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An Appraisal of Igbo Choral Music in the Light of Akin Euba's Concept of African Traditional Music

Jude Okelue
University of Lagos

Abstract

Akin Euba identified traditional music as the most widespread and most popular of all the various types of music existing in Africa today. This study attempts an exposition of his idea of traditional music, by highlighting the various elements that identify a piece in this light. This achieved, it proceeds to an analysis of selected Igbo Choral Music excerpts, with the aim of accentuating the prevalent features that mirror the above-stated position. This study employs the following tools: exposition, description and analysis. It makes recourse to archival and library materials. The findings herein reflect a fine balance between change and continuity in the present day Igbo choral music. The study therefore recommends to the modern composers, painstaking studies and rigour, to equip them with the wealth of compositional elements at the African's disposal, which can be adequately harnessed to produce works that can stand the test of time.

Keywords: Igbo, Traditional, Music, Choral, Euba

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Digitalisation of Worship: Assessing the Effectiveness of Christian Worship via Social Media Platforms during the Covid-19 Lockdown in Nigeria

Abiodun Afolabi & Abosede Babatunde
University of Ilorin

Abstract

In John chapter 4 verse 21-23, Jesus Christ envisaged a time when true worship will not really be defined by physical gathering but by a simple act of believers worshipping in spirit and in truth. While the statement was meant for a Samaritan woman, the reality of having to worship in spirit and in truth played out during the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown. The fact that believers could not gather physically paved way for digitalisation of worship. This study assesses the effectiveness of digital worship for Christians in Nigeria during the Covid-19 pandemic when services had to be held live on digital platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Telegram, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Zoom. Drawing from both primary and secondary data sources, the study finds that digitalization of worship was made effective by an already entrenched Christian-based faith that God is

Abiodun Afolabi, PhD.
Department of History and International Studies
University of Ilorin, Nigeria
Phone: +2348055201274; E-mail: afolabia7@gmail.com
&
Abosede Omowumi Babatunde, PhD.
Centre for Peace and Strategic Studies
University of Ilorin, Nigeria
Phone: +234; E-mail: bosc_babatunde@yahoo.co.uk.

Omnipresent and assessable even through the use of their electronic devices. It also finds that miracles did not dwindle in spite of lack of physical contact. The study concludes that contrary to predictions that flexibility introduced during the Covid-19 lockdown would cause attrition of Christian brethren, resumption of church activities in Nigeria have grown stronger. This could be perceived as the outcome of the strengthening of Christian faith via social media worship during the lockdown. The use of social media as a channel of worship and ministration during the period of Covid-19-induced restriction reinforces the existential and transcendental nature of religion. The religion adherents deployed digital technologies to demonstrate their spirituality and faith during that period of global health emergency, navigating the challenges posed by poor infrastructure and relatively low internet accessibility in a poorly governed African context.

Keywords: Covid-19, Lockdown, Digital worship, Social Media, Physical distance

Introduction

The era of digital worship had been a part of religious life in Nigeria prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the pandemic intensified the need to digitalise worship (Wobodo, 2020). Due to social distancing, quarantine and isolation measures imposed by the government as part of strategies to curtail the spread of Covid-19, many church administrators and the laity transitioned from physical to online worship. The transition was in line with the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommendation about "conducting faith activities remotely/virtually as long as required" (World Health Organization, 2020). Before the pandemic, and the imposed lockdown, religious worships in Nigeria was centred mainly around physical worship while the social media pages of different churches, both orthodox and charismatic denominations across Nigeria, were mainly used for snippets from worship services (short video clips), and as a medium to publicise upcoming events to Church members and people who were distant members of the Church. However, the lockdown measures to curtail the spread of Covid-19 pandemic necessitated the use of virtual worship to reach out to Church

members to facilitate continuous active ministering and sharing of messages of faith through various social media channels by religious leaders. For most Churches, as shown from the survey conducted across different denominations, there were three major activities that were important and could not be abandoned because of the pandemic and compulsory social distancing. These programmes were the Sunday worship service led by the ministers of God, and mid-week activities, especially Bible Study and Prayer Meeting (Afolaranmi, 2020:165). In order to hold these activities, Churches had to reactivate their social media pages or register new accounts and provide passwords for accessibility of the channels to their members (Wobodo, 2020:280).

