

[Grant on Brennan, 'Singing Yoruba Christianity: Music, Media, and Morality'](#)

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Vicki L. Brennan. *Singing Yoruba Christianity: Music, Media, and Morality*. African Expressive Cultures Series. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018. Illustrations. 230 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-03207-2; \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-03209-6.

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In *Singing Yoruba Christianity*, Vicki L. Brennan builds on years of relational work to present a case study of the Ayò ni o Church in Lagos, one of the larger congregations within Nigeria's Cherubim and Seraphim family of churches. At a time when Nigerian Christianity—especially its Pentecostal core—has drawn the passing attention of so many global observers, a study such as this, grounded in years of patient participation and listening, grows in importance. Insights derived from longitudinal experience cannot be faked. Brennan's core argument is that since the 1970s the Ayò ni o Church has sought to mediate divine authority, above all through music, to help its members navigate the times. As Nigeria and Lagos have grown, this guidance has taken the form of cultural creativity and innovation within the contours of what members understood as distinctly Yoruba values.

The Cherubim and Seraphim Church arose early in the twentieth century as what is now called an African-Initiated Church (AIC). Drawing both on Yoruba religion and Anglican liturgical practices, Cherubim and Seraphim believers, recognizable for their white robes, carved out a niche for themselves during the late colonial period and have continued to do so in the present day. As a new denomination within the fissile Cherubim and Seraphim movement, the Ayò ni o Church was founded in the 1970s by Nigerian expatriates returning home to participate in and enjoy the fruits of peace and growing prosperity from oil. During Brennan's years with the church shortly after the return to democracy, growing numbers of congregants were experiencing greater financial security than ever before—but were also facing new moral and social challenges, above all creeping economic inequality within the congregation.

The broader movement has never wanted for scholarly attention, and Brennan knows the literature well. For a few decades after J. D. Y. Peel's work in the 1960s (*Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba* [1969]), ethnographic and sociological studies on the Cherubim and Seraphim and similar movements appeared with some regularity. This focus has waned in recent years in favor of scholarship on Nigerian Pentecostalism, but this shift in attention does not mean that the mission-derived churches or the AICs have lost their vitality or innovative energies.

In *Singing Yoruba Christianity*, Brennan argues for a continued focus on the Cherubim and Seraphim, who have continued to grow (while nevertheless losing members to the flashier Pentecostals).

Brennan builds on older literature while adding a new element to great effect: the role of music—both live and recorded—in mediating between Cherubim and Seraphim religious arguments and congregants' lived experiences in twenty-first-century Lagos. Drawing on years of interviews with members of the Ayò ni o Church, including a spell as a member of the choir, Brennan displays great sensitivity to Yoruba music and oral culture in developing her argument.

The title of this book is its thesis at its most economical: the congregants felt that “the linking of Yoruba and Christian was mutually constitutive” (p. 185). That is, church members' core moral project is about the bridging of two ways of being in the world—they are Yoruba and they are Christian. This was no contradiction: congregants repeatedly stressed to Brennan that their Yorubanness and Christian-ness could become interdependent.

Understanding the inherent tension within that agenda, Brennan argues that music, and specifically songs, are the “central media through which religious, moral, and social ideas become possible and real” (p. 184). Hence the third word in the book's title and argument: Yoruba Christianity, as a moral community, is *sung* into existence, at least in the Cherubim and Seraphim Church. This argument is plausible, aligning as it does with much recent work in African ethnography and ethnomusicology. Brennan's argument is also plausible with respect to much recent work on African Christianity, although the author bypasses much of that field of research.

Singing Yoruba Christianity develops its argument over eight fairly dense chapters—there is very little superfluous detail here, although much of the theoretical work would have worked better at a slower pace—along with a preface, an epilogue, and a simple glossary of Yoruba terms. The introductory chapter introduces the core arguments. Broadly drawing on theoretical scholarship on media and mediation, Brennan argues that Cherubim and Seraphim modes of liturgy help congregants bridge the holy and eternal with their quotidian struggles in a rapidly developing megacity.

The second chapter narrates the early history of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church under Moses Orimolade and Christianah Abiodun, mostly in the 1920s. Brennan uses this history later in the book, when she analyzes its use in twenty-first-century internal politics within the movement—that is, the ways various leaders, in recent years, have asserted authority by their claims of faithfulness to the founders. In one fascinating anecdote, Brennan describes a dramatic moment of reverential stillness when a prophetess interrupts a sermon with a song. Brennan's subsequent queries among church members revealed the reason for the stillness: congregants understood the prophetess's song as a connection to the church's founding generation. The song's authority lay in its historicity.

