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Music in Religious Thought and Experience

Final Research Paper

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Topic: Indigenizing Religious Music: The Role of the Gyl in Dagara Christian Worship.

Guy Beck writing about the significance of music in religious activity says that “Religion and music are understood to be universal features of human culture and society.” In his view, “group performances of sacred songs or hymns consolidated various human communities into a religious world of their own, reinforcing identities and boundaries as if by some mysterious thread” (Beck, 2006: 1). Indeed to paraphrase Guy Beck’s reference of Rudolf Otto’s classic work on religious studies, there is a common view that the feelings associated with music in religious ceremonies are “very similar to the feelings of the holy itself, the spirit, the numinous, which is something wholly other” (see Beck, 2006: 4). It is in this line of reasoning that it seems difficult to study many religions independent of the role and function of music.

This paper discusses the role and function of the Dagara *gyl* in the musical practice of the Catholic Church in Dagara. In the Dagara people’s encounter with Christianity during the late 1920s, there were two challenges faced by both the missionaries and the indigenous population. The first challenge was a language barrier and the second one was a means through which the teaching of Christianity was to be imparted on the local converts. Thus catechism, (the teaching of the Catholic faith) started in both simple Latin rendition of the Ten Commandments and the recitation of the Holy Rosary in local melodies (see Anthony Naaeke "Kaleidoscope Catechesis,

Missionary Catechesis in Africa, 2006). As a result, most Dagara Christian music, especially in the Catholic Church, derives its tunes from the repertoire of *gyl* music utilizing melodies in the social recreational genres. I argue that as the center of the Dagara Mass liturgy, the *gyl* church music did not only help attract the local population to the Catholic Church in its early beginning, but it was also a medium through which the understanding of the Christian message was interpreted to the new converts. Through the singing of biblical texts in the local language, the early catechists and their choirs used the *gyl* music and other local melodies as a way of teaching and spreading the message of the new Christian faith. Up till present, the liturgy of a traditional Dagara Catholic Mass is structured around the *gyl* music.

If one consider the over five hundred years of contact between European explorers and the people of Ghana, European missionary work and Christianity did not get to the northwestern part of Ghana where the Dagara people live until the early part of the twentieth century. The Dagara first encounter with the White Catholic Missionaries who arrived in Jirapa on November 30th 1929 to begin Christianization of the Dagara people was met with mixed feelings and hesitation by the local population. A people who have not been exposed to or witnessed any other religion other than their indigenous ancestral faith until that time, met Christianity with suspicion, expectation, faith, hope and promise. Thus in their enthusiasm to embrace the “Good News” of the Christian message which preaches hope and promise, the Dagara people received Christianity through individual understanding of the supreme being that is known to them as [*Naamwin*] meaning chief of all the *mwime* [the lesser spirit beings or gods].

The Dagara people are religious and they have deep commitment of faith to *Naamwin* [God] and to their indigenous *bagr* religion. They believe that there is God who is all powerful and supreme in the universe (see the work of Bekye, 1991 and Dery, 2001). For the Dagara people, God is believed to be the creator of the world and all things that are in it. His power is manifested through the lesser spirits [*mwime*] who in turn communicates God's message to humankind. Hence *mwime*, known as deities are the intermediaries through whom the Dagara people communicate with God. This form of communion with *Naamwin* is called *bagr* [seeking]. Thus in the minds of the Dagara people, seeking to communicate with God has multiple ways through which one can profess their faith in him. *Bagr* is not the topic of discussion here but the understanding of the Dagara *bagr* religious theology vis-a-vis their conception of God will help explain the understanding of their interest in the Catholic Christianity that was introduced to them by the European missionaries.

