Authority, Deference, and Disregard in Catholic Liturgical Music in Central Cameroon

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Abstract. This article examines Catholic liturgical music in indigenous idioms in central Cameroon, focusing on a Sanctus by composer Jean André Yebnoun Ngann. We consider how musicians enact deference and authority through the sounding materials of music, discussions of music, and social interactions that allow music-making to occur, proposing that all of these might usefully be analyzed with the help of the linguistic concept of deixis. Study of four different performances of the Sanctus reveals how contemporary music-making elaborates forms of deference shaped not only by colonialism and Catholicism but also by older ways of leading and following.

In early November 2017, we met with Julienne Ngo Mbaga to study the text of a piece of Catholic liturgical music composed in her first language, Basaá. We convened at the bishopric of the Cameroonian diocese of Obala and got to work writing down the lyrics, marking the tonal accents, and producing a word-for-word translation in French (see music example 1). The three of us were shortly joined by Ngo’s daughter, who knew the Sanctus well and sang it for us as we worked. A little later, two of Ngo’s sisters called on her mobile phone to sing the piece for us. They had an even better grasp of the music, probably having performed it more recently, and we learned that they had been taught the piece by its composer, Jean André Yebnoun Ngann. The session eventually closed with a word of prayer, appropriately enough, given the music we were studying was created for the Mass.

Even during an investigation of dry details of pronunciation, then, the Sanctus was understood to do a particular kind of relational work, instantiating a connection with the divinity (the first words of the piece are “You are holy, o Lord our God”). That Essele was at the time rector of the diocese’s cathedral and...
that our work took place in the bishopric probably had something to do with this (see Essele 2017:10–15). The encounter also highlighted other connections. The Sanctus was composed for liturgical use by Basaá-speaking Catholics, and the meeting brought together insiders and outsiders to this text/worshiper relation. Most important for the purposes of this article, working on the piece required the activation of relationships with experts: Ngo called on members of her family to ensure the Sanctus was presented in the most accurate form possible.

This article considers how music-making acknowledges and activates relationships—with intimates and strangers, with fellow performers and observers, with persons co-present (including telephonically) and absent, with particular individuals and abstract groups, and with humans and other-than-human beings. More specifically, it looks at how these relationships are activated in performances of contemporary Catholic music in central Cameroon. Of particular interest in this context is how musical interaction mediates authority and assent and how it articulates a model of social organization in which the ability to mobilize social connections is highly valued. The vehicle for the exploration is a Sanctus by the Basaá composer Jean André Yebnoun Ngann (see figure 1), which is encountered in four versions: (1) as sung by Ngo and members of her

Music example 1: The melody of the opening refrain of Jean André Yebnoun Ngann’s Sanctus, with the lyrics in Basaá (line 1) and with tones marked (line 2), followed by a word-for-word translation in English (line 3, derived from a similar translation in French). The character ɔ represents the vowel o as heard in US English “thought”; ŋ represents the consonant ng as heard in US English “sing.” The diacritics indicate high (´), low (¨), rising (´), and descending (¨) tones. Descending arrows (↓) indicate downstep: lowering of the following high tone or tones. In addition to the work conducted with Ngo and her family, music examples 1, 2, 3, and 5 and table 1 draw on a transcription and translation of the Basaá text by Emmanuel-Moselly Makasso.
family; (2) in rehearsal and performance at a workshop on liturgical music, directed by a former chorister of the composer; (3) in rehearsal and performance by a parish choir directed by the composer himself; and (4) in an arrangement in the Ewondo language by another composer, Lucien Mebenga (see figure 2).³

Figure 1: Jean André Yebnoun Ngann (front left) with the Chorale Ngen-Yondo. Photo by Dueck.

Figure 2: Lucien Mebenga. Still from a video filmed by Dueck.
Fieldwork

We draw on fieldwork conducted jointly during five periods of two to four weeks between 2017 and 2019. Two of these periods are particularly important for this article. The first, in July 2017, focused on the Quinzaine de la musique liturgique (Fortnight of liturgical music), an intensive workshop hosted by the Faculty of Theology at the Catholic University of Central Africa in Yaoundé. The Quinzaine sought to develop the musical abilities and doctrinal awareness of church musicians and brought together twenty-four men and nineteen women, mostly from Yaoundé and nearby communities. The attendees included choristers, choir directors, and instrumentalists. Most were laypeople, although a small number had taken religious vows. The Catholic University of Central Africa has not until very recently had any dedicated offerings in music, nor is it possible to do a degree program in the subject at any institution of higher education in Cameroon, and so the workshop helped meet a broad need for formal music training. During the event, attendees heard lectures by instructors from the Faculty of Theology, by composers and directors of note, and by music academics. They also heard concerts by choirs from Yaoundé and the surrounding area, and they worked together in ensembles to prepare the music for daily services (masses, lauds, and vespers), a Saturday night concert, and two Sunday masses. We ourselves presented lectures and taught solfège, and we recorded talks, concerts, rehearsals, and the Sunday masses. Essele was one of the main architects of the workshop and served on the organizational and scholarly committees for the event. The other important period of fieldwork took place in November and early December 2017. During this time, we organized a study day on notation and transcription, met with the aforementioned composers Yebnoun and Mebenga, and made additional recordings of their versions of the Sanctus. We also began to extend the focus of our research, exploring how musicians, musical instruments, and musical materials circulate between the Catholic liturgy, community celebrations, funerary rites, and nightclubs.

The authors come to this study by different routes and with different levels of insidership. Essele is a Black Cameroonian and was born in the area where the study was undertaken; he conducts fieldwork in Eton, Ewondo, and related languages, as well as in French. Dueck is a white Canadian and has spent around six months in total in central Cameroon; he conducts fieldwork in French and English. Essele did his PhD in ethnomusicology at Paris Nanterre University and the Muséum national d’histoire naturelle, teaches musicology in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Management at the Catholic University of Central Africa, and is a priest and the former rector of the Cathédrale Notre Dame du Mont Carmel in Obala. Dueck did his PhD at the University of Chicago, teaches music at the Open University in the United Kingdom, and is agnostic. As this suggests, our study is impacted in complex ways by ongoing colonial legacies,
which have implications not only for the musical sociality we investigate, for how we represent this (in text, notation, and image), and for our relationships with research participants but also for our collaboration with one another as researchers.

