

Yale Journal of Music & Religion

Volume 5
Number 2 *Music, Sound, and the Aurality of the Environment in the Anthropocene: Spiritual and Religious Perspectives*

Article 10

2019

Singing Yoruba Christianity: Music, Media, and Morality

Olabode Festus Omojola
Mount Holyoke College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/yjmr>

Recommended Citation

Omojola, Olabode Festus (2019) "Singing Yoruba Christianity: Music, Media, and Morality," *Yale Journal of Music & Religion*: Vol. 5: No. 2, Article 10.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17132/2377-231X.1182>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by EliScholar – A Digital Platform for Scholarly Publishing at Yale. It has been accepted for inclusion in Yale Journal of Music & Religion by an authorized editor of EliScholar – A Digital Platform for Scholarly Publishing at Yale. For more information, please contact elischolar@yale.edu.

Vicki L. Brennan

***Singing Yoruba Christianity:
Music, Media, and Morality***

Bloomington: Indiana University Press,
2018. 210 pp. ISBN 978-0-253-03209-6

The Aladura movement, an Africanist Christian group that began in western Nigeria in the early twentieth century, emerged partly in response to what Yoruba Christians perceived as cultural domination within the Anglican Church of the colonial era. Interracial tensions began to develop within the church because of complaints by Yoruba Christians that they were denied administrative roles, rarely appointed as priests, and disallowed from using Yoruba music in Christian worship because of its alleged pagan roots. African church members responded by agitating for a more equitable distribution of roles and the incorporation of Yoruba songs into the liturgy. Consequent upon these developments, the Christian church would become the launch pad for a wave of cultural nationalism that anticipated Nigeria's struggle for national political independence in the mid-twentieth century. While many Yoruba Christians carried out their agitation within the imported, British-controlled Anglican denomination, others left to form new Africanist churches, arguing that it should be possible to be both Christian and African, a theological assertion that was unpacked through a wide range of syncretic practices. Members of the new churches aspired to a more visible form of spirituality, wore white robes, prayed more fervently, believed in spiritual healing, and cultivated Yoruba-derived trance practices. In these manifold ways, the new Africanist denominations, collectively known as the Aladura (prayer band) movement,

were able to simultaneously affirm their Christian convictions and Yoruba-grounded practices of spirituality.

Set against the general history of the Aladura movement, and building on the pioneering work of scholars like John Peel and Akinyede Omoyajowo,¹ Vicky L. Brennan's well-written and well-researched ethnographic study focuses on one of the movement's prominent branches, the Cherubim and Seraphim (C&S) or *Ayo ni o* church, based in Lagos. She examines "how religious music, understood both as forms of media and practices of mediation," produces "a moral community of people that are bound to each other through a set of meaningful and aesthetic practices." She also discusses how such practices link the church "community to a set of ethical guidelines that are themselves expressed and experienced via aesthetic media" (xii). In the course of her fieldwork in Lagos and Ibadan, in western Nigeria, Brennan sang with the choir, conducted interviews, worshipped with congregation members, participated in night vigils, watched religious-themed performances, and solicited testimonial reflections by church members. She also visited the Redeemed Christian Church, whose vibrant form of Pentecostalism has lured away some members of the *Ayo ni o*, forcing it to review its own practices in an effort to discourage such departures. Brennan explains that her ethnographic work carries an inherent political message in the insistence that indigenous knowledge be privileged, and

in debunking the notion that European academia-based theories are more important than emic perspectives

Two themes are particularly resonant throughout *Singing Yoruba Christianity*. The first is the discussion of how the history of the church has been shaped by developments within the larger Nigerian society. Second, Brennan continuously demonstrates how the history of the church functions as a guide for its leaders in responding to new challenges and developments within and beyond the church. As she portrays it, history becomes more than a passive catalogue of activities. Rather, it functions like a theological treatise, a code of religious and cultural thought that provides the framework for how the church copes with the existential reality of religious life in a postcolonial African environment.

