Choral Praxis in the Reformed Church amongst Vhavenḓa: Tradition, Expression, and Identity

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Abstract

The choral heritage initiated by the Berlin missionaries was part of a wider colonial project that aimed to control worship in line with European Reformed standards. However, the role and nature of music in Reformed worship have undergone a significant change over time as African Christian communities have grappled with changing theological orientations, church structures, and cultural identities. This article investigates how choral music evolved and changed within the Reformed tradition of Vhavenḓa, historically, using musical practices to negotiate colonialist liturgical hegemony and local expressions of faith. Archival sources, including church music manuscripts, hymnals, liturgical manuals, and other theological sources, serve as the primary data for this study. This is supplemented by an analysis of research on the social and political context of worship, as well as the embodied practices through which it was developed. The article concludes that a contested theological and cultural site that emerged through the incorporation, reinterpretation, and vernacularisation of European Reformed musical traditions into a unique Tshivenḓa liturgical soundscape. Therefore, by positioning music as a site of theological negotiation and ecclesial identity development, this study is relevant to contemporary discussions of missionary-conversion Christians in general, liturgical withdrawal, and the socio-aesthetic development of African expressions of Christianity.

Keywords: choral; liturgy; reformed; Vhavenḓa; worship

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Introduction

In Limpopo, the Vhavenḓa have a long-standing cultural history that is steeped in oral traditions, rituals, and music that existed before the onset of missionary Christianity (Huffman and Woodborne 2021). When Reformed missionaries appeared in the region towards the end of the 19th century, they brought along Western hymnody regulated by the principle of worship (Mugambi 2024). This meeting resulted in liturgical tension since the harmonic systems and metrical psalmody of Europe were different from the Venḓa musical aesthetics already established.

According to Article 69 of the Church Order, adopted at the Synod of Dordrecht (1618–1619), only the Psalms and those that conformed to biblical doctrine were allowed to be sung (Jooste and Potgieter 2020). This regulatory principle was of great importance in shaping how music was played within the Reformed Churches in South Africa (RCSA). During this time, hymns were adapted as the means of teaching doctrine while promoting reverence in worship. As Okigbo (2010) observes, the Western liturgical music introduction into African contexts, including the Vhavenḓa territory, formed part of a broader missionary strategy intended to civilise and evangelise the Indigenous people through education and religious instruction.

Although the missionary musical influence has been a subject of scholarly study, little attention has been paid to how Venḓa congregations actively transformed Reformed choral practices. Current papers mainly highlight missionary imposition but hardly address indigenous agency within mainline Reformed frameworks. This article addresses that gap.

Missionary Activism among Vhavenḓa

The adaptation of Western hymnody within the cultural framework of the Vhavenḓa can be attributed to reforms in church worship towards more formalised or stylised modes introduced by the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) following the 1618–1619 Synod of Dordrecht. The introduction of Western liturgical forms into Venḓa society changed not only the style of music but also the power relations inherent in the act of worship. These changes made an impact not only on musical style but also on religious rituals through changes in the balance of power among those present at most religious events, according to Mugovhani (2007). Although the influence of colonisation was present in this change, it was not simply a process of the Vhavenḓa adopting forms of music from their colonisers, but rather a process of the Vhavenḓa integrating their own cultural traditions, values, and forms of expression with the newly available choral forms of music developed in Western countries thereby producing a new choral musical style that is distinctly Tshivenḓa. The blending of Tshivenḓa cultural attributes with those of the DRC (Western choral) led to the development of a hybrid style of choral music that is more than the simple blending of two different styles (one Western hymns and the other precolonial Tshivenḓa music). It reflects a fusion of both genres that has taken years of careful development and was created to be reflective of the Reformed

faith, while still being performed in a manner that is truly representative of the culture native to the Vhavenḓa. As such, this newly formed music is not to be thought of as only representing Venḓa music with Western influences, nor Western music with Venḓa influences, but rather a unique combination of both cultures that provides a framework for the Vhavenḓa to build their sense of self, their individual and collective identity, through sound as musical performance created the shared experiences for the members of a community.

Kloppers (2020) states that traditional Vhavenḓa music has historically been a primary source for expressing an African cultural identity in addition to embracing Christianity. Music has served as a way to express, experience, and share the Christian faith socially and culturally, and theologically within local contexts. There is a great deal of tension and conflict created by attempting to accommodate the Reformed tradition's formal liturgical patterns with Venḓa music; therefore, it is important to carefully explore these issues. Tensions arise from the clash of Eurocentric worship styles that have always existed and indigenous worship styles that have their own individual historical, cultural, symbolic, and aesthetic importance.

