

AFRICAN ORAL LITERATURE PERFORMANCE AND AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY FROM THE 19TH TO THE 21ST CENTURY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This article examines the intricate relationship between African oral literature performance traditions and the expansion of Christianity in Nigeria from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century. It argues that the remarkable growth of Christianity in Nigeria was significantly facilitated by the appropriation, adaptation, and integration of indigenous oral literary performance elements, including narrative storytelling, poetic chants, songs, proverbs, riddles, drum language, and dramatic rituals, into Christian worship, evangelism, and theological expression. Drawing on the oral literature scholarship of Ruth Finnegan, this study demonstrates that oral literature performance was a crucial vehicle for the indigenisation of the Christian message across missionary, prophetic, and Pentecostal movements. It answers the following questions: What role did oral literature play in the growth of Christianity in Nigeria, and how did Nigerian Christians utilise their oral literary traditions to translate, interpret, and embody Christian teachings in culturally resonant forms? What are the positive and negative effects of this synthesis on conversion experiences and community engagement in Nigerian society in general? The study employs a qualitative historical and literary analysis of secondary sources, including missionary historical accounts, records of Nigerian Christian movements and ethnographic research of Nigerian oral traditions, to examine the relationship between African oral literature performance and the growth of Christianity in Nigeria.

Keywords: African oral literature, Performance, African Christianity, Christianity in Nigeria.

Introduction

The growth of Christianity in Nigeria from the nineteenth century to the present represents one of the most significant religious transformations in modern African history. From the arrival of the first Christian missionaries in the 1840s to the contemporary era of mega-churches and Pentecostal revivals of the 21st century, Nigeria has witnessed an exponential increase in Christian adherents, and the country now hosts some of the largest Christian congregations globally. However, understanding Christian expansion in Nigeria requires examining how African oral literature performance traditions mediated, translated, and indigenized the Christian message. As noted in the *Anthology of African Christianity*, the story of Christianity in Africa is fundamentally "an African story" (Phiri & Werner, 2016: xxxviii) and that "the voices of African scholars have unanimously grounded the faith deeply in the world and perception of Africans and their existential needs" (Phiri, 2016: 3).

Oral literature is understood as literature that is "mostly composed and transmitted orally from generation to generation and from one place to another" (Regassa and Mitiku, 2024: 115). This definition stresses the performativity and communal nature of oral literary forms, which are deeply embedded in the cultural, social, and religious life of communities. As Regassa and Mitiku (2024: 115) noted, oral literature is "closer to culture and societal life" because it communicates the "culture, history, norms, and beliefs of a group of people who share it." In African literary discourse, orality has been positioned as the defining characteristic that identifies the uniqueness of African writing (Ogude & ten Kortenaar, 2025: 62). African literature is authentic. According to Ogude and

Neil ten Kortenaar (2025:63), the oral forms have primacy over written ones, and that orality serves as the central dynamic of African literature. The significance of this research lies in recognising that African oral literature performance was not merely a passive receptacle for foreign religious ideas but an active agent in shaping the character of Nigerian Christianity. The literary and aesthetic dimensions of indigenous African oral traditions—their use of metaphor, imagery, rhythm, and dramatic enactment resonated deeply with the experiential and narrative aspects of Christianity, creating a synthesis that proved extraordinarily attractive to Nigerian converts.

This article explores the multifaceted relationship between African oral literature performance and the growth of Christianity in Nigeria. It examines how oral literary traditions were adapted and transformed within Nigerian Christian contexts across missionary, prophetic, and Pentecostal movements. The study covers the historical period from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first century, examining how oral literature performance traditions evolved in response to changing historical contexts.

Onwuegbuche (2024:18) observes that "oral literature abounds in every culture. It is ubiquitous, and therefore, transcends every boundary and culture. Also, it is pertinent to underscore that oral literature in all its forms depends on the verbal artist who formulates it in words and on a specific occasion." This ubiquity and dependence on performance made oral literature a natural medium for the communication of Christian teachings in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Ruth Finnegan's explanation of oral literature will serve as a framework for the research on the nexus of African oral literature and the growth of Christianity in Nigeria. Starting from the 19th century and continuing up to contemporary times, Nigeria was remarkably evangelised. She argues (2012:504-505) that oral literature is "of interest not only for students of literature, but also for sociologists and all those with an interest in African society, past or present." She also emphasises that oral literature is "not just something of the past" but relevant for contemporary analysis. This insight underscores the continuing significance of oral literature performance for understanding Christianity in contemporary Nigeria. Finnegan's discussion on oral literature in Africa pointed towards these concepts: *the Performer, the Performance, the Audience, the Improvisation and Flexibility and the Embeddedness in Social Context*. These are discussed below:

The Performer: Finnegan (2012: 3-4) emphasises that oral literature is dependent on a performer who formulates it in words on a specific occasion there is no other way in which it can be realised as a literary product of written literature with an independent and tangible existence in even one copy, so that it has format, number, and publicising of other written copies. For oral literature there is an intimate connection between transmission and very existence, because the means of actual communication are of the first importance. Without its oral realisation and direct rendition by singer or speaker, an unwritten literary piece cannot easily be said to have any continued or independent existence at all. The performer in oral tradition serves multiple functions. The performer serves multiple functions as creator and transmitter of cultural knowledge, interpreter of tradition, and innovator who adapts tradition to new circumstances. In the context of Christian growth in Nigeria, performers included missionaries, indigenous clergy, prophets, evangelists, and lay leaders who communicated Christian messages through oral forms like preaching, singing, reading memory verses, eulogising the divine and many more.

The Performance: Ruth discusses that "The significance of performance in oral literature goes

beyond a mere matter of definition: for the nature of the performance itself can make an important contribution to the impact of the particular literary form being exhibited" the actual performance is fundamental to the effects and the impacts (2012:5). She argues that performance is not merely an external addition since the bare words cannot be left to speak themselves. For oral literature, its essence is to communicate; meanwhile, the only means of communication is to perform. Performance is the means of translating and transmitting messages, emotions, concepts, ideas, ethics, and rituals within a community and society. Across missionary, prophetic, and Pentecostal movements, performance has been central to Christian communication. Missionaries translated hymns into local languages and taught them through oral performance (Ajayi, 1989). Prophetic movements like those of Babalola and Braide relied on dramatic oral performances, preaching, singing, and healing rituals—to attract converts (Kalu, 2008: 36, 42). Pentecostal churches have continued this tradition, with vibrant worship services that emphasise oral performance through singing, preaching, and testimony (Ojo, 2006). In each case, the Christian message was not merely translated but performed, making it accessible and engaging to Nigerian audiences. The performance of Christianity through songs, chants, stories, and rituals made the faith accessible especially to illiterate populations and facilitated its rapid spread across regions.

The Audience: Unlike written literature, oral performance involves direct interaction between performer and audience. Finnegan (2012:12-13) observes that "the audience is often directly involved in the actualisation and creation of a piece of oral literature." She notes that the audience can affect the presentation, participate in the performance, and even interrupt with additions or criticisms. This participatory dimension facilitated the formation of Christian communities where members actively engaged in worship and evangelism. The participatory dimension of oral literature is evident in Nigerian Christian worship across all movements. In mission churches, congregations participated through singing hymns and responding to sermons. In prophetic movements, audiences participated through singing choruses, responding to altar calls, and sharing testimonies of healing (Kalu, 2008: 36). They shout hallelujah without pre-informing the clergy leading the worship service. In Pentecostal churches, audience participation is even more pronounced, with congregations actively participating through singing, clapping, dancing, and responding to preaching (Gifford, 2004). This participatory dimension creates a dynamic interaction that shapes the worship experience and facilitates community formation. As observed, the contemporary Christian leaders place significance on having multitudes in their services; the more the crowd, the merrier. Large audiences for crusades, revivals, and worship services are pathways to glory and success of Christian ministries in the contemporary age.

The Improvisation and Flexibility: Finnegan (2012:10) notes that oral texts are not fixed but vary with each performance: "The scope of the artist to improvise or create may vary, but there is almost always some opportunity for 'composition.'" She emphasises that "the extent of this kind of innovation, of course, varies with both genre and individual performer." The variability of oral literature is evident in Nigerian Christian oral performances across movements. Oral literature makes it so easy for them to compose and recompose concepts like songs and sermons needed; Drama was added at a later time (the Mount Zion Faith Drama Ministry is an example of this). It makes performances more stylish and allows for a level of improvement that could attract the congregation to the worship service. Missionaries adapted hymns to local musical styles and created new songs for Christian worship (Ajayi, 1989). Prophetic leaders like Braide created new choruses that spread rapidly through oral transmission (Kalu, 2008: 36). Pentecostal preachers adapt their sermons to specific audiences and situations, improvising based on the leading of the Holy Spirit (Ojo, 2006). This flexibility allows Christian communication to be responsive to changing contexts and needs.