Before the arrival of the Catholic missionaries in Dagaraland, *bagr* was the only organized public religious practice that uses music along the teaching of its oral dogma. Music was not only central in the *bagr* religious ceremony, but it was the fundamental and preferred medium for conveying to the believers their religious meaning. The temporal structure of the *bagr* ritual ceremony centers around the song citation order of the *gyil* music. The sonic aspects of *bagr yielu* [*bagr* religion music] have two primary functions. First to communicate the message recited in the songs to *Naamwin* through the ancestors who are invisible spirits and believed to be with God after departing the human world through death. Second, the songs of the *bagr* religion are encoded with Dagara history, cosmology and their conception of God and creation of the universe. These are

the fundamental premises of their religious theology. Thus in order to preserve knowledge of this religious teaching, members or initiates of the *bagr* religion consider music to be an important aspect of their religion through which the message of God and their cosmological beliefs is retained, communicated, and understood. The religious texts of the *bagr* are therefore communicated in song recitation similar to the liturgical teaching of the Catholic Church. Indeed the Dagara Catholics refer to their liturgical Mass service as “*bagr-maalu*” (ritual of the *bagr*). Therefore, it is through this background of religious practice that *gyil* music became not only a tool for conversion but also a medium that saw the rapid manifestation of Christianity among the Dagara people in unbelievable ways.

As Fr. McCoy, one of the early missionaries observes, God had always been at work among the Dagaabas for a very long time preparing the soil of their hearts for the sowing of the seed of His Word. He writes:

The Dagaaba were a God-conscious people yet they never prayed to Him directly. They always approached Him through intermediaries either the spirits of their ancestors or the *tenganaa* (the spirits of land or earth). Common daily exchanges among them included God be with you; God guide you; God knows etc. The idea of God as creator was not new to them. For them He was the All-Powerful supreme Being master of all creation whom they see too “big”, too important, too aloof, and too far away “in heaven” to have anything in common with them or to permit them to address Him directly. (McCoy 1988: 63).

Much as Fr. McCoy may seem contradictory in the above pronouncements, the Dagara knowledge of God is significantly detailed in the work of Paul Bekye who writes that “Traditional religious beliefs, the bulk of which centre around a personal God, who is recognized as creator, as the one who sustains all that exists, and who above all, involves himself personally in the lives and destinies of people in his providential care of them, have to form the basis of a contextual theology” (Bekye 1991: xxvii). In their encounter

with the Catholic faith, the local converts blended their indigenous theology about God with those of the Catholic Church. And these religious beliefs are expressed through the music. For example, one of the first songs composed by the early catechists called “*Nangnwin nono Dagaaba*” (God loves Dagara), derives its tune from one of the social recreational *gyil* genres in the *Bewaa* repertoire. As Fr. McCoy pointed out, “God loves the Dagara which expressed the feeling that their massive conversion to Christianity was a proof of God’s special grace in that regard. This then is the story of how God at a certain moment in history chose to show His love in a special way to the people of northwest Gold Coast and of how they responded to it” (Fr. McCoy, 1988: 19). As I have argued so far, *gyil* music as has always been the fundamental medium through which the Dagara people communicate with God in their *bagr* religion. As a result, the religious matters of God are retained and perpetuated through worship music. And this is what helped in the evangelization of the Catholic faith among the Dagara people.

Literature on Music and Religion

Significant literature is available on Dagara religion, their exposure to Christianity as well as their experience with other religions such as Islam, Buddhism and many others. Edward Kuukure, 1985; Naaeke, 1986; McCoy, 1988; Bekye, 1991 & 2009; Dery, 2001; Naame, 2006 and many others have written extensively about other aspects of Dagara religious encounter with the Catholic missionaries, however few of these scholarly works has tackled the prominent role of the *gyil* in Christian worship. Indeed many of these scholars have sidestepped the significant role of the *gyil* not only as the center of the Dagara Catholic Mass liturgy but also as a tool for conversion. Paul Bekye’s extensive work on the development of Christianity and missionary work in Africa, and particularly

in Dagara, is illuminating on the exchange of histories and experiences between Africans and the Europeans missionaries but the focus of his attention is a pack of theory on Dagara theological concepts of God as well as a historical documentation of the African people's religious encounter with the Europeans missionaries.

His theoretical rendering on African religion and theology is an important contribution to the indigenization of Christianity in Africa, and some of his theory is worth mentioning to support the merit of the Vatican II dossier on the adaptation of indigenous practices in the Catholic Church. As someone who is a leader of the local African Church, the author's work is motivated by his interest for inculturation and theological openness as enshrined in the Vatican II documents. As he writes here:

“One of the motivating factors in this work is this statement by Ary R. Crollius that ‘the principal agents (of inculturation) are those who belong to the local church’. As one who belongs to a local African church this statement, and those papal pronouncements that have a bearing on inculturation, especially in the African context, cannot escape attention. One of the significant papal pronouncements in this regard is obviously the much referred to address of Pope Paul VI to the church of Africa at the closing session of the Symposium of African Bishops, (SECAM), in Kampala in 1969. Commenting on evangelization in the African situation, and, using the term “adaptation” that was current at the time, Paul VI had called for the “adaptation of the gospel and the church to the African culture. In this regard the pope admitted the legitimacy and desirability of a “certain plurality” in Christian expression, especially in the fields of pastoral, ritual, didactic and spiritual activities” and even challenged African Christians to “have an African Christianity” based on African “human values and characteristic forms of culture (Paul Bekye, 1991: xxv).

