

## Nigerian Christian Drama: A Reconstruction of History

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the history and development of Nigerian Christian drama from its earliest time till date. The paper affirms Agoro's position on the continuation of theatre in the Church after the exit of Hubert Ogunde contrary to Adedeji's submission, but notes the negative impacts of his untimely departure. Besides, the paper shows the factors responsible for the emergence of independent Christian drama groups, and generally indicates a particular trend in terms of changes in the role of Christian drama at different phases of its development in Nigeria. The study concludes that although Christian productions are making significant impacts in the society today, efforts still have to be concentrated on scripting, and productions that can fill and sustain the theatre.

*Key words:* Theatre, Drama, Cantata, Native Opera, Missionaries, Civilisation, Edification

### **Introduction**

Nigerian Christian drama is, no doubt, wielding much positive impacts on our society today. It has proved a quintessential tool in defining values for its audience, as well as serves as panacea for diverse ills, correcting vices and misdemeanours in the society. It is against this backdrop that it is important to attempt an incisive reconstruction of its history and development.

The year 1842 remains a milestone in the history of Nigeria as it marked the introduction of Christianity in the country (Agoro, 1996: 84). By the middle of the nineteenth century, various European missionary movements had already established spheres of influence in Nigeria, operating on the principle that European "civilisation" and "Christianity" hung together "as cause and effect, as root and branch" (Adedeji 1971: 25). In their own estimation, the early missionaries saw African culture and religion as a "deadly adversary and as an evil that had to be eliminated" (Emeagwali, 2004:1). As such, leaders of the various missionary groups adopted the doctrine of the three 'C'S', that is, Christianity, Commerce and Civilisation, aimed at creating an entirely new social order, potent enough to combat and relegate the traditional culture and religion which they had found to be so fundamental to the existence of the people.

Attempts to create a new social order, therefore, necessitated the adoption of a “modus operandi” by each missionary organisation, believed to reflect its denominational tradition, philosophy and religious practices (Adedeji 1971: 25). This initiative included the use of drama, not for evangelism in the real sense of it, but to foster the arts of Western civilisation through a Christian enlightenment programme geared towards an acculturation process. Traore (1970: 30) underscores this point:

The African Missionaries tried to exploit for purposes of religious propaganda, the black man’s love for the theatre. The guilds set up by the missions performed their usual repertory...The aim of this repertory was to educate and teach morals, hastening or clearing the way for the process of Christianization.

Among the various Christian missions that explored this medium are the Catholics, the Baptists, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the Wesleyans. The Catholics, however, surpassed all in the use of drama for a number of purposes, earning the name, “Pioneers of drama”. Leonard (1967: 63) succinctly captures the involvement of the Catholics in drama, particularly with the establishment of St. Gregory College in 1881:

...no other school, church or group gave as many consistently ambitious dramatic programmes as the Catholic of Lagos. Nearly every December, from the founding in 1881 of St. Gregory Grammar School to the end of the century, Catholic students commemorated simultaneously the close of the school term and the beginning of the Christmas festivities with an entertainment awaited eagerly by Catholics and Protestants alike.

Leonard further asserts that in 1887, the mission built a new school room, spacious enough to seat 8000 people (63). It is most interesting to note that apart from their school, other Catholic organisations were actively engaged in drama and stage performances. Some of these organisations include the Catholic Juvenile Association (1893), the Catholic Young Men’s Association (1898), and the Catholic Temperance and Literary Association (1911) (Agoro 1996:85).

It is essential to state, at this point, that the 1860s is claimed to be an important landmark in the history of the Nigerian elite as it signaled the inauguration of the policy of a new economic order aimed at producing the educated middle class who would be leaders in Church, Commerce and Politics (Adedeji 1971: 27). On the vanguard of this initiative was Henry Venn, Honorary Secretary of the Church Missionary Society (1842- 1872). So, by the middle of 1860s, various missionaries had succeeded in building a “civilised community”. This was achieved through a dynamic body of emigrants from Sierra-Leone and Brazil who provided “a vigorous impetus to the realisation of the objectives” of both the Church and the British government. This class of immigrants later formed the nucleus of nascent Nigerian educated middle-class (Ogunbiyi 1981: 17). These people, in the words of Ayandele, were “mentally, religiously and culturally part of the British Empire...as they had all originally accepted without questioning the Western

version of Christianity, had adopted European names in favour of African ones, (and) donned European dress” (Cited in Adelugba, *etal*, 2004: 143).

