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Factors Responsible for the Occurrence of Themes of Illness and Healing in Selected Nigerian Gospel Songs

By

Taiye S. Adeola (Ph.D.)*

Abstract

Themes of illness and healing occur in the Nigerian gospel songs reflecting the gospel musician's concept and perception of illness and healing. The factors that generate these themes range from the musician's personal experience to social, economic, spiritual and political. Some of these factors are obvious in the song renditions and some can be inferred through a careful analysis of the song texts and context of the renditions. Through participant observation and analytical methods foregrounding the research in Reflexivity Social Theory this paper examines the concept of illness and healing and discusses the factors responsible for the occurrence of these themes in selected Nigerian gospel songs.

Key Words: Illness, Healing, Gospel Music, Nigerian Gospel Songs, Theatre.

Introduction

Gospel music occupies a very important space in the Nigerian music scene and enjoys patronage from a wide range of audience. This musical genre which according to Adedeji (2005, p.4) developed from the music used by indigenous Pentecostal churches in evangelistic parades between 1930 and the 1960s is traced by Omibiyi (1994, p.6) to songs performed at special festivals such as harvests, thanksgiving and so forth. It was later taken out of the confines of the church in order to cater for the social interests of the youths dwelling on various themes one of which is illness and healing. Gospel music from the submissions of these scholars developed in the 1930s with choral and church music in the Southwestern part of Nigeria and later spread to other parts of the country.

The occurrence of themes of illness and healing in the Nigerian gospel songs is generated by a number of factors; some of these are obvious in the song renditions and some can be inferred through a careful analysis of the songs especially in the texts and context of the renditions. As Akpabot (1986, p. 86) observes, "Musical concept leads to musical behavior; and musical values are reflective of general values". Blacking

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(1982, p. 3) says, truly, "Musical change should signify a change of heart as well as mind... musical change may epitomise the changing conditions and concerns of social groups".

The above submissions substantiate the fact that musical compositions do not exist in a vacuum, they are influenced and generated by certain factors and the musical concepts are reflections or indicators of these factors. Gospel music in Nigeria is not an exception therefore in this paper some of the factors that are responsible for the occurrence of themes of illness and healing in Nigerian gospel music will be identified and discussed using excerpts from selected gospel songs as performed and recorded by some Nigerian gospel musicians from the southwestern part of Nigeria.

Concept of Illness and Healing in Nigerian Gospel Music

Illness is perceived by the Nigerian gospel musicians either as a temporary or permanent damage that has been caused to individuals or the country as a result of personal carelessness, leadership selfishness, individual godlessness and national sinfulness. The use of symbolic representations by the musicians relating the subject of illness to various aspects of individual, communal and national lives implies that several things, issues or situations are referred to or regarded as illnesses from which individuals and the society have to be healed. Some examples of things for which people require healing are sin, poverty, laziness, hunger, political instability, economic failure and crisis, social disorder or evil in the society, set back of any kind in business, academics, corruption, and religious unrest. Physical or bodily infirmities and sicknesses are also referred to and presented in form of prayer songs requesting that God will not allow sickness to afflict them or pray that it be taken away if it already occurred. One can conclude that in the mind of the gospel musicians illness is considered not only in terms of loss of physical health which will require medical attention but also in terms of things not working as it should be in individual's life, communal and national lives. It is looked at as a state of disorder, hardship, suffering, chaos, poverty and other negative things that befall a person, community or nation which requires spiritual or divine healing as well as political, economic and social rebirth to bring about the needed healing or liberation.

Healing is simply the restoration, repair, recovery or divine intervention that brings relief from all the pains and other consequences of the illness. For some illnesses, healing is considered to have taken place when provision is made for the things that were lacked. For example, healing comes for joblessness the day that the one plagued with the ailment of joblessness gets a job. While in other cases it is considered in terms of termination of some things such as removal of leaders perceived as evil or wicked. It is also considered in terms of restoration of things such as physical health, wealth, joy, peace to a nation and such other things.

Healing is also considered in terms of method and process of healing; people that will bring the healing and timing of the healing. Healing is regarded as relevant or needed in all spheres of the individual's and nation's life namely political, economic, spiritual and social. For example, the reign of political leaders that are considered not to be fulfilling the yearnings of the electorate is regarded as a period of illness for which people will pray to be delivered. As soon as such political leaders are removed healing is believed to have taken place. The authoritarian military era is a good example of a time when Nigerians considered leadership as a form of illness from which Nigerians prayed fervently to be healed. The jubilation that greeted the death of General Sani Abacha, the Nigerian military head of state 1993 - 1997 is a proof of this position.