**Relationships, Networks, Alliances, Deixis**

Music research in the 2000s has taken an increasingly relational turn. Georgina Born’s 2010 “For a Relational Musicology” is an early advocate for the shift, encouraging study that takes into account not only the immediacies of making music but also how music mediates forms of publicness, social relations, and large-scale economic and political forces (232). That approach resonates with the one taken here, in which musical performances and verbal exchanges present opportunities to reflect on how music mediates Cameroonian and Catholic public cultures, as well as older and newer ways of expressing deference. A relational turn is also evident in recent writing on instruments, recordings, and music technology, especially work in dialogue with actor-network theory (see, e.g., Stanyek and Piekut 2010; Bates 2012, 2016; Browning 2016; Born and Haworth 2017). This literature explores how human and other-than-human actors (e.g., instruments) alike shape music. Recent reflections on relationality (Diamond [2006] 2011) and acts of hailing/addressing (Robinson 2019) in work on North American Indigenous music and sound art are perhaps the most significant influence on this study, however. Beverley Diamond, for example, calls for attention to music’s capacity for “defining relationships” ([2006] 2011:11) and explores in a series of case studies the connections that musicians pursue and in which they are implicated. Her analysis reveals how music-making articulates simultaneous and overlapping modes of relationality. At the same time, it suggests that not only makers of music but also hearers define relationships and that music can become implicated in forms of connective work its makers never predicted.

The idea that music articulates relationships also resonates with the concept of indexicality in the metapragmatics of Michael Silverstein (see Silverstein 1993, 1997, 2004; for work in music studies, see Monson 1996; Wilf 2012; Dueck 2013a, 2013b). The term “indexicality” is most frequently associated with the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce, where it designates a sign that co-occurs with its referent (e.g., the sound of a violin is an index of someone drawing a bow over its strings). Peircean semiotics is amenable to investigations of both linguistic and nonlinguistic signs, and perhaps for this reason a number of music scholars have found it productive (see, e.g., Turino 1999, 2008; Samuels 2004; Beaster-Jones 2011). Silverstein’s metapragmatics extends Peirce’s concept of indices by emphasizing their consequentiality, which is to say how they not only acknowledge but also transform their contexts. This is perhaps best demonstrated by a group of
indices called deictics, which among other things allow talk to refer to other talk (through expressions such as “I’m glad to hear it” or “what I mentioned earlier”) and to its temporal and locational context (“this afternoon,” “right beside Anne”). More important for our purposes, deictics activate interactional roles (e.g., as speaker or hearer), status positions (e.g., through the use of honorifics), and relationships (e.g., through the use of terms such as “tu,” “vous,” and “Mom”). It is especially in these ways that the consequential aspect of deixis is evident, since interlocutors employ it not only in acknowledging roles and relationships but in establishing them (e.g., “How can I help you today, ma’am?”).

Many aspects of interaction outside language have this productively indexical character, including music-making, and in what follows, we consider some of the relationships that musical interaction brings into being—again, to persons known/unknown, co-present/absent, human/supernatural, particular/abstract—with special interest in how it mediates leadership and deference. The analysis takes particular instances of in-person music-making as a starting point but extends beyond the intimacies of performance to consider how musical relationality is shaped by powerful institutions and historical changes.

An example of how musical practice both acknowledges and initiates relationships may help ground these ideas. For over half a century, Catholic churches in central Cameroon have tuned xylophone ensembles, known in Ewondo as mèndzáŋ, to accord with the Western diatonic scale (some xylophones also incorporate the flattened seventh scale degree). At the same time, the instruments are constructed like central Cameroonian xylophones, with the bass notes on players’ right and the treble notes on their left, the opposite of how Western mallet percussion instruments are typically configured. Figure 3 shows a xylophone from the chapel of the Grand Séminaire de Nkoldibisson at the Catholic University of Central Africa. The structure of the instrument both acknowledges and constitutes (i.e., deictically recognizes) a particular kind of musician:

![Figure 3: The keyboard of a xylophone from the ensemble of the chapel of the Grand Séminaire de Nkoldibisson. The notes ascend from right to left, taking the pattern sol-la-ti-do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-ti flat-ti-do. Photo by Dueck.](image)
someone whose practice has been formed by a legacy of contact, colonialism, and Christianization, as well as by an indigenous musical heritage. In doing so, it contributes in an incremental way to the reproduction, in every new generation of seminarians, of relationships to musicians and practices both inside and outside central Cameroon.

The remainder of this article explores the relationships enacted in the course of a number of performances of the Yebnoun Sanctus. We begin by considering how the decision to perform the piece at the final mass at the 2017 Quinzaine acknowledged both specific performance circumstances and broader aesthetic affinities. This leads to a discussion of religious and political circumstances that have impacted contemporary musical practice. Next, two further performances of the Sanctus, one directed by Lucien Mebenga and the other by Yebnoun himself, lead to reflection on how musical borrowing can express both deference and disregard. Finally, we consider how contemporary liturgical music simultaneously articulates both older and newer aspects of central Cameroonian sociality.

The Sanctus at the Quinzaine

The process of choosing repertoire is one that is indexically rich, whether the decision involves the *maqām* appropriate to a particular audience (see Racy 2003:99–100) or the tunes jazz musicians play on a bandstand (see Faulkner and Becker 2009). Potential considerations include the time and place of the performance, the knowledge and ability of the performers, the affordances of the instruments and sound equipment available, and the listeners present—not to mention how choices might be understood to situate musicians aesthetically and ideologically. All of this was true of the situation in which we first encountered the Yebnoun Sanctus.

