

[Working Paper] Local Arts and the Missionary Task in Cameroon



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Introduction

During the closing ceremony for the 2020–21 academic year at the Faculté de Théologie Évangélique du Cameroun (FACTEC), my ethnomusicology class decided to present two songs composed during our course. On that day, the person presiding over the service—a teacher at the seminary, and also a pastor in a church in the city—did something seemingly innocuous that actually reveals a lot about the state of local arts in the church in Cameroon. The students presented their songs just before the preaching. Generally, according to the liturgy of worship adopted by the seminary, a song is performed before the preacher of the day takes his place to proclaim the Word. These songs are usually hymns from the hymnal inherited from Western evangelization. After the students presented their songs, which were entirely local (melody, language, dance, and instruments), the worship leader asked that a “hymn . . . a real and acceptable hymn,” be sung from the usual hymnal before the preacher spoke.

Without blaming anyone, I later mentioned to my students that what had happened seemed to be the norm. Nobody else had noticed anything wrong. Was I normal?

This story illustrates what I would like to present here on the topic of local arts and the missionary task in Cameroon.

Meeting Cameroon

Cameroon is a country in Central Africa that is unique in local African arts. The country covers over 475,000 square kilometers and is often called “Africa in miniature.” As Paul Tchawa stated, however, “Cameroon is not a faithful summary of all African environments but, by the luck of the draw, this country . . . reveals itself as being able to represent, better than the others, the synthesis of the ecosystems of the countries of the continent and in particular of sub-Saharan Africa” (2015). The linguistic (about 280 languages) and cultural diversity found in Cameroon also reflects the whole continent. Thus, Cameroon exemplifies different artistic styles often grouped within four major cultural areas, each an important symbol of its identity. These areas include the Sudano-Sahelian (the desert north), Sawa (the maritime coast), Grassfield (the mountainous forest), and Fang-Beti (the equatorial forest).



Cameroon is a secular state that hosts several religions, including African traditional religions, Islam, and Christianity. But according to statistics, about 70% of its population claims to be Christian. There are several groups among Christians, including Catholics, Protestants (Calvinists, Baptists, Methodists, Anglicans, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, or so-called “revivalist” churches), and Adventists.

Local Arts in the Church in Cameroon

What is the current state of the arts in Cameroon, and more particularly, of local arts in the church? The story I shared at the beginning of this presentation reveals several issues regarding the state of local arts in the church in Cameroon.

1. **Singing has a prominent place in the church in Cameroon.** “When Africans meet to worship,” as Thomas Oduro said, “they sing their hearts out. In fact, music takes about three-quarters of the duration of worship in many Christian communities in Africa” (2008, 92). Based on observations and a survey I am conducting, I’m finding that Oduro is right. In Cameroon, singing consistently occupies about 60–75 percent of the time devoted to worship in almost every denomination in Cameroon. But the question is, what kinds of songs are people singing?
2. **Hymns from the Western heritage persist.** Cameroon has inherited Western songs from the first missionaries, and they have a predominant place in the singing of the church. It’s important to note that “Christian music for most Africans, as has been observed, was at the onset subtly imposed on the people through education. [...] many Africans internalized western music as the norm; consequently, the association of Christian worship with western music became part of the people’s collective memory” (Muchimba 2008, 81).
3. **Local songs and arts do not have the same status as modern or Western ones.** Local songs and arts, when present, take a secondary place. They are often considered a stopgap or simply tools or elements of exhibition to show that we have nothing against the culture.
4. **The so-called modern artistic styles are considered the most appropriate for worship.** Consciously or unconsciously, the artistic styles from the West or made in the Western way are considered superior and more appropriate for worship in the church. During a worship service, between 50 and 70 percent of songs used are genres of Western origin. Usually those songs are placed in most the important moments of the service.
5. **For the most part, the African or Cameroonian artistic genres found in the church are hybrids.** Several local artistic genres have been modified and modernized to engage with the Western world. These are fusions between local Cameroonian genres and Western genres. Examples include makossa, bikutsi, bend skin, soukouss, and rumba. Those songs constitute 10–30 percent of the repertoire, and most of the time they have a secondary role, as mentioned. In fact, in most African-initiated churches they are used at the beginning of the service, as preparation for worship. Sometimes they’re used as latecomers are seated or for moments of animation. These songs might also be used during the offering.

6. **Traditional local genres are often perceived as obsolete and sometimes looked down upon.** This could be why they typically constitute only 10–20 percent of the worship repertoire.
7. **Christian artists rarely, if ever, make a living from their art.** To make a living, they usually have to have another job. Art is not considered a profession in itself.