The Reformed style of worship, like that of many other denominations, is based on a set of theological beliefs, including God's ultimate authority over all of creation, the importance of God's grace in shaping people, and the authority of the Scriptures. Nevertheless, Cas W Letšosa and De Klerk (2007) contend that the universality of these theological beliefs does not imply that all cultures must worship in the same ways; rather, the theological foundation of worship is the same (Faith), but the way that people express their faith through worship will differ from culture to culture and can involve differences in language, symbols, and music (not to mention differing degrees of producing sound, i.e. singing vs. playing instruments) without affecting the integrity of theology. In this way, the praxis of Vhavenḓa continues to be an example of how faith can still be lived out authentically in local idioms.

In African Christianity, historically, choral music has contributed to meditation for both faith and culture. However, in the Reformed church, music is usually viewed as a secondary aspect of spiritual growth, with the doctrine being primary. Limited attention is given to how choral practices are negotiated, developed, adopted, and adapted theologically in Reformed churches. Many scholars and theologians focus more on African choral traditions and music in African independent churches, while limited attention is given to music in mainline churches. This, therefore, creates limited information and knowledge of how music functions fully not only as an artistic but also as a theological resource.

The Berlin Missionary Society introduced the Vhavenḓa to Western liturgical music, particularly choral hymns, during the 19th century (Khorommbi 2009). The Berlin Missionary Society grouped hymnal texts into four harmonies and had the purpose of instilling Christian teachings and fostering congregational participation. This method of

the missionaries was in accordance with the regulative principle of worship, which states that only songs taken from Scripture, mainly Psalms, are to be sung as per Article 69 of the Church Order stemming from the Synod of Dordrecht (Jooste and Potgieter 2020). In 1859, the Reformed churches in South Africa were legally established, and this was adopted to perpetuate the practice of singing only God's inspired songs in worship (Jooste and Potgieter 2020). Jooste and Potgieter (2020) reveal that the early Cape psalmody served as a confessional boundary marker within colonial church theology. They argue that the dissemination of Datheens Psalter and the Statenvertaling not only brought about the use of these texts in worship but also the establishment of a liturgical culture that was highly doctrinally confined. It was this confessional rigidity that later shaped missionary expectations regarding hymnody in African contexts.

In 1652, Jan van Riebeeck and his fellow settlers 1652 introduced the practice of psalm singing that was not only about musical tradition but was also rooted in theological statements of fidelity to the Reformed tradition and faith. These settlers preserved the European Reformed identity in a colonial era by introducing Datheen's Psalter and the Statenvertaling to the Cape. Jooste and Potgieter (2020) illustrated that when the missionaries introduced worship in Africa, it was very sober, based on scriptures and Psalms, and was doctrinally structured. They explained how the psalter was introduced and later updated to include "free hymns," hymns that are not directly taken from scriptures, and eventually these "free hymns" entered public worship without a formal theological debate. Therefore, there was a transition in Reformed worship, from a very strict practice of singing hymns directly from scripture to a more inclusive practice rooted in social and cultural shifts. This shift from exclusive psalm singing to a more inclusive hymnody shows a subtle theological evolution within the Reformed church. This will eventually open the way for theological evolution, cultural adaptation, and perhaps even African expressions of Christian worship.

Louw (1999,599) argued that many scholars and theologians are coming to a shared understanding on how the secession of the VGK from the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk (NHK) had a significant role in what was sung in worship. What most interested scholars was the motive and intentions behind Article 69, not the free hymns.

According to Faber (2020):

> At the Synod of Dordrecht's first session after the international delegates' departure, on the morning of 13 May 1619, the church order adopted by the last national synod, Gravenhage (1586), was read. In the afternoon session, the articles of the church order were 'in substance approved by all of the delegated ministers and elders from every province' (Biesterveld and Kuyper 1982,176). The Gravenhage church order was itself based on the decisions of several prior synods, including Emden (1571), Dordrecht (1574), Dordrecht (1578), and Middelburg (1581).

Therefore, the confirmation of the Church Order of the Gravenhage at the synod of Dordrecht in 1619 showed that it was not merely about administrative acts; it also

demonstrated that the Reformed church valued order, unity, and faithfulness to its teachings. According to the synods held previously, e.g., Emden (1571) and Middleburg (1581), the Reformed did not shift but fought to stay true to its original principles. The leaders of the church during that time prioritised obedience to Christ, leading them to govern not only for management but also to serve and obey Christ, whom they saw as the head of the church. This mentality and these beliefs later influenced the evolution of Reformed worship and music in other parts of the world. This then profoundly shaped the organisation, liturgy, and musical traditions of Reformed worship in South Africa.

