music literature (Akpabot, 1998, and Ekwueme, 2004).

Secondly, the harmonic structure could pose rhythmic challenges, characterized by abundant parallelism, syncopations, overlapping, and counterpoints. The harmony might reflect characteristics of various traditional instrumental music genres, such as the polyphonic texture and form typical of the Akunechenyi traditional dance of Anambra State, or the hocket technique observed in the Ikorodo dance of the Nsukka people in Enugu State, Nigeria. We have vast harmonic resources available in traditional African music that goes beyond the usual SATB (soprano, alto, tenor and bass) texture found in European hymns (Nzewi, 1997).

Igbo is a tribe made up of over five States of the South Eastern part of Nigeria such as: Anambra, Imo, Enugu, Abia, Ebonyi and also some other States like Delta and Rivers. The predominant religion is Christianity with the Roman Catholic denomination towering high as the largest in population with over 12 dioceses full of not less than a million Christians in each State.

Several years following the departure of missionaries from Nigeria and subsequent to the Vatican II's call for the indigenization of sacred music, many African composers continue to grapple with the complexities of inculturation. These challenges encompass aspects such as cultural identity, distinctive stylistic attributes, and the unique forms of expression. Given that contemporary composers are limited by their own experiences, the endeavor of inculturation remains fraught with difficulties. For instance, numerous Nigerian youths of Igbo descent raised in urban environments may have little to no exposure to their traditional musical heritage. Consequently, we are confronted with two significant challenges: the task of inculturation and enculturation, where one is inherently linked to the other. Inculturation involves integrating positive cultural elements into the Christian worship practices of a particular region, while enculturation pertains to the process through which individuals become immersed in their own cultural milieu (Nwabeke, 1995). For this reason, and as a panacea, the first fundamental challenges which most contemporary composers have is the challenge of enculturation. According to Meki Nzewi,

¹ Adewale Adeogun, Unpublished Lecture discussions, April 20 2000.

A composer specializing in contemporary African music should strive to evoke the essential harmonic, developmental, and textural elements unique to African musical traditions. Without this, the composition lacks significance within the ongoing narrative of African creative expression. To label it as African modern music without capturing these elements would not only be a disservice but also an affront to the cultural integrity of Africa. It may more accurately be described as modern music influenced by African themes. (Nzewi, 1997: 72)

A composer of African Music should think in indigenous categories. As Roosenschoon in Pooley (2011: 60) says, composers should be guided by what their 'creative consciences dictate'. Kofi Agawu makes this even clearer:

I ask that we rethink the extent to which European influence has come to determine our construction of the "purest" of African musics and to embrace the challenge of formulating a view of our creative activities not under the weight of a nostalgic look at the past but through a realistic look at the present. (Agawu, 2003: 29)

Accordingly, the process presents a new theological challenge for liturgical music composers. Regardless of whether a piece of music is composed for worship, entertainment, or any other purpose, it should embody the identity of the composer and the intended performers. African composers, particularly those with a liturgical inclination, must thus embody this cultural renaissance.

Liturgical art music in Nigeria has undergone significant fragmentation, largely due to composers' unfamiliarity with their indigenous music styles. Over the years, a form of cultural colonization has pervaded their musical development, starting from their early education. The songs they were taught, including national anthems, were predominantly in Western languages and styles. This influence extends to their church hymns and anthems, which are saturated with Western airs, styles, and forms. Their music education revolves around Western genres such as Gregorian chants, hymns, fugues, and symphonies, contributing to a pervasive confusion in liturgical music. Moreover, the Western notion of solemnity, often associated with immobility, exacerbates this confusion (Adeogun, 2005).

General Characteristics of African Songs

A close look at African songs will reveal the following peculiarities; 'African songs are typically brief, transmitted orally, and effortlessly memorized, owing to their concise nature and oral transmission method' (Agu, 1999: 33). Hence, in liturgical music, they tend to be highly accessible to congregations. The scale system is primarily modal and/or diatonic, characterized by intervals of full and half tones. African melodies typically comprise fewer notes, ranging from 3 to 7 tones, such as tritonic, quadratonic, pentatonic, or occasionally hexatonic. Kwabena Nketia describes music and language as "parallel" and "text – tune relationships" as "integral" (Nketia, 2002: 145). The pitch of African songs largely relies on the tuning of individual singers, the collective performance of the group, and the instruments utilized throughout the ensemble. Thomas Pooley discusses the close alignment between linguistic tone and melody in the music of Sub – Saharan Africa. Thus, melody is defined by Pooley in Russo (2020) as "the linear patterning of pitch in a phrase or group of related phrases...In African tone languages, relative pitch is used on lexical items to confer semantic meanings" (pg. 109). Additionally, the tuning is influenced by the voice quality of the singer/soloist and the vocal abilities of individuals from the regions where the performing group operates.