While there were times when the services were singlehandedly organised by the minister or preacher, there were opportunities for members to comment or send voice messages to express their feelings and testimonies about each worship service. This, in many ways, changed the rigid conceptualisation of worship on the basis of physical gathering, and emphasised that people could gather online for religious worship (Ngozika et al., 2020:15).

This article examines the effectiveness of digital worship for Christians in Nigeria during the Covid-19 pandemic where services had to be held live on digital platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Telegram, WhatsApp, Instagram and Zoom. It assesses how the restrictive measures, including lockdown, affected people's religious worship and how the use of social media platform as an alternative medium of worship served as a medium of interaction between the religious leaders and adherents and the impact on people's faith. The key questions that underpin the research centred around what digital media channels specifically enabled worship to continue throughout the pandemic and how did the digital channels foster worship experience compared to the physical gathering. The article also provides perspectives on the question of whether online worship was better suited to faith than physical gathering. It argues that digitalization of worship was made effective by an already entrenched Christian-based belief that God is everywhere and can be reached even through the use of electronic devices. This notion of God

worship to mitigate the restriction of movement due to the health emergencies of COVID-19.

Research Method

The method adopted for this research is a qualitative study of virtual worship scenarios during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns. As Kiyunja and Kuyini (2017) have pointed out, methodology has to do with a structured approach towards collection, collation and analysis of data. To this end, primary and secondary sources of data were consulted. The primary source of information for the study was through both one-on-one interview and online interviews with members of different Christian denominations, including Anglican Churches, Christ Apostolic Church, Living Faith Ministries and the Redeemed Christian Church of God. Participants ranged from age 18 to 40 years and they offered information on grounds of anonymity. This explains why their names were not mentioned in the quotations employed in the study. However, majority of the respondents were based in Ilorin and Lagos, although chat information was gathered from adherents of Christian faith across other parts of the world via their social media handles. The researchers requested the participants to answer questions through an unstructured interview template. Some of the questions asked were: How did you feel when you were unable to attend Church physically during the pandemic? What virtual channels did your Church employ to reach out to members during the Covid-19 lockdown? How effective were the social media platforms you engaged with for worship during the lockdown? What were the overall impact of digital worship on your Church during the Covid-19 lockdown? The data generated were coded and analysed based on emerging themes relevant to the study. Secondary data derived from scholarly articles, books and newspapers all of which were used to complement the primary data derived from the field research.

Digitalisation of Christian worship through social media platform
Some writers such as Kgatlel (2020) and Yemtsa (2020) have argued that digital worship allowed church members to be more focused than the actual physical worship. Unlike the physical gathering where

different members of the congregation could engage in distracting activities, there is only a possibility for online activities to be distracted by self-indulged distractions (Diskeo, Guissepina and Wobodo, 2020). There were also different views collected from interviews which indicate that digital worship enabled many Christians to develop personal encounters with God. There was adherence to strict liturgical order in many instances when attending physical worship and, in most cases, these adherences to liturgical orders inhibited personal approach to God, in favour of a corporate or collective intercession (Froudn, 2021:16). However, with the digitalisation of worship and subsequent usage of digital tools to engage in self-study and quiet time with God, many Christians recorded that they were closer to God during the pandemic than the period before the pandemic when they only attended Church as a matter of routine. A particular respondent explained thus:

The lockdown for me was a time of great awakening. I was not used to doing personal devotion prior to the pandemic because I only relied on Sunday worship. The fact that I was afraid of the reality of the Covid-19 disease, and I had people around me who tested positive to the symptoms, led me to strengthen my hope and faith in God, and most times, I connected to different sermons online without any constraint of denomination. All that I was concerned about was hearing a word appropriate enough to liberate my soul and lift me up, above the wide gamut of challenges around me. Thus, the pandemic was not only a time for sober reflection for me, but a time of spiritual awakening, so much so that, if I am to identify when I became really born again, it would be the time of the Covid-19 lockdown (Interview, 2020).