The coming of age of this educated middle class became evident in the formation of *The Academy* in October 1866 as a socio-cultural centre for mass enlightenment, “dedicated to the promotion of arts, science and culture” (Adedeji 1971: 28). As Adedeji noted, the establishment of *The Academy* by the Lagos elite is aimed at improving the Lagos society, politically, socially, economically and spiritually. Thus, the first public performance held in *The Academy* was a Variety Concert played to an audience comprising merchants, churchmen, civil servants, students and artisans (28). The contents of the performance included a variety of such items as classical music, dramatic sketches, recitations, songs and glees. Though *The Academy* soon dwindled into insignificance and by 1867 fizzled out, the first concert indulged in by the elite, which was modelled after the *Victorian Music Hall*, became a model form of theatrical art for several decades.

A number of factors have been adduced for the rather untimely demise of *The Academy*. Aside the accusation that the president and his vice failed to give an account of the money contributed by the public for the promotion of *The Academy*, there were also criticisms in the press on the conversion of the institution into a brothel. This imbroglio, notwithstanding, concerts continued to be organised throughout the seventies and eighties, many of which gained the supports of members of the defunct Academy. The premature death of *The Academy*, nevertheless, necessitated attempts to bring about a cultural and material reform that could be self-sustaining and yet yield enough that could be donated to the missions. These manifested in the promotion of numerous concerts and other cultural entertainments in the seventies, largely by mission-owned schools and other Church organisations.

As a result, school concerts became popular during the seventies. These concerts were organised to meet social and economic needs than to satisfy intellectual or spiritual motives. This is evident in how each performance had a distinguished personage as patron or chairman whose name was advertised to popularise the show, and was expected to “donate a generous amount that was also publicly announced” (Adedeji 1971: 30). Needless to add that the elites similarly formed other dramatic clubs in the seventies, which used theatrical entertainments solely to relieve the dull monotony of Lagos life.

The Catholics Mission, as expected, pressed the use of drama to its service than all other missions. Apart from using it for “civilisation”, relaxation, as well as generate funds for church activities, drama was also used by the Catholics for a more effective way of communicating the gospel, the ultimate goal of which was the conversion of people. This, undoubtedly, must have compelled the French Order of Catholic Priests (Societie des Missions Africanes), which arrived in Lagos in 1867, to rely on the theatre for a more effective communication (Ogunbiyi 1981:18).

The influence and popularity of the “Catholic performances”, however, received series of attacks from the C.M.S. as Reverend J.P. Vemalin in 1889, accused the Catholics of using the concerts to gain converts. This allegation, which resulted in a great deal of ill-feeling among the missions, was denied by the Acting Superior of the Catholic Mission, Benin, Rev. P. Pellet, in a

letter he forwarded to the *Lagos Observer*. He, however, admitted that St. Gregory's Infant School was used "once or twice a year as a concert-room, say if you like as a theatre...", and then went ahead to ask, "...is this a reason to say it has been built for concerts?" (Echeruo 1981: 358; Adedeji 1971: 37).

It is significant to mention that the types of entertainments held in Lagos prior to 1890 were uniquely European, albeit some of the experiments in Abeokuta included native items. This is particularly evident in the concerts organised by Professor Robert A. Coker, a product of the Abeokuta Mission, who was popularly referred to as the "Mozart of West Africa" (Agoro 1996: 91). In those entertainments, Coker successfully blended native and foreign sketches. In his concert, therefore, we find a trend which the church could not ignore- the emergence of works on local themes, which later became an inevitable tradition to the chagrin of the foreign missionaries (Agoro 1996: 92). Also, at Ibadan, the members of the Choral Society of Kudeti Church under the inspiration of L. Akinleye and M.D. Coker unreservedly gave their theatrical entertainments many novelties by blending local materials with foreign ones. This made their shows to always be crowded to overflowing and included heathens and Mohammedans (Adedeji 1971:34).

By 1872, the authoritarian tendencies that became apparent in the European Christian missionaries in their relations with the same influential group of elites raised by them had become disappointing. Pushed to an uncompromising stand, the elite started to pursue a kind of cultural nationalism, strong enough to checkmate the overbearing attitude of their erstwhile mentors. This led to the establishment of "The Association for Promoting Educational and Religious Interest in Lagos" (Adedeji 1971: 31). Founded in 1873 by Charles Foresythe (the church warden of Breadfruit Church, who became its secretary) and Otunba Payne (the Church Warden of Christ Church), other leaders of the Association included Captain J.P.L. Davies (the president) and I.H. Willoughby.

