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**Praise Singing in Evangelical Circles in Benin and Implications for the Growth of Christian Churches: Media Staging of Adoration**

By

Dr Qemal Affagnon

**Abstract**

In a context of democratization, at the beginning of the 1990s, the Christian offer was increased by the arrival of new missionary enterprises in Benin, including the presence of evangelical missions that devote a large part of their time to praise in order to celebrate the benefits of God. With the rise of churches and prophet movements, the new missionary enterprises grew by leaps and bounds in Benin. For instance, these missionaries have the advantage of being able online. By developing an online presence, they can benefit for an additional space to talk about their experience. In addition to the old methods limited to billboards, radio programs, TV programs, magazines, and door-to-door evangelization, social media started to be used for evangelization purpose. These developments led to several changes in the Benin Christian landscape from the dominant era of historic mission Christianity. This article also attempts to recover the voices of the evangelists through their efforts to establish mission stations and spread Christianity online among their followers in Benin. Based on information gathered from observation methods, this article aims to reveal the dynamics behind the use of social networks by the evangelists in Benin. Following a descriptive approach, this study analyses the staging of a moment of spiritual communion in an evangelical assembly. This article analyses the role played by the evangelists in the evangelisation of people. It also pays a particular attention to the work of evangelists to adjust to its new environment in the technological advances of the twenty-first century.

**Key words:** Praise; Christianity; Evangelism; YouTube; Benin

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**Introduction**

Recent research on sub-Saharan Africa highlights the remarkable success of evangelical churches in recruiting their followers from among the population. These two words from the same root are: *euangelion* which means good news or gospel in French and *euangelizômai* which means to announce, proclaim or give the good news. Regarding the religious practices in Benin, evangelization is not specific to the evangelical communities. The Catholic Church was the first to claim evangelization, but the term now refers to many Christian religious movements. These Christian religious movements managed to establish and expand at a breath-taking speed in Africa at the turn of the 1980s (Mayrargue 2004). Within the religious field, the dynamism that affects these communities is manifested in a variety of models of worship, religious attitudes and the practice of praise.

About these new churches, Paul Gifford says:

In every major city, from Harare to Freetown and from Nairobi to Kinshasa, these new churches were met every Sunday in schoolrooms, cinema and drama rooms, under halls and in hotel conference rooms where they celebrated their services. Some of them have become great churches with a remarkable profile in just a few years.

For (Gifford 2001), these churches very quickly managed to take over places such as public squares and football stadiums. (Mayrargue 2008) states that the evangelical churches are first of all looking for a place to establish their activities. In some cases, the choice of the location of these new places of worship refers to data specific to the history of each church. This may be the Pastor's place of residence, for example.

Outside the pastor's place of residence, the choice of the location of a church can be motivated by a strategy of conquering certain spaces or districts. When it is not a conquest strategy, economic considerations such as the cost of renting space or the presence of other competing religious actors are taken into account by evangelical missions. In the General Mathieu Kérékou friendship stadium, for example, evangelization campaigns were conducted by international evangelists through public sessions of miraculous healing. In the eyes of the evangelical missions, the General Mathieu Kérékou friendship stadium is one of the buildings for collective use that can accommodate thousands of people.

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Moreover, these buildings are most often used by televangelists who heavily rely on the media globalization of the religious people. In Africa, (Apprill & Ziavoula 2005) point out that these televangelists owe their success mainly to the religious turmoil of the continent.

In Benin, apart from crowded places such as the General Mathieu Kérékou friendship stadium, the evangelists also choose gathering places such as private homes, schoolrooms, built lands, hotel and hostel halls. (Mayrague 2008) adds that health centres and hospitals are also spaces where an evangelical presence is perceptible on Beninese soil. Regarding the penetration of the evangelists into the public space, (Mayrague 2008) states that the same applies to the Cotonou Central Prison, which is a suitable place for evangelization. In comparison with the Catholic Church, (Apprill & Ziavoula 2005) note that the evangelists advocate an approach based on the promotion of emancipatory values in relation to local traditions. With the support of the transnational networks to which they belong, (Apprill & Ziavoula 2005) insist that the Evangelical Churches offer their followers a pan-African openness based on biblical values that are radically universalist, trans-territorial and in an outwardly break with ancestral traditions. In this way, evangelical churches contribute to the dissemination of new paradigms concerning the place of the individual and social cohesion in the urban space.