Well before the 2017 Quinzaine, its scholarly and organizational committees had agreed that the participants would provide the music for the masses to be attended by the broader university community on the second and third Sundays of the workshop. The organizational committee also decided that the final mass would highlight music in African languages and styles. That mass thus had to meet both the regular requirements of the liturgical calendar (the sixteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time in Year A) and expectations around African repertoire. The participants, with the guidance of two of the Quinzaine coordinators, chose fifteen pieces for it. Seven of these made use of Cameroonian musical idioms, and six were in Cameroonian languages: there were five pieces in French, four in Ewondo, two in English, two in Latin, one in Basaá, and one in Bamileke. The choices constituted a somewhat localized response to the request for African music. Although the Quinzaine had been advertised across Central Africa in the
hope of bringing together an international group of participants, travel proved too expensive for people from far away, and almost all of the attendees ended up coming from Yaoundé or nearby. All but one of them were Francophones, and the great majority also spoke Ewondo or a closely related Beti language. The music at the mass thus reflected central Cameroon rather than Africa as a whole. In fact, the Ewondo songs were familiar to enough of the participants that little rehearsal of them was needed.

Nevertheless, organizers and participants sought to make the service inclusive. Especially notable in this regard was the Yebnoun Sanctus, which was new to nearly everyone and required considerable time to learn. To our knowledge, the only attendee who spoke Basaá was a musician named Mathilde Ngondjip, who proposed the Sanctus, taught it, conducted it, and performed the verses (whose words the choir did not have time to learn). Notwithstanding the linguistic challenges, the Sanctus was amenable to acquisition by participants who had grown up singing liturgical music in and around Yaoundé. First, it was supported by the same kind of ensemble that accompanies liturgical music in indigenous languages across the Centre Region: a set of xylophones in distinct ranges, a tall single-headed barrel drum, and a rattle. Second, it employed a six-beat rhythmic cycle regularly encountered in sacred and popular musics in the area. Third, although Basaá is not closely related to Ewondo or other Beti languages, it shares similarities with them as another A-group Bantu language, and many Beti people have Basaá-speaking neighbors. The Sanctus also had characteristics in common with many contemporary musics in the area, making use of ostinato, melodic parallelism, and elements of Western harmony. Music example 2, an extract from the piece’s coda, demonstrates melodic parallelism, as well as an apparent V–I cadence. In a number of ways, then, the difficulty of learning a piece in a new language was balanced by the familiarity of the musical content.

The decision to program the Yebnoun Sanctus was thus both appropriate and effective. On the one hand, it helped meet the expectation that the mass would feature music in a range of African languages and idioms; on the other, its musical elements were accessible enough that it could be performed with limited rehearsal. This success can be understood in deictic terms of role recruitment and role occupation: the organizers of the Quinzaine asked the participants to realize an African mass, and they met these expectations using the repertoire they were best able to present; Ngondjip expected her fellow musicians to be able to learn the Yebnoun Sanctus, and they rewarded that confidence; Quinzaine participants chose a program that—notwithstanding unfamiliar pieces and languages—would lead the congregation in worship, and the response at the end of the service indicated that they had done so successfully. Notice how conceptualizing music in these terms highlights not only
roles but also relationships of leadership and obligation, connections that come further to the fore below.

**Political and Ecclesiastical Context**

First, however, it is important to understand the political and ecclesiastical context for the performance just discussed, beginning with some of the tensions around language and ethnicity in Cameroon. The country is home to around 250 indigenous languages, but its two official tongues are French and English, and Francophones significantly outnumber Anglophones. Bilingualism is a legacy of colonialism: the territory that now comprises Cameroon was a German colony from 1884 until 1916 but was divided between France and Great Britain after the First World War (Ruppel and Ruppel-Schlichting 2018:62–64). The French-administered area became independent in 1960; the following year, the part of the British-administered territory known as the Southern Cameroons voted to join it (Tiewa and Yenshu Vubo 2015:333–34). Together these lands became the Federal Republic of Cameroon in 1961 (Konings and Nyamnjoh 1997:208).

Although founded as a federal state, Cameroon was restructured in a more unitary way following a 1972 referendum. That restructuring has been a significant grievance to many Anglophones, as has subsequent poor accommodation of the English language by state educational and judicial systems. These issues, among others, have informed recent violence in the country’s
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Anglophone-majority regions. There are also tensions around the prominence in political and cultural spheres of Beti peoples, who are perceived to have been inordinately well-represented following the coming to power of President Paul Biya, a member of the closely related Bulu ethnic group, in 1982 (see Nyamnjoh and Fokwang 2005:257–58). As one of the largest ethnic groups in the country, Beti peoples were prominent well before the Biya presidency, but this has only increased since the 1980s.\(^{13}\)

This said, state and church alike evoke the cultural and linguistic diversity of the nation at important events, frequently using music and dance to represent its constituent ethnic groups (see Tiewa and Yenshu Vubo 2015). This helps to explain why it was not unusual to ask the singers at the Quinzaine to perform songs in English and non-Beti languages (Basaá and Bamileke): the performance of multiculturalism is common in Cameroon. (The politics of language also impacted musical interactions in other ways. For instance, at a moment when the lack of accommodation for English speakers was being protested nationally, the sole Anglophone participant at the Quinzaine spoke pointedly in English whenever he addressed the assembly. And during a collective evaluation of how the workshop had gone, one group of respondents complained that music in Beti languages had been too dominant.)

Ecclesiastical, political, and musical developments all played a part in how indigenous music came to have a prominent place in the Cameroonian liturgy in the first place. First, the twentieth century saw a gradual incorporation of indigenous languages, styles, and instruments in Catholic worship, often led by innovators at Catholic educational institutions. In 1923 Abbé Frédéric Essomba led the very first mass sung in Ewondo at the École Saint-Joseph de Mvolyé (Mba 1981:75–76), with Ewondo words set to European melodies. In 1936 Catholic Missions Cameroon published *Bia Bi Nda-Zamba* (Songs of the church), a book of Ewondo hymns, also set to European melodies. Cameroonian instruments and musical styles followed beginning in the 1950s. Particularly important were the students at the Grand Séminaire d’Otélé, who around 1957 began to compose religious music in Cameroonian styles and accompanied by indigenous percussion instruments (Mba 1981:153–56).\(^ {14}\) A number of composers who studied at the seminary in the late 1950s and early 1960s—including François Xavier Amara, Athanase Ateba, Barthelemy Tsilla, Michel Evuna, Sylvain Atangana, Gabriel Mfomo, Bernard Nanga, and Pie-Claude Ngumu (Mba 1981:154)—created music that is still sung.