This respondent's position was supported by most of the other interviewees, suggesting that worship during the pandemic was an opportunity for most believers to re-ignite their faith in God during that period of health emergency. The pandemic-induced anxiety,

despair and fear of the unknown and uncertainty of ill-health and death given the doomy projection about the pandemic made many to take solace in God through any form or medium of worship including social media platforms. For some believers, there were less distractions in private worship through digital devices compared to the physical gathering that they had prior to the Covid-19 imposed lockdowns (Wobodo, 2020). This perspective does not in any way discredit the efficacy of physical gathering for some worshippers but it emphasises that the despair and anxiety caused by the pandemic-induced lockdown provided an opportunity to rejig one's spirituality and reconnection with God.

As recorded in several passages across the Bible, particularly in the account of plague in the book of Exodus from Chapter 7 to 12, there were times when people encountered pandemic in different forms accompanied with hunger and starvation. These experiences it was revealed in these biblical passages did not make the people distant from God. Rather, it was a time when people began to employ various means to reach God and hear from God. The case of the 1918 Spanish Flu also known as the Great Influenza provides account of how people draw closer to God in situation of health emergency. Although there was no social media at the time of the Spanish flu, and places of worships were closed down as part of measures to curtail the outbreak of the virus, people relied on biblical verses in Exodus 16 to connect with their God (Brundage and Shanks, 2007). The health emergency reinforces Marx's metaphor that religion is the opium of the people (Kowalczyk et al., 2020:2674). While there were no digital devices to connect people to God in those times, they sought to hear God and follow his commands through the word of the prophets. In contemporary times, in the era of COVID-19 pandemic, adherent of the Christian faith, relied on the word of faith from various preachers, as a mean to seek solace from God. This revived and strengthened their faith in spite of fear and uncertainty created by the turbulent statistics of infections and death that accompanied Covid-19 cases around the world. Moreover, health emergency brought about by Covid-19 pandemic reinforced the fact that religion still remains the opium of the people. Covid-19 pandemic created fear and panics and

people sought solace in their religion, embracing the media and social media to connect with their spiritual leader and lean on the word of God. The emphasis on reliance on God's word as a shelter in time of storm is buttressed by Isaiah 30:15, which reads:

For thus says the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, "In returning and rest, you shall be saved; In quietness and confidence shall be your strength.

Through the use of online platforms and social media, worship services in many Churches across the Nigerian federation went on unhindered during the Covid-19 lockdown. The major social media platforms that were used during the lockdown were Zoom, Instagram, YouTube and Facebook (Wobodo, 2020). The interviewees' accounts confirmed the use of these social media platform as the mode of worship during the lockdown. These channels contained live features that ensured that services were covered in the auditorium of most churches or at other official locations where the pastors in charge of the Church ministered the word of God. It was observed that majority of the aspects of worship such as praise and worship and recognition of first timers in Church were not featured during the online services. The focus was directly and strictly on study of the Bible and sermons (Sulkloski and Ignatowski, 2020: 4). It was revealed by the respondents that most of the pastors who were already used to televangelism prior to the lockdown found it easy to transit into digital worship, while those who were used to physical ministration of the word had to put in digital, technical and human resources to be able to transmit their messages to the congregation.

Findings from the research data indicated that online services, however, recorded low attendance of members compared to the number of people that frequented the physical worship services. The reason for the low attendance via digital platforms was mainly because of the intermittent and disruptive power supply to charge phones and computer devices, cost of data that would be adequate to stream programmes live, and also the quality of devices that some members were using were not up to the standard that could enable

online streaming (The Africa Report, 2020). Therefore, it was only the members who had browsing features on their phones that were able to connect to the services. The pandemic and the subsequent lockdown, however, increased the digital literacy of most church members, because those who had utilised their phone mainly to make or receive calls expanded its usage to web surfing so as to log in to applications relevant to their religious beliefs.