Although Paul Bekye's work has some particularities to my topic and discourse here, it escapes to address “inculturation” and “adaptation” as the cultural and musical elements that the African Catholic Church incorporated into their religious practice following the Vatican II Council on inculturation. For the Dagara Catholic Christians even before Vatican II, *gyil* music was the primary medium through which the religious

message of Christianity took seed among the large non-literate converts. Whether a believer is able to read the bible or not, *gyil* songs are able to explain the biblical texts as well as the ritual meaning of the Catholic Mass, enhancing the understanding of their faith in significant ways. This was part of the reason many people throng to church in the early days of the missionary work in Dagara.

On his part, Reverent Fr. McCoy, one of the early missionary pioneers in Dagara provides detailed accounts of how the missionization of the Dagara people evolved in its infancy. But he too did not talk about the role and contribution of the indigenous music and musicians to the propagation of the Christian message through the *gyil* music. Having sidelined the central role of the *gyil* music in the Dagara experiences of conversion to Christianity, scholarly works especially those after the Vatican II, fall short of covering an important aspect of the inculturation process. In the *Apostolic Exhortation, Evangelii Nuntiandi*, on the (Evangelization of the Men of our Time), (1975), Pope Paul VI considers the transformation of man's culture through the gospel message as integral to evangelization. He understands this to be done not only in theory but the need for practical application of man's culture including the incorporation of music as part of the evangelization process. On this issue, Paul Bekye write that, "Pope John II, in his numerous discourses during his pastoral visits to several African countries, especially in the 1980s, constantly urged the local churches to translate the fullness of the Christian experience into the cultural setting of their people" (see Bkeye, 1991). As Bekye writes, "To take one example from the many, on his visit to Zaire in 1980, the Pope called the process of inculturating the gospel, and the "Africanization of the Church," aspects of evangelization" (Bekye, 1991: xxv). While the gospel transcends all cultures and is not

to be identified with any particular culture, evangelization through inculturation means liturgical innovation through which the Catholic Mass liturgy would incorporate the musical elements of the indigenous people.

Therefore, other scholarly theory on music and religion that supports the argument of this topic or in fact served as the foreground of my theoretical path in discussing the role of the *gyil* music in Dagara Christianity is the work of Guy Beck. Beck points out that “within the context of a sacred text or teaching, the tonal dimension of language serves to bring that text or teaching more effectively into a common symbolic realm. As such, the text of sacred songs can be said to form part of the domain of mythos, the intuitive realm of timeless truths and narratives of the gods, goddesses, and spiritual beings” (Beck, 2006: 12). As I mentioned earlier, the sacred texts of the Dagara religious teaching are encoded in the music of the *gyil* and therefore its role in the inculturation and adaptation to Christianity cannot be overlooked. Thus to cite Guy Beck one more time that current academic work in liturgical studies confirms the centrality of music in all religious worship serve as the motivation of my topic of discussion here. As Beck points out, “Instead of being treated as decoration and extraneous to the “real business” of worship, music is integral to the expression of liturgical content and bodily engagement. Texts and music together—musical liturgy or sung prayer—are appreciated for their power to illumine the mind and move the heart” (Beck, 2006: 15).