Indigenous languages, styles, and instruments made further inroads following independence in 1961. Pie-Claude Ngumu, an Ewondo vicar, was the first to incorporate the xylophone ensemble in Catholic sacred music, doing so as part of the celebrations for a patronal feast in 1961 (Ngumu 1976:10). Indigenous
instruments were also heard at the inauguration of Cameroon’s first native-born archbishop, Jean Zoa, in January 1962 (see Mba 1981:187). And after becoming first vicar and music director (maître de chapelle) at Yaoundé Cathedral, the aforementioned Ngumu founded the Maîtrise des chanteurs à la croix d’ébène (Choir of singers at the ebony cross), an ensemble accompanied by four xylophones in a traditional design, wooden slit drum (ŋkúl), tall single-headed drum (mbè), double bell (ŋkéŋ), rattle (nàs), and stick zither (mvèt) (Ngumu 1971).

Several other developments supported the incorporation of indigenous elements from the 1960s onward. The first was a national effort to address the consequences of colonialism through re-Africanization. Writing in 1973, Ngumu characterized this as “a serious effort of ‘culturation’ and instruction in order to redress thinking traumatized by colonial action” (1976:7, translation by the authors). Another was the Second Vatican Council, whose reforms encouraged the use of vernacular languages and allowed for indigenous musical styles in the Mass. The Sacrosanctum Concilium, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of December 1963, had the following to say on the subject: “In certain parts of the world, especially mission lands, there are peoples who have their own musical traditions, and these play a great part in their religious and social life. For this reason due importance is to be attached to their music, and a suitable place is to be given to it, not only in forming their attitude toward religion, but also in adapting worship to their native genius” (Vatican [1963] 2018:§119). Notwithstanding the Eurocentric language (“mission lands”), the constitution smoothed the way for further incorporation of local musical styles in worship.

Note, however, that Cameroonian innovators were already incorporating indigenous elements in sacred music by this time. As this suggests, the reforms of the Second Vatican Council were as much a response to vernacularization as the impetus for it. In fact, Jean-Marie Bodo (1992:171–72) argues that all of the important liturgical innovations in Cameroon preceded Vatican II.

A third and related factor is the concept of inculturation, which gained currency in Catholic discourse from the 1970s onward. Inculturation can be understood as the process by which Christianity is translated into culturally specific forms. Implementers of inculturation have often focused on translating elements of the liturgy in ways they deem appropriate to the culture being evangelized. Notwithstanding the openness of this approach, implementers hold certain Christian concepts to be superordinate to culture: as Michael Angrosino writes, “Even the most liberal inculturationist must at some point believe that immutable truth is at stake; otherwise there would be no need to ‘incarnate the gospel’ [i.e., translate Christianity culturally] in the first place” (1994:829). The concept is very familiar to Catholic clergy and composers in Cameroon and was discussed regularly at the 2017 and 2018 Quinzaines. The idea that the liturgy
should incorporate Cameroonian languages, music, and movement is uncontroversial, although just how this should happen engenders much discussion.

A final and less direct factor in the indigenization of the liturgy may have been the valorization of elements of traditional expressive culture in Cameroonian popular music. The period immediately after independence witnessed an Africanization of popular music led by ensembles such as the Richard Band de Zoétélé (formed around 1963), which performed merengue and rumba on xylophones rather than guitars (Brunner 2014:160). Such groups gradually started to adapt traditional dance genres such as elak and perform them alongside merengue and rumba (Kubik 2001). This trend continued, and as Anja Brunner (2014) shows, the 1970s and 1980s saw a decisive shift toward a Cameroonian musical aesthetic. Music in traditional dance rhythms with twelve- and eighteen-pulse metrical cycles gained prominence, and in central Cameroon, these overtook “international” dance styles with sixteen-pulse cycles. The Cameroonian styles—generally known as bikutsi, a repurposing of the name of a traditional Beti women’s genre—have retained currency up to the time of writing. Crucially, these styles share melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic characteristics with contemporary Cameroonian Catholic music. Musicians and musical materials move between sacred and popular music, and many popular artists start out as church musicians.

This brief consideration of social developments in Cameroon helps to explain further how a heterogeneous group of musicians was able to learn the Yebnoun Sanctus so quickly. Factors included a history of Catholic music incorporating local languages, styles, and instruments; the reforms of the Second Vatican Council; the promulgation of the principle of inculturation; and the emergence of an aesthetic bridging popular and liturgical music. These factors have contributed to the emergence of a public of performers attuned to one another’s musical practices, allowing, among other things, the quick assimilation of new music.

The Sanctus and Its Composers

The remainder of this article examines how authority is constituted, contested, and ignored through musical deference or its absence. In particular, it considers how music-making in central Cameroon at once articulates newer relationships of power related to Catholicism and older ones involving patron-client alliances. We begin by examining how arranging or reimagining a piece of music highlights relationships of respect between composers and between composers and the church.

The Yebnoun Sanctus was heard twice during the Quinzaine, not only at the final mass but also at an earlier evening concert, where Lucien Mebenga
directed the Chorale Saint-Jean Apôtre de Nkolbisson in a performance of his own Ewondo-language arrangement of the piece. We compared the two versions during the following months and, struck by the differences between them, decided to make them one of the focuses of a second period of joint fieldwork. Thus, in November 2017 we invited the composers to a study day on the transcription and notation of Cameroonian musics at the Catholic University of Central Africa. On that day, Dueck discussed some of the issues the two versions of the Sanctus raise for transcription, playing extracts from the pieces to give attendees a sense of the music. Yebnoun seemed surprised when he heard Mebenga’s highly compressed version of what in his own piece is an expansive passage on the text “Hosana, dilela, u ye mpubi o.” In Yebnoun’s Sanctus, the passage increases in volume and polyphonic complexity over the course of several repetitions of the melodic material. In the performance at the final mass of the Quinzaine, for instance, the passage was presented over twenty-eight iterations of the (six-beat) metrical cycle, and in the performance we recorded of Yebnoun conducting his own choir, it took sixteen such cycles (see music example 3). But in Mebenga’s arrangement, it is all over in six (see music example 4).