According to Agu (1999),

It's crucial to emphasize that in African (specifically Sub-Saharan) traditional music and folk songs, there exists no fixed pitch due to the absence of scoring. Instead, each community relies heavily on its soloist, who consistently delivers songs with precise pitches. While occasional deviations may occur, soloists generally maintain close proximity to their established tones within compositions sharing the same scale and melodic structure (p.34).

The melodic structure of many African traditional songs predominantly features small intervals, typically ranging from 2nds to 5ths. These melodies tend to stay within a relatively low range, often spanning no more than an octave. Moreover, their contours may exhibit undulating, ascending, or descending patterns. The vocal techniques employed are;

1. Antiphonal singing, a prevalent practice in African traditional music, involves a call-and-response dynamic where the chorus or choir responds to the soloist's initial call.
2. Solo and chorused refrain, in which the soloist sings a song and seamlessly links it to the next, followed by yet another, while the chorus answers the soloist's vocal cues.
3. Mixed structural form, where in combination of songs, each featuring diverse styles and rhythmic patterns, results in the creation of multiple movements within the performance.

The melodic imagination displayed on African instruments such as the xylophone can be quite amazing and according to Agawu (2016: 275), "it grows in part from invitations issued by the instrument itself. Slabs over resonators arranged in ascending or descending order provide the conditions of possibility for a network of creative actions. While some melodies enact the rhythm of spoken language, others borrow the rhythm of dance, while still others travel back and forth between speech and dance".

Rhythm in African Music

The distinctive quality of African music lies in its rhythmic structure. Agawu (2003: 125 & 127) contends that Africans possess a "unique rhythmic sensibility" full of "irregular rhythms". African music is more replete with skilled drummatic rhythm than its Western counterpart. The following terms have consistently appeared in the discourse of African rhythmic proclivities as enuntiated by both indigenous and foreign discussants: additive rhythm, commetric accent, contrametric accents, counter meter, cross rhythm, density referent, divisive rhythm, downbeat, free rhythm, gross pulse, hemiola, hot rhythm, interlocking rhythm, isorythm, linear rhythm, melorhythm, metronome sense, multilinear rhythm, phrasing referent, polymeter, polyrhythm, resultant pattern, silent beats, syncopation, timeline and so many other terminologies. Each of these terms has a musicological narrative which we cannot exhaust here (Agawu, 2003). The concept of melorhythmic polyphony has been well enuntiated by Bode Omojola as follows:

All melodies are rhythmically defined. Melo - rhythm, however, refers not to silent rhythms - those that hide behind melodic motion. Melo - rhythm designates and empowers rhythm as an active determinant of melodic identity. If rhythmic lines must be (at least minimally) melodic, and if the juxtaposition of melo - rhythmic lines is deliberate, that is, according to specific rules of complementarity, then harmonic resultants should be seen to be pre - purposed rather than incidental. (Omojola, 2021: 86).

African instruments like the xylophone, talking drum and others help, ipso facto, in generating the melodic framework of many traditional performances such as the one presented briefly below.

Musical Example of a Traditional Liturgical Composition

Let us now look at a few musical examples that demonstrate how traditional liturgical compositions can be both rhythmically very lively yet liturgically solemn. An excerpt from the choral composition *Obim di na njikere* by Ben Agbo (Rev Fr) is presented below as an example of an experiment on liturgical music inculturation using the *Akunechenyi* genre from Igbariam in Anambra State, South – East Nigeria:

OBI M DI NA NJIKERE (Ps 108:1-5)

BEN AGBO

Andante ♩ = 100

SOPRANO
O bim di na nji ke re o

ALTO
O bim di na na nji ke re o

TENOR
O bim di na nji ke re o

Baritone
O bim di na nji ke re Chi ne ke

BASS
O bim di na na nji ke re o

8

Allegro

The first system of the score consists of five staves of piano accompaniment. The top staff features a continuous eighth-note pattern. The second staff has a similar eighth-note pattern with some rests. The third and fourth staves contain sparse notes and rests, while the fifth staff has a more active eighth-note accompaniment.

re o _____ A

re o _____

re o'e wo

A ga m'e kwe u kwe buo kwa'

re o'e wo

2

5

The musical score consists of four staves. The first staff is a vocal line with lyrics: "o bim di na nji ke re o" followed by a long horizontal line, then "O bim di na nji ke". The second staff is another vocal line with lyrics: "o bim di na nji ke re o" followed by a long horizontal line, then "O bim di na na nji ke". The third staff is a vocal line with lyrics: "o bim di na nji ke re o" followed by a long horizontal line, then "O bim di na nji ke". The fourth staff is a bass line with lyrics: "o bim di na nji ke re" followed by a long horizontal line, then "O bim di na nji ke". The key signature has five sharps (F#, C#, G#, D#, A#) and the time signature is 8/8.