One aim of the Association was to establish a central fund which would be used in aiding church activities. This, therefore, necessitated the establishment of the "Lagos Philharmonic Club" in 1873. A building on Tinubu Square, later known as Phoenix Hall, was acquired by the Association, and for many years served the community as a public hall for entertainment. Since virtually all members of the defunct Academy were equally members of the newly formed association, the club was declared to also be used for the purpose of "enabling young men in Lagos to spend their evenings more profitably...thus improve their minds in many ways" (Adedeji 1971: 31).

As part of its policy, the Association authorised Charles Foresythe to donate half of the proceeds raised at a concert presented by the club to Aroloya Church, Lagos, for the use of the church. The Association was, however, denounced and the money rejected on the pretext that the said performance showed "a great prevalence of licentiousness which sadly hinders the prosperity of families and churches in this place" (Adedeji 1971: 31). Due to its political overtones, the European missionaries found this African organisation a formidable movement that must be suppressed. A step in this direction was the transfer of Reverend James Johnson to Lagos in 1874 by the Church Missionary Society so as to set up the Pastorate scheme there.

Rather than his transfer being a solution, the arrival of Reverend Johnson as the minister in charge of the St. Paul's Breadfruit Church was timely as he became a tower of strength to the nationalistic activities of the already weakened Association. Thus, he gained the supports of both the great patrons of the arts and organisers of theatrical entertainments of the period, all of whom were lay readers of his church. During the ensuing decades, the Breadfruit School-room replaced the Phoenix Hall as the most popular venue for theatrical entertainments, especially those whose proceeds were donated for the missionary work (Adedeji 1971: 32).

From the beginning of 1881 when James Johnson took the Breadfruit Church into the orbit of the Native Pastorate, contribution to the *Pastorate Fund* became substantial. Also, under the patronage of the church, various forms of theatrical entertainment were featured. On the 14th and 15th of October, 1886, a large crowd gathered at the Breadfruit School-room to hear the recital of the famous R.A. Coker's cantata, *Joseph*, which was reputed as "the first in the history of the Church and the Theatre in Lagos when a biblical theme was enacted" (Adedeji 1971: 33). This same Breadfruit School-room was the venue of a pantomimic entertainment of the Young Abstinence Union of 16th April, 1886. When Herbert Macaulay organised his first opera, *Trial By Jury*, which witnessed a large number of attendance two years later, the venue was the same Breadfruit School-room. One can, therefore, conveniently say that during Johnson's leadership of the Breadfruit Church, theatrical entertainments were encouraged and certain new theatrical developments evolved.

Aside the usual feast of variety concerts, theatrical art forms such as the pantomime, the opera and the cantata were featured. On the desecration of the Church or its premises by holding theatrical performances, James Johnson's statement may be seen as a useful index of his attitude: "We Africans in our pure and simple native state know not any distinction between what is secular and what is religious (Adedeji 1971: 33). By the 1880s in Lagos, therefore, both the educated Africans and the converted natives, seized with nationalistic fervor a decade before, had started to reject wholly the attempts to civilise them through the production of foreign concerts which they termed "exhibition of meanness".

This attitude significantly marked the beginning of awareness by the "rising generation" of the new nationalism of their parents and consequently their readiness to move along with it. With no obvious affiliation, *The Rising Entertainment Society* performed *The Rising of the Dead* among other sketches in 1881, under the patronage of C.J. George, a staunch Wesleyan Methodist and a founder of the defunct Academy of 1866. Due to the use of Yoruba cultural materials, the performance received a mixed reception, evident in the comments of one critical reviewer who described the performance as "an exhibition of contortional powers, idiotic ideas of dress and of mutual admiration on the part of the artists..." (Adedeji 1971: 34). More jabs came from another critic who termed the drama as blasphemous and the entire effort as meaninglessness.