Insight into the meaning of illness and healing as perceived by the Nigerian gospel musicians is reflected in this song by Evangelist Bola Are (1990). An excerpt is given below:

SÙGBÓN KAN N BE LÁYÉ MI

Chorus: Sùgbón kan n bẹ láyé mi

Èmi kò fẹ ẹ mó látóní lọ

Oba tó wo sùgbón Jábésì

Wo sùgbón ayé mi

Solo: Àìlówó lówó, sùgbón ni
Àìròmọbí sùgbón
Gbèsè àti àgbàná, sùgbón ni
Àìtẹgbé n kọ?

Àìrẹni-boni-lásìírí
Ìsòro àtọdúmódún
O n sísẹ bí erin
O n jẹjẹ ilírí
Àìlókọ gidi

Àìláyá rere
Àìlówó lówó,
Èmí ẹsẹ nínú ayé rẹ
Àìnísé lówó sùgbón ni
Àì tẹgbé nkọ

Ó jẹ tàárọ kò sí talé

TRANSLATION

There is a predicament in my life

I do not want it from today
Henceforth

The king who healed Jabesh's
but

heal the predicament in my life

poverty is a predicament
childlessness is a predicament
debt and waste
not measuring up to one's
equal

not getting help
persistent problems
working like an elephant
but eating like a tiny ant
not having a responsible
husband

not having a good wife
not having money
the spirit of sin in your life
joblessness
not measuring up to one's
equal
eating breakfast and unable to
eat dinner

Àilalàáfiań kò?
 Àikóléń kò?
 Jèsù jòwò ràn mí lówò
 Kójú ó t'ẹlẹgàn mí láyé

Ọba tó wo sùgbọń Jábẹsì

Wo sùgbọń ayé mí

not having good health
 inability to build a house
 Jesus please help me
 let my mockers be put to
 shame
 the king who healed Jabez's
 predicament
 heal the predicament in my
 life

The above song by Evangelist Bola Are is based on the Biblical story of Jabez (recorded in 1Chronicles 4:9-10) who was named a child of sorrow because of the circumstances surrounding his birth and as a result was not doing well. But after he prayed to God, everything was turned around positively for him. Bola Are based in Ibadan, Oyo State known for her unique style of praise and prayer songs is one of the leading female gospel musicians in Nigeria. She used figurative and symbolic expression in this song to paint the picture of illness and healing.

"Sùgbọń" which literally means "but" is referred to in this song as a limitation or inadequacy in a person's life that has to be healed by God. The illness which can manifest in form of poverty, not being able to feed well, joblessness, barrenness, and difficulty in getting a wife or husband, is being presented in form of a prayer to be healed by God.

Reference to healing in this song is specifically in the last two lines of the chorus even though all those things listed as "Sùgbọń" (but) are things for which healing is required. "Ọba tó wo sùgbọń Jábẹsì, wo sùgbọń ayé mí" (The king who healed Jabez's "but", heal the "but" in my life) The term king is usually used in reference to God and this is obvious because the story being referred to says "And Jabez called on the God of Israel...And God granted him that which he requested" (2 Chronicles.4:10a KJV) "Wò" in this song means heal. In the Yoruba context of traditional medicine "wò" can also literally mean look after or take care of, all in the context of healing. "wò" from the Yoruba word "iwòsàn"(healing) or "wòsàn"(heal) is used in the overall context of the need for healing or restoration. In the song the previous state of Jabez before he prayed to God is regarded as illness and after he prayed he was healed and consequently became prosperous and more honorable than his brethren. The same picture is being painted in this song by Bola Are that one who is poor, jobless, childless, without a wife or husband though one is of age or even one who is married but the partner is not responsible or doing well, is sick and needs the healing that will turn around those negative situations into positive ones. Reference is also made to lack of sound health in the song. "Ailalafia" (lack of good health) is considered a 'but' that needs to be healed.

Theoretical Framework

This study is fore grounded in Reflexivity Social Theory which refers to the bidirectional consequences of any cause or effect. The theory amplifies the ways that the social and the individual mirror or co-determine each other and how changes in the behavior of one create corresponding changes in the other. (Wikipedia). The principle of reflexivity was perhaps first enunciated by the sociologist William Thomas (1923, 1928) and was built on by sociologist Robert K. Merton (1948, 1949) to define the notion of a "self-fulfilling prophecy". In sociology, reflexivity therefore comes to mean an act of self-reference where examination or action "bends back on", refers to, and affects the entity instigating the action or examination.