When we asked Yebnoun on a later date about Mebenga’s version, he replied diplomatically that it could have followed his own a little more faithfully, although the essence was there: “If we had worked . . . I would like to help Lucien to be even truer to the melody, even truer, just a little. I believe I will if time permits. . . . But he did the essential. That’s the important thing. . . . You know . . . everything changes” (interview with authors, 11 November 2017). As Yebnoun’s remarks indicate, arranging liturgical music in Cameroon is guided in part by expectations of deference. Lest this suggest disregard on Mebenga’s part, other aspects of his arrangement demonstrate respect for the original. When Dueck and Mebenga spoke in November 2017, the arranger sang the openings of the two pieces to demonstrate how he had maintained the contour of the original melody when recomposing it to fit the Ewondo words. His point becomes evident when the transcriptions in music examples 5 and 6 are compared: during the first twelve beats (two bars) of both examples, the melody emphasizes the progression sol–la–sol–mi (i.e., scale degrees 5, 6, 5, and 3). Our aim here is not to make a case for or against the care of the arranger but rather to show musicians themselves doing so—in short, to show them evaluating the music in terms of respect or its absence.

There are at least two reasons why some degree of recomposition was necessary in Mebenga’s version of the Sanctus. First, Yebnoun’s piece sets not only the standard text of the Sanctus but also additional interpolated material based on passages from the Bible. Mebenga keeps closer to the standard text of the Sanctus (rather than presenting an Ewondo translation of Yebnoun’s Basaá text)
Music example 3: The passage on “Hosana dilela u ye mpubi o” from the Yebnoun Sanctus, as performed by the Chorale Nngen-Yondo under the direction of the composer on December 1, 2017 in Yaoundé.
Music example 4: The passage on “Hosana mfufub, One mfufub o” from the Mebenga arrangement of the Yebnoun Sanctus, as performed by the Chorale Saint-Jean Apôtre de Nkolbisson under the direction of the arranger on July 13, 2017 in Yaoundé.
Music example 5: The beginning of the melody of the Yebnoun Sanctus, as performed by the Chorale Ngen-Yondo under the direction of the composer on December 1, 2017 in Yaoundé. Asterisks in the first two bars of the top vocal line outline the progression sol-la-sol-mi.
Music example 6: The beginning of the melody of the Mebenga arrangement of the Sanctus, as performed by the Chorale Saint-Jean Apôtre de Nkolbisson under the direction of the arranger on July 13, 2017 in Yaoundé. Asterisks in the first two bars of the top vocal line outline the progression sol-la-sol-mi.
and thus sets many fewer words (see table 1). Second, vocal melodies in Basaá and Ewondo are shaped by the tonal patterning of the text: if a group of syllables has a particular contour (e.g., low–high–low), the melody to which they are set will need to take this into account.

Correspondence between tonal accent and melodic contour can be observed in both music example 5 and music example 6 (for earlier discussions of “tone and tune,” see Jones [1959], Schneider [1961], Agawu [1984, 1988], Fünniss and Guarisma [2004], Schellenberg [2009], and Essele [2017]). It is clearest in music example 5, where the melodies setting “à sòn à jòb jès màpúbí món” match the tonal patterning of the text exactly. This is not always straightforward: notice, for example, how both syllables in “ù yè” have a low tone, yet the pitch of the melody rises.21 Correspondence is murkier still in music example 6, perhaps because Mebenga was attuned to both Yebnoun’s original melody and the tonal contours of the new Ewondo text. Nevertheless, the setting of “mfufúb” in measures 1 and 2, “-nè mfufúb” in measures 3 and 4, and “a nti” in measure 4 unambiguously match the pattern of tonal accent in the text.22 Moreover, in both pieces, the overall correspondence between tonal accent and melodic contour is much higher than would happen by chance: at least 78 percent in the Yebnoun Sanctus and 74 percent in the Mebenga Sanctus, compared to 33 percent by chance. We will discuss this correspondence at greater length in a future article; the detail here serves mostly as a bridge to another site of musical deference, namely, how official discourses around Cameroonian Catholic music expect vocal melodies to respect the tonal patterning of the text.

This expectation seems to have crystallized in the late 1950s among the composers studying at the Grand Séminaire d’Otélé (Mba 1981:3, 153–54; see also above). Regarding the “principles of the Otélé School,” Mba writes: “The

Table 1. Texts from the opening of the versions of the Sanctus by Yebnoun and Mebenga, together with the corresponding portion of the standard Latin text.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Piece and language</th>
<th>Text of opening</th>
<th>English translation of opening</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yebnoun Sanctus, Basaá</td>
<td>U ye mpubi a sòn a Jòb jès</td>
<td>You are holy, o Lord our God;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mapubi mòn ma biheles mbok</td>
<td>Your light has astonished the world;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>U mpob yaga ilò mòtanga</td>
<td>Truly your purity surpasses the hail;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ndi u fiayak ilò yak hyangaa</td>
<td>And you shine more than the sun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mebenga Sanctus, Ewondo</td>
<td>Mfufúb, mfufúb, mfufúb one he Wa</td>
<td>Holy, holy, holy, only you;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E a Nti one mfufúb; a Nti one mfufúb</td>
<td>O Lord, you are holy; o Lord, you are holy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanctus, standard Latin text</td>
<td>Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus</td>
<td>Holy, holy, holy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dominus Deus Sabaoth.</td>
<td>Lord God of hosts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ewondo language . . . is [one] in which each word has its particular accent. It is only necessary for this accent to be poorly pronounced for the word to change its sense or to become nonsense. Consequently, even in song, the word must keep its accent completely—whether high, low, or medium” (1981:154–55, translation by the authors). Implicit here is that a mismatch between tonal and melodic contour might change the meaning of a liturgical text, which would be unacceptable in the context of the Mass (compare Ssempijja 2018:128–30). The music-text relationship continues to be a concern in the composition of contemporary sacred music and is one of the factors considered when a piece is evaluated formally—for instance, by a diocese’s censorship committee—to determine whether it is suitable for inclusion in the liturgy. This raises questions. On the one hand, mismatches between textual accent and melodic contour are relatively common in music in tonal languages (see Agawu 1988; Schellenberg 2012); listeners are often able to determine the meanings of words contextually, with the help of the words around them. On the other, central Cameroonian composers seem to connect melody to tonal accent without consciously attempting to do so. Yet our fieldwork suggests that agreement between tone and tune remains a concern, especially for clergy. This reflects in part a desire for sung liturgical texts to be comprehensible (in accordance with an emphasis on conscious participation in the liturgy in the Sacrosanctum Concilium; see Vatican [1963] 2018:§14, §48). It also reflects a rejection of the musical infelicities of the colonial era, when European missionaries inexpertly grafted texts in indigenous languages to European melodies. It may also address a practice Bodo criticizes in his 1992 monograph: starting with a “more-or-less traditional melody and plastering the words onto it” (1992:128, translation by the authors).