Another columnist, however, came to the rescue of the group, asserting that there was nothing sacrilegious about the show and that he was rather impressed by the amount of money that the entertainment yielded (Adedeji 1971:35). Encouraged by the success of the performance of the Rising Entertainment Society, both the Lagos Grammar School and the Wesleyan High

School, produced a concert in which, according to one critic, “the use of native materials and the tom-tom on the stage, rude expressions of the native language, and dancing of a fantastic kind were found to be inconsistent with missionary ideals (Cited in Adedeji 1971: 35).

Adedeji identifies two points from the criticisms of these concerts: first, the entertainments were criticised as having deteriorated in standard from the familiar concerts of the past because of their inclusion of indigenous materials. Second, the use of the dialect and experiments with local materials were frowned upon by the people who had found that the trend was an “exhibition of low forms of heathenism” and a contradiction of the principle of “Christianity” and “civilisation” which the Christian missionaries had used as a beacon of light from the very foundation of their missionary endeavour (35).

This period coincided with the decline of the Theatre in nineteenth century England as most of the productions were burlesques, farces and pantomimes. The parent body of the Wesleyan Movement in England, therefore, described the Theatre as a “canker-worm” eating into the fabrics of the new industrialised society (Ogunleye 2007: 22; Adedeji 1971: 36). This prevailing situation gave the Mission their opportunity. At the Annual Conference of the Wesleyan Church in 1881, an address was presented expressing concern: “Some places, chapel and school premises, set apart... for the worship and service of God, have been unlawfully abused by the holding therein of entertainments...devoid of religious tendency...” (Echeruo 1981: 359). This became the basis of a general appeal by a Methodist faithful a year later for a united stand against the use of indigenous materials for concerts:

Brethren, we call upon you to stand by us in an uncompromising opposition to this mistaken and dangerous policy. Even if success were to be gained thereby, it is too dearly to be worth having. And, in truth, such gain is unreal and must in the end bring damage and loss to the Church that seeks it...I would say that not one out of five of the songs in the programme was appropriate for a Methodist School-room. I am quite sure that the spirit which these entertainments foster is wholly at variance with the spirit that Methodists ought to cultivate. Sgd: VERITAS (Echeruo 1981: 395).

Interestingly, the Catholics, in their characteristic manner, rose to the occasion by setting out to cash in on the confused state in which the Protestant missions had plunged themselves by discarding a form of entertainment that showed through “spectacle” the relation which a cultural product like the Theatre bears with Christianity. So, by the middle of 1890s, they had adopted devotional drama and the Cantata in addition to their usual concerts, thereby becoming the champion of using the Cantata to enliven their Christmas and Easter festivities (Adedeji 1971:39).

The Cantata belongs to the variety of the concert as used in Europe, and is a short musical composition comprising arias, choruses and recitations, often with a religious subject matter sung by soloist and chorus, accompanied by orchestra (Ogunleye 2007: 22; Adedeji 1971: 38). Its realisation could derive from either a sacred or secular text but usually the former. Under

the auspices of the Missions and their products, therefore, Christian theatre existed in the form of devotional drama as Cantata, musical and variety concert (Agoro 1996: 92).

What all these Mission groups, however, failed to realise was the growing tendency of Nigerians to have a church wherein their language and music would be freely used. The aversion of the missions to things native engendered a corresponding repudiation of the foreign pattern of liturgy in the Church and in the forms of entertainments that existed at that time. Therefore, the secessionist churches grew out of the resistance of the converted natives and educated Africans, the very kind of people the missions had assumed would take over the local pastorate from them (Agoro 1996: 93). Justifying the secessionist Church, Ayandele declares:

The church was valued mainly for its social advantages; it afforded for the converts the pleasant instrumentality for marriages, christenings and funerals, with their opportunity for pomp and display. Patently lacking however were the intense zeal, devoutness and spontaneity that characterised the unsophisticated Africans and which educated Africans were rapidly losing. The failure of Christianity to be deeply rooted in the people impelled educated Africans to study their religion in order to see how much features of indigenous worship could be grafted on the pure mild of the gospel (Cited in Leonard, 1967:106).

Consequently, Dr. Mojola Agbebi spearheaded the formation of the Native Baptist Church from the American Southern Baptist Convention in 1888. This was followed by the formation of the United Native African (U.N.A) Church in 1891. In October 1901, two-thirds of the Breadfruit Church broke away to form the Bethel African Church, which in 1902 became a denomination of the African Church Organisation, joining Agbebi's Native Baptists and the United Native African Church and began to encourage and preserve aspects of indigenous culture which they found consistent with their newly conceived African Christianity. It must be noted that the U.N.A. Church had begun to exploit the African creative impulse in the use of music and dance in its church services since 1891 and "were prosecuted in the courts for promoting a holy edifice" (Adedeji 1971: 39-41). However, this act did not deter the movement towards the indigenisation of the Theatre which the secessionist churches advocated for.