Among evangelicals, worship is the business of the whole assembly, not just the one of the pastors. Each member with the gifts received from the Lord can therefore take part in the worship process. This reality creates the basis for collective worship with the possibility for all individuals to live their faith in a relaxed way. It is not uncommon to see bars or restaurants integrated into evangelical places of worship. During evangelical services, the congregation can clap their hands during times of praise, for example.

Unlike Catholic Christians, the evangelists also take pleasure in using the multimedia tools during sermons and recordings can be made available on social networks. Through this type of practice, these Churches multiply the parish and associative functions so that each believer finds a place and plays a particular role in the religious system. As a space of communion, they become in a way places of renewal for those who find themselves destabilized by their difficulty in finding a professional or social status. Taking advantage of this strategic approach, the evangelical churches were able to weaken the existence of other churches such as the Catholic Church in Benin. Over time, the latter has thus lost its religious monopoly.

In a religious environment where the pastor occupies an increasingly unique and intimate position in the lives of the actors of society, the pre-existing churches must now face strong actions from these evangelical movements. However, this observation deserves to be strongly qualified. Indeed, despite the strong growth of the so-called revival churches in the Beninese religious landscape, no evangelical wave has succeeded in overrunning the Beninese society, to the point of fundamentally weakening other currents of religious expression or colonizing the public space for its sole benefit.

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### **Statement of the Problem**

Many pastors have embraced the use of technology in their religious and ministerial practices in Africa. This paper will therefore explore a range of views of the use of new technology in religious contexts. The paper presents the ways, information technologies are impacting the evangelical church in Benin. The challenges with the adoption of new technologies by these evangelists will be discussed, with insights from the literature.

Since the use of these tools can also pose legal, ethical, and theological challenges, this paper will identify potential threats and suggests some ways churches and religious organizations can begin to address these challenges. Content analysis constituted the data collection methodology used for the study. According to (Downe-Wamboldt 1992), the objectives of content analysis are as follows: to describe substance characteristics of message content, to describe form characteristics of message content, to make inferences to producers of content, to make inferences to audiences of content and to predict the effects of content on audiences. Given these purposes of content analysis as suggested by Downe-Wamboldt, this article used the Youtube activities of Pastor Elvis Dagba, founding President of the Ministère d'Evangelisation et de Perfectionnement des Saints (MEPS) as a case study. In addition, a couple of key areas of ethical concern will be identified from the use of technology in the African context.

### **Spread of Faith Through Social Media**

On internet, online movements from the so-called revival churches are now able to gain followers at rates unimaginable in the past. The observation of the development of worship in the so-called revival churches reveals a plurality of practices. These practices include praise and worship. On YouTube, for example, the video of a form of worship celebrated by Pastor Elvis Dagba allowed us to see that praise occupies an important place during this man of faith's preaching. The video featuring Elvis Dagba was viewed three hundred and sixty-five times on YouTube, an online video sharing platform. The video lasts four minutes and forty-eight seconds and was uploaded on September 15, 2017. As soon as the recording starts, we see Pastor Dagba leading a sung office, with a microphone in his hand. While going back and forth with his second hand in his pocket, the Pastor directs the ceremonial, furnished with music that sometimes rhythms the congregation's dance steps, the clapping of their hands or the raising of their hands to the sky.