Formal Organization

Obi m di na njikere is in rondo form. The theme *Obi m di na njikere* is recalled each time after the development sections: *Aga m ekwe ukwe buokwa abu, onu m meghee kelee Chukwu, Aga m ekele gi n'etiti ndi Mmadu* and *ka e bulienu gi elu*. It is predominantly in Call and Refrain Style where the soloist takes up the call sections while the chorus takes the refrains.

Tonality and Scalic Organization

Obi m di na njikere sounds somewhat modal since the melodies are always cadencing on the mediant note of the scale reminiscent of the phrygian mode of primitive church music. This feeling is borrowed from the *Akunechenyi* traditional melodies from which the composition was inculturated. This original music was borrowed from *Igba Okwunechenyi* (Igbariam) as recorded by Tabansi Records and transcribed by this researcher below:

Igba Okwunechenyi(Igbariam)

Recorded by Tabansi Records

♩ - 220

The musical score is written for five percussion instruments and a vocal line. The instruments are: Igba I, Side Drum, Snare Drum, Tambourine, and Wood Blocks. The tempo is marked as ♩ - 220. The key signature has four sharps (F#, C#, G#, D#) and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are: O ko ko g'a bu l'E ze a - e - nwa lo go di ke. a - e - nwa lo - go di - ke a - e - nwa.

6

Perc. Igba I
S. D. Side Drum
S. D. Snare Drum
Tamb. Tambourine
W. Bl. Wood Blocks

O ko ko g'a bu l'E ze a - e - nwa lo go di ke

a - e - nwa lo - go di - ke a - e - nwa

2

12

Perc. S. D. S. D. Tamb. W. Bl.

lo - go di - ke a - e - nwa lo - go di - ke

18

18

Perc. S. D. S. D. Tamb. W. Bl.

a - e - nwa lo - go di - ke

49

Harmonic Devices

There is a balanced mixture of both contrapuntal and homophonic writing in this work. The theme song *Obi m di na njikere* is rendered in homophonic style while the episodes are

predominantly contrapuntal in style. For example, *Agam ekwe ukwe buokwa abu* and the rest. The entire instrumental accompaniment framework showcases a complex contrapuntal interlock of drums, voices, local flute and other local instruments - an emblematic representation of the African concept of orchestration and accompaniment.

Melodic Features

In *Obi m di na njikere* the original melody from the compositional research source above is pentatonic consisting of G#1, A#1, C#1, D#1 and F#2 but in the fresh composition, the composer has widened the melodic range to encompass the seven notes of a major scale. The melodic range now spans from G#1 to A#2. The melody is undulating rising usually from the dominant to the upper tonic and falling to the mediant through the supertonic.

Rhythmic Features

Obi m di na njikere is a lively composition with its rhythmic framework very depictive of the *Akunechenyi* traditional dance. The interlock of the multiple drum ensemble, the vocal part and the intermittent interludes of the melodic instrument - bugle, help to produce the melo - rhythmic flavor of *Akunechenyi* which is well captured in this composition. "The African individual cannot be criticized for a perceived absence of solemnity in their worship practices, as their cultural musical heritage inherently incorporates rhythmic vitality that accompanies their singing, often leading them to clap or dance (Agbo, 2006: 62). Elsewhere, I have contended that worship can be understood in three distinct senses: the cultic, the evangelical, and the celebrative. The cultic sense pertains to the ritualistic aspects of worship, such as the actions performed by the priest at the altar during specific moments of the liturgy. The evangelical sense has to do with the message of worship, for example what the choir is saying during the communion. The celebrative sense has to do with the mood of the celebration, for instance it is expected that if the people are happy during thanksgiving or Easter celebration, then they can express their joy like Africans do through clapping and dancing (Agbo, 2012). This development reaffirms the position statement of Pope John Paul II (1982: 686) that "A faith that does not become culture is a faith not fully accepted, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived."

