

BOOK REVIEW

Vicki L. Brennan. *Singing Yoruba Christianity: Music, Media, and Morality*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018. xxi + 201 pp. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. \$80.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-0-253-03207-2.

Very few academic texts have focused on Yoruba Christianity. In *Singing Yoruba Christianity: Music, Media, and Morality*, Vicki L. Brennan examines the significance of music, songs, and communication in the creation, growth, and development of *Ayo ni O* (Cherubim and Seraphim) churches in Lagos, Nigeria. Brennan has put together a very careful analysis of the beginning of this charismatic church that boasts a fusion of Yoruba culture and western Christian ideas. Its uniqueness is not only based on the appearance of the churches, but also on how members have used music as a locus for active participation during worship and beyond. When congregants converge and enact various music and songs, they are consciously reconnecting with God, with the conviction that their requests will be answered.

Spread over eight chapters, the book explores how members of the *Ayo ni O* (Cherubim and Seraphim) churches have used musical and religious media such as hymn books, cassette tapes and other recordings, and clothing and architectural space to reproduce themselves as Christian subjects. These materials have mediated religious experiences for church members, drawing them closer to God, to church history, and to each other. At the same time, religious and musical media have provided means through which church members develop an ethical self that enables them to interpret and apply the lessons learned through embodied and affective participation in church worship to issues and situations that they face in their own lives. The practices through which church members cultivate such moral and ethical dispositions, which include attending choir rehearsals and bible study sessions, are adequately discussed in the last few sections of the book.

One important statement made in the text that is very true with regard to this church and other traditional religious groups in Nigeria and other African cultures is the importance of music or song in any ritual ceremonial gathering. According to Brennan, “musical performance in the context of worship had to be done correctly in order to be effective at transcending space and time, linking human and divine and creating

unison amid difference” (6). It is also correct to stress that musical performances reproduce religious community; they not only organize life on this plane, but they also enable access to the divine. Like many worshippers of various traditional religions, members of the *Ayo ni O* church acknowledge that music, a magnet that draws people to the church, also attracts God’s attention during worship, and especially as a prelude to prayer sessions (7).

Music in the form of songs and hymns is indispensable in the buildup to religious events. When the songs become amplified, it is expected that the melody combines in activating the sacred or worship spaces, making it possible to summon various spiritual entities to come and provide their needed presence at the event. Against that backdrop, this book examines musical and ritual performance in the context of worship by members of the Cherubim and Seraphim church of Nigeria. Through ethnographic and historical analysis, Brennan demonstrates that songs are the medium through which “religious experiences and beliefs were materialized and made available to church members.” In this manner, members of the church are bound to one another and to a set of moral ideals as articulated by church authority through the means of “aestheticized sensational form.” This book further provides detailed ethnographic analysis of the relationships between musical sound, text produced in and about music, and the social contexts for musical performance, in order to understand how music becomes an efficacious practice for church members.

In exploring the ethnography of time and place, Brennan is able to articulate the history and effectiveness of the activities of the churches and its members. It is important to mention that through observer participation, researchers are able to probe deeper into the ideas and practices that define groups, building on that to develop a powerful narrative that provides nuanced analysis. Brennan achieves this in her book through her active participation as a member of the church choir. Being an active fieldwork researcher myself, I find her method to be effective both for advanced research and for the teaching of the rudiments of fieldwork research.

Given the ever-expanding scope of the study of the visual and expressive arts of Africa, this book offers another perspective and one that accesses the activities of one of Africa’s adapted churches. Although Brennan made numerous attempts to infuse the vernacular of the group she studied, I would like to see more works that follow from the advocacy of Roland Abiodun, that of inserting the African into our analysis of the material culture of any group.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2019.60

For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Lawuyi, O. B. 1992. "The Obatala Factor in Yoruba History." *History in Africa* 19: 369–75. doi:10.2307/3172006.
- Willis, John Thabiti. 2017. "Bridging the Archival-Ethnographic Divide: Gender, Kinship, and Seniority in the Study of Yoruba Masquerade." *History in Africa* 44: 63–100. doi:10.1017/hia.2016.12.