Embeddedness in Social Context: Finnegan (2012: 14) stresses that oral literature is embedded in social contexts: "The performer of oral pieces could thus be said to be more involved in actual social situations than the writer in more familiar literate traditions." She notes that "the significance of the actual occasion" is important, "which can directly affect the detailed content and form of the piece being performed." This embeddedness is evident in Nigerian Christian oral performances across movements. Missionaries addressed specific social issues through their preaching and teaching (Ajayi, 1989). Prophetic movements addressed the social and spiritual needs of their communities through healing, deliverance, and prophecy (Kalu, 2008: 36, 42). Pentecostal churches address contemporary social issues—corruption, poverty, political leadership through their preaching and teaching (Gifford, 2004). The oral performances in these contexts address the specific needs and concerns of the participants.

Christianity in Nigeria from the 19th to the 21st Century

The effective missionary work in Nigeria began on September 24, 1842, when Thomas Birch Freeman and two Fanti missionaries, Mr. and Mrs. William De-Graft, arrived at Badagry from the Wesleyan Methodist Mission (Oduyoye, 1969: 34). The second missionary society to enter the Yoruba Mission was the Church Missionary Society (CMS). Henry Townsend and Andrew Wilhelm arrived at Badagry on December 17, 1842 (Ajayi, 1965:45). Baptist mission work in Nigeria can be traced to the arrival of Thomas J. Bowen on August 5, 1850, at Badagry (Bowen, 1857: 45). Baptist mission work among the Yoruba people and in Nigeria resulted in the formation of the Nigerian Baptist Convention in 1919 (Bowen, 1857: 62). Ajayi (1989) documents that these early missionaries faced significant challenges, including the prevalence of African traditional religions, the resistance of local rulers, and the difficulty of translating Christian concepts into indigenous languages. However, they also encountered receptivity among some Nigerian communities, particularly those seeking access to Western education and trade. Still others appropriated Christian teachings selectively, integrating them with traditional beliefs and practices.

The early twentieth century witnessed the emergence of prophetic movements and African Independent Churches that played a significant role in the growth of Christianity in Nigeria. These movements were characterised by their use of oral literature performance, their emphasis on healing and prophecy, and their integration of indigenous cultural elements. The **Garrick Braide Movement** emerged in the Niger Delta region. Kalu (2008: 36) notes that he was "particularly creative with new choruses." The oral literary dimension of Braide's movement made it accessible to illiterate populations and facilitated rapid spread across the Niger Delta region. **The Aladura (Praying) Movements of Josiah Oshitelu, Cherubim and Seraphim Church by Tunolase Orimolade and the Celestial Church of Christ by Bilewu Oshofa** emerged in the 1920s. **The Christ Apostolic Church**, with the great revivalist, **Joseph Babalola**, conducted revival meetings characterised by powerful preaching, healing, and prophecy in the 1930s. Kalu (2008: 42) notes that his movement "set the western regions on their ears." They all emphasised prayer, healing, and spiritual warfare. Their worship was characterised by singing, drumming, dancing, and prophetic utterances.

The late twentieth century witnessed explosive growth of Pentecostal and charismatic movements in Nigeria. Kalu (2008:87-88) notes that "during the early 1970s the populace of some of the townships... witnessed the emergence of a new religious phenomenon. This was facilitated by several factors, including: youthful leadership, as youths emerged as powerful leaders; use of media, which provided networking with external western forms of Pentecostalism (Kalu 2008:

103), the liberalisation of media space; emphasis **on** healing and deliverance; and emphasis on the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The oral performances—preaching, singing, and testimonies—attracted large crowds and contributed to the movement's growth.

The twenty-first century has witnessed the continued growth and diversification of Christianity in Nigeria. Mega churches characterise this contemporary Nigerian Christianity, with thousands of members, characterised by vibrant worship. It is predominantly Pentecostal and charismatic and also makes extensive use of social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. This digital oral literature performance extends the reach of Christian communication. They preach the prosperity gospel, as Togarasei (2016:1006) notes, prosperity theology "emphasises that God wants believers to prosper physically, materially and spiritually." The oral performance of this message through testimonies, sermons, and songs has been crucial to its spread in Nigeria. In addition, Nigerian 21st-century Christianity engages with social issues, including corruption, poverty, social vices and political leadership. Oral literature performance—through preaching, singing, and drama—addresses these issues from a Christian perspective. As observed, twenty-first-century Nigerian Christianity is also characterised by ecumenical and inter-religious relationships, which have started since the end of the twentieth century.

