

**CONTEMPORARY TRENDS IN NIGERIAN GOSPEL MUSIC: BALANCING
IMPACTS AND CHALLENGES IN PENTECOSTAL CHURCHES**

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the contemporary trends in Nigerian gospel music, focusing on the balance between its impacts and challenges within Pentecostal churches. The primary aim is to analyze how modern musical styles shape worship experiences and congregational engagement in these church settings. The objectives include identifying the key trends in gospel music, assessing the effects of these trends in church activities, and exploring the challenges faced by congregations as they adapt to these changes. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with some pastors, church members and leaders, the findings reveal that contemporary gospel music fosters a more vibrant worship atmosphere, enhances participation and attracts younger audiences. However, challenges such as commercialization, content authenticity and the dilution of traditional worship practices were identified. In conclusion, the study underscores the importance of embracing contemporary gospel trends while remaining true to the core values of Pentecostal worship. Recommendations include providing training for church musicians on the theological implications of music selection, encouraging collaboration between traditional and contemporary music styles, and fostering open dialogues within congregations to address the challenges posed by these trends. This holistic approach will ensure that Nigerian gospel music continues to thrive in a way that enriches the spiritual lives of congregants.

KEYWORDS: Nigerian gospel music, contemporary trends, Pentecostal churches, worship experiences

INTRODUCTION

Gospel music within Pentecostal churches in Nigeria reflects a fusion of cultural, artistic and spiritual elements, because it holds a significant place in worship, serving as a means for spiritual expression and cultural identity in church worship. Pentecostal churches are a subset of Christianity known for the emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit - spiritual gifts, and experiential approach to faith and the active role of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the believers. In many Pentecostal churches today, gospel pop, and contemporary music take prevalence over hymn singing and anthems especially during congregational worship or rendition by youth choir.

However, the scope of this work is on the gospel music, which is being described by Femi Adedeji (2010) as a brand of Christian religious music that dwells on telling people the good news of Christ. Oluwaseyi (2018), explains further that gospel music started in Nigeria as an effort by the early indigenous Christians as a means for evangelizing the gospel of Jesus Christ. This study seeks to explore and analyze the

current trends in the composition of gospel music within Nigerian Pentecostal churches using selected Pentecostal churches. While the focus is on the evolving musical styles, cultural influences and their impact on congregational worship experience. Though there is a wide range of Pentecostal denominations, each with its own doctrinal emphasis and practices, few churches to be considered here are: Assemblies of God, Redeemed Christian Church, Church of God. The aim of the study aims is to identify the emerging musical trends prevalent in Nigerian Pentecostal churches to include the styles, lyrical themes and structural elements and its impact in the church. Also to evaluate the spiritual depth, theological themes and worship dynamics conveyed through these compositions. And lastly, to assess the impact of current musical trends on congregational worship experiences, whether the worship objectives are met by singing with spirit and understanding to bridge the gap of different age group among church worshippers.

In recent years, Pentecostal churches have witnessed a dynamic shift in the composition of gospel music, characterized by fusion of traditional elements with contemporary styles and global influences. However, this evolution raises the following critical questions:

How are these emerging trends shaping the sound of music to meet the needs of Pentecostal worship?

What cultural elements are being integrated into these compositions, and how do they influence congregational cultural identities and spiritual experiences?

What theological and spiritual messages are conveyed through these musical compositions and how do they influence the faith of the people?

What impact do these evolving musical trends have on congregational dynamics, worship practices and the overall sense of worshippers within the Pentecostal churches?

Evolving Musical Styles of Gospel music in Nigerian Pentecostal churches.

Through personal observation and interview, and responses from questionnaire, gospel music in Nigerian Pentecostal churches has undergone a notable evolution, thus, incorporating diverse musical styles that reflect the global and contemporary society. Akpan (2012) states that church services in the early years of Assemblies of God in Nigeria, the instrument mainly used was voice and rigorous hand clapping. Udok (2022) also observed that Assemblies of God have been known generally for the distinctive style of praise and worship that is spontaneous with hand clapping, singing and speaking in tongues with great love and devotion to God.