The third chapter picks up in the period of the oil boom of the 1970s and the founding of the Ayò ni o Church as a new branch within the broader Cherubim and Seraphim movement. The oil boom brought with it several new challenges: the influx of money made possible a growing middle class but with it a growing Christian sense of the incommensurability between aspirations and realistic opportunities for meeting them. Brennan develops the drama of the moment with a detailed analysis of the congregation's first venture into recorded music: a 1978 cassette tape. This chapter is a delight—a great example of how much understanding may be gleaned from an artifact.

The fourth chapter continues in the same vein with a discussion of the feedback loop between

recordings and live music and draws in part on the author's experiences singing with the Ayò ni o Church choir in the early part of this century. The focus of this chapter is a song called "Take Control," which had initially been recorded in late 1993, in the context of an acute political crisis involving an election annulled by the military (an event that Ebenezer Obadare has argued was catalytic in Nigerian Pentecostal political consciousness in *Pentecostal Republic: Religion and the Struggle for State Power in Nigeria* [2018]). To "take control" was unmistakable as social commentary in 1993, and remained so ten years later, when an older woman interrupted a choir rehearsal to remind the choir that they were asking God to take control of their situation (p. 86).

Chapters 5 through 7 constitute the heart of the book. Each describes and analyzes aspects of the life of the church, interspersed with stories of various congregants in their diverse struggles in life, from single mothers to migrants from the countryside to business owners. It is in these stories that Brennan's abstract arguments about mediation begin to take on flesh. It is in these chapters, accordingly, that the subject's importance becomes clear: less flashy than the Pentecostal churches, to whom the Cherubim and Seraphim regularly lose members, the Ayò ni o Church provides real human connections, moral grounding, and spiritual power—and does so above all through music. Chapter 9 recapitulates the book's arguments through the lens of an annual event put on by one of the congregation's constituent *ẹgbẹ* societies. Here the "Yoruba values" of which Brennan's interlocutors regularly spoke becomes most clear.

Although *Singing Yoruba Christianity* is not intended as a work of history, the author navigates members' historical assertions well, complementing critical historical scholarship on the Cherubim and Seraphim churches with in-house publications. By treating the latter, some of which are intended as hagiography (and which narrate visions and miracles as evidence of divine presence and thus authority), as arguments about values, Brennan is able to show the ways church members use the logic of inheritance to think through problems in the present day. On the other hand, the author at times allows congregants' petty antagonisms toward Pentecostals to color her analysis, as in her description of a piece of musical theater in which Cherubim and Seraphim pilgrims avoid being deceived by Pentecostal preachers depicted as flamboyant scoundrels. At times dismissing Pentecostal churches for the transnational scope of their ambitions (such as consistent Pentecostal use of the English language in preaching and song), Brennan risks echoing earlier generations of outsiders who presumed to define cultural authenticity on behalf of Africans.

Obadare has argued that by 1999 (that is, before Brennan began fieldwork in Lagos), "Nigerian Christianity was more or less subsumed under the label of Pentecostalism," and that this alignment was held especially among the Yoruba.[1] If Obadare is correct—that Yoruba Pentecostal political thought in the twenty-first century has drawn on much older modes of leadership—Cherubim and Seraphim assertions of stewardship of traditional values begin to sound like sour grapes. Rather than simply recording and reproducing these claims, Brennan might have critically evaluated them.

Finally, aside from some engagement with ethnographers of African-Initiated and Pentecostal movements (Birgit Meyer, Ruth Marshall, and Paul Gifford, above all), there is only passing recognition or awareness of West African theological scholarship. While this book was not intended as a contribution to theological issues raised over the last three decades by Kwame Bediako, Ogbu Kalu, and above all Lamin Sanneh, much of Brennan's core argument comes off as incomplete without at least some acknowledgment of recent African Christian intellectual history.

These issues aside, *Singing Yoruba Christianity* is a welcome contribution to the literature on West African religion. Brennan's solid grounding in a single congregation over several years, and her subordination of theory to messy human realities commend her work, and her deliberate and methodical approach is rewarding, especially the author's empathetic profiles of individual members.

Note

[1]. Ebenezer Obadare, *Pentecostal Republic: Religion and the Struggle for State Power in Nigeria* (London: Zed Books, 2018), 71.

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