

Roles and Functions of *Ebibindwom* (Akan Sacred Lyrics)

Dr. Joshua A. Amuah^{1*}, Timothy E. Andoh²

¹School of Performing Arts, Department of Music, University of Ghana, Legon

²Department of Music, School of Performing Arts, University of Ghana, Legon

***Corresponding Author:**

Dr. Joshua A. Amuah.

Email: jamuah@ug.edu.gh, joshuaamuah@yahoo.com

Abstract: *Ebibindwom* (Akan sacred lyrics) is a traditional musical genre which has been adopted by the Methodist Church in 1835 to allow the participation of illiterate older women in the singing of songs in the church. This paper investigates the incorporation and acceptance of *Ebibindwom* as a traditional choral musical genre in the church as well as the role and functions the genre has played and continues to perform since its inception. Through interviews and visits to higher hierarchical membership of the church, the authors delineate the roles and functions of *Ebibindwom* in the Methodist Church to encourage the younger generation to register their appreciation and involvement in its performance.

Keywords: *ebibindwom*, traditional, Methodist church, choral, younger, generation, performance

INTRODUCTION

This paper subdivides into three sections: The first section examines the methodology used for the research, and the historical background of the *Ebibindwom*, whilst the second section discusses the performance setting and the social functions of the musical genre. The third section draws conclusions and provides recommendations to the paper.

METHODOLOGY

In this research, the authors engaged in fieldwork activity in which they played a complete membership role as revealed by Adler & Adler [1]. As researchers who are already members of the group under research, data collection of information over the period was done on weekly basis, each time the group met for deliberations. Observation, which has been defined by Creswell [2] as the process of gathering first-hand information by perceiving people and places at the research site", was also carried on a weekly basis as the authors went about life as usual, participating in the activities and socializing with members of the church, and specifically members of the *Ebibindwom* performing group of Good Shepherd *Ebibindwom* group, *Bubuashie*¹.

Interviews were used to seek out explicit information from leaders of the *Ebibindwom* group and some church members. This was important since "interviewing is one of the most common and most powerful ways used to understand our fellow human

beings" as determined by Fontana and Frey [3]. Other secondary sources were used in the process.

THE SOURCE OF *EBIBINDWOM*

According to Mensah [4] European colonization brought Ghanaians and Europeans into contact. This contributed to the emergence of a new society in which members of different ethnic groups and Europeans got together to create new arts, new wealth based on an industrial-commerce economy and new ways of living. The *Ebibindwom* was one of the products of this Ghanaian European socio-cultural interaction.

According to Amuah [5] the expression *Ebibindwom* (Akan Sacred lyrics) refers to traditional songs used in Christian worship, specifically in the Methodist Church-Ghana. These songs were used because of the large number of non-literate, semi-literate and older women in the church whose ability to sing the English Hymns or their translations were a big challenge when the church was transplanted in Ghana in 1835 by Rev. Joseph Rhodes Dunwell. When Rev. Dunwell died, Rev. Thomas Birch Freeman assumed leadership to see to the growth and development of the church in Cape Coast, Ghana, then the Gold Coast. Turkson [6] confirms this as he says:

The lyric as a musical type owes its development during the office of Rev. Thomas B. Freeman, by non-literate members of the church in Cape Coast in 1838. When Freeman realized that the non-literate members of the church did not participate in singing of the

¹A suburb in Accra, where the research took place.

English Hymns he encouraged members to sing biblical text to traditional tunes.

The performances of *Ebibindwom* have evolved out of certain traditional musical types as a result of singing style of the Methodist church which did not favour the non-literate old women. The most probable of the traditional song types from which *Ebibindwom* has evolved is the *asafo*² which has also been the foundation of several other traditional musical types.