In their attempt to express the understanding of the Christian message, early Dagara converts of the new faith utilized traditional musical melodies in the teaching of catechism and other Christian learning. Bishop Dery writing on the Dagara Christian training relates, “No matter how beautiful the liturgy was the language in which it was

rendered made it impossible for our people to benefit from it. The Gregorian chant, both in its music and its language, is foreign to the people; for example the song “*Jesu Dulcis Virgo Maria*” which the people love to sing was given its own rendering by the people as follows. “*Yezu dug benge ob sib mearia ka ma wa sogri ke boo nie no. A bible nga to sob fo dug bengne ob sib.*” Literally it means “Jesus boiled beans and ate it all without giving some to Maria, and when the mother asked, what is the matter, such a small child too you eat beans and refuse to give him some?” (Dery, 2001: 112). Dery who was among the early converts to Christianity in the 1930s would later become the first Dagara priest, bishop, and ultimately the first Dagara cardinal. Popularly known among Dagara as Bishop Dery, his leading role for the indigenization of the Catholic Mass cannot be underrated. His extensive knowledge of Dagara belief systems and religious practice will bring to bear on the introduction of indigenous practices especially the use of local music in the liturgy of the Catholic Mass service even before the Vatican II Council’s proclamation for inculturation in the 1960s.

The Second Vatican Council on Inculturation

The following excerpts of the Vatican II Council document (*the Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Church, Lumen gentium*), shed more light on the introduction of indigenous practice within the Catholic Church around the world. Commonly referred to as the “inculturation,” it was a religious reforms and theological openness initiated by the Papal See in Rome in the 1960s that encouraged the adaptation of indigenous practices especially the use of indigenous music by Christian culture groups as a form of evangelization. These excerpts taken from portions of the main dossier serve as a guiding path of the topic of discussion here:

“The seed which is the word of God, watered by divine dew, sprouts from the good ground and draws from thence its moisture, which it transforms and assimilates into itself, and finally bears much fruit. In harmony with the economy of the incarnation, the young churches, rooted in Christ and built up on the foundation of the Apostles, take to themselves in a wonderful exchange all the riches of the nations which were given to Christ as an inheritance. They borrow from the customs and traditions of their people, from their wisdom and their learning, from their arts and disciplines, all those things which can contribute to the glory of their Creator, or enhance the grace of their Savior, or dispose Christian life the way it should be” (cf Ps. 2:8; *Lumen gentium art*).

The above pronouncements clearly indicate the Papal See’s desire for major religious reforms within the Catholic Church. Coming around the end of colonialism when many nations were agitating for political freedom and independence, the need for religious reforms was inevitable. As cultural nationalism became the expression of political freedom among many independent nations, this was definitely going to affect religious expressions as well. The Catholic Church, recognizing that cultural nationalism for these free nations would mean the adoption of indigenous ways of religious expression in its Church encouraged the local churches to incorporate certain traditional customs and practices they deemed appropriate for evangelization. In Africa and especially for the Dagara Christians, this was good news. I mentioned earlier that Bishop Dery and many others were already in tune for inculturation. I will return to it in detail but it is important to mention that what they were doing was not only a move for indigenizing their religious expression but in reality, they saw this theological innovation as a means of winning more souls for Christ which is exactly what the following excerpts of the Vatican II dossier articulates:

“To achieve this goal, it is necessary that in each major socio - cultural area, such theological speculation should be encouraged, in the light of the universal Church's tradition, as may submit to a new scrutiny the words and deeds which God has revealed, and which have been set down in Sacred Scripture and explained by the Fathers and by the magisterium. Thus it will be more clearly

seen in what ways faith may seek for understanding, with due regard for the philosophy and wisdom of these peoples; it will be seen in what ways their customs, views on life, and social order, can be reconciled with the manner of living taught by divine revelation. From here the way will be opened to a more profound adaptation in the whole area of Christian life. By this manner of acting, every appearance of syncretism and of false particularism will be excluded, and Christian life will be accommodated to the genius and the dispositions of each culture.(6) Particular traditions, together with the peculiar patrimony of each family of nations, illumined by the light of the Gospel, can then be taken up into Catholic unity.”

With the forgoing papal pronouncements, authority was then in the hands of the local Church leaders and the lay faithful to bring to their Christian lives indigenous cultural practices that will not only contextualize their religious expression but this will also attract people to the Church. Indeed one of the greatest promises of inculturation was the utilization of indigenous music set to the liturgy as well as the contextualization of other theological teachings in local languages. For the Dagara, this was a tool of evangelization through which the message of the gospel could be propagated widely among the non-literate majority Christian population and the would-be-converts. Through the use of local music, people could not only understand the practice of their new faith but they could indeed make sense out of their new religion. Christianity was at home with them as the final excerpts of the Vatican II document unanimously suggested:

“Finally, the young particular churches, adorned with their own traditions, will have their own place in the ecclesiastical communion, saving always the primacy of Peter's See, which presides over the entire assembly of charity (7). And so, it is to be hoped that episcopal conferences within the limits of each major socio - cultural territory will so coordinate their efforts that they may be able to pursue this proposal of adaptation with one mind and with a common plan” (Ad Gentes Chapter 3, No. 22. Nov 18, 1965. 1207_ad-gentes_en.html. 2/28/2012).