Tone-tune relationships were only one area of musical concern discussed at the Quinzaine, however. For example, clergy and composers stressed the importance of musical settings that were sufficiently solemn in character. The broader point is that musical decisions—including around tone-tune calibration—were understood as a manifestation of composers’ obedience to the church. And thus at least some of the differences between the two versions of the Sanctus might be explained as reflecting not a lack of respect between composers but rather deference to the church. In play here are instances of musical deixis as defined earlier: actions that both acknowledge and instantiate relationships. Mebenga’s care to have his melodic material reflect Yebooun’s original honors the latter’s work, and both composers’ settings can be understood to defer to the church stylistically. Their work ratifies certain musical ideologies, including honoring what previous composers have created and ensuring that liturgical texts are intelligible. This is not to say that ideologies always determine behavior but rather that stakeholders know that their work will be evaluated against certain expectations and that they evoke these expectations themselves when discussing music.
Writing Down Cameroonian Liturgical Music

The preceding material examines how musicians enact relatively recent forms of deference associated with Christian liturgical music. We turn here to ask whether musical practice simultaneously elaborates older ways of leading and following. (The word “elaborate” is important: we are not suggesting that pre-colonial forms of sociality have passed unchanged through the decades.) An important touchstone will be the concepts of “wealth in people” and “wealth in knowledge” encountered in the literature on societies in southern Cameroon and Equatorial Africa.

One of the goals of the 2017 study day mentioned earlier was to invite feedback from Cameroonian musicians on how their music might be represented in notation. To this end, Dueck gave a talk about some in-progress transcriptions, drawing on a distinction made by Charles Seeger in 1958 to explain that his notation was primarily descriptive rather than prescriptive. During the question-and-answer session that followed, one of the attendees expressed concern that prescriptive notation was lacking in Cameroonian liturgical music and that there was a corresponding danger of inaccurate transmission. The composers in attendance, including Yebnoun and Mebenga, appeared to agree. Certainly Cameroonian compositions are transformed in the course of transmission. The great majority of choristers and accompanists do not read or write notation, and liturgical music is usually taught and learned aurally. When compositions are written down, it is typically only the words, presented in the sequence in which they are to be sung; thus, the music examples in this article are our transcriptions of the singing we heard rather than extracts from scores prepared by composers. It is not unusual to hear calls for more sacred music to be notated or for more musicians to become familiar with solfège, but it is difficult to say how successful such initiatives would be. Many musicians do not have the means to buy sheet music, and making photocopies can be financially difficult or otherwise unfeasible (for instance, in rural areas without regular electricity).

Nevertheless, struck by the call for prescriptive representations of Cameroonian music, when we later interviewed Yebnoun, we asked whether he would be interested in working with us to produce a definitive version of his Sanctus. He told us he would be happy to do so and invited us to attend a rehearsal where we would be able to record one of his choirs performing it. In early December we visited the Paroisse Saint Pierre d’Elig-Belibi in central Yaoundé to record him and the Chorale Nngen-Yondo. A number of factors suggested that this ostensibly definitive performance might have sounded very different on another occasion, however. For example, we met on a Monday evening, and it can be difficult to gather musicians for weeknight practices. In the end, a full complement of singers and xylophonists showed up, but the sanctuary of the church
was being used for another meeting, and we had to make the recording outside on a crowded balcony overlooking the street, with the choristers on one side of Yebnoun and the xylophonists on the other (i.e., with a less direct line of sight between director and instrumentalists than is usual; see figure 4).

Other less context-specific contingencies impacted the session. When directors indicate what xylophonists are to play, they often sing a core melody or melodies and then allow the musicians to elaborate these in ways that are differentiated according to the musicians’ roles and abilities. Much of the detail of the accompaniment is thus introduced independently of directors except insofar as they are involved in recruiting and teaching the instrumentalists in the first place. Further, directors do not always get the sounds they want out of musicians. Clip 1 at https://youtu.be/xP5sCo1ucvA is an extract from the video Essele shot at the recording session. Within it, there are two moments (0:06 and 0:21) at which Yebnoun gestures to silence the instrumentalists, the first of which is more successful than the second. Other cues are entirely effective: notice how the choir responds to the composer’s signal on the drum at 0:42, launching immediately into the next section of the piece.

Director and musicians seemed happy with the recording session, and we were, too. At the end of it, the ensemble performed an additional piece for us and posed for pictures (see figure 1). We acknowledged their contribution to our research by presenting a cash gift for the benefit of the ensemble (of this, more later).
Musical Performance and Wealth in Knowledge

Given the potential for problems (e.g., not enough musicians showing up), why did Yebnoun choose to transmit his piece in the way he did? Musicians in central Cameroon regularly teach new music by singing one part at a time to their choirs; could he not have passed the piece to us by singing it into our recorder? It seems not: proper representation of the Sanctus necessitated the participation of an entire ensemble. This was in part because of the complexity of the piece: the clearest way to convey the whole was to bring together enough people to realize its various elements in simultaneous performance. It was also because the creative labor required to produce the piece in its entirety was distributed between several musicians (on distributed musical creativity, see Clarke, Doffman, and Lim [2013]). This was especially evident in the instrumental accompaniment, where three xylophonists played three sets of distinct but complementary musical material, for the most part without input from the composer. Yebnoun offered only brief guidance to the accompanists during the rehearsal and recording session, spending the majority of the time reviewing melodic and textual elements with the choir instead.