As stated by the synod held in 2009, the RCSA concluded that Article 69 should be revised in a way that would allow for free hymns. This decision was influenced by claims that the principles in Article 69 were adopted to prevent songs that could promote heresy and false teachings within the church. After so many recourses were made, after so many arguments around 2006 and 2009 (RCSA 2012, 374), in 2012, the RCSA synod made a landmark decision, and finally Article 69 was amended to allow hymns in all their denominations.

However, like many Africans, the Vhavenḓa did not practice or sing the hymns as they were but instead adapted the melodies and rhythms to fit their traditional music styles. For example, they included local tonalities and features like call-and-response structures. By indigenising the hymns, Vhavenḓa infused worship with their own identity, allowing them to practice it in a way that felt more meaningful to them. According to Kloppers (2020), this dilution did not change worship in Reformed churches; rather, it enriched it.

The Theological Evolution of Choral Music amongst the Vhavenḓa

Vhavenḓa's choral composition has evolved through an intricate, culturally syncretic process of musical hybridisation, greatly influenced by the reworking of Christian theology over several years. The introduction of Western hymnody into the Vhavenḓa community in South Africa, in the 19th century, was principally accomplished through missionary activist work. Although the initial style of choral music reflected the Western style in relation to harmonic and structural forms, subsequent generations of Vhavenḓa musicians reinterpreted and developed these earlier forms systematically (Ndou 2000). Vhavenḓa composers used the original missionary hymnody as a starting point and modified the harmonic, rhythmic, and linguistic elements to fit within their own indigenous aesthetic framework. The changes made to the original missionary hymnody were not merely adaptations but a compelling form of cultural expression. Some of those who played a very crucial role in this transformation are notable composer Stephen Maimela Dzivhani (Mugovhani 2013). He and others contributed significantly to putting together *Nyimbo dza Vhatendi* (a hymn that had Western harmonies mixed with indigenous themes). Other hymns that blended Western harmonies and indigenous themes include, but are not limited to, Hosanna (a hymn mostly used by the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA)). Joseph Khorommbi Nonge and Derrick Nephawe are other composers who significantly

contributed to this indigenisation by incorporating traditional Venḓa themes and structures into their works (Mugovhani 2013). Their works reveal that indigenisation was not simply aesthetic improvisation but a translation of theology, such that Christian doctrinal themes were incarnated in Venḓa symbolic soundscapes. The development of choral music among the Vhavena mirrors a slow change in the theological understanding of the regulative principle as seen in local practice. Theological education was taught through choral music and also served as an avenue for worship. According to Jooste and Potgieter (2020), the words of the hymns usually expressed the significant Christian themes in a way that anyone and everyone in the church could understand, even when they were not familiar with the complex theological concepts. Singing was and still is more than just singing, but it is also a way that people can connect with God. Music in churches and church ceremonies can also be a tool of oneness; for example, during celebrations like weddings, music is part of celebrating the couple's union, while at funerals, choral music serves to comfort the grieving family. Therefore, choral music is significant to Reformed church members.

Jooste and Potgieter (2020) further argue that these methods align well with the Reformed church's tradition of focusing on the doctrine of the church and the use of music to spread the gospel. Followers were able to relate to and connect with the teachings spiritually and emotionally, as they were taught in their native language. The Reformed church has strict rules when it comes to worship, what kind of worship they do and how they do it. Letsosa and De Klerk (2007) argue that the adaptation of worship music shows how Reformed liturgical principles can accommodate different kinds of cultural expression without going against their original theological integrity. Vhavenḓa Identity and Resistance

The Vhavenḓa's use of indigenous features in their hymns demonstrates how community members exercised cultural agency through the colonial church. The incorporation of indigenous elements into hymns was a way for Vhavenḓa to use their religion, acquired under colonialism, to express their indigenous identities. Both Okigbo (2010) and Kloppers (2020) have noted that this indigenisation of hymnody contributed to the celebration, maintenance, and increasing acceptance of local traditions while adhering to a new, alien religion. Like many African Reformed church denominations, the liturgical music of the churches served both to provide praise and to affirm the ethnic/cultural roots of the congregation.

Choral music became central to worship services, marking various stages of the liturgy and fostering communal participation. The congregations led by choirs significantly contributed to the spiritual atmosphere while strengthening the service's theological themes (Letšosa and De Klerk 2007). This was adopted not only inside the church but also outside, where there was a great deal of community choral music, for example, at funerals, weddings, and cultural festivals. It was a uniting tool for expressing solidarity and shared values and experiences (Mugovhani 2009). Devotional theology often focuses on the affective dimension of music, but historical analysis needs to pay more

attention to institutional and doctrinal negotiation rather than subjective spirituality alone.

Methodology

In this paper, a historical, theological investigation is combined with an analysis of the musical changes among Vhavenḓa people from the late nineteenth century until the incorporation of Article 69 in the RCSA liturgy in 2012. The main sources include different editions of Nyimbo dza Vhatendi, RCSA synod records (20062012), service booklets, and theological expositions on Article 69. The chosen documents are only those that most closely relate to the arguments about acceptable hymnody and church order changes.