Since its inception *Ebibindwom* as a song-type has been constructed on popular biblical stories such as the parables, Christian experience, Hope and Endeavor, Good Friday and Passion, Praise and Adoration. Turkson therefore writes:

Of all the traditional songs of Akan the *Ebibindwom* is the most suitable for use in the church. The repertoire of *Ebibindwom* contains songs that are particularly suitable for use in the Christian church and include songs about God, birth, life and death of Christ songs about the Prophets and events of the Christian year. They are general songs reflecting on the pain of death, songs which explicit reference to bereaved families could be expressed. Turkson [6]

On the same issue, Nketia asserts that:

Since the repertoire of songs performed by social group may be intended for recreation, work, war, a ceremony, a rite, or a festival, the mood of the occasion as well as the actual events are naturally reflected in the words of the songs and guide the choice of themes. Nketia [7]

Divine service or worship in the castles was the practice before Dunwell arrived in Cape Coast. Beecham records that 'they adopted for their guidance the following rule that, as the word of God is the best rule a Christian ought to observe, it is herein avoided framing other rules to enforce good conduct. From twelve to eighteen 'educated' Africans attended public worship in the Cape Coast Castle each Sunday, and out of this group came the 'Bible Band' or the 'Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge' (S.P.C.K) of Cape Coast. This band provided the foundation members of the Methodist Church-Ghana. It should be noted that before systematic missionary work started after January 1, 1835, Rev. Thomas Birch Freeman, a mulatto, and others met on Sundays in the house of one of their members at a very early hour Bartels [8]

From the onset, singing formed a very important part of the Methodist class meetings. 'To the Christian practice which grew out of the "meeting" to the fellowship and prayerfulness of its members, to their singing and their seeking, to their reading and interpretation of God's holy word, Dunwell brought the instruction and inspiration of the sermon, the meditation and witness of the class meeting, and the appeal of the extempore prayer.

Singing remained a powerful means of spreading Methodism in Ghana, and most of the hymns were British Methodist hymns. Thus the Methodist Mission accomplished its evangelizing work through the hymns that the congregation sang (see the Preface to the Methodist Hymn Book). Indeed, the opening line to the preface of the Methodist Hymn Book reads 'Methodism was born in song'.

It is not known when the first hymns were sung in the Methodist Church, but from accounts as those above, hymns were sung during the Sunday meetings of the SPCK. Some of the tunes were by such composers as Mozart, Bach, Haydn, M. Herbst (c. 1654-81), and Gibbons (1583-1625) Andoh [9]

Ebibindwom, which literally means *African Songs* and is called *Akan Sacred lyrics*, are derived from the Christian scriptures. The musical elements of the *Ebibindwom* (*Akan Sacred lyric*) however share a similarity with the other traditional musical types.

Ebibindwom (*Akan Sacred Lyrics*) was the first authentically African church musical style to emerge in the course of the evolution of Ghanaian church music. Jones indicates that the continued search for meaning and the total involvement of the native in traditional religious practice were the factors that precipitated the upsurge of this sacred musical type. Jones [10]

In the Methodist Church, Rev. Freeman encouraged the non-literate older women to sing Christian scripture to traditional tunes. Being a product of the native's musical ingenuity, participation in the *Ebibindwom* did not require books; it was therefore ideal for the non-literate or semi-illiterate to be actively involved in the singing of the *Ebibindwom*. Members of the congregation tended to remember the text more than if they had listened to a sermon. For this reason, the missionaries allowed *Ebibindwom* to flourish. Turkson [6]

It is interesting to note that the enthusiasm with which the non-literate members of the church composed and performed *Ebibindwom* (*Akan Sacred Lyric*) in Rev. Freeman's times has dwindled. Because the though it is an important part of the Ghanaian musical culture such that a number of individuals from named churches have *Ebibindwom* constituted groups.

²an ancient warrior organization that exists in all Akan societies of Ghana. (Turkson 1972:2)

For example: An *Ebibindwon* group at Ajumako, an offspring of the Ajumako Methodist church, is led by *Opanyin*Ato Brown. There is yet another at Tema which has Rev. Yedu-Bannerman as the leader.