We suggest there is another reason Yebnoun chose to transmit the Sanctus to us through an ensemble performance: because it conveyed something beyond the sounding stuff of his work, namely, his significant position within his musical community. Mobilizing an ensemble involved the activation of a set of relationships, and his ability to do this demonstrated the wealth in people and knowledge he was able to call on. The formulation “wealth in people and knowledge” here points to a common way of understanding patron-client relationships in central Cameroon, captured, for example, in the Eton saying “bòd bò báŋá á́ kúmá” (it is men who are wealth). It also alludes to an anthropological theory of the economic organization of societies in Equatorial Africa before colonialism, in which men of standing sought to accumulate wives, children, clients, and so on as forms of wealth (see Miers and Kopytoff 1977:60; Vansina 1990; Guyer and Eno Belinga 1995:92; Laburthe-Tolra 1981, 2011).

The concept of wealth in people is both challenged and extended in a 1995 article by Jane I. Guyer and Samuel-Martin Eno Belinga, who argue that it focuses overly much on accumulation, posits too static a model of social organization, and accounts insufficiently for the importance of knowledge in African societies. They argue that societies in precolonial Equatorial Africa fostered diverse and individuated forms of knowledge and that these fields of expertise were often of a complexity that went “far beyond the basic requisites for making a living” (1995:93). Moreover, social life did not revolve around the straightforward accumulation of dependents but rather around a continual aggregation and disaggregation of groups, “a constant improvisation along a continuum from centrifugality to . . . synergism” (103). Their revision of the “wealth in people”
paradigm is summed up in the concepts “wealth in knowledge” and “composition.” The first is the idea that social leaders were people who were able to mobilize a range of clients possessing highly individuated forms of knowledge. The second refers to the temporary, aggregative nature of this mobilization, which involved assembling (“composing”) the forces appropriate to a particular undertaking. Both concepts seem applicable to the music-making discussed in this article, including Yebnoun’s ability to bring together a group of singers and instrumentalists for our recording session and Ngo’s resourcefulness in assembling members of her family to help us transcribe the Basaá text of Yebnoun’s Sanctus. In short, aspects of this mode of social organization appear to persist in contemporary musical interactions.

Some readers may be skeptical about continuities between contemporary musical life and older forms of sociality. Is it appropriate to characterize the individuation of musical knowledge (evident, for instance, among musicians who develop expertise as xylophonists or composers) and swings between aggregation and disaggregation as manifestations of older modes of central Cameroonian sociality, given the changes of the twentieth century? Another interpretation would be that specialization has its roots in capitalism and that transient comings-together are characteristic of societies where financial precarity is common. Yet as Guyer and Eno Belinga argue, “wealth in knowledge” and “composition” are widely documented in the ethnographic literature. Further, to regard individuation and specialist knowledge solely as fruits of Western modernity risks perpetuating evolutionary theories of social structure that present an overly simple view of societies. It therefore seems reasonable to suggest, at a minimum, that musical specialization and the alternation between aggregation and disaggregation reflect both recent and more long-standing aspects of social life in Cameroon.

Returning to the main argument, the recording session made manifest a number of relationships, above all between Yebnoun and the musicians he was able to assemble. In mobilizing these musicians and their knowledge, Yebnoun transmitted his work in a more complete way than he would have been able to do alone while at the same time evidencing his consequentiality as a musician and leader. To play on the theoretical term “composition” introduced earlier, he demonstrated his abilities as a composer of both music and groups of people. Beyond this, the recording session was an opportunity for Yebnoun to meet his obligations as a patron to connect his clients to resources, raising money for the choir and putting them in touch with outsiders with access to an international audience.

Conclusion

The versions of Yebnoun’s Sanctus considered here offer a window on contemporary Catholic liturgical music in central Cameroon and on how relationships are
articulated in the course of composition, arrangement, rehearsal, performance, and ethnographic inquiry. Discussions with Yebnoun and Mebenga demonstrate how musicians interpret arrangements in terms of respect. Statements by clergy and musicians reveal how compositional practice is evaluated in terms of obedience to the church. And the transcription meeting with Ngo and the recording session with Yebnoun demonstrate how musical activity relies on the ability of key figures to mobilize networks of experts: family members in Ngo's case and choristers and instrumentalists in Yebnoun's. As these examples show, making music often involves the articulation of relationships of deference and obligation: between composers and arrangers, musicians and the church, patrons and their networks, and ethnographers and research participants. (The text of the Sanctus is, fittingly enough, an expression of reverence.) At the same time, it is evident that musical interactions present continual opportunities not to defer—and that interested parties may disagree about whether a particular piece or performance demonstrates sufficient respectfulness. The examples considered here thus highlight certain deictic aspects of musical practice: how it not only acknowledges but also instates roles and relationships.

The preceding accounts also suggest that, however much Catholicism shapes contemporary musical activity in central Cameroon, so too does the elaboration of older ways of leading and following. We are aware that this interpretation could be understood to downplay the impact of colonialism and of powerful institutions on the music we document, and we have accordingly sought to acknowledge these in our account. At the same time, church and state are far from the only forces shaping musical life: for example, contemporary articulations of patronage and clientship also play a role.

We hope to have demonstrated that one way of pursuing a relational ethnomusicology—considering the intimacies of emplaced music-making without losing sight of their broader social, historical, and political context—is to attend closely to musical deixis, to the honorifics and power relationships that are enacted as sounds and musicians are organized. This approach also suggests a productive way of understanding two methods with a long history in ethnomusicology: recording and transcription. The documents produced by these methods provide an account of sounds as well as of the relationships that allow those sounds to come into existence. They are transcripts of connections: those that we as researchers were able to activate, as well as those deployed by the musician with whom we work.

Acknowledgments

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**Notes**

1. The examples in this article employ the conventions of Western staff notation, in part in response to research participants’ calls for more Cameroonian music to be made available in forms that can be used in performance. This includes the use of time signatures, which differentiate our transcriptions from those of Arom and Fürniss, among others (see Arom 1991:227–28; Fürniss 2006:169; Essele 2017:327–33). Examples 1–6 all employ an \( \frac{18}{16} \) time signature whose bar lines coincide with the cycle of dance steps done to the music. There are six beats in each cycle, grouped in threes and subdivided triply. In performance, singers shift their weight on the first and fourth beats. All examples are shown as if in C; however, most xylophone ensembles are tuned to the scale of D major (Bodo 1992:119–20).