During evangelical services, it can happen that the raising of hands to heaven, the clapping of hands that accompanies music or dance, are bodily expressions that allow some people in the congregation to give free rein to their emotions. This observation is not insignificant because (Lecourt 1977) states that the sensory and emotional power of music has long been recognized, among others by Plato and the Bible. In addition, (Lecourt 1977) adds that the element of music that is most often exploited is its calming effect. For its part, (Abran 1989) points out that according to Aristotle, music has the power to form character and that according to Cicero there is a direct link between music and the heart, which is the consciousness of a people. (Rivière 1997) notes that the Greeks used various instruments, rhythms and sounds to influence people's moods. One minute after the video starts, the Pastor sings: "What your heart

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desires, it will do for you". Very quickly, the ceremonial is interspersed with cries, and exhortations in national languages.

The sung service begins first in French before switching to national languages. We see Elvis Dagba very comfortable in his movements as the singing and instruments become more and more powerful. Adopting a serious attitude, he calmly walked to the edge of the stage and moved like an officer who had come to inspect his troops. One could deduce from the overall movement on the video that the pastor managed to heat the room, an advantage to Elvis Dagba's credit. Despite the daily difficulties of his followers, he tries to convince them at the microphone so that they can put their trust in God. Thus, (Rivière 1997) notes that in traditional music, sound rhythm and music are often used to generate modified states of consciousness.

The images in the video show that for the people present at the ceremony, it is obviously an important moment of communion and sharing of experiences. In a warm atmosphere, the audience takes an active part in the office. The songs of praise performed are popular local melodies and include short and easy to sing choruses in both French and the national language. For evangelicals, making use of popular praise is an eminently strategic act. In religious circles in general and in evangelical congregations in particular, when instruments are played, music and praise can help practitioners to become more emotionally involved in the service. This allows them to be more receptive to the Pastor's sermon, for example. Under these conditions, the faithful can better participate in the success of the celebration. Indeed, when the eyes are not fixed on a text, people have a large margin of freedom in their movements. Members of an assembly who cannot read can thus sing praises without complexes.

Through his presence, Pastor Dagba invigorates his followers who express their joy aloud on the video. Through the charisma he displays during his musical performance, Dagba seems to use his musical talent to show that he is full of energy and positions himself as a kind of guiding thread between the sky and his audience. This positioning seems to positively influence the assistance that accompanies the Pastor with strong bodily expressions such as shaking the head and punching in the air as if to strike down an invisible opponent. At the bottom of the video, we can see an illustrative commentary on this subject.

One Internet user commented: "Congratulations Pastor, be great in spirit, the enemy is defeated". The series of praises performed with the support of a modern orchestra takes on the appearance of a show that seems to confirm the many talents of the Beninese preacher in front of an audience, whose number of women present is greater than that of men and children. As can be seen from the video, women often constitute the overwhelming majority of the evangelical audience. Like the cult celebrated by Elvis Dagba, it is through female voices and bodies that praise, and worship reach their peak during evangelical preaching. In Cotonou, Elvis Dagba is one of the pastors who have revealed themselves on the evangelical scene through their charisma. This revelation was made through the creation of the Ministry of Evangelization and Perfection of Saints (MEPS). It is a Church that emphasizes prayer and deliverance and values the collective expression of a desire for commitment and ardent faith through song, music, prayers, Bible readings and other expressions. In evangelical churches, (Stolz, Favre, Gachet & Buchard 2001) note that some evangelical leaders organize their community like Elvis Dagba

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using their personal charisma. In Pastor Dagba's case, this charism is manifested, for example, through his talents as an orator.

### **An oral liturgy focused on worship**

Apart from the power of his verb, Elvis Dagba has also made a name for himself as an artist, composer and singer of Gospel music, with several albums to his credit. Thanks to his musical talents, Elvis Dagba writes melodies to slow rhythms. Sometimes his songs are accompanied by dynamic or very rhythmic rhythms. Listening to the melodies he has produced, it appears that the man of God shows a preference for themes such as love of God, religious values, the encounter with God and prosperity.