Nevertheless, in Cameroon local arts are not completely rejected, in contrast to what I've seen in some other places. The history of the church in Cameroon reveals efforts to integrate local genres into the church, both amongst Catholics and Protestants. Although the Roman Catholic Church in some ways modernized the traditional *balafon*, it was the first to introduce this instrument into worship. A priest named Pie-Claude is recognized as one of the greater pioneers of this musical movement in Cameroon among Roman Catholics, alongside two other priests, Pierre-Lucien Betene and François-Xavier Amara (Bodo 1992). Protestant churches—notably, the Eglise Evangélique du Cameroun (Evangelical Church of Cameroon)—followed with the introduction of the balafon and the creation of a balafon choir, called “liturgical groups,” under the leadership of Abraham Tetoum and Abel Nkuinji, who are considered pioneers (Ntankeh Nana 2019). Several communities use certain local instruments, such as drums, and sing in local styles while being accompanied by modern musical instruments.

In general, people are aware that local arts have an effect on congregations that borrowed art forms do not. When a local song is performed during a program, for example, one can observe the power it has on the participants. Despite these obvious effects, however, change comes slowly. Talking with several leaders, I have been able to identify some hindrances to the use of local arts.

Obstacles to the Use of Local Arts

There are many obstacles to the use of local arts in churches in Cameroon. I will list a few that seem most significant.

- **Correct theology regarding local arts is not developed and taught.** Scripture doesn't speak against local arts, as one might think in Cameroon. On the contrary, whether from an Old Testament or New Testament perspective, Scripture encourages the expression of worship with whatever is most important to us. As I pointed out in my master's thesis (2012), there is an urgent need to bring church leaders, pastors, theologians, and worship leaders (all Bible experts, whether theologians or not) to the table to formulate a correct theology regarding local arts that will have authority and credibility for the use of local arts in the Cameroonian church.
- **Inferiority complexes.** Even if unintentional, the education we receive in Cameroon is not favorable to the local. Our perception of ourselves is often pejorative, and we feel we must do anything to be similar to the West. “The colonial administrator chose the policy of assimilation. It was a question of giving the illusion to the colony that by the means of civilization and education it would become French” (Kenmogne, *La traduction de la Bible et l'Église : Enjeux et défis pour l'Afrique francophone* 2009, 230). Today's behaviors, which result in inferiority complexes, seem to be the result of this assimilation policy.

- **Insufficient knowledge and skills.** Many local artistic styles are not well-known by believers, especially those in charge of music in church. People have been taught the wrong things (doctrine), which has shaped their attitude toward anything local. As Felix Muchimba emphasized, “music was used to express both good and evil. Indeed, the ethos of the music often had strong association with what is hostile to the Bible” (2008, 79).
- **Lack of Christian specialists.** Some leaders want to develop local artistic styles, but they don’t succeed because they don’t have specialists to help. I was talking recently with a friend who is a pastor of a large church in downtown Yaoundé, and he shared with me the difficulty of introducing a local genre in his church, due to lack of specialists. Other leaders might seek help from non-Christian specialists, a service for which they would be paid. One time in a village church, I saw a pastor ask for the help of a non-Christian specialist to train church members in a local genre. Unfortunately, without the Bible as a filter, the advice of a non-Christian specialist might sometimes lead to unintended results, including the risk of syncretism.

Conclusion

The Cameroonian church has a deep need to proclaim, just as the psalmist did, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!” To do this, the church needs commitment and courage to go against the tide in an environment in which Western genres are considered more the norm than the alternative, as Jean Kidula (2008) has pointed out.

Local arts are a potent medium for the communication of the gospel in Cameroon. Michel Kenmogne illustrates this:

Generally speaking, within the churches, there are two types of songs: Hymns translated from Western hymnals from missionary times and folk hymns, composed by local Christians. There is generally a difference in the enthusiasm with which Christians sing them. The former are sung without commitment and life, somewhat as a religious duty. The music that accompanies them, essentially Gregorian, hardly touches the emotional fibers of the people. However, the local songs are performed with enthusiasm. They naturally invite to dance and one perceives a fervor that attests to the commitment of the whole being: body and soul. (Kenmogne 2017, 193)

Such consideration should not be theoretical only. Theory must be accompanied by practical action—such as the introduction of training modules dealing with the issue of local arts in theological institutions; the recognition and recruitment of specialists overseeing the arts in churches; and the restoration of the place of local arts alongside those of Western origin.

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