Gospel music as a social commodity influences and is influenced, activities in the society defines the course of events evident in the composition and performance of gospel music reflecting the society and these in turn generates actions and reactions in the society. The social, political and economic realities in Nigeria forms one of the strong bases for the construction of Nigerian gospel musicians' notions and ideas reflected in their compositions and expressed through the text of their songs. The impact of the social, political and economic realities on the lives of the musician cause the reactions exhibited in the contents of the songs by the gospel musicians which in turn influence the society for a change when they hear the songs. We therefore proceed to discuss the factors that are responsible for the occurrence of themese of illness and healing in Nigerian gospel songs.

Factors Responsible for the Occurrence of Themes of Illness and Healing

Personal Experiences of the Musicians

The personal experiences of the gospel musicians form a major factor responsible for the occurrence of the themes of illness and healing in their songs. The musicians have experienced one form of illness or the other. Hence, these experiences are brought into songs. It is common for the gospel musicians to personalize the issues raised in their songs praying for healing or deliverance. Experience, they say, is the best teacher, personalizing issues therefore points to the realities of the contexts of the musicians' existence which does not exempt them from being affected either positively or otherwise by the issues confronting the generality of the populace. Some experiences are however peculiar and personal and are shared in form of prayer, hope, desire, warning, advice, supplication or appreciation in gospel songs. Some examples are given in the following excerpts:

OLÓRUN MI SEUN

Olórun mi seun
Ó tàmólè sáyé mi
Ó mú bànújé mi kùrò

TRANSLATION

My God did something
He shed light into my life
He removed my sadness

Solo:	Ó so mí domo rè Olórun mi seun Ó fètò sáyé mi Ó mú ìpónjú mi kúrò Kò jé kójú tì mí	He made me his child My God did something He ordered my life He removed my suffering He did not allow me to be put to Shame
	Nígbà ìrètí pín, tórò mi sú mi Ó dójú telégàn Ó fifé rè hàn mí Nígbà tirèwèsì fé mú mi Tókàn mí fé Sàko lo Ó gbé mi lé apa rè Ó wonú okàn mi lo Mo pè é, ó jé mi, Ó sèrànwó fún mi Kòjé kí won ó bèrè Olórun mi...	When hope was lost, I was fed up He put the despisers to shame He showed me his love when I was getting discouraged And my heart about to wonder away He carried me on his arms He entered into my heart I called on him, he answered me He sent help to me He did not allow them to ask for my God

The above song clearly gives a picture of one narrating what the personal experience has been and how God came to the rescue. The kinds of illness and healing experienced by this song writer are stated in the words of this song. Expressions like “ó mú bànújé mi kúrò”; “ó f’ètò sáyé mi”; “ó mú ìpónjú mi kúrò”; “Nígbà tí rètí pín”; “Nígbà tí rèwèsì fé mú mi”; and “T’ókàn mí fé sàko lọ” are indicative of experiences of depression, disorder, suffering, hopelessness, discouragement, and backsliding respectively. The healing experienced is also represented in expressions like “Ó tàn mólè s’áyé mi” (he shed light into my life); “Mo pèé ó jé mi” (I called on him, he answered me); “Ó sè rànwó fún mi” (He sent help to me).

The presentation of experiences passed through by the gospel musicians themselves shared in the songs are usually meant to encourage others who may be going through similar situation. They share how God has brought healing to them (the musicians) in their own moments of illness as such sharing the gospel message about the power of God and his ability to deliver from all forms of illnesses. These personal experiences can be in the area of physical, social, economic or Spiritual illnesses and healing. Musicians who have been saved sing about their conversion experience which is a form of healing, those who have been blessed financially sing about God’s provision which is healing from poverty and so on.

Personal experiences of the musicians generate reactions to issues as they see it and how it affects them. From these reactions encoded in the song text, one is able to understand what the experiences are, that is why we can draw conclusions from the song cited above about what the song writer must have been through which motivated such texts.

Social Factor

Gospel song presents social, political, economic and religious realities hence, the presence of themes of illness and healing in Nigerian gospel song is not surprising because they are influenced by sociological factors. Social problems in musician's community of existence and in the nation at large are concerns that are presented by the gospel musicians serving as watch dogs and mouth piece for the citizens. Sociological issues like gender matters, liberation, religious problems, relationship between husbands and wives, ethnic conflicts, and various others, feature in gospel music recordings.