African Oral Literature in Nigeria

African oral literature is intrinsically tied to oral tradition and communal living. It is "a configuration of communal traditions that reflect African culture, experiences, and societies" (Abe, 2024:76). The indigenous knowledge of Africans is "generally archived in oral traditions and folklore traditions that have been carried out over time" (Ibanga, 2021:117). Meanwhile, oral literature cannot be performed without a group of people living together or having a thing to do in common as often as it could be. The community consciously or unconsciously acts, displays, and transfers them within itself. According to Ibanga, oral literature is an "art form" that "lives in performance," connecting its existence inextricably to its enactment (2021:119). In addition, it is a lens for analysing a community's worldview on concepts like ethics, birth, marriage, indigenous professions, death, friendship, integrity and many more. For example, Alabi (2022:11) explains that the **Udje** tradition of the Urhobo people is a "highly competitive oral poetic performance genre that artistically enacts the form of warfare". This performance takes place annually on an appointed day when rival groups perform songs composed about each other before large audiences.

Oral literature serves as the repository for indigenous knowledge and identity. Its songs, stories, and proverbs are embedded with local knowledge systems that "sustain the community and its culture" (Abe, 2024:576). Placing value on such knowledge can strengthen cultural preservation and identity and promote social development (Ibanga, 2021:117). Alabi (2022:1) further explains that these oral life stories and poems are usually "used to record, teach, and document history, culture, tradition, identity, and resistance."

Moreover, Nigerian literature in written form is deeply indebted to oral tradition. Scholars have noted that from its beginnings, modern Nigerian drama and fiction have drawn heavily on oral sources (Salifu, 2025:1). Olaniyan and Quayson (2007:65) corroborate that oral genres "have served as veritable resource pools for writers to borrow from and transform in their written works." Playwrights like Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, and Ola Rotimi and novelists like Chinua Achebe have used oral traditions as inspiration and raw material for their written works (Salifu, 2025:1).

However, because oral traditions are passed down verbally, they are subject to variation, distortion,

and omission over time (Salifu, 2025:2). There could be exaggerations to impress or discourage when performing. Salifu (2025:3), in his analysis of Igala legends, notes that the oral accounts are silent on certain details, such as the specific reactions of central characters. This creates "silent voices", perspectives that remain unheard or suppressed in the dominant narrative, often due to factors like power imbalances or the storytellers' thematic focus. Finnegan (2012: 10-11) also notes that the scope of the artist to improvise or create may vary and also definitely create variations in the oral arts. Nevertheless, it still helps to connect past known and unknown generations' lifestyles and worldviews to the present and the future.

Nigerian oral traditions encompass a diverse range of genres, each with distinctive characteristics and functions. Omalosoye (2012:1) notes that Yoruba oral literature "could be categorised into three main areas: oral poetry, oral prose and oral drama."

Oral Poetry: This is one of the most significant genres of Nigerian Yoruba oral literature. Babalola (1966) and Olatunji (1984) have documented **Hunters' Chant**, ***Ijala***, **Oral Poetry**, ***Ewi***, **Praise Poetry**, ***Oriki*** and **Dirges**, ***Rara*** as Nigerian oral poetic forms. **Hunters' Chant** is a form of oral poetry chanted by hunters in a high-pitched voice. Babalola (1966:V) describes *ijala* as "a type of speech utterance with rudimentary musical characteristics, rather than a species of song." **Oral Poetry** is a form of oral poetry that is recited in a falsetto voice. Olatunji (1984: 46) notes that *Ewi* "is a modern genre of Yoruba poetry that freely draws on the vast repertoire of traditional oral literary forms." **Praise Poetry** is oral poetry that praises individuals, families, lineages, and deities. Olatunji (1984: 67) describes *orikias* "a poetic elaboration of individual names" that "over time, are inflected to include unique information revealing the social and cultural background of the subject." **Dirges:** This is a form of oral poetry characterised by a slow, wailing chant. *Rara* is typically performed at funerals and other occasions of mourning. All these are full of metaphor, imagery, proverbs, chants, social commentaries and praise.

Oral Prose: Oral prose encompasses various forms of narrative storytelling, including: **Folktales**, **historical narratives**, ***Itan***, **Proverbs**, ***Owe***. **Folk tales** are a form of storytelling that typically features animals as characters and conveys moral lessons. Finnegan (2012:307) notes that "the existence of stories in Africa is well known" and that these stories "are a rich source of imagery and succinct expression on which more elaborate forms can draw." **Historical Narratives** are about storytelling that recounts historical events, genealogies, and the origins of communities. Finnegan (2012:359) notes that "historical narratives" are "regarded locally as true" and "depict the deeds of human rather than supernatural heroes." Proverbs are concise sayings that convey wisdom about life, relationships, and values. Finnegan (2012:379) notes that "proverbs seem to occur almost everywhere in Africa" and that they are "a rich source of imagery and succinct expression on which more elaborate forms can draw"

Oral Drama: This encompasses various forms of dramatic performance, which include **Masquerades** and **Ritual Performances**. **Masquerades** are dramatic performances featuring masked performers who claim to embody spirits or ancestors. Finnegan (2012: 494) notes that masquerades are widespread in this part of Africa and take many different forms but seem to be especially developed in the southern (forest) areas. **Ritual Performances** are dramatic performances associated with religious rituals, festivals, and ceremonies. Proverbs, incantations, divination poems, and songs integral to festivals and rituals are central to the tradition (Adedeji, 1971:136).