As mentioned earlier, Churches that were not active on social media before the lock down had to revive their social media platforms on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram Live, YouTube, and Zoom platform. The revamping of the technical and digital facilities of the Church have endured till today in most places that were observed for the purpose of this study. For example, across a section of Anglican Churches, Christ Apostolic Church, Living Faith Ministries and the Redeemed Christian Church of God, as evident from their branches in Ilorin Metropolis, the social media platforms were revived during the pandemic and in order to capture quality production of sermons and other church activities, there were tremendous investments into audio-visual devices in the Church. For various Churches, the online communication channels were used as means of outreach, information sharing to church members and also some communities of faith were formed during the pandemic as a result of the connectivity afforded by use of social media (Guisepeña, 2020; Wobodo, 2020).

Since the lockdown subsided, the gadgets put in place have been useful for Sunday services and other important church programmes. Thus, while the pandemic prevented people from coming together to engage in physical worship, the value added to the Church digital and technical equipment as a result of the need to give members the best experience online is still very much relevant today. It also helps the Church to reachout to its members who are either unable to attend services live and those who are in Diaspora but are interested in connecting with other parishioners in their local Church.

The lockdown did not affect the Sunday worship alone and mid-week activities, it also affected other church programmes lined up to hold especially between April and August 2020. However, the pandemic scuttled so many of these plans and prevented them from

holding in designated venues in the physical environments. Besides, this did not deter Churches from going on with the programmes, particularly since experience of Sunday services had transformed the modality of conducting worship. It was easy for churches to adapt to and broaden the demands for other activities such as seminars, revivals, vigils and personal prayer sessions. These activities were broadcast through online services on the social media platforms throughout the lockdown and members with access to internet and mobile devices were able to connect with these events. While there were occasional glitches in transmission, a large number of church members who joined online events especially in places like Lagos and Ilorin confessed that they received a lot of miracles from the divine encounters they had via the vigils and prayer sessions. Relating this experience, an interviewee, a parishioner, noted thus:

I was not used to participating in church programmes online because I was used to the physical gathering. Although our Church had started interactive platforms online way before Covid-19, majority of us follow online platforms to keep up to date with events going on in the Church from the headquarters to other parts of the country. However, with the Covid-19 pandemic and the imposed lockdown, we began to cherish the online platforms and spent more time online, because there was no other better way to catch up with messages from our Senior Pastor and other important information. Beyond the issue of services, the welfare unit of the Church utilised social media platforms to communicate constantly with all members of the Church that were online to seek their wellbeing and safety. This does not mean that online was sufficient as what could have been physically done but at least, it was like a half loaf that is idiomatically better than none (Interview, 2020).

From the transmission to digital worship during the Covid-19 lockdown, it could be argued that there was a sort of technological invasion in the sense that people were forced to learn new things about digital platforms that they were not familiar with prior to the

pandemic. For instance, many of the respondents explained that most churches only used their social media platforms to save pictures of notable events in church but during the lockdown, other functions such as live streaming and IGTV were explored and utilised (The Africa Report, 2020). Other online platforms such as Google and Microsoft were challenged to develop applications that could accommodate the diversity of communication needs of people, either as individuals or groups, and this was very relevant to holding church meetings and making plans even ahead of the lockdown. For instance, for families who were bereaved during the pandemic, the online communication tools and social media channels enabled those who could not physically attend the funerals as a result of the Covid-19 protocols to show sympathy towards the families of the deceased by attending the online memorial service organised by the churches and aired on the social media platform.

The import of the digital worship during the post-lockdown was very significant. On the one hand, it was predicted by some public analysts and religious leaders that the digitalisation and subsequent personalisation of worship that the Covid-19 lockdown afforded would cause a significant reduction in the number of people who would attend Church in post-Covid-19 lockdown. On the other hand, however, many studies have found that the lockdown and the social distance increased the fervour of many people for the place of worship. This also is in conformity with the findings of this study that the digital worship increased the faith of the adherent and enhance their closeness to God. Prior to the lockdown, many people never predicted the possibility that a time would come when they would be unable to worship physically in their local assemblies, not to even talk of engaging in other activities such as House Fellowships, Mission Outreaches and Evangelism. Galang et al. (2021) pointed out that, contrary to the claim that social media worship would cause attrition in church membership, rather church membership increased after the lockdown because many who followed sermons consistently across different social media platforms saw the need to go back to God and renew their faith by being members of a Bible-based church.