Each of the book's eight chapters develops these central ideas by discussing worship services and the role of music, including music recordings, material culture, special annual events, and church bands (societies). Chapter 2, for example, discusses the church hymnal, which is considered to be a powerful item of material culture and imbued with strong spiritual authority. The hymnal is believed to contain the prophetic utterances of the founders of the church. According to church members interviewed by the author, the "hymnal contains the wisdom of our daddies, who started this church" (29). Chapter 3 discusses the role of the media, with a focus on the music recordings produced by the church choir, which provide the means for reaching out to a wider audience through radio and television broadcasts and commercially produced cassettes. Brennan analyzes the creative strategies and choices made by church musicians, and how their productions provide a sacred alternative

to the growing tradition of Yoruba secular popular music, notably *juju*—a major cultural icon of Nigeria's emerging capitalist economy. In Chapter 4, Brennan turns to live performances: the "discipline and disciplining work" of musical rehearsals, the "practical techniques through which religious sound-artifacts are performed in new contexts," and the "perceived spontaneity of musical performance" together constitute what she calls a "labor of immediacy" (76). Musical rehearsals and performances provide the means by which church members master the skills needed to embody and express their religious beliefs. Chapter 5 focuses on the architectural space of the church building and the significance of the white robe that members must wear to church. Brennan describes how spaces are delineated within the sanctuary and explains the spiritual symbolism of the white garment. Her ultimate objective is to explain how spatial demarcation and religious dress code symbolize the relationship between earth and heaven, the two complementary domains of existence within which Christians contemplate their relationship with God. The connection between heaven and earth as understood by the *Ayo ni o* church is also embedded in the traditional Yoruba philosophical saying that earth is the marketplace, while heaven is home (*Ayé lojà, òrun nìlẹ̀*). Chapter 6 describes a major annual event, Choir Day, which features music renditions and dramatic plays depicting diverse life experiences as reinterpreted and explained through biblical perspectives. Chapter 7 discusses Yoruba Christians' belief in the authority and power of the Holy Spirit, and how trance represents the medium through which worshippers are transformed into *ẹ̀lẹ̀mí*, or spirit-mediums. In Chapter 8,

Brennan discusses the power of elderly male members of the church who belong to Egbe Fogo Folorun (Show the Glory of God Band), one of the church's many societies. This band is regarded as the major custodian of the history of the church; its members mentor younger worshippers and provide help for the less privileged.

As expected, music is a significant focus of *Singing Yoruba Christianity*. Brennan's discussion revolves around the idea that musical performance and participation provide the experience through which church members express and embody the ethical fabric of a good Christian life. Her account of the life of a major founder of the church, Moses Orimolade, draws attention to the power of music, while laying the groundwork for understanding how spirituality, music, and politics intersect to shape the identity of the church. Born in the late 1870s, Orimolade created music that is both spiritually powerful and reflective of Yoruba culture. For example, his songs do not employ the strophic form of European hymnody and are accompanied by bell rather than organ. Interweaving Christian themes and elements of Yoruba music, Orimolade's music echoes the theme of cultural nationalism that was foundational to the emergence of the Aladura movement. Furthermore, Orimolade is presented as both insider and outsider, one who, although a Christian, did not belong to the Western-educated Yoruba elite that formed the bulk of the first generation of Nigerian Christians of the colonial era. This complementary subjectivity—being part Christian and part Yoruba—has been crucial to the ability of the *Ayo ni o* church to claim its agency, resist the imposition of European culture, and remain visible and viable as a religious denomination since the colonial era.

Although *Singing Yoruba Christianity* is successful overall, I would have liked to have a greater sense of the music of the church, the power of which accrues from its unique vocal and harmonic practices, and how musical instruments like guitars and keyboards are used to create atmosphere and generate a variety of worship moods. While Brennan describes some musical performances, focusing on a few more examples and providing a more detailed discussion of how music functions in specific worship situations would have highlighted the role of music more effectively. Fortunately, the reader can go on the Internet to personally experience the music of the *Ayo ni o* church.

In conclusion, I commend Brennan for the rigor of her scholarship, the clarity of her writing, and her ability to effectively position her discussion within the larger discourse about the multiple cultural and religious subjectivities that give the C&S church its unique identity.

Bode Omojola
Mount Holyoke College/Five College
Consortium, Massachusetts

NOTES

1 J. D. Y. Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba* (London: Published for the International African Institute by Oxford University Press, 1968); J. Akindele Omoyajowo, *Cherubim and Seraphim: The History of an African Independent Church* (New York: NOK, 1982).