Between 1904 and 1912, these and other secessionist African churches became the primary promoters of the new drama. By 1917, there was already a proliferation of secessionist churches in Lagos, numbering some fourteen, and they all emboldened the growth of an authentic, firmly rooted Yoruba native drama in the early decades of the twentieth century (Adelugba, *et al* 2004: 146). African songs, chants, dance, and music thus became the regular service components of the Protestant churches. The secessionists believed that if the converts were to be discouraged from religious syncretism, and to ensure a genuine conversion to Christianity, the indigenous churches must sufficiently meet their religious needs. This, they felt, could only be achieved by "enculturation", the imbibing of the entire kernel of Christianity into the Nigerian culture through theatrical and dramatic means (Ilesanmi 1992, cited in Ogunleye 2007: 24).

Specifically, in *WS, EgbeIfe*, a church dramatic organisation formed through the combined efforts of St. Jude's Church and Bethel African Church, staged a play titled *King Elejigbo*, written by D.A. Oloyede of the Bethel Church. The performance received so much accolades from the public that it was again performed in 1904 at the Glover Memorial Hall. This production thus marked the first appearance of a church drama group in a public hall, and the play was reputed as the first full act in the history of the Yoruba Theatre (Ogunleye 2007: 24; Adedeji 1971: 41). However, this play has been criticised by Agoro (1996: 97) as falling short of an ideal Christian play:

Though *King Elejigbo* was written by a Christian and done by a church drama group, the play may not have been, strictly speaking, a Christian play. If it was intended to be one, it failed in its bid as a Christian play. A play in which a Christian king adopts Islam in order to marry a princess undermines the Christian religion. Coming in the wake of the first few years in the bid to Africanise Christianity that the Bethel Church was ready to make a big compromise between Christianity and Islam as shown in the play was to endanger the chances of the spread of the new faith.

Despite this noted lapse, the success of the play encouraged *Egbe Ife* hence, the group went on to stage other plays such as *The Jealous Queen of Oyo* (1905), *Penelope* (1908), and *Kakanguwa Oba Afi Haramu Sanra* (Adelugba *et al* 2004: 146; Adedeji 1971: 42). The success of the group earned it the respect of the Lagos audience and was thereafter absorbed as the Bethel Dramatic Society in 1908. It is pertinent to state that the appearance of this group in a public hall marked the genesis of the gradual departure of the native drama movement from the confines of the Church, especially with the performance of Akinyele's *Awo Twefa Mefa* in 1912 by the Lagos Glee Singers- an established group of prominent Lagosians. Dramatic activities, however, still took place within churches and schools, but not on a grand scale. One can surmise here that the crux of the propaganda through theatre in secessionist churches was to emphasise that Christianity could and should be adapted to fit into the African culture in order to make it more relevant to African person (Ogunleye 2007: 24).

Nevertheless, the African Church Movement soon got bogged down by doctrinarism and in the process laid itself bare to dissipation. By 1918, questions were still being asked as to the extent of the affinity of the Church with African tradition and culture in its litany, dogma, hymns and ceremonies (Adedeji 1973: 388). Also, the Theatre had remained Nigerian only in attribute- in its quality of performance, and in character, plot and setting- as both the structural devices and the artistic form of the Theatre employed were foreign. Christianity thereby became a spent force in the main determinant of nationalist struggles.

However, much more than in the two earlier movements, drama was used for an overt religious purpose in the independent churches. The genesis of this was the influenza epidemic that rocked the country at the end of the war in 1918, which necessitated the closure of the churches by a Government decree and also opened the floodgates for a new religious revolution aimed at curing the paralysis that had eaten up life and property in the community (Ogunleye



2007: 25; Adedeji 1973: 388). The kind of religion that was, therefore, required was not the sedate, orthodox form, but a type that would produce a therapeutic effect. The Spiritual and Pentecostal Churches provided this outlet (Ogunleye 2007: 25).