Following the Vatican II proclamation that gave universal permission for Catholics to indigenize their ways of Christian worship, *gyil* music took a center stage of the Dagara Catholic liturgy and Sunday Mass service. The songs or hymns that were sung in Latin

were transposed into Dagara melodies and by the late 1960s the first Dagara Catholic hymnal, (*Sog Hamama*) was compiled with indigenous songs covering the entire liturgy from Kyrie to recession. Each segment of the liturgy which was performed in Latin was replaced with Dagara songs and the Mass service was conducted mainly in Dagara language. Today, the Dagara Catholic hymnal has over five hundred songs in it. This significant move was engineered by Reverent Fr. Peter Dery, who became the first Dagara bishop of the newly created Wa diocese in 1960. In his memoir, [1988], Fr. McCoy recounts:

"In terms of liturgical rites of worship, bishop Dery was the first to have the foresight after his ordination as Bishop of Wa in 1960 and well before the Second Vatican Council that brought serious reforms, to submit a petition to Pope John Paul XXII asking him to permit him to 'bring the vernacular music into the liturgy'. The Pope not only granted the permission but exhorted him to translate the Latin songs and compose new ones using the people's thought patterns and cultural symbolism that are expressing the essence of the Christian message and at the same time meaningful to the people. Dery then went ahead to compose the Dagara Missa (Dagara Mass) a service in the Dagara language and became the first bishop ever in the Catholic Church to compose non-Latin Mass Service. He was also one of the first to introduce the use of such African and traditional instruments as the xylophone and the drum and to encourage rhythmic movements of the body in resonance with ritual music" (McCoy, 1988: 72).

Bishop Dery's efforts of indigenizing the liturgy of the Dagara Catholic Mass service are deeply recognized in the universal policy of the Second Vatican Council's dossier.

Among the Dagara Christians, it was a good way for them utilize their indigenous music as a form of religious expression. Following his ordination as bishop of a new diocese and his petition granted by the Pope to use local musical instruments in the church, bishop Dery and his converts were ready for inculturation. An extensive quote from his personal memoire on this move is worth reading:

"After my ordination as a bishop I thought it worthwhile to have an audience with the Pope to express to him my feelings about the issue relating to the liturgy. It

was my intention to ask him for permission to make certain adaptations to the liturgy to make it meaningful to my people. In my meeting with him I explained that I am not against the use of Latin in the liturgy provided those participating understand what they are saying and singing through that language.” Even though I had the approval of Rome, I had to be very careful and gradual in initiating any changes in the liturgy. People could misinterpret things. Some could say: “The White Fathers brought us the true religion. Dery has hardly taken over as bishop and he is dragging us back into the very pagan practices that we have rejected.” I decided to start by using Dagara tunes for the Latin chants. Hence, though we continued to sing in Latin, the tunes for the songs were taken from the traditional folk songs. It was only after some time that we decided to experiment singing in Dagara to the accompaniment of the traditional xylophone and drums. This we did first in Nandom by means of a prepared choir. The very first Sunday that we had them sing Mass in Dagara, we posted people at all the exits of the church instructing them to try to get a feedback from the people on the liturgy as they left the Church after Mass. The reports we received were overwhelmingly positive. Many were heard saying: “Aha, now we can understand this celebration. That is what we should have been doing since long” With time, we went beyond the songs to translating the bible into the local language to enable the illiterate folk hear the Word of God in their own language. Hence, one can say that the liturgical adaptation started in Wa diocese before Vatican II when it became a universal policy for the entire Church. This is because, in my vision as bishop my principal concern was to make the people interiorize their faith. I wanted to help them live their faith authentically” (Dery, 2001: 113).