Performance Mood/Dynamics

The entire composition has a joyful mood of thanksgiving that lends itself to dancing and loud singing which is a replica of the African concept of solemnity in a celebrative context of worship. The music starts solemnly and gathers momentum as it progresses. The motive of offering as presented by Psalm 108 gives the congregation more liveliness especially at the invitation of more and more musical instruments to join in praising God. The music runs gradually into 4_4 allegro with more and more dancing. The bugle comes at the climax of jubilation with its solo passages shortly before the coda.

Similar works of translation of Psalms like *Abu maka echichi* (Songs for Ordination, Ps 2), *Ndi ilo m azogbuella m n'ukwu* (My enemies have encompassed me, Ps 55) and many others were composed in native airs with traditional instrumental accompaniment by Fr Raymond Arazu. He was one of the first composers to explore the *Akunechenyi* genre with his *Abuoma* group around Ihiala in Anambra State (Arazu, 2011).

Analysis and Evaluation of Texts used in the Composition

In line with the aim of Vatican II which is to adapt worship to its native genius (Flannery, 1982) and in consonance with the postulations of Agawu (2003) emphasizing the composers' commitment to delivering a spiritual message, the texts were chosen from the scriptures, Ps 108 with few additional phrases from the composer. The text elicits a humble disposition for

offering and thanksgiving. As the psalmist himself exhorts "Awake my soul awake. Awake lyre and harp I will awake the dawn", *Teta mkpuru Obi m Teta. Une na ubo akwara teta. Aga m akpote chi obubo*. When the whole being of a worshipper, body, mind and soul is charged up in worship, the next step is to go beyond the vocal instrument to the inanimate musical instruments. *Onu m meghee kelee Chukwu, ogene kwughonu boliboli - Igba kwugh'onu kwata* are onomatopoeic ways of expressing the role of other instruments rather than voice in praise worship. The music ends with the popular Psalm text "Be thou exalted O Lord above the heavens. Let your glory be over the earth" - *Ka e bulienu gi elu karia eluigwe, ka Otito gi ziputa n' uwa*. The full text and English translations will be presented shortly:

Igbo	English
Ch: Obi m di na njikere Chineke	My heart is ready, God
1. Aga m ekwe ukwe buokwa abu	I will sing and make music
Teta mkpuruobi m teta	Awake, my soul
Une n'ubo akwara teta	Awake, lyre and harp
Aga m akpote chi obubo	I will awake the dawn
Obi m di na njikere	My heart is ready
2. Aga m ekele Gi n'etiti ndi mmadu	I will praise You among the people
A - e tiere Gi egwu. Aga m ekele Gi n'etiti mba nile	I will praise You among the people
A - e Igba na ogene egwu anyi bu egwu oma	Drums and metal gongs Our music is glorious
3. Onu m meghee kelee Chukwu!	Let me mouth praise God!
Ogene kwugh'onu boliboli	Let the metal gongs reverberate!
Igba kwugh'onu kwata	Let the drums bellow!
4. Ka e bulienu Gi elu karia eluigwe	Be exalted above the heavens
K'otito Gi ziputa n'uwa	Your glory over the whole earth
k'ebulienu Gi elu	Be exalted

To access the performance of the whole composition *Obi m di na njikere* on line, see the link below:

https://youtu.be/AwEPW92CxMM?si=bV3R4q_dZn96yRVy

Conclusion

This researcher has presented evidence of special features not distinctive but identical to the Africans especially of the Sub Saharan extraction such as antiphonal singing, solo and chorused refrain and several others. As a result, he has argued that melodic imagination in African music is predominantly instrument borne. From this development, he has taken a case study of the drummatic rhythm typical of the *Akunechenyi* traditional music of Anambra area of Igboland and as an outcome underscored its melorhythmic polyphony.

He has embarked on a compositional analysis of *Obi m di na njikere* which conveys a unique modal underpinning and which presents a very interesting rhythmic vitality. Surprisingly, despite its dance like mien, the graceful movement of the *Akunechenyi* (just like *Ikorodo*) cannot be said to cause any form of liturgical distraction. This song can perfectly fit into the Thanksgiving period of the Roman Catholic Liturgy. The text setting on Psalm 108 renders this song quite liturgically meditative and relevant.

In all, this researcher calls for a rethinking of the pristine notions of sanctity of immobility - a morbid Western oriented concept that calls for jettisoning at such a time like this, over 150 years after the coming of Christianity in Igboland. Hence, he calls for a conceptual renaissance in the Liturgical Music of Igboland.

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