Economic Factor

The economic situation of the country which affects the citizens generally also affects the gospel musicians and therefore forms a strong factor in the desire and prayer for economic healing for the nation and for the individual musicians. It is very common to hear the musicians pray in their song that God should bring poverty to an end in their lives and in the lives of the nation and that God should bring good times. The economic recession of a nation influences the thoughts of musicians when they think of the message to bring out in their songs. The gospel musicians say that it is the bad economy that leads to piracy of their music which makes many of them not to make gains on their recordings.

Economic factors that motivate the gospel musicians to sing about illness and healing are both personal to them and reactions to the general situations in the country as it affects the citizens. Issues of poverty, joblessness, hunger, country's resources and how they are being managed by the leaders, mismanagement of the economy, youth empowerment, and women empowerment and so on are regarded as forms of illnesses. They are strong factors that influence the musicians to call for healing either in the lives of individuals or the nation.

Spiritual Factor

Spiritual motivation or inspiration is a strong factor in gospel music, many of the gospel musicians lay claim to spiritual factors as major determinants of their compositions and ministrations. Personal (spiritual) experiences of divine interventions or a desire for it is a factor for the occurrence of the themes of illness and healing in Nigerian gospel songs. Gospel musicians who claim to be born again and know the power of God acknowledge same in their songs proclaiming Jesus as the only source of healing from any form of illness.

Some musicians claim that God inspired them spiritually to write the songs that they write. They use words such as "God gave me the song" Pastor J.A Adélakùn talking about his song "Amọ̀nà tètè ma bọ" (the one who knows the way, come quickly) at a public performance of the song on December 14, 2008, said that, the song is not his song but God inspired the song to instruct and bless Nigeria as a nation¹.

In a similar vein, Niyi Adedokun (1991) addressing the issue of the spiritual state of the church with particular reference to the Christ Apostolic Church in a satire described the church as having lost its power because of the sin of love of money, struggle for power and involvement in cultism. An examination of Niyi Adedokun's *Church wa inmemu* explains how spiritual issues constitute factors responsible for the occurrence of theme of illness and healing in Nigerian Gospel songs. Excerpts are given below:

TRANSLATION

OYIN SO ADUN NÙ

Court, E diide, Adájó ti dé

Ejó tí ó kàn lónlì, oun náà ni láàrin CAC

àti àwon omo bíbí inú rè and the members born into it

A à! èyin CAC, ohun té e dà niyí

Sé sí Babalolá se fi fún yín le se é yí?

E ó jábò bí e bá délé

Oyin, oyin, oyin, oyin

Oyin so adun nù, ó deni yèyè

Idí abájo okú oyin nílè pèpè

E yá mi létí yín o ké e fi gbó

Mo déédé jókòó ní ibi kan lójó kan

Ibi tí wón ti n fo móto gan-an ni

Kí n tajú kán, mo rí àwon òkú oyin

Mo sì ráwon èèrà tó n wó won lo

Mo bèèrè lówó òré mi tó n fo móto

Ó ní inú emù loun ti kó won jade...

Court, Rise up, the judge is here

The next case is between CAC

A, members of CAC this is what you have become

Is this how Babalola handed it over to you?

