

## **The Use of Indigenous Musical Genre in Christian Worship: A Case of *Ebibindwom* (Akan Sacred Lyrics) in the Methodist Church – Ghana.**

Joshua Alfred Amuah

**ABSTRACT:** The expression *Ebibindwom* (Akan Sacred Lyrics) are traditional songs used in Christian worship specifically in the Methodist Church-Ghana. The paper unravels the circumstances that led to the institution of this traditional musical genre in the Methodist Church. It also attempts to provide an understanding and direction as to how *Ebibindwom*, a traditional musical genre, has been performed in and outside the church settings. The paper further provides the distinctive stylistic and expressive idioms that have impacted on the general liturgical and musical outlook of Methodism in Ghana, to serve as an aid to the younger generation who look down upon traditional musical genres, to participate in, and sustain the singing of *Ebibindwom*.

### **Introduction**

In this paper I present a historical background of the Methodist Church as well as *Ebibindwom*. The paper further dilates on the performance setting of the musical genre and provides musical characteristics which include scale, melody, rhythm, harmony, form and structure and the repertoire at various occasions on the Christian calendar. It also offers social functions of *Ebibindwom* and concludes with the impact of *Ebibindwom* on general liturgical and musical outlook of Methodism.

### **The Start of Methodist Church in Ghana**

The present Methodist Church descended from the Wesleyan Mission in 1835, the year in which Joseph Dunwell of the Methodist Missionary Society in England arrived at Cape Coast to start the mission's work in the western part of Ghana. He was the Methodist Missionary to Ghana. However, it must be pointed out that it was through the efforts of small group of African Christians,

led by one William de Graft, which brought the Rev. Dunwell to the country, in an attempt to start Methodism in Cape Coast and other parts of Ghana.

On a successful attempt to start the church, singing remained a powerful means of spreading Methodism in Ghana, and most of the songs were hymns of the British Methodist. 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'. The non-literate, semi-literate and the older women in the church did not participate in the singing of the English hymns.

When Rev. Dunwell died in 1838, Rev. Thomas Birch Freeman held the fort to see to the growth and development of the church in Cape Coast-Ghana, the then Gold Coast. Rev Freeman on realizing the non-participating attitude of the illiterate, semi-literate and older women in the singing of the hymns which was primarily the singing culture of the church encouraged them to substitute sacred (biblical) text to traditional tunes. This therefore gave birth to *Ebibindwom*

Methodist Church-Ghana, because of the large number of illiterates, semi-literates and older women in the church, whose ability to sing the English Hymns or their translations was a big challenge when the church was transplanted in Ghana.

*Ebibindwom* or Akan Sacred Lyrics, as they are ascribed, are traditional songs and have developed out of certain musical types as a result of social change. These musical types that have existed for some time are still recognized and performed in the Fanti area where it originated from. It has been challenging tracing the musical background of *Ebibindwom*. A very reliable source has been the *asafo* which has also served as the source of many musical types. A second source according to I.D. Riverson who researched in *Adenkum*<sup>2</sup> music or festivals, such as *Akwambo*<sup>3</sup> which takes place at the beginning of the new year, and which includes thanksgiving and cleansing rites.

---

<sup>1</sup>Adolf A. Turkson: "The Evolution of *Ebibindwom*" in *Research Review Vol. 9 No.3* (1975), p. 5

<sup>2</sup>(lit. calabash)

<sup>3</sup>path clearing festival

However, not all Akan Sacred Lyrics can be drawn to an original traditional song. Though many constructed on traditional lines owe their inspiration to a biblical passage.

Rev. Dr. S.G. Williamson also proposes two probable directions in which the traditional background of the Akan Sacred lyric may be sought.

“Thus in the folk-tale *Anansesem*<sup>4</sup>, it is traditional for the narration to suffer interruption (as the sermon is interrupted by the introduction of a lyric). Such interruptions may be either by way of diversion, similar to the entr’acte (*break between acts of play*) in Western dramatic production, or may serve the purpose of commentary on the story or some aspect of it. These musical interludes may take the form of a regular, metrical song or of recitative (call) and response.<sup>5</sup>

The lyric may be equated to the *Mboguo*<sup>6</sup> in that it provides a commentary on the sermon and brings out some interesting points in the sermon. But there are some differences between *Mboguo* and *Ebibindwom* in their musical aspects. Musically, the *Mboguo* is shorter than the *Ebibindwom*.

because it was the belief of the Methodists that *Ebibindwom* could evoke and invite the Holy Spirit at such times.