Some Evolving Musical Styles Common within Nigerian Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria

Afro beat fusion

Gospel music in Nigeria has embraced elements of Afro beat, infusing vibrant rhythms, brass sections and percussive elements reminiscent of this popular Nigerian genre. The fusion of afro beat with gospel lyrics creates a dynamic and danceable style that resonates with the congregation

Highlife gospel

Highlife music, known for its infectious melodies and lively rhythms has found its way into Nigerian gospel music. This style features guitar-driven melodies, syncopated rhythms, and call-response vocals, creating an uplifting and celebrative atmosphere during worship.

Contemporary worship

Pentecostal churches in Nigeria have adopted contemporary worship styles influenced by western Christian music. These compositions often feature simple yet emotive melodies, modern instrumentation, anthems and music to facilitate congregational participation and spiritual engagement.

Rhythm and Blues

This musical style is embraced by some Nigerian gospel artists to infuse smooth vocals, soulful melodies, and modern production techniques into their composition. This style appeals more to younger people and creates a contemporary sound in gospel music.

Reggae Gospel

Reggae-inspired gospel music has gained popularity, featuring laid-back rhythms, offbeat accents and spiritually uplifted lyrics. This style offers a relaxed yet spiritually stirring worship experience.

Afro-gospel Fusion

Gospel artists often blend traditional African sounds and rhythms with gospel themes, creating a fusion that honours both cultural heritage and religious expression. This fusion results in a unique and vibrant musical style that celebrates both faith and culture.

The above musical styles within Nigerian Pentecostal churches reflect a blend of traditional, indigenous, and contemporary influences, catering to diverse congregational preferences while fostering spiritual engagement and cultural understanding within the church

Findings

The findings from interviews revealed several significant insights such that:

- i) Contemporary gospel music contributes to a lively and engaging worship experience, fostering greater congregational participation.
- ii) Young people gravitate towards contemporary styles of worship music, including a shift in musical preferences that align with global trends.
- iii) The commercialization of gospel music, which leads to the pursuit of fame and financial gain may undermine the spiritual message of the music
- iv) The authenticity of worship when integrating contemporary styles, should emphasize the need for theological reflection on the choices of music.

The Lyrical Themes and Structural Elements in Gospel Music

Nigerian Pentecostal gospel music often centres on themes of praise, worship, faith, salvation, and spiritual empowerment. The lyrics always celebrate the goodness of God, His faithfulness and the redemptive power of Christ. They also touch on personal experiences of triumph over challenges, testimonies of God's miracle and the joy of salvation, aiming to inspire hope, uplift spirits and strengthen believer's faith. Few examples of such compositions are:

- i). **'You are Great' by Steve Crown** - is a song of worship that acknowledges the greatness of God, it focuses on praising God for His mighty works, declaring the His Supremacy and expressing adoration for his majesty.
- ii). **'Excess love' by Mercy Chinwo** is a soulful song that expresses God's unconditional and overwhelming love. It emphasizes the depth of God's love for humanity, showcasing how His love goes beyond measures. The lyrics of the song vividly express gratitude for God's unfailing love, highlighting His mercy, grace and compassion towards His people.
- iii) **'Holy Spirit, you are welcome here' by Nathaniel Bassey** is acknowledgement of the presence and importance of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. It invites the Holy Spirit to dwell in the midst of worshippers, with His transformative power and guidance. And the desire for His active involvement in the worship experience. The songs cited as examples encapsulate the themes of gospel music by exalting God's greatness and emphasizing the profound love and faithfulness and the presence of Holy Spirit with His people.

Structural Elements of Gospel Music in Pentecostal Churches

In Nigerian Pentecostal gospel music, the structural elements often follow a distinct pattern such as:

Dynamic and energetic Rhythms: The music is characterized by vibrant, energetic rhythms often driven by drum patterns, percussion, and lively instrumentation. These elements contribute to the uplifting nature of Pentecostal gospel music, fostering an atmosphere of joy and spiritual flavor.

Improvisation and Spontaneity: There is room for improvisation and spontaneous expressions of worship during services. Singers, musicians or the entire congregation can sometimes be engaged in improvised vocalizations, instrumental solos or spontaneous prayers, giving room for more heartfelt worship experience.