Though *Ebibindwom*(Akan Sacred Lyrics) is a vital element of the music made and enjoyed in the church, it does not exist as a compilation in print format unlike hymns, anthems and most church-used music. However in 1954, because of its impact, the Methodist church appointed a committee to collect and study specimens of *Ebibindwom*. This eventually led to the publication of *Ebibindwom*, a book containing 105 lyric texts Anang [11]

SETTING OF PERFORMANCE

There is no specific setting for the singing and performance of *Ebibindwom*, even though the preferred setting is the church. Nketia [7] for instance declares that

Since the traditional approach to music making makes it a part of the institutional life of community, the physical setting for performances can be any spot suitable for collective activity. It may be a public place or private area to which only those intimately concerned with the event are admitted, regular place of worship, such as a shrine, a sacred spot, a groove, a mausoleum, the courtyard of the house where a ceremony is taking place or the area behind it, the scene of communal labor, the corner of a street habitually used by social groups for music and dancing, a market place or a dance plaza.

In the Methodist Church, *Ebibindwom* performances have usually been in the church at a worship setting. As the society grew, performances have been extended to social functions outside the church. These social functions include, outdoorings, wedding and funeral.

CHURCH SETTING

The church choir dresses in black and white western robes, leads the congregation in singing of hymns, canticles and responses in English or the Vernacular. The choir also renders some anthems during the worship service when called upon to do so. However, *Ebibindwom* is interjected into the sermon by the Christ Little Band³ which has made it a responsibility to render *Ebibindwom* in the Church. The cantor sings the *Ebibindwom* when moved by the Holy Spirit, and the whole congregation joins in singing the choruses/responses.

³The Christ Little Band is one of the organizations in the Methodist Church, Ghana

SOCIAL FUNCTIONS

Nketia [12] states that musical types like the *Ebibindwom* are closely bound up with such social functions as rites of passage or life-circle events, work, play and religious worship. No indigenous society is without it; as such it is created and used with norms of organization defined by the particular ethnic group or people. In this regard, there are four major social events in the life of the individual. These are birth, puberty, marriage and death. In the past, puberty (for girls) and death were all musical occasions. In the contemporary social environment however, all four occasions call for the use of music. The Methodist Church does not feature *Ebibindwom* performances at puberty because this is not performed by the church. However, it features prominently in the rest of the social events of the life cycle.

Outdoorings

Outdoorings is a ceremony performed in some communities in Ghana, at the eighth day of birth there is a musical performance at the eighth day celebration of the individual since a new-born child is regarded as a stranger and is reckoned as a member of the family if it survives on the eighth day. Traditionally, on this eighth day of the birth of the child, the outdoorings and naming ceremony are held without music. To Christian parents however, every child must be baptized and given both Christian and local names to signify having been accepted into the family. At the baptismal service, the western hymn features prominently but the performance of *Ebibindwom* is never relegated. The group stands in a semi-circle with the soloist in front of them and sings from their repertory, items that transmit messages of welcome, good behaviour, long life and prosperity.

On this occasion, friends, relatives, and well-wishers of parents are invited to a party to eat and drink. While popular music and hymns are performed, *Ebibindwom* from the performing group is also heard.

Wedding /Marriage Ceremony

Traditional Ghanaian marriage is more of a contract between the families of the future couple than a celebration.

Currently, marriage can be contracted in any one of the three ways, namely customary, the civil procedure, culminating in a church wedding. During or at the end of any of these, some form of music is performed.

As regards the customary marriage, the point where music features is when the woman moves from her house to set up permanently with the husband. On that occasion, there is a feast at which traditional recreational bands are invited to provide music or popular music records are played which is danced to. The civil marriage is also often concluded with music by an ensemble or a sound system. Essandoh [13]

The wedding performed in church is a musical occasion and just as one finds in a service of worship, hymns and other sacred musical types are sung by the congregation and other singing groups. *Ebibindwomis* also heard from the Christ Little Band⁴. The cantors/soloists do the recitative while they move front and back for the members and the congregation to join in at the chorus. The themes of the items selected from their repertory hover around peace, understanding, love and happy marriage.

Funeral/Death

The celebrations of funerals differ from individual to individual depending on the social relationships and circumstances of death. The funeral of kings or people of royal birth differ from that of commoners. Premature deaths such as those resulting from an accident, suicide, through childbirth or suspected to be caused by witchcraft or poison are distinguished from natural death through normal illness or old age.

There are usually three phases to an ordinary funeral that are open to the public. These are: pre-burial mourning (including wake-keeping), burial, after-burial mourning (excluding subsequent eighth, fifteenth, fortieth, eightieth day or first anniversary celebration) interspersed with final obsequies which consists of wake-keeping, burial, family gathering or customary rites, thanksgiving or memorial service.

