



Music in the Life of the African Church

Roberta King

with Jean Ngoya Kidula, James R. Krabill, and Thomas Oduro



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To the unsung heroes of the African church who have put their
faith to music and led in singing this faith to their peoples.

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Preface

Music in the Life of the African Church seeks to energize conversations between music, culture, and the church. After more than 500 years between the first encounter of Western Christianity and African traditional religion south of the Sahara, the African church continues to grapple with questions and issues surrounding culture and music in profound ways. One of the major characteristics of African Christianity today is the emergence of culturally appropriate music that has breathed vitality into the life of the church, both in people as witnesses and as present at worship. This has come about at a time when scholars are recognizing the phenomenal growth of the church in Africa in the twentieth century and beyond. They note that, "From an estimated 4 million professing Christians in 1900 African Christianity has grown to over 300 million adherents by the year 2000" (Shaw 2000, 37). This widespread growth is making front page news, especially because the church's unabated growth means that there is a major shift of Christianity into the southern hemisphere (see Jenkins 2002). One of the untold stories of the church's phenomenal growth is the central role of music and its dynamic interaction with African cultures, which is the topic of this book.

The story of music in the life of the African church reveals the central role that different cultural music can, and often does, play in effectively bringing the good news of Jesus Christ into new contexts. It identifies struggles, tensions, and issues that arise when

people of differing cultures encounter one another. Such struggles and issues are not limited to Africa alone but are regularly encountered in today's global world because missions in the church continue to introduce new people to Jesus Christ. Music is always linked to cultural contexts. Historically, Western Christianity has not adequately recognized this. Even though music has always played a significant role in the life of the Western church, recognizing the validity of indigenous music found around the world has largely been ignored, which has resulted in wholesale rejection of cultural music. Understanding music as cultural expressions and identity markers is new to the Western church in the twenty-first century, but it is absolutely essential. Thus this work not only tells the story about music in the African church but also brings to light critical issues and insights from African church music that are relevant to the universal church in both global and local contexts.

The global church needs to continually strive to make the gospel more relevant to particular cultural contexts in ways that encourage authentic interaction with the living God. This work seeks to raise categories and paradigms for the church in going about its task of sharing the gospel cross-culturally and living in Christian fellowship as it relates to music. Such highly complex tasks require a forging of new academic and theological links. This study brings together the disciplines of ethnomusicology, theology, and missiology in a unique way, creating a new paradigm that provides lenses for examining music in relation to culture, theology, spirituality, and the church. Although the book is based on our African experience, we believe there are principles and values that apply to any number of world-wide contexts. We address such questions as:

1. How do culture and worldview shape African music?
2. What is music in African cultural life?
3. What was the music culture that Western missionaries brought with them to Africa?
4. What happens to music when people of differing cultures encounter one another?
5. How has music in the African church developed?
6. What processes of contextualization has music undergone to make it meaningful to the people of Africa?

7. How is African Christian music informed and nourished by the scriptures?
8. What are the lessons and principles gleaned from the African church that foster strong and vital faith communities both in Africa and the global church today?

Music in the Life of the African Church is in no way meant to serve as an encyclopedia documenting music in every African church or culture. Rather, we have chosen to recount this untold story in an illustrative way with the goal of stimulating further reflection and conversation about the central role of music in the global church. This volume is not meant to be comprehensive. The African continent and church are too vast and remain beyond the scope of this volume. Although we acknowledge centuries of active interaction with the Christian faith on the African continent, our primary focus is on what has transpired during the last 150 years. Furthermore, we concentrate on sub-Saharan Africa and do not attempt to treat the realities of Christian communities in North Africa, such as the Coptic Church or various forms of Orthodox Christianity. Likewise, what is occurring between Christianity and Islam, Hinduism and various Eastern religions on the African continent would make for a fascinating and much needed area of research, but it is beyond the scope of this study.