Call and response Form: Call and response is the prevalent style in gospel music, where it can be call and refrain section, where the lead vocalist sings a line and the congregation or choir responds, creating an engaging interaction between the leader and the rest. It fosters participatory atmosphere, enhancing the communal worship experience.

Repetitive Choruses and Refrains: Pentecostal gospel music commonly feature repetitive choruses or refrains. These repetitive elements allow for easy memorization, encouraging active participation and creating sense of unity among worshippers

Spiritual Verses and Testimonies: The verses often contain personal testimonies, or narratives of faith, emphasizing individual or collective experiences with God. These narratives serve to inspire, encourage and strengthen the faith of other Christians.

The Positive and Negative Effects of Modern Trends in the Composition of gospel Music in Nigerian Pentecostal churches.

Music in the society be it religious, or secular is subject to change, as long as society is by nature dynamics, Okafor and Okafor (2009) opined that music in a society by nature is dynamic-expressing the changed, changing, and still changeable environment. The evolution of gospel music in Nigerian Pentecostal churches has been influenced both positively and negatively. In the positive side, modern music style can enhance engagement, attract younger generations and create a more vibrant worship atmosphere. It can help people connect with spirituality in a contemporary context. However, there are potential downside if the focus shifts too much towards the structural presentation – entertainment or if the essence of the worship gets diluted amidst the pursuit of popular trends.

Some Negative Effects of the Evolution of Gospel Music in Churches in Nigeria

Loss of Spiritual Insight and Theological Depth: Over-emphasis on modern styles may sometimes lead to a loss of the deep contemplative and spirituality found in conventional traditional gospel music, which impact the depth of worship experience. These adaptations to some secular rhythms and traits may sometimes compromise the theological richness and depth found in traditional gospel music impacting the teachings conveyed through songs.

Entertainment over Worship: There is a risk that the pursuit of some musical trends might prioritize entertainment value over the spiritual purpose of worship, potentially shifting focus away from connecting with God.

Generational Gap: While modern music can engage younger generations, it may alienate older congregants who may find it difficult to connect to the new musical styles, leading to a generational divide within the church.

Commercialization and Worldliness: Embracing secular musical elements can inadvertently introduce worldly influences or commercialization into the sacred space of worship, diluting the sanctity of the music and the message.

Superficial Worship: Emphasizing catchy tunes and contemporary beats over meaningful lyrics and spiritual depth can lead to superficial approach to worship.

Strategies to Address these Negative Effects are:

1. **Balance Approach:** Encourage a balanced approach that respects both traditional and contemporary styles, fostering unity and inclusivity within the congregation.
2. **Emphasis on Spiritual Depth:** Prioritize the spiritual depth and theological richness in lyrics and musical content to ensure that the worship experience remains focused on connecting with God.
3. **Critical Reflection:** Encourage critical reflection on the impact of modernization, ensuring that changes in musical styles align with the church's core values and spiritual objectives.
4. **Collaborative Decision-making:** Involve congregants including both older and younger members in discussions and decisions regarding musical direction of worship services, fostering a sense of unity among old and young people.
5. **Purposeful Selection:** Intentionally select songs and musical elements that align with the spiritual message and objectives of the church, ensuring that the music serves its intended purpose in worship.
6. **Continual Assessment:** Continuously evaluate the impact of musical changes on worship experiences, and let it be open to adjustments, while maintaining the integrity of gospel music by engaging congregation effectively.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of gospel music in Nigerian Pentecostal churches stands as a testament to the dynamic nature of cultural and religious expressions. It embodies a journey marked by a fusion of tradition and modernity, striving to maintain spirituality while adapting to changing musical landscapes.

As gospel music continues to evolve, the conclusion drawn is not one of finality but of ongoing adaptation and balance. While embracing contemporary elements, it is essential to preserve the spiritual depth, theological significance, and cultural heritage embedded in traditional gospel music. This evolution should not compromise the sacredness of worship or lead to division among youth and elders within the congregations.

The key takeaway is the necessity for a harmonious blend, allowing the music to speak to diverse generations without losing its essence. Striking this balance ensures that gospel music remains a powerful conduit for spiritual connection, cultural identity, and worship experiences within Nigerian Pentecostal churches. It is a journey of continual assessment, fostering unity, and embracing the richness of both tradition and innovation to create a meaningful and impactful worship environment.

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