2. As a speaker of two other Bantu languages, Essele was much less of an outsider than Dueck.

3. Ewondo and Basaá are Bantu languages spoken in the Centre Region of Cameroon. Ewondo, with perhaps six hundred thousand speakers, is spoken extensively in and around the Cameroonian capital, Yaoundé; Basaá, with perhaps three hundred thousand speakers, is spoken in western parts of the Centre Region, as well as in parts of the Littoral, South, and West Regions (Simons and Fennig 2018).

4. The research was funded by the office of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research and Academic Strategy at the Open University.


6. There are also resonances with the idea that music interpellates listeners, both hailing and characterizing its addressees (on interpellation, see Althusser [1971] and Steingo [2017:90–92]). Dueck explored this subject along with Luis Manuel Garcia, Lauren Osborne, and Eva Pensis in “The Call: Ethics and Sonic Entanglement,” a panel presented at the 2017 meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology.

7. For a discussion of Ewondo concepts of upper and lower and how these relate to musical practice, gender, and the right and left sides of the body, see Mba (1981:173–76).

8. Bantu languages are found throughout much of the southern part of Africa; Harald Hammarström lists 555 of them in his 2019 update of the system of classification devised by Malcolm Guthrie. There are nineteen regional groupings for the languages, labeled A through S (Ewondo is A72 and Basaá A43a).

9. I–ii\(^{-1}\)–V\(^{-3}\)–(passing\(^{-1}\))–V\(^{-7}\)–I would be overly literal as an interpretation of a passage in which linear motion is so important, so only a sketch of chord function is included below the bottom line.

10. These expectations may not have been explicit or conscious: recruiters are not always aware of the kinds of recruitment they are doing.

11. The Northern Cameroons voted to join Nigeria.

12. The name of the country reflected this shift, the Federal Republic of Cameroon becoming the United Republic of Cameroon in 1972. The name changed again in 1984 to the Republic of Cameroon (see Konings and Nyamnjoh 1997).

13. Bulu and Beti peoples belong to a larger Pahuin group comprising Beti, Bulu, and Fang peoples; Cameroon’s head of state is sometimes perceived as Beti because of this broader affiliation (see Brunner 2014:60). Another more localized tension exists among Beti groups, namely, that the Ewondo language has had primacy of place among them. For instance, the Ewondo Bible
and missal are used in Catholic services not only in Ewondo communities but also in Eton and Bamvele ones.


15. According to Mba, slit drums, single-headed drum, rattle, and double bell were incorporated in the service.

16. The symbol ɛ represents the vowel e as heard in English “red.” The symbol ŋ represents the consonant ñ as heard in English “senior” or Spanish “señora.” The Maîtrise achieved some fame in its time, with performances at the Festival des arts nègres in Dakar in 1966 and the first Festival culturel panafricain in Algiers in 1969 (Ngumu 1971:10–12); the release of recordings including *La psalmodie camerounaise* (Ngumu 1964) and a lavishly illustrated book on the choir (Ngumu 1971).

17. For further discussion of the consequences of the Second Vatican Council, see Scruggs (2005) and Reily (2016).

18. Recent work on music and inculturation includes Engelhardt (2006); Ssempijja (2018); and Poplawska (2018).

19. “Si on avait travaillé . . . je voudrais aider Lucien a être encore plus fidèle à la mélodie, plus fidèle, juste un peu. Bon, je crois que je le ferai, bon, si le temps le permettra. . . . Mais, il a fait l’essentiel. C’est ça qui est important. . . . Vous savez que . . . toute chose évolue.”

20. It may also be informed by aspects of what Goehr ([1992] 2007) calls the “work concept.” Thanks to Andrew Killick for drawing attention to this possibility.


22. Taken together, differences in the amount of text and the tendency toward tone-tune correspondence help explain differences between the passages in music examples 2 and 3, considered earlier. Yebnoun makes use of three different sets of words, resulting in a setting that is longer and more rhythmically and melodically independent. Mebenga uses only one set of words, inviting a shorter setting in parallel motion.

23. “Le langue Ewondo . . . est une langue qui emploie des mots dont chacun a son accent particulier. Il suffit seulement que cet accent soit mal prononcé pour que le mot change de sens ou bien devienne tout simplement un non-sens. Resultat: même dans le chant, le mot doit garder son accent intégralement: accent haut, accent bas, accent moyen.” Mba’s “high, low, or medium” is now understood differently. Ewondo has only high and low (and rising and falling) tones, although an apparent medium tone can emerge as a consequence of downstep.

24. Thanks to Susanne Fürniss for making this case. Fürniss’s work with Gladys Guarisma (2004) shows that tone-tune correspondence is very common in certain repertoires in Bafia, which, like Basaá and Ewondo, is an A-group Bantu language.

25. “Le plus souvent, les compositeurs partaient d’une mélodie plus ou moins traditionnelle pour y plaquer les paroles.” Note, however, that Bodo is concerned by a possibility different from the one we raise here: that composers will write texts that match the traditional melodies but depart from the liturgy.

26. Complicating matters, of course, musicians do not always know that they are making decisions that might be judged proper or improper.

27. We offered this option to Yebnoun when we interviewed him in November 2017. Dueck had observed another Cameroonian composer do something similar at the Quinzaine, singing soprano, alto, tenor, and bass parts one after another into the mobile phones of two musicians who wanted to share his piece with their choirs.

28. See Nettl’s description of the symphony orchestra as “a replication of a factory or a plantation” having a “dictatorial arm-waving director” and a “rigid” and “hierarchical” class structure (2005:189).

29. Thus, while “differentiation by political hierarchy or by market function” accounts for many forms of social organization, complex kinds of differentiation also exist for other reasons (Guyer and Enô Belinga 1995:117).
30. Again, the forms of deference described in this article are in no way strictly European or African (insofar as such categories can even be deployed responsibly). Philippe Laburthe-Tolra (2011) argues that the patron-client relationships that emerged in the wake of colonialism are clearly related to earlier ones but have been transformed in fundamental ways. Similarly, contemporary Cameroonian liturgical music is unimaginable as emerging from anything other than cultural contact.

References


Discography