Drum Language and Musical Performance: Drum language involves the transmission of words

through drum beats and other musical instruments. Drum language was used for various purposes, including announcements, names, proverbs, and poetry. Finnegan (2012: 470) notes that "this type of expression is a highly skilled and artistic one and adds to the verbal resources of the language."

Oral Performer

The oral performer occupies a central position in Nigerian oral literature traditions. Onwuegbuche (2024: 20) notes that "the performer of oral literature, therefore, gives body to the material, formulates it and realises it within regulated and specified events such as funerals, title-taking ceremonies, and many others." They are: **Court Poets, Freelance Poets and Part-time Poets.** Court poets are performers attached to royal courts, performing panegyric poetry that praises rulers and their achievements (Akinyemi 2026; Lawal 2025:1). Court poets are recognised as official custodians of historical memory and genealogies, and their performances serve not merely as entertainment but as significant political and cultural acts that legitimise royal authority. They are attached to the monarch and the community. Freelance poets are performers who move from place to place seeking wealthy patrons (Finnegan 2012: 93). Part-time poets are individuals who earn their living through other occupations but perform oral poetry on specific occasions to supplement their income (Finnegan 2012: 99).

Purpose of African Oral Literature in Nigeria

Oral literature serves important social functions in Nigerian culture. Afolabi (2002: 25) notes that oral literature in Africa "is used for definite purposes in the society. It serves similar functions as written literature. Apart from the aesthetic function of satisfying the emotional needs of people, it is used to educate, inform, promote unity and solidarity, entertain, propagate ideas and norms and values, and correct anomalies in society. Finnegan (2012:14) emphasises that oral literature is embedded in social contexts: "Oral pieces are not composed in the study and later transmitted through the impersonal and detached medium of print, but tend to be directly involved in the occasions of their actual utterance." Oral literature is "specifically 'occasional,' in that it is designed for and arises from particular situations like funerals, weddings, celebrations of victory, soothing a baby, accompanying work."

Relationship of African Oral Performance and the Growth of Christianity in Nigeria from the 19th Century to the 21st Century

The arrival of Christian missionaries in the 19th century represents one of the most significant religious transformations in modern African history, yet this growth cannot be adequately understood without examining the crucial role played by African oral literature performance traditions found in narrative storytelling, poetic chants, songs, proverbs, drum language, and dramatic rituals in mediating, translating and indigenising the Christian message. These traditions fostered receptiveness, deeper conversion, and other spiritual and physical experiences. It also sustained community engagement across the missionary, prophetic and contemporary movements. According to Ajayi (1989), the early missionaries faced significant challenges because of the prevalence of African traditional religions, resistance from local rulers, and the difficulty of translating Christian concepts into indigenous languages. As a result, indigenous responses were varied; some embraced Christianity enthusiastically, others resisted, and many appropriated Christian teachings selectively, integrating them with traditional beliefs and practices. Missionaries became performers of the Christian message, preaching and giving sermons orally, translating hymns into local languages and teaching them through oral performance. Meanwhile, the oral nature of hymn transmission was evident as Udoh (2023: 133) notes, "many of the earlier attempts were either not in written form or were not preserved for a long time." The missionaries also preached and

gave their sermons orally. Some of these sermons must have come through storytelling. However, the audience was the African people, which is a significant aspect of oral literature.

The early twentieth century witnessed the emergence of prophetic movements and African Independent Churches (AICs) that played a significant role in the growth of Christianity in Nigeria. These movements were characterised by their extensive use of oral literature performance, emphasis on healing and prophecy, and integration of numerous indigenous cultural elements. The AICs movements emphasised prayer, healing, and spiritual warfare, with worship characterised by singing, drumming, dancing, and prophetic utterances. They created new choruses, forms call-and-response singing, poetic chanting patterns, using the indigenous tune, making proverbial speech, and narrative structures for Christian worship. As Ayandele (1978: 389) observed, "The songs of the Aládúrà, which match the emotionalism of their worship, again a distinctly African element are not the compositions of Europeans and Americans, nor are they sung to alien tunes. They are evocative, sometimes spontaneous compositions." In Nigerian Christian worship, transformation occurs as worshippers move from everyday consciousness to heightened spiritual awareness, experience healing and deliverance, or are "slain in the spirit." The oral performances in these contexts facilitate personal and communal transformation, making the worship experience both spiritually powerful and culturally resonant.