Prior to the pandemic, church programs were broadcast on radio and television stations, but those who did that were known as televangelists. However, during the lockdown, virtually every minister of God became a televangelist but in this case, through the use of the social media platforms for ministrations. This confirms that the social media has attained popularity as a means of sharing information far beyond what the traditional media could envisage. Both traditional and social media were deployed as channels of reaching out to the congregations. It is important to highlight this fact. Also, while broadcasting on televisions required large amount of money and takes a whole amount of time to perfect production, use of social media was relatively easier and personal. With email or username and password, the mobile phone can be used to access quality audio or video broadcast.

The digitalisation of worship brought to the fore the place of the preacher in an age of virtual reality. Prior to the pandemic, the idea of a preacher that most people had, including preachers themselves was a man standing in front of a congregation and moving round with gesticulations and sometimes drawing examples from members of the congregation. However, in this case of digital worship, there were less distractions involved and messages were communicated without consideration of human reactions or emotional frames. The preacher is seen as a lone person, the voice of one speaking to empty pews in the physical environment but online, hundreds or thousands of people for a congregation (Pillay, 2020; Orinjinmo, 2020). This created a paradigm shift from church as a physical gathering to church as a spiritual connection that is unhindered by the emotional and social clusters that come in some cases with physical assembly of people. This as many have argued enabled Christ to be the focus of the worship services as there were no distractions about the human appearance or appeal of worshippers in the sanctuary. Hence, people were able to worship in spirit and in truth.

It can be argued that the pandemic and subsequent lockdown strengthened the faith of many believers. Prayers were answered not necessarily by the laying on of hands but through faith, a faith in the

existence of God's power everywhere including the social media. One of the respondents interviewed for this study notes that:

When the Bible says that where two or three are gathered in my name, there I will be also. This statement was not limited to physical gatherings. It has become clear that God was in gatherings held on the social media (Interview, 2020).

The aftermath of online services was evident in the digital habits of many church members even after the lockdown. Prior to the pandemic, social media use by the majority of congregations was infrequent. Before the lockdown, social media as a means of connecting with congregation members outside of an in-person church setting was not a priority. However, Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown necessitated the dominant shift to laptops, tablets and mobile phones as a platform for worship. Studies indicated that prior to the lockdown, some churches were sceptical about congregation using phones to access the word of God but the same devices that were rejected prior to lockdown became the platform for worship and service (Afolaranmi, 2020:167). The Covid-19 lockdown brought an increased awareness about digitalisation as a new normal. It was evident that people could access the Bible and other religious materials on their phones and do not necessarily have to use physical or hard copies. Many Churches were encouraged to provide electronic resources and copies of materials such as devotionals which existed only as hard copies prior to the pandemic. An example was the devotionals of most of campus ministries across several Nigerian universities.

The digitalisation of worship also had consequences on Church finances, especially tithes and offering which were a significant part of the worship services. As noted in different instances, some churches had been having a semblance of digitalisation in many aspects prior to the pandemic such as having both physical and electronic platforms for payment of tithes. Thus, many parishioners had opted for bank transfer of their tithes rather

than the physical payment at Sunday services. It was noted that this practice was carried on during the pandemic and more members were encouraged to make electronic transfers of their tithes. Thus, there was no significant problem with tithing as a result of the lockdown. Churches received tithes through mobile banking options and prayed for faithful tithers on the social media. Testimonies abound across several denominations on how blessings multiplied as a result of such prayers.

The digitalisation of worship also led to increased inter-denominationalism. Prior to the lockdown, the physical worship on Sundays was restrictive in the sense that one can only attend one service physically. One cannot be physically present in more than a church. However, the social media allowed believers to catch up with services in various churches and this transformed the oneness of the Church. People were less discriminatory about denominations. They were more concerned about the accuracy of God's word and were less concerned about the Church from which the Biblical Word was coming from. The increased inter-denominationalism was a positive influence on perception of Christians across different denominations in Nigeria as it fostered more sense of unity. The experience of many people online helped in the realisation that the Church is one foundation, and not just a cluster of denominations.