Interestingly, those old hands who took great delight in emphasising the role of the Theatre outside the Church were also instrumental to the return of the Theatre to the Church. In 1918, A. K. Ajisafe initiated the formation of the African Church Choir Union whose aim was “to improve Native airs for divine service and popularise Native music by means of Special Concerts” (Adedeji 1973: 389). But, it was the activities of the Aladura Movement spearheaded by the Cherubim and Seraphim Society that secured the future of the Theatre. Some of the leaders of the newly formed Aladura Movement formerly belonged to the group of progressive and educated leaders of the African Church Movement which had nurtured the Theatre from its birth.

At first, the Aladura Movement saw theatre as a socialising institution, hence failed to wake up to the realities which allied the Theatre to religious ends. Later, when the Aladura Movement accepted the Theatre, it was prompted by the content and form of their anniversary celebrations and other spiritual considerations (Adedeji 1973: 390). The Movement’s resort to the use of dance, music and singing as a means of impelling its members to express their religious experience made it find a common ground in the Theatre. By basing their plays on stories taken from the Bible and setting them to music and dance, thereby mixing entertainment and instruction, the Aladura Movement adopted practically the same approach that allied the Theatre to the Church in medieval Europe (Adedeji 1973: 390).

The performance of *The Valiant Twelve* in Lagos in 1931 signified the Cherubim and Seraphim’s sortie into the Theatre. Although the show included such items as ‘dialogue’, ‘recitation’ and sacred songs, the use of native airs and cultural materials which had become the convention of the Theatre hitherto were absent. Subsequent shows, however, revealed the Aladura Movement’s preference for the form of the European sacred Cantata. Adedeji (1973: 390-391) gives the reason for this initiative:

Evangelism rather than intellectual escapism seemed to have guided their selection of materials and composition of plays. Plays based on popular Biblical stories like the life of Samuel, Hannah, Nabuchadnezzar (sic), Isaac, and Job were common features as well as plays based on the birth, passion and resurrection of Christ

Even though the Aladura Movement accepted the Yoruba way of life, it showed strong aversion to all manifestations that tended to connect the Church with traditional Yoruba religions. Its guiding principle was based on the statement, “Let no step be taken which revives in any form the spirit of worship of old religion” (Ogunleye 2007: 26; Adedeji 1973: 391). Consequently, the Movement forbade the use of drums that had been associated with idol worship and festival performances, but composed and sang hymns whose lyrics and prayers contained indigenous Yoruba idioms and strains. This act turned the Church into a fruitful soil for the enrichment of the Theatre with sacred songs and music, sowing the seeds of a new type of drama- the “Native Air Opera”- in the process (Ogunleye 2007: 26).

The sacred songs and music first gave birth to groups known as Concert Parties, which briefly thrived both within and outside the Church until eclipsed by the Native Air Opera. Adedoyin has this to say about the Native Opera:

Native Opera...That's how the real public native plays based on biblical stories were described in the middle of the 1930s. These years saw the birth in Nigeria of native plays composed in native airs. For the next 10 years that followed, the African Churches led by the United African Methodist Church "Eleje", Oke Arin, Lagos (U.A.M.C.) had a monopoly in this field. If the play was not "the Birth of Christ" it would be "Joseph (David) Goliath (Cited in Adedeji 1973: 392).

Notably, in these performances, dramatic action was kept to the barest minimum (Clark 1979: 7). However, besides Native Opera, there was 'Service of Songs' reputed to have taken the form of a choral presentation in which the choir rendered song after song with individual and collective performances. This trend was popularised by A.K. Ajisafe (Agoro 1996: 99). From Adedeji's assessment of the Theatre in the African churches, plays whose plots were based on stories taken from the Bible became a pervading influence in the middle of 1930s, such that they relegated to the background popular satirical and morality plays drawn from folktales and contemporary events (393). Significantly, this trend has remained till date.

In the early forties, Hubert Ogunde became the celebrated organist and composer of sacred songs for the Church of the Lord (Aladura), Ebute Metta, Lagos. His arrival on the scene signaled the introduction of dramatic action and realism in Native Air Opera as evinced in his first production, *The Garden of Eden and The Throne of God*. By so doing, he directed attention away from a pure musical form to the more composite character of the Theatre (Clark 1979: x). Interestingly, the content of the play is biblical as Ogunde chose the story of the fall of man and his expulsion from the Garden of Eden. This performance which first took place at the Church of the Lord, Ebute Metta, Lagos, was later presented to the public at the Glover Memorial Hall, Lagos, on 12th June, 1944, under the Chairmanship of Mr. Nnamdi Azikwe, for the purpose of raising funds for a church building (Clark 1979: 5).