With music, one could deduce that Elvis Dagba's objective is to use melodies as a means of spreading his religious teaching. In addition, in this case, music represents an important means of raising public awareness of religious values, thanks to the references of a certain musical culture. From this observation, we can think that through this activity, which is religiously educational, Elvis Dagba is convinced that he is able to create an art capable of haranguing the crowds. As part of his pastoral activities, Elvis Dagba is also one of those evangelical pastors who devote part of their time to building a space for listening and accompanying their faithful.

At the beginning of his Ministry, Elvis Dagba quickly became known by getting closer to his followers and their daily concerns. Through frequent use of the radio and television broadcast media, Pastor Dagba has set about performing an eminently relational function with his audience. In the early 2000s, (Noret 2007) observes that the Church of Elvis Dagba is characterized by a strong proximity to the media. In practice, Dagba had weekly one-hour programmes on three non-confessional stations broadcasting from Cotonou. He was featured in *Parole de vie* on Wednesdays on radio Capp Fm. Every Thursday, he was followed on Radio Tokpa in the program *Opération sur la breche* and could be followed every Friday in the *Voie du défi* on Radio Star. During these various programs, listeners could intervene live by telephone to obtain advice and prayers from young Pastors. Through this attitude of proximity, built and worked on a regular basis and through the relationship of trust he tried to build, Elvis Dagba has managed to acquire a certain legitimacy over time. As pointed out (Noret 2007), this search for legitimacy makes it possible to understand why Elvis Dagba took the trouble to invite Michel Gohou to Benin in 2007. Indeed, Michel Gohou has made himself famous in the past thanks to his activities within the troupe *Les Guignols d'Abidjan*. Within this company, for example, he toured in the series *Les Guignols* before playing in the series *Ma famille*. In the West African television landscape, these are two programmes that have been very successful throughout French-speaking Africa. These series have even managed to cross the borders of Africa to be broadcast in Europe.

As an actor whose popularity is undeniable, Dagba certainly realized that the presence of the Ivorian comedian at his side could enhance the brilliance of the *Nuit de l'Excellence*. This event, which marked the first year of his television program, represented an important opportunity for the Pastor to seek to strengthen his legitimacy with the general public. As part of this event, Dagba recorded an advertising spot with Michel Gohou to announce the event.

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For François Gauthier, Associate Professor of Religious Science at the University of Fribourg, this type of association between two personalities is linked to the rise of a consumerist society, in search of authenticity, experience and belonging.

Moreover, François Gauthier notes that this type of action around an event is perfectly in line with a contemporary trend that affects all religions. Consequently, the Associate Professor of Religious Science emphasizes that we are witnessing a shift towards a total offer, a religion that offers a lifestyle and a resonance with everyday life and its challenges, a religion more focused on pragmatism than on a set of beliefs. The researcher points out that we see a great difference from what we used to see with institutionalized churches, a trend he calls Christianity 2.0. Given Michel Gohou's popularity throughout French-speaking Africa and Elvis Dagba's possible intentions, (Amouzouvi 2014) notes that these actions demonstrate how precisely identifiable actors use religion to become rich.

Driven by the momentum of the search for support in addition to its quest for legitimacy, Elvis Dagba also turned to the Beninese political sphere. The founder of the Ministry of Evangelization and the Development of Saints has thus become a defender of the actions of the current Head of State Patrice Talon. During the program *Zone Franche*, broadcast on March 11, 2018 on Canal 3 Benin, he declared: "I am Patrice Talon... I support him, because it was God who sent him. He is the right man for this country."

Following this statement, Elvis Dagba returned to the set of the Canal 3 television channel in March 2019. During this passage Dagba declared: "the President of the Republic is on the right path". The neat-looking pastor also took advantage of this media coverage to denounce a number of manoeuvres carried out by a small group of ill-intentioned people whose sole purpose was to destabilize President Patrice Talon.

