SONGS OF PRAISE:
GOSPEL MUSIC IN AN AFRICAN CONTEXT

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The Worship Tent, pitched at the heart of the University of Zimbabwe greens, reverberated and burst into life during the worship session at the opening of the World Council of Churches (WCC) Eighth Assembly on 3 December 1998 in Harare. A high point for the ecumenical movement, one was struck by the colour and diversity characterising the event. For an observer with an ear for music, the co-ordinated rhythms of African musical instruments and passionate singing were unmistakable. As Taungana (we are gathered) was belted out, its infectious beat proved enticing and people from different corners of the world found themselves swaying, clapping, dancing along and, even attempting the moving lyrics! This confirmed Sebastian Bakare’s observation that “when Africans dance, they express the joy of life in community, social solidarity, renewal and building of relationships, thus proclaiming their oneness.”

This article seeks to explore the impact of electronically recorded Christian music in Zimbabwe, popularly known as gospel music. Most of the Zimbabwean delegates in the scene described above were familiar with hymns sung in other denominations due to their availability as audio cassettes. During the Pre-Assembly Youth Event and the Ecumenical Women’s Decade Celebration, precursors of the WCC Assembly, the chorus Hakuna akaita saJesu (No one is like Jesus) quickly caught on because of its wide circulation.

How has this recording of Christian hymns been affected by the development of hymnody in the different denominations? Which themes dominate Zimbabwean gospel music? Attempting a response to such questions, this narrative examines the status of gospel music in an African context. This article provides 1. The evolution of electronically recorded Christian hymns and songs with Christian themes in Zimbabwe. 2. An exposition of the dominant themes in Zimbabwean gospel music. 3. An analysis of the impact of gospel music on popular culture. 4. A concluding summary of the discussion.


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1. The historical development of gospel music in Zimbabwe

Like most terms that enjoy a lot of currency, such as "religion", "literature" and others, "gospel music" elicits different responses from people. Is it possible to clearly enunciate what is included in the expression? Does it constitute a distinctive genre? Depending on one's musical and ideological posture, varying responses are possible. For some, "gospel music" is not useful as a heuristic concept since it does not designate a specific class of things. According to this argument, "gospel music" is an ideological invention or fictioning by those who derive economic mileage from the description and have arrogated to themselves special privileges.

Writing in the Nigerian context, Matthew A. Ojo provides some insights into the definitional predicament. "The term 'Gospel music' is really too sweeping", he observes. However, it could be used to mean "a distinct kind of music composed and rendered by men and women who call themselves Christians, and who refer to their music as 'ministration of the Good News in songs'." In Zimbabwe, "gospel music" is largely associated with the artistic products coming from musicians affiliated to the Zimbabwe Association of Gospel Musicians (ZAGOM). However, there are also numerous independent gospel artists whose claim to the label lies in the fact that they are cultural workers dealing with Christian themes. The Gospel Songwriters Club considers gospel music as "communication of the gospel through beat with a message."

Although the term "gospel music" is ambiguous and contested, it is clear that it is closely linked to developments in Christian hymnody in Zimbabwe. The majority of recorded gospel music consist of hymns and choruses sung in Christian churches. Christian hymnody in Zimbabwe is a result of historical processes that have allowed the phenomenon to become pronounced in the postcolonial period. Unfortunately while other aspects of Zimbabwe Christianity, such as the history of main line churches, the rise of African Instituted Churches, and the church and the state, have received scholarly

3. ZAGOM defines gospel music as "music designed to further the spread of the Christian message." It was formed in June 1997 and is open to all gospel singers. Interview with its president, Clive Barangiro, 31 October 1999 in Harare.
4. Interview with Mrs Shuvai Wutawunashe, pioneer gospel artist and coordinator of The Gospel Songwriters Club, 20 November 1999 in Harare. The Songwriters Club seeks to promote original compositions in schools. It was formed in September 1999.