Readers will soon note that our bibliographic references are drawn mainly from French and English sources; we have not drawn on materials in Portuguese that describe the church in Lusophone Africa. Our main concern was to find literature that examines the interface between the various aspects of church life and music. Unique to this work is the fact that much of our material is drawn from extensive research, fieldwork, and ministry that we each bring to the text. Each of us has more than twenty years of ministry experience in Africa, which is in addition to visits and other assignments in multiple locations across the continent. Thus we each draw from our experiences as broadly as possible—more particularly from where we have lived and traveled—predominantly in East, Central, and West Africa. Resulting from the desire to keep the volume limited in size and accessible to many and recognizing that there is a considerable amount of literature on music in the southern part of the continent already, we have not attempted to include southern Africa as a major focus. That is also a wonderful story of music in

the life of church, but it is one that is not adequately covered in this work. The current volume, nonetheless, makes a major contribution to studies in music, culture, and mission in relation to the church in both global and local contexts, which is an emerging subject that has suffered from a scarcity of materials.

Finally, *Music in the Life of the African Church* is written as a textbook that will serve as a valuable resource for seminary, Bible school, and Christian university students, church leaders, church musicians, worship leaders, missionaries, and those churches desiring to appreciate, value, and incorporate diverse cultural groups into their worship life. With its unique focus on music and its dynamic interaction with culture, the church in mission, biblical theology, and individuals within their cultural context, this volume is intended for those who have a passion for spreading what God has done in ways that dynamically energize the church. For as the psalmist declares, “All the nations you have made will come and worship before you, O Lord; they will bring glory to your name” (Ps 86:9). God is at work among the nations of Africa. They are bringing their worship to Yahweh, the creator God they have longed to know, and they are doing much of it through their music. We invite you to join us on this amazing journey of faith and grace.

Roberta R. King
Jean Ngoya Kidula
James R. Krabill
Thomas Oduro

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“It takes two hands to play a drum!” This well-known West African proverb highlights the importance of collaboration by expressing that nothing can be done without the help of others. Many people have played critical roles in seeing this volume come to fruition. For this we are extremely grateful and want to acknowledge the following institutions and people:

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1

Beginnings Music in the African Church

Roberta R. King

Birds of different rivers chatter differently.

—Ethiopian Proverb, *Amharic*¹

The dawn chorus sung by local birds on the African continent is glorious. Indeed, the rich variety and diversity of birds are staggering and immense. The birds' songs faithfully greet the new day with each rising of the sun. From the African fish eagle, flamingos, pied kingfishers, and weaverbirds on the shores of Lake Naivasha in Kenya to the contrasting cries of multicolored turacos and West African fish eagles along the river Comoe of Côte d'Ivoire,² each unique voice contributes to a grand and glorious doxology proclaiming God's glory. Their lively songs permeate the air. Indeed, they cannot be silenced as they create the local soundscape of their environment.

The birds of each river have their own unique chatter, or sound environment, as our Ethiopian proverb teaches. Yet their purpose is the same; they are each singing of life in their own context. This is also true of the African church and its music. The variety and diversity of music praising God in Africa are as rich and varied as the birds' songs. In profound ways, African church music reveals the life of Christian faith communities within their unique contexts, which are communities of believers seeking to know and understand who Jesus Christ is within their local setting.

MUSIC SCENES IN THE AFRICAN CHURCH

Music in the life of the African church is varied and highly diverse. Though there are many common elements, each local church generates its unique set of church dynamics. No one setting adequately describes music in the church. To begin to grasp the richness of music in the African church in light of the current global era, two musical vignettes provide illustrative windows on the myriad ways in which African peoples interact musically with their Christian faith.

Scene 1: Worship in the City, East Africa

It is a Sunday morning in August 2003. Numerous *Pajeros* and *Mercedes*—high end four-wheel drive and luxury vehicles—surround the Anglican Cathedral in Kampala, Uganda. Parking on the hill is difficult to find. The second of three services is about to begin; already there is standing room only. National leaders and university students rush to find their places. They crowd into the tightly filled sanctuary where many people are standing shoulder-to-shoulder. The sound system is at full volume, and electric guitars wail. An imported pipe organ, a robed choir, and the praise team join together to sing their songs of praise.



1.1 Nairobi Pentecostal Church on Valley Road. The church experienced explosive growth in the 1990s.