The above statements by bishop Dery confirm the approach to which many Africans express their religious feelings in worship. Inculturation brought in wide adaptation of African ways of religious worship and many culture groups reconciled their indigenous religious practices with those of the Catholic Church. In church service, the use of musical instruments helps to activate the dramatization of the worship through singing and bodily movements. Music also serves to preserve and perpetuate in the minds of believers the understanding of the religious message; and so people internalize the sonic aspects of the biblical lyrics naturally by singing them. As Fr. McCoy observes, “It is a safe generalization to say that Africans everywhere grasp ideas more readily from seeing them dramatized than they do from listening to them in a sermon or a lecture or from reading them in a book. They are often masters of the art and certainly have no

peers when it comes to improvising on a theme at short notice before a live audience” (McCoy, 1988: 213). Dramatizing their religious expression in their local language was the motivation that prompted Bishop Dery and Dagara converts to use the indigenous music in the church. In their effort to entice people to join the new faith, Bishop Dery and his compatriots felt that people will be more interested in the Catholic religion if the message was dramatized in song using the local language and musical instruments.

Indeed the response to the adaptation of indigenous music in church worship was massive as many people upon hearing the new lyrics set to their own musical melodies thronged to church to hear the music. As recounted to me in conversations with many of the older converts, people could now not only understand the songs they sung, because they were in Dagara, but also could identify themselves with the music and the worship as a whole. This was very significant in terms of attracting people to the Catholic faith. People went to church because they could sing the Catholic version of folk songs, and could enjoy the music of the xylophone. As Paschal Kyoore, one of the second generation converts recounts, “I remember the role of a blind xylophonist from Kogle called Abra. I don't know whether his full Christian name was Abraham or Abrasio, but Mass in Nandom church was revolutionized by the tantalizing music of this man.” According to him, that was significant for conversion among the Dagara people. These statements forms the premise of my arguments here because, gyil music was important contribution to conversion as well as the propagation of the Gospel message that the locals could relate to. As Paschal Kyoore told me, “I would consider all the young ones who are xylophonists in the Nandom church to be disciples of Abra.” He said that people always looked forward to Sunday High mass because of his xylophone music. As he recalled, “I

still remember how the conductor of the choir would literally dance during midnight mass at Easter and the Easter rituals of Jesus Christ death was celebrated like the traditional Dagara funeral.” He writes:

“When our people sang in Latin, they often produced sounds which at times could be profane, because they tried to match the Latin words with Dagara sounds, and that produced "Dagarized" Latin sounds that were comic. This was counterproductive to conversion, so the introduction of Dagara music accompanied by the xylophone was significant in that sense. Using the xylophone meant transposing traditional worship strategies onto Catholic worship. Strategically, this was a positive thing for making more converts in the community. For instance, Good Friday was (and is) celebrated with xylophone and drum music like a Dagara funeral. People actually weep because they can envision Jesus on the "paala" (funeral pyre), and his mother Mary and other relatives as well as his disciples and other friends mourning him. In other words, thanks to the music of the xylophone and the drums, the Dagara people can identify with Jesus and his family as they would for any family in their community. This is attractive to the potential converts (email interview on March 24th 2012).

In the beginning of the inculturation process, xylophone music was reserved for the High Mass in St. Theresa’s Minor Basilica in Nandom, and it was the most crowded Mass, partly because people wanted to listen to and participate in enjoying the xylophone music. Today, *gyil* xylophone music is played during mass service at all the Catholic parishes in Dagara albeit not with the same amount of pomp when it first started in the beginning, Even when outstations were created in a number of the villages, most of the young men and women would still walk or ride a bicycle in long distance to attend High Mass in Nandom. Why? Because of the xylophone music. Church Mass in the outstations and new parishes has now been made more attractive to people because in most cases if not all, they play *gyil* music during Mass service. This is how the people, the general Christian laity believers conceive and express their new faith. Nowadays it is not uncommon to find *gyil* players or people with musical orientation become catechists or

teachers of the bible. Their service in Church is a binary responsibility of perpetuating tradition as well as sonically propagating the message of the Christian gospel in the traditional context.