### Setting of Performance

Nketia states:

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.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup>story telling

<sup>5</sup>S.G. Williamson, “The lyric in the Fante Methodist Church in Africa” in *Journal of the International African Institute*. Vol. XXVIII No. 2 (1958),

<sup>6</sup>song-interlude in an *Ananse* story situation

<sup>7</sup>a voluntary group made up of mostly women, in the Methodist Church.

<sup>8</sup>J. H. Kwabena Nketia, *The Gramophone and the Contemporary African Music in the Gold Coast*, (1974), p.31

In the Methodist Church, the chapel has been the main place for *Ebibindwom* performance but the church also permits performances to be extended to social functions outside the church. These social functions include, outdoorings, wedding, and funeral.

### **Social Functions**

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 musical occasions. In the contemporary social environment however, all four occasions call for the use of music. The Christ's Little Band which is responsible for the rendition of *Ebibindwom* does not feature at puberty; however, it features prominently in the rest of the events of the life cycle.

Sutherland Addy asserts:

The most dramatic manifestation of *Ebibindwom*, performance in the life cycle is when sung in the church or at a funeral, where the entire congregation/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 colleague".<sup>9</sup>

### **The Repertoire**

*Ebibindwom* is obviously admired on the strength of its textual content for the achievement of the purpose of evangelism. It is also principally in respect of its elements of melody and rhythm that *Ebibindwom* enjoys much of its importance. When we sing, the absolute elements, that is melody, harmony, intervals or rhythm do matter, but the text, the vehicle on which the message the composer intends to bring to the listening public is of prime importance. In a culture where documentation of events is not done, the tendency has been to rely on oral tradition for historical facts and other pieces of information. One of the greatest means of keeping facts is through the medium of song *Ebibindwom* as a

---

<sup>9</sup>E. Sutherland Addy, "Women and Verbal Arts in the Oguaa-Edina Area" in *Research Review (NS) Vol. 14 No. 2 (1998)*, p. 9

song-type has since its creation reflected 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.<sup>10</sup>

On the same issue, Nketia asserts “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”<sup>11</sup>

In that vein, Christ’s Little Band has categorized their songs under the following:

**General Songs;** *Nhyira aka abrefo* (Blessed are the meek) *Mihia wo mber nyina* (I need thee every hour) *Oguanhwefo pa* (The good shepherd) *Woeker wo* (You have been assessed) **Thanksgiving/Praise/Adoration** *Hen koma Nsa nye ndze* (Our hearts, hands and voices) *Qsabarimba* (The warrior) *Qnye wo dze daa* (It should be yours for ever) *Akwan nyina mu yedze ndaase bema wo* (In all ways we shall thank thee)

**Funeral** *Ahenkyew* (The crown) *Onyimpa tse ase yi* (As man lives) **Heaven** (Heaven) *Da bi da* (In the Future) **Parables;** *Talent no* (The talent) *Kwa wura na apaafu no* (The Landlord and the labourers) *Dua bi* (Any tree) *Mbaabun du no* (The ten virgins)

**Petition;** *Menye kronkron rekasa* (I am talking to the Holy One) *Buebue sor ntokura* (Open the windows of Heaven) *Ma me Nyansa* (Give me wisdom) *Yeaboa ano* (We have congregated)

---

<sup>10</sup>Turkson, *Research Review* p.7

<sup>11</sup>J. H. Kwabena Nketia, *The Music of Africa*. W.W. Norton and Company Inc., New York, (1974), p 203

**Good Friday and Passion;** *Nkye mow<sub>o</sub> dom oo* (I was a custodian of multitude) *Oemmbua hwee* (He did not give any response) *Minnyim noo* (I don't know him) *Bon Ben?* (What crime)

**The Birth of Christ;** *Qba no oawo no* (The child is born) *Enyansafo no rok<sub>o</sub> o* (The wise men are on their way) *Nedzin ara nye Jesus* (His name is Jesus) *Aba mu de mbre nkonhyefo ahyehye* (It has occurred as prophesied)

#### **Formal Organization of *Ebibindwom***

The beauty and success of *Ebibindwom* is to a large extent dependent on the vocal melody.

#### **Melody**

The melodic features of *Ebibindwom* are closely related to the structure of the language. This is due to the major intention of the song to communicate in clear precise and comprehensive way. The melodic organization in the *Ebibindwom* therefore follows speech contour. This is so because Akan, the language in which the *Ebibindwom* is found, is a tonal language and as such influences the melodic and rhythmic patterns.