Continuing his speech on the Canal 3 platform, Dagba said he was pleased to see that the fruits of the various reforms initiated by the executive power were already bearing fruit. During his time on Canal 3 Benin, the man of God reassured public opinion that the power of the break will not end his mandate with white elephants as it was the case in the past... On Sunday, March 3, 2019, Pastor Dagba somehow signed his return to the small screens after a long moment of silence. In fact, he had suddenly disappeared from the airwaves after an impressive media rise. Despite this media disappearance, which occurred after a promising start, Pastor Elvis, as he calls himself, does not fail to make certain statements in the press from time to time.

During the parliamentary elections of 28 April 2019, Elvis Dagba took the opportunity to reiterate his views on the absence of some opposition parties from electoral contests. In this regard, Elvis Dagba believes that the opposition parties are responsible for their exclusion from the race for deputies. Referring to the tense post-election climate, the Pastor believes that the Forces cauris pour un Benin Emergent parties of former President Boni Yayi and Restoring Hope of Candide Azannai did not do in time what they should do to comply with the electoral laws. Regarding the exclusion of these parties, Elvis Dagba said: "When you spend your time distracting yourself, going through funeral homes and not complying with the law, you find yourself in this position.

During his televised speech, Elvis Dagba then went on to say: "These opposition parties can only attack themselves... Whether you are a minority or not, the texts of the Republic are

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binding on the entire political class". Most of the time, the mediated statements of the young Beninese pastor are based on biblical quotations, accounts of experience or testimonies.

### **Recommendations**

Even if the use of social networks has a lot of advantages, they can be a source of destruction. Due to the power of these communication tools, many Christians start to see their faith only in terms of its effect on their lives, not its overall truthfulness. In such context, evangelist's moral demands are applicable only if they bring the kind of happiness followers think that it is the goal of their life. This interpretation of the faith can be problematic because when religion is privatized, the nature of what is good can change. Furthermore, this can lead sometimes to the loss of traditional values. In fact, the vision of the good life that Christians must conform to or something that they are trying to achieve, or a goal that they need to strive for in order to become fully and gloriously human tends to disappear.

Instead, Christians redefine well in terms of whatever is rewarding, and consumerism colonizes the religion beliefs. However, churches should have ethical obligation because when religion is commercialized, money becomes a crucial issue especially in a context where some evangelists actors are currently appropriating new technologies to shape new public spheres in Africa. Regarding the current developments in the technological infrastructure, the churches also have an ethical obligation to protect the safety and privacy of their members online. On YouTube for example, the illegal harvesting of the personal viewing habits and online identities of millions of users appear to be extremely lucrative. In a digital world where personal data is routinely bought and sold for commerce purposes, privacy is an important social value and evangelist followers expect their privacy to be respected. This will raise additional challenges that evangelic churches need to address in the future.

### **Conclusion**

In recent years, thanks to the dynamism of some pastors, the evangelical missions in Africa have been strongly involved in the modernization of theological production, so that they have become a source of influence. This influence requires the development of an innovation process based on music, among other things. In such a context, we are witnessing the appearance of a flowering of singers who put their talents at the service of the Lord. Through their activities, these singers focus on entrepreneurship through a wide range of products such as CDs, DVDs of concerts or collective prayers.

The use of traditional musical styles in addition to contemporary rhythms, combined with an increasing use of the media, has thus popularized evangelical praise that now speaks beyond the walls of the churches. Relying on the financial power and support of a large part of the population, as is the case in Benin, these activities generate significant income and sometimes pastors and other singers become true national stars whose prestige is enhanced by their regular appearances on television. Apart from music, the means used in the modernization of theological production in the evangelical churches are diverse. As we have seen in the Beninese context, this is for example televangelism, which uses the media to preach the good word. In general,

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television programmes, radios, books, conferences gathering thousands of faithful in public places such as stadiums characterize this modern evangelism whose success is not to be denied.

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