The stories of my informants on their experience with *gyil* music in church as well as my own as a Catholic are fundamental to the Dagara religious understanding of Christianity. Personally for me, it was *gyil* music that drew me to be converted to Catholicism in 1990. Not only was I fascinated with the playing of biblical lyrics that are transposed on *gyil* melodies that I already know, but the textual meanings of the new songs with its promise of salvation was appealing to me. As a choir music director, I led the Saint Francis Xavier Society choir at the St. Kizito Parish in one of the largest ghetto suburbs of Accra for many years. I view my role not only as a musician but a culture bearer of my people as well as a member of a religious group that seeks to spread its faith through our indigenous ways of religious expression. The next section provides the liturgical structure of the Dagara Catholic Mass and this is to help elucidate on how *gyil* music was integrated in the liturgy of the Mass service.

The Liturgical Order of Dagara Sunday Mass

The Catholic Church service, whether celebrated in Latin or otherwise follows a conventional structure of formalities. Known as the “Liturgy of the Eucharist,” the usual Sunday service follows the traditional liturgical structure of the Catholic Church service as stipulated in the rubrics found in the Roman Missal. The Mass service usually led by the priest, is carried out with the support of the singing choir which provides the music that accompanies every segment of the Mass. As a ritual service, it is structured around various formalities that prepare the congregation towards the receiving of the Holy

Eucharist. Thus, singing as the primary aspect of this holy ritual precedes and ends every Sunday Mass service. Singing in church worship is used primarily for the exaltation of the Holy Eucharist, the proclamation of the gospel, and generally in praise to Jesus Christ our Lord God.

In Dagara Catholic church service, the temporal order of the Holy Mass usually starts with a processional song from outside of the church compound into the main chapel of the church. The processional song is led by the choir in a choral type singing to the accompaniment of the *gyil*, music, drums and other percussion instruments. The musical organization of a typical Dagara choir includes the *gyil* (African xylophone), *kuor* (a big open end gourd drum covered with a monitor lizard skin) as well as the *sesege* (small gourd rattles used in leading the *bagr* song cycle and some small grass straw woven shakers). The *gyil* as the leading instrument is usually played by the xylophonist, but the drumming and other percussive parts are played by women musicians. In modeling the music around the liturgy including all segments of the Mass service, every parish in Dagaraland has a choir group in which the members are recruited and trained for this new musical convention. Obviously, the songs are sung in the local language but the lyrics draw on references of the biblical texts and other theological teachings that are composed on melodies of the *gyil* music.

I will use four songs here as examples to try and sketch a picture of a typical Dagara Sunday Mass service. The four songs in particular are used during the important segments of the entire liturgical Mass service. 1) the Kyrie eleison or invocation of the holy spirit. 2) the Gospel Acclamation (a song that precedes the reading of the Holy Gospel), 3) the liturgy of the Eucharistic Prayer which include a series of song segments

for the preparations and blessing of the Holy Eucharist including the profession of the “mystery of faith” as well as the communion rites; and 4) the recession song which brings to an end the concluding rites of the Mass service. These songs were taken from the Dagara Catholic hymn book (*Sog Hamama*) and the recorded CD compilations for the 50th anniversary commemoration and celebrations of the St. Theresa’s Minor Basilica in Nandom. Saint Theresa’s church in Nandom is situated in the heart of the Dagaraland and it stands tall in the history of the Dagara Catholic Christian faith. In fact, it was at one time the largest basilica in West Africa, and is it the second oldest parish in Dagara after the Saint Joseph Church in Jirapa where the missionaries first settled among our people in 1929 and introduced Christianity to the people of northwestern Ghana.

Returning to the music of the liturgy, the earliest songs that were used to substitute the Latin version of the Kyrie is “*Naamwin di suuri ku ti*” translated as Lord have mercy upon us. As a song of invocation, this piece is sometimes played just only on the *gyil* without the accompaniment or singing. Its solemn melody is supposed to induce a meditative moment during church service as the members of the congregation prepare their minds towards the receiving of the Holy Eucharist. For the gospel acclamation, there are many versions of the Alleluia renditions composed in Dagara. As a matter of fact, the congregational response to this song as in track six of the CD compilation literally goes like this; “Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia....” Then the verses are taken from the texts of the day’s reading of the gospel either led by the priest or the choir conductor if the recitation is done in a musical form. It is important to note here that it is the *gyil* player that sets the tune of every song during Mass service. He is expected to use his musical ear to pick the right pitch of every tune as a wrong tune or pitch will obscure the

liturgical mood. Therefore, gyl players must be familiar with the liturgy and display musical qualities that are in line with the music of the worship service.