Through qualitative textual analysis, the paper identifies evolutions in the content of the lyrics, the harmonic patterns, and the emphasis on theology. The study of the documents was done in chronological order to identify the transition from the domination of the missionary culture through the changes in the church's apartheid. The analysis is based on liturgical theology and inculturation theories, which help in pinpointing whether the musical changes serve as a sign of theological growth, compromise, or resistance.

Findings

Choral singing, as indicated by the findings of this study, encompasses both the Reformed tradition of the church and cultural expressions of Tshivenḓa among the Vhavenḓa in Reformed churches. Singing in Tshivenḓa with local rhythms enhances the congregation’s connection to the worship experience and encourages congregants to be more active participants. Among congregational and choir members, there are some issues regarding the understanding of music’s role in reformed worship, even though many enjoy music. Synodical (RCSA 2012,374) discussions highlight generational issues regarding the introduction of new instruments (guitars and keyboards) into worship; historically, these instruments were not used in the Reformed worship tradition. For individuals accustomed to traditional forms of worship, these changes can be difficult to accept, especially for senior members. The lack of adequate training for choirs in reformed worship practices adds to this problem.

Discussions

The findings of the study show that choral music being performed by Vhavenḓa in the Reformed church context is a continual and evolving dialogue (or conversation) between the Reformed liturgical tradition and the various (indigenous) cultures and Tshivenḓa traditions. The question arises whether the regulative principle (i.e., the principles through which the church’s actions are limited or defined) will constrain this dialogue or whether contextualisation of the music represents an expansion of theology rather than a dilution of Reformed tradition. The continued use of the local language

and the practice of traditional (polyrhythmic) forms of worship can be seen as demonstrating a willingness to integrate local cultural expressions within the Reformed church. Accordingly, this allows for greater involvement by all church members and a stronger sense of belonging. By acknowledging local culture and providing opportunities to adapt religious practices to it, places of worship can create an environment where congregants feel more connected to their religious community and enhance their overall spiritual experience.

The study's results demonstrate an ongoing struggle between traditional church (or Reformed Church) theology and how congregations practice music in worship, largely because of the many different ways congregations interpret what "worship" means. Hence, to prevent liturgy from becoming simply entertainment, the Reformed Church needs to articulate a clear theological vision for worship. While the inclusion of local musical forms will likely enhance the congregation's engagement and provide contextual relevance, using them without an adequate theological foundation can lead to syncretism. However, historical and ethnomusicological records indicate that with appropriate mediation, Tshivenḓa musical practice may be incorporated into Christian theology in an appropriate manner and can also provide valid representations of the embodiment and transmission of Christian faith through using culturally defined means.

The findings further indicate a need for a balance in worship. A worship that remains true to the Reformed tradition but also considers cultural ways. The churches should have a clear institutional framework for the selection and use of music in worship services. This will create a good flow, and the church will be able to control music and choirs in its congregation. Therefore, church music will be consistent and focused on the church's mission and values.

Recommendations

Few things can strengthen choral worship amongst the Vhavenḓa in the Reformed Church without compromising either the church doctrine or the traditional culture**.** Here are a few:

- Choir leaders must receive basic theological training so that their song choices and the way they play their songs can align with the Reformed doctrine and help the congregants' spiritual growth.

- The church should encourage the creation of Tshivenḓa songs that communicate biblical messages and are relevant to the people who are singing them. This will therefore allow the worshipers to relate to the gospel in their cultural expressions and language.

- Regardless of age, church members should be able to communicate with each other about music styles to help in bridging the gap between older and younger generations. This will help with unity and teamwork, as well as keeping to time.

- Another thing, the churches should invest in Tshivenḓa hymns and training materials like hymn books, music education, etc., so that even those in rural congregations can have access to the resources they need for spiritual growth and musical growth.

Naturally, the church should have rules and even a constitution stating which kinds of music are allowed, which will help maintain the integrity of the doctrine.

Finally, the church should engage in ongoing research on the transformation of choral music among Vhavenḓa, which will help them and future generations make informed judgments and protect their faith and culture.

Conclusion

Choral music in the Reformed Church among Vhavenḓa provides a basis for continued theological dialogue between a confessional base and cultural reality. Although hymns were performed by Vhavenḓa within their Christian context, they also continued to express their cultural identity through localisation and appropriation of these hymns. The article emphasises the importance of listening to indigenous voices to help shape the religion and theology of the Reformed tradition in relation to Vhavenḓa and their culture. It also describes the importance of chorales as both liturgical and representative of spiritual and theological depth.

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