The health consequences of online worship are very positive for the Church. The digitalisation of worship played a vital role in preventing the spread of disease within the church. It helps to adhere and ensure conformity with the restrictive measures of social distancing imposed by the government to curtail the spread of Covid-19. The social media became not just a convenient way for congregation leaders to connect with community members, but a vital platform for joining adherents together while remaining apart. While members kept in touch online, it ensured that there were no cases of self-inflicted deaths in the Church as a result of Covid-19 virus. Prior to the discovery and distribution of the vaccine against Covid-19, continued physical gathering could have led to uncontrollable spread of the virus and the Church could have witnessed a decimation greater than persecution.

Contending Issues in the use of Social Media Platform as a Medium of Worship

This section analyses the challenges that adherents encountered in the use of digital platform as a medium of worship linked to government Covid-19 restrictive measures. While there were significant positive outcomes of digitalisation of worship during the lockdown to curtail the spread of Covid-19, there were some challenges experienced which undermined the efficacy of the digital worship. First, there was the conspiracy theories about Covid-19 pandemic to be signs of end time which influenced people's faith and embracing media and social media platform of worship and spirituality. The doom and gloom of these conspiracy theories impact on how digital worship helped to give hope and solace to people at these challenging times of health crisis.

In addition, the virtual worship was not without its inherent challenges. The challenges of virtual worship include poor and erratic electricity to watch the television, charge phone, high cost of data for accessing social media, poor internet connectivity, and inability to buy data by some worshipper especially those whose sources of livelihoods were affected by the lockdown. To some extent, people were able to navigate these challenges by making use of personal financial upkeep or making requests to church members who were well to do to make data available on WhatsApp platforms of the Church for members who were in need of data for live streaming of Church programmes. However, this was only made available in very few instances and this affected the number of people who could benefit directly from Church programmes.

This financial aspect further exacerbated the issue of class division in Church between the haves and the have nots. Those who have the financial wherewithal were able to survive the lockdown unscathed while those who lacked the means had to go through the pandemic contending with lack or inadequacy of material resources, which amounted to another form of social persecution. The Church had done much by investing in its own virtual equipment and other digital tools to transmit the word of God to the people but the Church could not intervene directly in providing data for members to access

the programmes. However, with regards to the problem of electricity to see live broadcasts on TV, many churches tried to duplicate the live broadcasts to multiple social media channels which can be downloaded and then shared without necessarily using internet data.

Conclusion

The digitalisation of worship during the lockdown transformed religious experiences among Nigerian Christians. It affirmed that physical distance is not a barrier to worship and also served as a test case for future worship especially with increasing influence of technology on faith. Currently, some of the churches set up on social media still hold fellowship meetings without gathering physically. Overall, it is clear from this study that the role of faith and spirituality in coping with health emergencies during the pandemic cannot be undermined. The church was able to help during the period. Despite the opposition of some religious leaders to the lockdown, many embraced social media platforms for disseminating the word of God and giving hope to the people. The widespread use of virtual platforms for religious worship affirms Marx's notion that religion is the opium of the people. The people take solace in God through interaction with their religious leaders by virtual means to draw solace from the sermon in their efforts to cope with and mitigate the fear, and uncertainty linked to the global health emergency of Covid-19 pandemic.

The deployment of digital platforms as media of worship during the Covid-19-induced lockdown demonstrated that religion is existential and transcendental. At this contemporary period of digital technologies, religious faithfuls were able to take advantage of the advancement in information and communication technologies to connect with their religious leaders and worship God virtually. Notwithstanding the challenges posed by limited internet accessibility and intermittent power supply, many adherents of the Christian faith demonstrated their resilience at a time of global health emergency rife with fear, uncertainty, and gloomy projections to connect, revive and strengthen their faith in God. The virtual mode of worship, spirituality and faith at such a time of global health emergency reinforced the

notion that religion pervades individual and social belief about the centrality of spirituality to human wellbeing. It evidently strengthened the religious adherents' capacity to cope with life realities and experiences occasioned by the Covid-19 pandemic.

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