In the twenty-first century, the nexus between oral performance and Christianity continues to evolve, increasingly shaped by increased civilisation, media, technology, and globalisation. The tradition of adapting oral forms for Christian purposes remains vibrant and has expanded into new genres and platforms. One significant development is the emergence of Gospel Apala music. Originating from the traditional Yoruba Apala genre, known for its highly proverbial folklore and percussive instruments such as the *dundun* drum and *sekere*, Gospel Apala has metamorphosed into a powerful form of Christian worship (Ojo, 2023:106). Gospel Apala music encapsulates indigenous knowledge contained in oral literature, employing stylistic devices such as repetition, rhetorical questions, personification, loan words, code-mixing/switching, and proverbs which garnish the metamorphosed music (Ojo, 2023:106). Examples of this type of Gospel artist are Sade Osoba, Yomi Olabisi, and Boiz Olorun (Ojo, 2023:106). Another example is Adeyemo Oluwatobiloba Sunday, known as 'Woli Apete.' He is also very good at Apala Gospel music. Bukola Akinade also uses Yoruba native musical tune known as *Senwele* to sing the gospel. She is called 'SenweleJesu.' We have others too that are not into Apala and Senwele but have used oral literary means in music to preach and give gospel messages to Nigerian society.

We have contemporary gospel music artists such as Esther Igbekele. She represents another dimension of this contemporary dynamic. Known for her "energetic and unconventional style" (Tribune Online, 2026: 1), she is good at dramatically singing to address drug addiction. Tope Alabi, Bukola Bekes, Bisi Alawiye, Bidemi Olaoba and Yinka Alaseyori have been known for using proverbs and idiomatic expressions to sing praises and preach the gospel to society. Elijah Akintunde uses oral literature to tell stories through his gospel music. Remilekun Amos inherited the Ilaje native music style from his father to sing the Gospel. Also are Nathaniel Bassey and Mercy Chinwo, who perform gospel arts through Igbo native tones. The late Osinachi Nwachukwu was very good at oral performance in Igbo songs until close to her death in April 2022. Shekso Bassey performs with Hausa native musical tones. These people have organised praise programmes, concerts, and have sung at open-air crusades on themes like: praises, thanksgiving and adoration to God, salvation, God's miracles, forgiveness, unity, holiness, heaven, death, love among brethren, commitment, and dedication to God's work.

Furthermore, there is Gospel Drama, with the Mount Zion Faith Ministry playing a leading role. It was founded by Mike Bamiloye in August 1985. Included in the acting team are his wife, Gloria Bamiloye, their children and other drama artists. He has been able to train many drama artists and has formed a group called 'All Nigerian Conference Evangelical Drama Ministers' (ANCEDRAM). They have staged many plays and produced many gospel dramas in the African context. A good example is the film *Agbara Nla*, *The Ultimate Power*, *Ide Esu Devil's Bondage*, *One Careless Night*, *Unprofitable Servant*, *Ibere Opin Aye*, *The Beginning of the End*, *Lost Forever*, *The Perilous Times*, *Abejoye* (a native King Maker who contextualises the gospel through his salvation) and many others. As observed, the ANCEDRAM acted in a film titled *Esin Ajoji, Strange Religion*. In addition, the clergy and the leaders of the church in contemporary times use African oral literature performance traditions known as narratives like storytelling, poetic chants, songs, proverbs, and folklore to present their sermons, teachings, and preachings, as it was with 19th-century missionaries and the 20th-century leaders of the AICs.

Christianity in these three centuries in Nigeria has witnessed tremendous growth. The audience of these performances was the congregation. The use of aesthetic mega churches, technology, social media platforms, Pentecostal prowess and entertainment strategies alongside oral literature has helped the growth of Christianity. Schechner argues that performance involves "restored behaviour," which refers to "physical, verbal, or virtual actions that are not-for-the-first-time" (Schechner, 2002:35). In the Nigerian Christian context, restored behaviour included the adaptation of indigenous oral literary forms, such as call-and-response singing, poetic chanting patterns, proverbial speech, and narrative structures for Christian worship. These behaviours were not invented anew but restored and transformed for new religious purposes.