Ogunde, before turning professional in 1946, had five productions which were adaptations of Bible stories. These include *The Garden of Eden and The Throne of God* (1944), *Israel in Egypt* (1945), *Nebuchadnezzar's Reign and Belshazzar's Feast or Two Impious Reigns* (1945), and *King Solonion* (1945) (Ogunleye 2007: 27; Clark 1979: Appendix A). All these performances took place at the Glover Memorial Hall. After turning professional, Ogunde abandoned works on Biblical subject matter as evident in his subsequent productions (Agoro 1996: 101). Adedeji sees Ogunde's withdrawal to the professional stage as the final departure of the Theatre from the Church and its emergence in the society as a professional concern (1996:387,396).

Adedeji's stance has, however, been refuted by other Christian theatre historians, notably Agoro (1996) and Ogunleye (2007) who assert that **the sparks of Christian drama did not fizzle out with the departure of Ogunde and others into the secular theatre arena.** Clark (1979: 81), in fact, submits:

Other masters at the time, A.B. David, P.A. Dawodu and G.T. Onimole...stubbornly continued to perform biblical plays and did not concern themselves much with the lauding of African culture but with the glorification of Christianity...Onimole and...Layeni are still today invited as guest directors by church organisations to produce their biblical plays.

Also, to back up his argument on the continuation of the theatre in the church after the exit of Ogunde, Agoro carries out a study in which he identifies some factors responsible for the growth of Christian drama and theatre in Nigeria between 1970 and 1992. Among the striking factors identified are: the establishment of inter-denominational organisations, conversion and involvement of renowned theatre artists and scholars in Christian drama, the growth of new churches and para-church organizations, as well as the creation of drama units in several tertiary institutions (1996: 384-410).

However, Agoro criticises the failure of both Adedeji and Clark to give reasons for Ogunde's withdrawal of his theatre from the patronage of the church. He, therefore, postulates some factors which, he believes, were responsible for his action. Prominent among them are: the various arts of the theatre which were utilised by his troupe to the resentment of some members of the church who may still have been Western in their spiritual orientation; the costumes used by the troupe which may have been considered offensive to the congregation; the unenviable status of the Theatre in the Church at the time which ruled out the need for a standing professional group whose members should be placed on salary like other church workers; and, lastly, Ogunde's desire 'to arouse the interest of his people in their tradition and cultural heritage' (1996: 101-103).

Regrettably, Agoro fails to state the adverse effects that Ogunde's untimely withdrawal from the church had on the development of Nigerian Christian drama. It must be noted that Ogunde led a mass exodus of dramatists from the Church into the secular theatre (Ogunleye 2007: 28). Some of these dramatists include A.B. Layeni, Adunni Oluwole, E.K. Ogunmola, and, of course, Duro Ladipo. The exodus of these theatre stalwarts affected the rapid growth of Christian drama for several decades.

It is worth mentioning that the departure of Ogunde almost marked the death of the idea of church drama groups performing to the public in a public hall, evident in how these groups' productions were confined largely to churches and mission schools, while secular artists took over the centre stage. In fact, to the best of our knowledge, there was no sufficient record of a church dramatic society performing at the Glover Memorial Hall after Ogunde's departure from the church. Unfortunately, for decades, this trend continued until in the 1980s when some independent Christian drama groups started surfacing.

Besides, Ogunde's eventual marriage to many ladies as a way of keeping his theatre company going, and his recourse to the mystical, animistic and intractable world as evident in two of his works- *Aye* (1979) and *Jaiyesimi* (1980)- were considered inconsistent with Christian ethos and sensibilities. All these, among others, fired the arrow of negative perception of the art of theatre at many Christian leaders; hence, the unenviable status of drama in the Church for

several years, and the uncelebrated cold reception given to any idea by a Christian dramatist to set up an independent theatre troupe, as drama was regarded as a seed-bed for all vices.

Consequently, drama was relegated to the background, and it became an instrument for entertainment during church festivities. Unfortunately, the Christian artists that often participated in these drama presentations were seen through the same lens used for their secular counterparts. This view has, however, changed significantly today as Christian drama has warmed its way back into the hearts of many Christian leaders across the country. This was made possible by the combined efforts of both church drama groups and independent Christian drama groups.