The Christ Little Band has chosen not to participate in all the activities of funeral ceremonies. Currently the act of wake keeping as part of funeral ceremonies is prohibited in the Methodist community. The group which is one of the subsets of the organizations in the church cannot therefore involve themselves in wake-keeping as part of their funeral ceremonies, but before the burial, members of the group in a procession with wooden rods painted in black and white stripes, visit the family of the deceased at where it is laid, if the deceased is a member of the band. The cantor standing at one end of where the dead body has been laid, starts with one of the songs and with the other members of the group who serve as the chorus sing, while moving round the body three times and offer their last prayers which serves as parting message to the dead member. The singers of *Ebibindwom* rarely sit down where the corpse is laid, they pace up and down, flanked on all sides by members of the deceased's family, friends and sympathizers seated on benches. It is also the culture of the group to ensure that the body is put in the coffin for a procession to the church premises where the burial service takes place.

At the burial service the theme is death so the hymns other sacred songs and the sermon, all dwell on the life hereafter. It is during this period that *Ebibindwom* features prominently. After the preacher's sermon, the lead singer stands in front of the chorus and perambulates up and down relating text of the songs to the life history of the dead member. After some time they move round the coffin still singing. "The most dramatic manifestation of this in the case of *Ebibindwom*, when sung in the church or at a funeral, where the entire gathering may join, the lead singer (s) may perambulate up and down the aisle, pace in the front of the performers, or stand in the middle of the performing group and perform facing inward towards their colleagues" Sutherland-Addy [14]

This is followed by another procession to the cemetery, but singing is left to the choir to lead until the grave-side service is over when the group would stay behind and perform rituals to the dead body to usher him/her into the ancestral world. These ceremonies play a principal role in establishing the dead person as an ancestor in order to maintain good relations with those who are still living. Glaze [15] that:

The entire series of events that form the funeral undertaken for one encompassing purpose to mark the completion of the spiritual, intellectual and social formation of the individual member within the group and to create the necessary conditions underline the dead one will not leave this world of the living. The funeral is the final rite passage, one that transforms the dead into a stage of being beneficial to the living community, thereby ensuring a sense of continuity between the living and the dead. Only in the "Village of the dead" can the dead one function effectively and safely as an ancestor.

The next activity after the burial is family gathering or the performance of customary rites. The group plays no role since a popular band normally provides music for entertainment for sympathizers, well-wishers and the general public. Memorial or thanksgiving follows the family gathering. It is the normal church service with its hymns and chants. *Ebibindwom* features only during the sermon. Generally, *Ebibindwom* at the funeral celebration provides an outlet for emotion, to re-assert life even in the face of death. Hence *Ebibindwom* that is performed is lively and danceable.

CONCLUSION

The creation of *Ebibindwom* in the Methodist Church was an attempt Christians made to develop a traditional musical type that made them participate in singing in the church. The widespread popularity of *Ebibindwom*

⁴*Ebibindwom* performers in the Methodist church

outside the Methodist church then might be regarded as a welcome by-product of this endeavor.

Ebibindwom in Christian worship has lived to raise the spirit of worshippers to a plane high enough to facilitate an interaction with God. It has also performed the role discriminating the principles and values of the church. In this dimension therefore, *Ebibindwom* has been able to satisfy Christians the role traditional worship songs did for indigenous religion. Through *Ebibindwom*, the Ghanaian is able to receive and relate to Christianity as if it originated from Africa. Besides the worship situation, the general acceptance of *Ebibindwom* provides strong evidence and support to the extent to which Christianity permeates the current Ghanaian way of life since the musical genre has been accepted to be used in other social functions such as outdoorings, wedding and funeral

RECOMMENDATION

It has been evidently portrayed in this paper that *Ebibindwom* has been accepted and has received massive participation by both literate and non-literate members in the Methodist church. Its acceptance motivated membership of the church and also encouraged a transplant of its performances to social functions to involve all members in the society. It is therefore recommended that varied traditional musical genres should be encouraged in the church.

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