The third most important song for Dagara Mass service is the “Eucharistic Prayer” and this song sample, “*barka pupielu te nye Naamwin maalu*” (thanks be to God for His blessings on us), is used from the series of music that are performed in this segment to venerate the Eucharist and prepare the minds of the congregants after the communion. As the words of the song suggest, there is some solemnity as well as excitement in the performance of this song and choir directors always made sure they select a good song for this part of the Mass service. Sometimes, the priest will lead the song which will immediately be taken over by the congregation and the choir. A Eucharistic Prayer song with good feelings can be anchored at the end with poly-ululations from members of the congregation as a sign of affirmation for God’s blessings.

Finally this recessional song, “*Bagr lile de na*” which literally translates as the “acknowledgement of the sacrificial bird,” the lyrics of this song are directly taken from the indigenous *bagr* song texts as a replacement of the recessional hymn.... “The Mass is Ended, Go in Peace and Announce the Gospel of the Lord.” It is an exciting song at the end of the church service and members of the congregation are normally seen clapping and dancing to the music of the choir as they bring the ritual proceedings to an end. Although Dagara church song repertory as a whole has three components of structure for its melodic material, percussive texture and compositional style, the music is normally performed in a congregational singing style. While the Latin hymns were sung in verse and chorus, the indigenous ones use similar singing structure of the verse and chorus but the performance style significantly reflects many elements found in Dagara music

making and performance practice. At some segments of the Mass service, there can be dancing incorporated into the liturgy and Dagara church dance music normally utilizes the dancing movements of the women's *kaare* as well as the recreational *gyil bewaa* dance styles. Thus aiming for a music that will accommodate their appropriate religious expression, Dagara Christian worshippers used *gyil* music and other Dagara social musical elements as a means to entice and attract non-believers to the Catholic religion. The music performance in church worship is dramatized and it is understood to invoke the experience of the people closer to the religious music that they were familiar with before.

Conclusion

The introduction of *gyil* music as part of the Dagara Catholic liturgy was no doubt a revolutionary move in wooing people to the new religion. In the 1930s and 1940s, significant parts of the Dagara Catholic Mass were sung in Latin. That was before the Second Vatican Council's religious reforms; (see the Latin samples on track three, four, and seven of the "*Ti puori Naamwin Saa Barka*" CD compilation. At that time, very few of the Dagara people understood Latin; even the ones who had formal Western education later on did not know Latin. The only privileged people who knew Latin were the priests who were trained seminarians in Rome, and those who attended the Catholic minor seminaries--more precisely, the Saint Charles Minor Seminary in Tamale, and the Xavier Minor Seminary in Wa, both in northern Ghana. With Vatican II came the introduction of indigenous music and thus the introduction of the *gyil* music along with the *kuor* drum and other local percussive instruments in Dagara church worship (see samples of the remaining CD and the *Song Hamama* hymnal). The teachings of Christianity in the local

context as well as the adaptation of indigenous musical practices into the liturgy are steps that really helped spread the message of Christianity among the Dagara people. The European Church music in Latin was strange to the Dagara people; it was a foreign music, with foreign instruments that could not appeal to the soul of the Dagara person in the same way that *gyil* music does for them in church today.

In the Dagara Christian church worship today, the biblical texts and other musical elements are translated into meaningful religious service in a context that does not only identify who the Dagara people are, but this form of religious expression also shows how they conceive religion, spirituality and music. For them, the effect of music performance in ritual context is an activity that helps enhance the understanding of the ritual experience and so validates the meaning of the ritual event. Thus, consequently in the Catholic Mass service, it is the music that shapes and defines its temporal structure, the worship style, as well as the purpose of the ritual ceremony itself. Much as the social function of *gyil* music is intended for the education of the socio-cultural values and beliefs of the community, its teaching in the Catholic Church is helpful for the evangelization and perpetuation of Christianity. Therefore through this cultural experience, *gyil* church songs serve the same purpose not only for transmitting the teaching of the Bible and Christian values, but the music is viewed by local church leaders as an evangelizing tool for conversion. In fact, nowadays *gyil* church music is inextricably part of the “new” charismatic movement within the Catholic Church. And with the upsurge of technology and mass-media in our present time, this is another area that begs for scholarly inquiry in Dagara religious studies.

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