Independent Christian drama groups which sprang up in early 1980s but became visible in early 90s came up as a result of many factors. Prominent among them was the ambivalent attitude of many Christian leaders to the utilisation of Christian drama for evangelism, which led to its relegation. As a result of this unwholesome development, some burdened members of varied church dramatic societies and Christian campus drama groups who had an understanding of how drama could be effectively used for mass conversion of souls as well as edification of the church, gave birth to independent drama groups, which could perform for the public without any hindrance arising from Christian leaders.

Other factors include: the vision to reach out to many people, both believers and unbelievers; the desire to proffer enduring solutions to diverse social, moral, political and economic ills bedeviling Nigerian society, the passionate desire of some theatre professionals to introduce professionalism into the Christian drama movement; and a need for an alternative to secular drama productions, many of which are considered inimical to Christian ethos as most of the subject matters often treated and their modes of presentation run contrary to the biblical standard. In fact, both Popoola (2003) and Enemaku (2003) have identified some alleged ethical breaches in most Nigerian home videos.

The factors mentioned above, amongst others, gave birth to independent Christian drama ministries in Nigeria. The first ministry in this respect is Kunie Ogunde's The Word Production Ministry established in 1982 (Adesina, 1998: 69).. It is arresting to note that Kunie Ogunde is, coincidentally, the son of the renowned theatre veteran, Hubert Ogunde, who veered off the track of Christian drama in 1945. Shortly after, other independent Christian drama groups started emerging, including The Mount Zion Faith Ministries International (formerly Mount Zion Christian Productions, August 1985), EVOM World Network (1989) and Christian Multimedia International (1990). The 1990s is very significant as it witnessed the proliferation of many drama groups, notably The Breakthrough Ministries International (1993), Christoline Evangelical Drama Outreach Ministries (1993), and Kay Technical Evangelical Ministries (1994). Today, there are many independent Christian drama groups in the six geo-political zones of the federation. It is apposite to state here that the fruitful exploits of these independent drama groups have changed the orientation and attitudes of many Christian church founders and leaders, hence the establishment of drama groups in several denominations, both old and new. This has, no doubt, led to the increasing strength of Christian drama in the country today.

Besides, many independent and church-based Christian drama groups are now vigorously involved in the production of video films. In fact, one of them, The Mount Zion Faith Ministries

International, recently launched Mount Zion Television (MZTV)- a 24-hour Christian movies channel as a testament to the popularity and reception that Nigerian Christian productions enjoy in the country ( and even outside the shores of Nigeria) today, as well as their usefulness for evangelisation and edification.

### **Conclusion**

It has become evident in this study that the Nigerian Christian Drama has passed through different stages in the course of its development. Therefore, any effort at understanding its state today should be based on a sound and thorough knowledge of its history. Even though there have been some scholarly works on the Nigerian Christian drama, this study is intended to provoke a new focus aimed at developing an informed history of Nigerian Christian Drama from its earliest time till date, which would enable a correct assessment of the genre. In the light of the above pre-occupation, this study has taken cognisance of the origin and development of the Nigerian Christian Drama. The study generally indicates a particular trend in terms of changes in the role of Christian drama at different phases of its development in Nigeria. For instance, unlike in the Colonial era when Christian drama was used solely for enlightenment, fund raising and entertainment, emphasis is on the use of Christian drama for evangelism and edification today.

No doubt, Nigerian Christian drama has recorded some laudable successes, especially with its transition from theatre to screen. However, efforts still have to be concentrated on the production of plays that can fill and sustain the Theatre. This, therefore, points to the need to fully exploit the aesthetics of the theatre, in terms of the uses of such devices as flashback, suspense and other cinematic techniques. Also, if the main purpose of Christian drama is evangelism and edification, if the goal is to recommend virtue and discourage evil, thereby instilling positive ideologies into the lives of its audience and correcting the misdemeanours in the society, then Nigerian Christian playwrights (and screenwriters) should pay keen attention to their scripts, especially in terms of the use of materials from the Bible in building up a story, so as to avoid ungrounded scriptural reflections, shallow doctrinal values and sub-standard spiritual lessons which are capable of rendering their outputs counter-productive or dysfunctional. When this is done, the whole idea of exploiting the medium of drama (and film) for evangelism and edification will have been a worthwhile endeavour.

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