#### **Rhythm**

The melody of *Ebibindwom* employs two types of rhythmic organization. The introductory part which is the recitative is in free rhythm (and as such there is no feeling of a regular basic pulse) and is based on the soloists' subjective choice of pulse. The rhythm that follows the recitative is in strict time and is usually danceable and has its structure in duple or triple time. There are times where the strict time is rendered in a relaxed manner, especially when it is being performed by soloists. In such cases, handclapping or some simple idiophones such as: - castanets, clappers and bells are used to articulate the time lines to enhance the basic pulse of *Ebibindwom*:

#### **Harmony**

The scale of *Ebibindwom*, heptatonic, makes use of harmony of thirds and sixths with the chorus at the terminals of musical sentences or at the end of sections.

Heptatonic traditions are nowhere confined to thirds or their inversions (sixths), even though these always predominate. Nor is the progression always parallel. There are almost always variations in melodic direction, which give rise to three-part

structure at points of variation. Methods of harmonizing *Ebibindwom* are rather fluid; there is no strict apportioning of parts. Two or three parts may arise and sometimes a supporting voice may sing above the main melody in a kind of descant or counter-melody. This is often done spontaneously, but in a manner that is aesthetically in tune with *Ebibindwom*, as Nketia observes: “The performers usually add their parts in their own way; drawing on their experience of part singing in Western music particularly hymns tunes and simple school songs which most of them are usually familiar”.<sup>12</sup>

Harmony in *Ebibindwom* also follows a kind of progression. Thus, after the introductory call or the recitative, the chorus comes in harmonizing on either the submediant or subdominant to the dominant chord, depending on the note(s) in the solo, after which the chorus joins the cantor till the end in a Dorian mode though it starts on C.

### **Form and Structure**

Form in *Ebibindwom* is a bit complex; though the songs that are drawn from the Akan tradition rely on the basic call-and-response form so typical of African songs in general. With its own sort of musical dialogue, this form allows for necessary involvement and participation of the whole church.

The real form of *Ebibindwom* derives partly from the context in which the music is used and partly the form of the text on which the melody is based. The structure of *Ebibindwom* grows out of a performance situation. This is so because the cantor who leads the singing has ample room for extemporization.

---

<sup>12</sup>J. H. Kwabena Nketia, “The Gramophone and Contemporary African Music in the Gold Coast”. A paper presented at the proceedings of the 4<sup>th</sup> annual conference of the Western Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of Ibadan. (1956), p. 4.

Amuah declares:

Traditionally, the basic structure is that, the lead singer calls out a line or phrase with the rest of the group (chorus) responding on the last note (chord). The opening line or lines, which are the recitative, become a thematic statement, which introduce the song. This also serves as the first section. 'A'. The second section 'B' is the chorus and functions as a type of exegesis and application of the opening statement. As the lead singer presents this development, the group continues to respond to the presentation of new material with its repetition response in most cases the 'A' phrase that keeps the opening theme continually before them.<sup>13</sup>

This development section not only serves as an exegetical section but also provides a means of musical elaboration and extension of the song as judged by the song leader. It is at this point that the song leader (soloist) may choose to lengthen the *Ebibindwom* by repeating the basic textual phrases and making it more danceable to be accompanied by instruments.

### **Singing Style**

Performance and voice production are problems that are closely associated with the structure of *Ebibindwom*. In the performance of *Ebibindwom*, open voice quality and an evenness or gradual decrease in breath force towards the end of a long musical sentence are employed by the cantor. Soloists often sing *Sprechstimme*<sup>14</sup>.

A singing voice may change to speaking voice in a syllable, or group of syllables, particular words, or even phrases.

### **Instrumentation**

*Ebibindwom* as a vocal musical type has the voice as its principal and most important instrument. By reason of its links to earlier Ghanaian traditional musical types, hand Clapping has been a

---

<sup>13</sup>Joshua Amuah, Performers of *Ebibindwom* and their music: A case of Good Shepherd *Ebibindwom* group, Bubuaashie, Accra. Unpublished M.Phil Thesis, (2001).

<sup>14</sup>a special voice quality lying between singing voice and speaking voice

normal way of providing percussive effects and maintaining a rhythmic pulse for singing in African communities. In its combined function as a metronome and a percussion instrument, clapping beats may not coincide with melodic accents. Often the clapping sounds fall squarely between stressed voice tones and constitute a regular off-beat.