Effects and Implications of Oral Performance on the Growth and Development of Christianity in Nigeria

Below are discussions on the effects and the implications of oral literary performance on the growth and the development of Christianity in Nigeria:

Participatory worship: One of the most significant effects of oral literature performance on Nigerian Christianity is the development of participatory worship. The participatory dimension of oral performance has been carried over into Christian worship, where congregations actively participate through singing, clapping, dancing, and responding to preaching (Omojola, 2024:115). As Omojola observes, the integration of Yorùbá music into Christian worship presents interesting perspectives about identity construction, with worshipers engaging physically through dance and rhythmic response (Omojola, 2024:116). In Nigerian Christian worship, worshippers are not passive spectators but active participants who contribute to the creation of the worship experience. Fasipe (2021) explains that West African preachers in oral culture often dialogue with listeners after narration, and "people learn to own the story by singing it, dancing it, drumming it, and dramatizing it." This participation helps them pass on what they have learned to others (Fasipe, 2021). This participatory worship has been characteristic of missionary, prophetic, and Pentecostal movements alike (Ayegboyin, 2005:40; Kalu, 2008:87; Ojo, 2006). Participatory worship has several benefits. It creates a sense of community and belonging, facilitates emotional engagement with the faith, and allows for the expression of faith in culturally resonant forms. The call-and-response patterns, communal singing, and participatory storytelling of Nigerian Christian worship create dynamic worship experiences that have contributed to the growth of Christianity (Gifford, 2004).a

Easy Transfer of Spiritual Legacies

In Nigerian Christianity, some spiritual legacies are transferred through songs, testimonies, sermons, prayers and stories. These oral forms are easily memorized and transmitted, allowing for the continuation of religious traditions across generations. The oral nature of these legacies makes them accessible to illiterate populations and ensures their wide dissemination. This transfer of spiritual legacies has been evident across missionary, prophetic, and Pentecostal movements (Ajayi, 1989; Kalu, 2008; Ojo, 2006). The transfer of spiritual legacies through oral literature performance is particularly important in contexts where written records are limited. Songs, testimonies, and stories preserve the memory of religious experiences and teachings, ensuring their transmission to future generations.

Effective Memorisation of Large Spiritual Bible Passages

In Nigerian Christianity, the use of songs, chants, and rhythmic recitation facilitates the memorization of Scripture. Many Nigerian Christians can recite large portions of the Bible from memory, a skill developed through oral performance. As observed, memorization is particularly important in contexts where Bibles are scarce or where literacy levels are low. The memorization of Scripture through oral performance also facilitates its internalization and application. When Scripture is memorized through song or chant, it becomes part of the individual's consciousness, shaping their thoughts and actions.

Empowerment of Women and Youth

Oral literature performance has contributed to the empowerment of women and youth in Nigerian Christianity. Omojola (2024) examines the role of vocal performance among Yorùbá female chiefs and the songs of kings' wives, highlighting how women have historically been at the forefront of performance (Omojola, 2024:113). This tradition of female performance has carried over into Christian contexts, where women have found opportunities for leadership through singing, testimony, and other oral performances. Similarly, youth have found opportunities for expression through Christian music, drama, and other oral performances. The participatory nature of oral performance has provided young people with a voice in the church community. Kalu (2008: 87-88) notes that "young boys and girls" were at the forefront of charismatic movements, "conducting large revival meetings." The empowerment of women and youth through oral literature performance has implications for the broader society. It provides opportunities for leadership and expression that might otherwise be unavailable, and it contributes to the development of skills in communication and public performance.

Creating Communities of Faith

The participatory nature of oral performance, with its emphasis on audience involvement, facilitated the formation of cohesive religious communities. Finnegan (2012: 12-13) notes that "it is common for the performer to involve his listeners directly." Schechner's concept of *communitas* (1987:13-14) illuminates how shared ritual participation creates bonds of solidarity. In Nigerian Christian contexts, oral literature performance creates communities of faith that transcend ethnic and social boundaries. The formation of prayer groups, singing societies, and church choirs provided structures for ongoing community engagement across missionary, prophetic, and Pentecostal movements (Ajayi, 1989; Kalu, 2008; Ojo, 2006). The use of familiar oral literary forms in Christian worship created a sense of cultural continuity that facilitated community formation.

Indigenising Christian Theology

The use of indigenous oral literary forms to express Christian teachings allowed for the development of theological understandings that were culturally resonant. This indigenization made Christian theology more accessible and meaningful to Nigerian audiences across missionary, prophetic, and Pentecostal movements (Ajayi, 1989; Kalu, 2008; Ojo, 2006). Samuel and Adekola

(2015: 4) document how Yoruba traditional music embodies "philosophical nuances embedded in agidigbo music with a view to understanding their educational values." Similarly, Nigerian Christian music and oral performances embody theological nuances that reflect the integration of Christian and indigenous worldviews. This indigenisation has contributed to the growth and vitality of Christianity in Nigeria.