You will give account when you get home

Honey, Honey, Honey, Honey, Honey has lost its sweetness, it is a ridicule

Ask me the reason I talk about dead bees

Lend me your hears, please listen

I sat down in a place one day

It is at a place they wash cars

As I looked I saw dead bees

And I saw plenty ants dragging them

I ask my friend who washes the car

He said he brought them out of palm wine

Lójó tí mo rí òkú oyin tó memu

Mo ràwé ìròyìn Daily Sketch lójó yen

Ọrọ CAC ni mo kà kà kà

Mo kà á tití o, ibànújé mú mi

Ìjọ mi CAC, ti mo fẹràn jù ni oyin

Àwa la lágbára láti ta òkùnkùn pa

Adùn táyé rí lára wa ni àdúra

Sùgbón ẹmu tí a mu, ohun ni ẹsẹ

taláse, tolórí, tòmọọjọ n kùnà

Olúwa ló so ìgbéraga di ilè

Òhun ló se jé kí reformation kó wáyé

Àbùkù inú rè nilé ejó tí a lo

Tí a fi gba kẹfẹrí bíi lóyà fúnra wa

Daily Sketch, Tribune, wón so wá di ije

Gbogbo ayé wá n fi wá seléyà káàkiri

Chorus

Ìsòro méta tí a ní nínú ijowa

Owó, ipò, òògùn ló sùketa

Lóòótó, kò síjọ tí won kíí tí dájó

The day I saw the
dead

bee that was drunk
I bought Daily sketch
News paper

I read so much about
CAC

I read to the point that
I became sad

My Church CAC that
I love is the bee

we have the power to
sting darkness to death

The sweetness that the
world saw in us is
prayer

But the palm wine that
we drank is sin

The church leaders,
elders and membership
have failed

It is God that brought
our pride down

That is why he allows
reformation

The shame in it is that
we went to court

And we employ
unbelievers as our
lawyers

Daily Sketch and
Tribune, they feed on
us

The whole world
makes mockery of us

The three problems
that we have in our
church

Money, Position, the
third is being fetish

It is true there is no
church where money is
not contributed

Owó ni kèké l'inyin rere, èyí yé mi

Àmó ibi tí a ti n sàsise, e gbó mi

A lè lo wákàtí méta o láti dǎwó ...

Ìsòro kejì tí a tún ní nínú ijo

Òun nìsòro ipò pelú oyè jíje

Tajá-teran ló fẹ di alábòójútó

Alábòójútó pelú fẹ di aláse

Ó seése káláse fẹ di Olórun

Oyè àlùfáà dára, e má sì mí gbó

Sùgbón a ní láti kékòò òrò Olórun...

Òrò keta náà ni òògùn síse

Kírànsé Olórun máa segbé ògbóni

Nígba téni kan oyè nínú-ògbóni

Tó wá fẹ se idúpé nílẹ Olórun

Ara orí burúkú tí à n so nìwòn yíí...

I understand that money is the wheel of the gospel

But this is where we make mistake

We can use three hours to contribute money

The second problem that we have in the church

Is the problem of position and offices

everybody wants to be an overseer

An overseer wants to become a superintendent

It is possible that the superintendent wants to become God

the office of a pastor is good, don't misunderstand me

But we need to learn the word of God

The third issue is that of being fetish

servants of God are in Ogboni cults

Someone was given an office in ogboni cult

And he wants to do thanksgiving in the church

This is part of the ill luck that we talk about...

From the above song, the spiritual state of the Christ Apostolic Church which the musician described as having degenerated forms the basis for the desire for spiritual healing for the church. The church symbolically referred to as "Oyin" (Honey) is said to have lost its sweetness and as such it became an object of ridicule. The crisis that rocked the Christ Apostolic Church in Nigeria in the late 1980s to 1990 which led to many court cases forms the ground for the release of this record by Evangelist Niyi Adedokun who is also a Pastor in the Christ Apostolic Church.

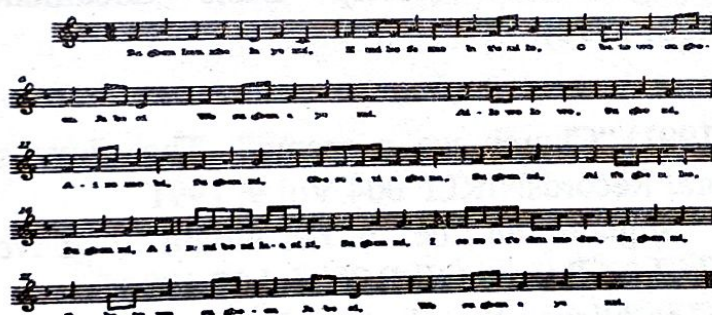
The spiritual state of the nation as it is seen in the way of life of the people, the behaviour of the religious and political leaders and the general spiritual atmosphere of the nation usually motivate the gospel musicians to

pass comments. They constantly ask for divine intervention and encourage the people to turn to the Lord, serve him and do what will be pleasing to him so that the troubles experienced by the country will be removed. Many gospel musicians as well as all religious people say that if the religious life of a people is right, it will be easy for God to step into their affairs and bring peace and prosperity that they need.

The focus of this paper has been on the factors that influence the gospel musicians' inclusion of themes of illness and healing in their songs. It is observed that personal experience of any form of illness and healing of the singer is a motivating factor. Others include sociological, economic and spiritual factors. The context of existence and operations of the gospel musicians affect them either positively or negatively. What they present in their songs is evident in the use of words, concepts, descriptions and outright criticism of situations, systems, programmes and ideologies that they consider not working as expected. This come either as reactions to the situation or divine inspirations to the gospel musicians to suggest necessary solutions.

Sugbon Kan N be Laye Mi

Dele Ade



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