Although *Ebibindwom* as they are sung today, require a number of vocal parts with hand clapping, other instruments have slowly worked their way into the song presentation. In the early stages of its development, the group hardly felt free even to snap their fingers as they asked themselves if this was acceptable for the worship of God. Today an ensemble of instruments may be employed in the presentation of *Ebibindwom*, depending on the availability of the instrument itself and the availability of sufficiently developed instrumentalists. The instruments that have been incorporated are: *Awosowa (Axatse)* – The Gourd rattle. According to Savage

The gourd rattle, common with the people of Volta Region of Ghana as a traditional musical instrument and given under the name *Axatse* (pron: *Ahacheh*) has become an important popular music instrument known as *Cabasa* in Afro-Cuban and popular music circles, this instrument is in the form of an empty gourd with ruffed sides encased in a network of metal, pebble, seed or plastic beads. In sound production, the *Cabasa* is held by the neck with the thigh and the palm of the other hand. It may also be played, held in both palms or on a cord around the production to scrape or rattle the beads against the gourd with a circular motion of the wrist.<sup>15</sup>

The *Frikyiwa* – Iron hand castanet fixed into the thumb and middle finger and played by one of the cantors. The *Dondo* – Hour-glass drum, sometimes two *dondo* are played but usually there is one. The *dondo* may play some verbally based pieces that acknowledge the recitative expertise of the cantors but its rhythms

---

<sup>15</sup>S. Savage, *The Billboard Book of Rhythm*. Billboard Publications Inc., New York 1989 p. 53

keep close to the time provided by the hand clapping and *frikyiwa*. The variation is achieved by increasing the tautness of the drumhead.

This is done by applying pressure to the strings that join the drum heads together when no pressure has been applied to these strings; the membranes are lax and produce the lowest note of the drum. As pressure is applied, the drum heads increase in tautness yielding higher notes. Gradations of pitch are thus possible between the lowest note or the position of maximum tension and the highest note or the position of maximum tension. The *Tontom – Congas* – have also come to be added in the performance of *Ebibindwom*. (The name “*conga*” comes from a Latin dance that was popularized in the United States in the 1940’s)

Savage states:

*Conga* drums are usually played in sets of two, providing a lower and a higher pitch (like the local *atumpan*) which can generate two-voiced rhythm. An enormous number of sounds and pitches can be coaxed from the conga drum set; even a *portamento* (a sliding shift of pitch) effect can be created by sliding or pushing the fore-finger of one hand across the drum head while striking the head with the other hand.<sup>16</sup>

In the performance of *Ebibindwom* therefore the first part ‘A’ which takes the form of a recitative is sung unaccompanied. It is this portion that is dominated by a free rhythm. In the second part ‘B’ which is up-tempo where there is an interplay of call and response, and opportunity is provided for some form of bodily movement, one finds the use of hand clapping and other instrumental resources such as *marakas* (gourd-rattle) *mfrikyiwa* (Castanet) drums for example *dondo* (hour glass drum) and *tontom* (*congas*).

---

<sup>16</sup>Savage, *The Billboard of Rhythm*

## Conclusion and Impact on General Liturgical and Musical Outlook of Methodism

Since the inception of this musical genre in the Methodist church, the illiterate semiliterate and the older women have enjoyed the participation in the singing of the church because, through *Ebibindwom*, the congregation is able to receive and relate to Christianity as if it originated from Africa.

Worshippers always asserted that when they listen to *Ebibindwom* and participate in the performance; they equally understand and enjoy the scriptures as if they have listened to the sermon. Worshippers claim the liturgy looks more of African and provides strong evidence and support to which Christianity permeates the current Ghanaian way of life.

With the proliferation of electronic musical instruments, and its attendant formation of Praises Team (Gospel Band) in the church, the youth have drifted to performing with these instruments than to participate in the singing of *Ebibindwom*. The Singing Band and the choir are no exception though; they constitute part of the chorus and join in responding to the cantor at church service.

At early morning and late evening services where visibility becomes a challenge, hymn books are left out for *Ebibindwom* to take precedence over all singing cultures of the church, because the singing of *Ebibindwom* does not require hymn books.

Towards the sustenance of *Ebibindwom*, the Methodist church, Ghana, should assign the youth with the singing of this genre as part of their obligation. On first Sundays as it is done to the reading of scriptures, the youth and other organizations in the church should be made to take over the responsibility of singing of *Ebibindwom* under the direction of the Christ's Little Band. The learning process can also be facilitated by asking the youth to participate in the rehearsal periods of the Christ's Little Band.

Not only should the youth participate in the learning and performance processes, but must also be made to compete in the singing of the genre as the choir has been doing to the singing of hymns, canticles and anthems. This in a long way and to a very large extent would promote an effective way of sustaining the singing of *Ebibindwom* in the church.

Though the school music programme is currently dominated with African elements, there is also the need for music teachers to be equipped with methodology and content to enable them impart this musical genre to pupils/students.