Lack of Elaborate Administration in African Pentecostal Churches

One negative effect of the emphasis on oral literature performance in Nigerian Christianity is the lack of elaborate administration in African Pentecostal churches. The reliance on oral communication and the emphasis on charismatic leadership have sometimes resulted in weak administrative structures (Ayeboyin, 2005:38). In Pentecostal churches, the emphasis on charismatic leadership and oral communication has sometimes resulted in weak institutional structures. Kalu (2008: 137) observes that "growth has changed the leadership ethos" and that "the older generation of Pentecostal leadership institutionalised and sought new imageries for legitimising their positions". The lack of elaborate administration can lead to problems of accountability, financial mismanagement, inconsistencies in teaching and practice and conflicts over leadership.

Overpraise and Hero Worship of Church Leaders through Oral Exaggerations: The tradition of oral praise poetry has been carried over into Nigerian Christianity. While praise of leaders can be positive, it can also lead to overpraise and hero worship. Ayeboyin (2005:42) discusses how oral theological expressions can sometimes lead to excessive veneration of leaders. He notes that the "Yoruba oral Pentecostal Christology" often elevates leaders to heroic status. Ojo (2006) documents how charismatic leaders are often portrayed in hyperbolic terms in their churches' oral traditions. Kalu (2008:112-113) discusses how the "big man of the big God" phenomenon in Pentecostalism can lead to excessive veneration of leaders. This overpraise can lead to leaders being placed on a pedestal, creating unrealistic expectations and vulnerabilities when their shortcomings as humans become apparent.

Lack of Documentation of Cogent Parts of the History of Some Churches: The oral nature of much of Nigerian Christian tradition has led to a lack of documentation of significant parts of the history of African Indigenous Pentecostal churches. Kalu (2008:7) notes that "in doing fieldwork on African Pentecostalism, many researchers have encountered the lack of interest shown by the leadership in their local histories." The lack of documentation means that some significant contributions to Nigerian Christianity may be lost to history. Ojo (2006) notes the difficulty of reconstructing the history of charismatic movements in Nigeria due to the lack of written records. Fasipe (2021) also acknowledges this challenge, noting that "since oral tradition depends on people's memory, facts can be changed or easily altered when someone forgets."

Carefree Attitude to Pastoral Training Due to Excessive Use of Oral Literature: The emphasis on oral literature performance has sometimes led to a lackadaisical attitude toward pastoral training. Kalu (2008:126-127) notes that "ministerial formation is a key component of mission" and that "the quality of Christianity in Africa would depend on how churches train their leadership." However, the emphasis on oral performance has sometimes led to a devaluation of formal theological education. Ojo (2006) documents how many charismatic leaders in Nigeria emerged from university settings without formal theological education, reflecting this devaluation. This carefree attitude to pastoral training can result in problems of theological inconsistency, doctrinal error, and

pastoral malpractice.

Recommendation

Religious leaders should sustain and develop oral literature performance traditions in worship and evangelism as vital expressions of faith that resonate with Nigerian audiences. Seminaries and theological institutions should provide training in oral performance skills preaching, music, storytelling, and drama complemented by rigorous theological education. Leaders must develop adequate administrative structures to ensure accountability, transparency, and effective governance, maintaining written records alongside oral traditions. Scholars should prioritize further research on how oral literature performance has shaped Nigerian Christianity across different regions, denominations, and historical periods. Policymakers should support the preservation and promotion of Nigerian oral literary traditions through funding for documentation, research, and cultural events. They should recognise the diversity of religious traditions—Christianity, Islam, and indigenous religions—and their oral performance expressions to promote religious tolerance. Oral literary traditions should be integrated into educational curricula at all levels to ensure their transmission to future generations. Finally, policymakers should support the expression of religious faith through oral literature performance, recognising its significance for religious freedom and cultural expression.

Conclusion

This article has examined the intricate relationship between African oral literature performance traditions and the growth of Christianity in Nigeria from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first century. The analysis has demonstrated that oral literature performance narrative storytelling, poetic chants, songs, proverbs, drum language, and dramatic rituals served as a crucial mediating medium for the Christian message, facilitating its appropriation and transformation by Nigerian audiences across missionary, prophetic, and Pentecostal movements.

The integration of oral literature performance into Nigerian Christianity has transformed religious practice in terms of gospel propagation and has contributed to the emergence of different waves of Christianity throughout the period under study. Oral literature has also helped reshape Nigerian culture into the modern age. It has strengthened the bond of social networks as Christianity continues to grow. The oral literature performance traditions of Nigeria have been a vital part of this expansion, demonstrating the creative and dynamic nature of African Christianity from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first century.

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