



The Sound of Service: A Comparative Study of the Collaborative Relationship Between Musicians and the Priesthood in Ghana's Religious Landscape

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Abstract

Ghana's religious landscape, comprising Indigenous religious traditions, Islam, and Christianity, is characterized by worship practices in which music and ritual performance are central. While existing scholarship has emphasized the importance of sacred music, it has largely treated it as an ethnomusicological phenomenon or liturgical accompaniment, giving limited attention to its role in religious leadership. This study addresses that gap by examining the collaborative relationship between musicians and religious leaders across Ghana's diverse religious traditions. Drawing on Weber's sociology of authority alongside ritual theories advanced by Turner, Bell, and Rappaport, it distinguishes ritual necessity from institutional authority and introduces the concept of operational authority to explain how musicians facilitate ritual performance without replacing formally recognized religious leaders. Using a qualitative comparative ethnographic approach, the study draws on interviews, participant observation, and documentary analysis conducted among Indigenous religious communities, Sunni Muslim congregations, and Christian churches. The findings show that musicians play indispensable roles in regulating ritual flow, coordinating transitions, fostering congregational participation, and supporting the conditions within which religious leaders exercise their responsibilities. The study concludes that religious leadership is collaboratively enacted through complementary institutional and operational responsibilities, offering a theoretically grounded contribution to comparative religious studies and ethnomusicology in Ghana.

Introduction

Ghana is widely recognised as one of Africa's most religiously diverse and socially cohesive societies, where Indigenous African religions, Islam, and Christianity have coexisted within interconnected cultural, historical, and social environments. This religious plurality, often described through the notion of Ghana's "Triple Heritage," reflects not merely the presence of different faith traditions but also their continuous interaction, adaptation, and influence on national identity and everyday life. Religion in Ghana extends beyond formal doctrines and institutional structures; it is experienced



through embodied practices involving music, movement, speech, symbolism, and communal participation. As Mbiti (1969) argues, African religion is deeply integrated into social existence, making spirituality inseparable from culture, history, morality, and community relationships.

Within this worldview, music occupies a central position as a medium through which religious meanings are created, transmitted, and experienced. Sacred music is not simply an artistic activity performed during worship but a vital process through which communities communicate beliefs, preserve cultural memory, strengthen identity, and facilitate collective participation (Acquah & Sackey, 2021). Studies on African musical traditions demonstrate that music functions simultaneously as sound, social action, and cultural expression rather than as an isolated aesthetic product (Nketia, 2002; Ekwueme, 1980; Feshchenko, 2023). In Ghana, this relationship between music and spirituality is evident across Indigenous religions, Islam, and Christianity, although expressed through different ritual forms (Afriyie, 2023).

Among Indigenous religious communities, music forms an essential component of ritual communication. Drumming, chanting, dancing, and vocal performances are used during ceremonies honouring ancestors and deities, as well as in communal spiritual practices (Matczynski, 2022). Traditional musical forms among the Ga and Akan peoples demonstrate that rhythm, language, and performance are closely connected to social organisation and spiritual expression (Nketia, 1958; Abarry, 1984; Hampton, 1978). Instruments such as talking drums function not merely as musical tools but as communicative systems capable of conveying culturally meaningful messages. Recent studies further highlight that music within African traditional religion operates as a bridge between human communities and spiritual realities, reinforcing communal values and ritual continuity (Ikumapayi & Alao, 2025; Olaoba, 2025).

Similar patterns exist within Ghanaian Christian communities, where hymns, choral compositions, gospel songs, and contemporary worship music play significant roles in organising worship experiences. Music assists congregations in preparing for prayer, preaching, reflection, and collective participation. Research on Ghanaian Christian worship demonstrates that musical practices have become central to liturgical development, particularly within Methodist and African Initiated Churches, where music contributes to spiritual expression and communal identity (Aniadze et al., 2023; Brewu et al., 2024). Ghanaian choral traditions also reveal how musical texts communicate theological ideas through proverbs, metaphor, and indigenous linguistic structures (Acquah et al., 2015; Amuah & Wuaku, 2019; Agyekum et al., 2020; Dodoo, 2025).

Despite extensive scholarship on sacred music, important theoretical gaps remain. Existing studies have largely examined musical structures, performance traditions, cultural meanings, and theological expressions, while research on religious leadership has focused primarily on priests, pastors, Imams, and institutional authority. Consequently, limited attention has been given to how musicians collaborate with recognised religious leaders in the practical organisation of worship. Although musicians are widely acknowledged as essential contributors to religious activities, the relationship between musical expertise and formal religious authority remains insufficiently explored.

This gap raises a critical question: does the indispensable role of musicians automatically make them religious authorities? The study argues that functional contribution and institutional authority are distinct. Musicians may exercise significant influence through specialised knowledge, ritual competence, and practical experience without replacing recognised religious leaders. Drawing on Weber's understanding of authority and broader perspectives on ritual organisation, the study introduces the concept of operational authority to explain the socially recognised competence through



which musicians coordinate worship, regulate ritual transitions, facilitate participation, and sustain communal religious experiences.

Rather than presenting musicians and religious leaders as competing actors, the study advances the framework of collaborative ritual leadership. This approach recognises that effective worship emerges through cooperation among individuals possessing different but complementary forms of expertise. By integrating insights from African religious studies, ethnomusicology, and theories of authority, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how music, leadership, and ritual practice interact within Ghana's plural religious landscape. It demonstrates that religious leadership is not limited to institutional office but is also enacted through coordinated performances involving multiple actors who collectively sustain religious life.

Research Philosophy and Design

The study adopted an interpretivist philosophical orientation and a qualitative comparative ethnographic research design to examine the collaborative relationship between musicians and recognised religious leaders within Ghana's Indigenous religions, Islam, and Christianity (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Interpretivism facilitated an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences, meanings, and social interactions, while ethnography enabled direct observation of ritual practices as they naturally occurred. The comparative approach provided a framework for identifying similarities and differences across the three religious traditions without overlooking their distinct theological and institutional characteristics.

Study Context and Research Sites

Fieldwork was conducted in the Greater Accra and Ashanti Regions of Ghana, selected because of their religious diversity. Seven research sites were purposively chosen, comprising two Akan traditional shrines, two Sunni Muslim mosques located in Nima and Madina, and three Christian congregations representing Methodist, Pentecostal, and African Initiated Church traditions. Although Ga ritual traditions informed the literature review, no primary fieldwork was undertaken among Ga communities.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

The study employed purposive sampling, complemented by snowball sampling, to recruit participants with specialised knowledge of religious leadership and sacred musical performance (Etikan et al., 2016). A total of 15 key informants participated, including Akan priests, shrine attendants, master drummers, Imams, Muezzins, pastors, prophets, worship leaders, choir directors, and instrumental musicians. Participant recruitment continued until thematic saturation was achieved.

Data Collection Methods

Methodological triangulation was employed through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and documentary analysis.

Semi-Structured Interviews: Fifteen interviews lasting 45–90 minutes were conducted in English, Twi, or Fante. Discussions explored worship organisation, relationships between musicians and religious leaders, ritual preparation, leadership responsibilities, worship coordination, and challenges associated with musical ministry.

Participant Observation: Twelve worship events were observed, including four Indigenous religious ceremonies, three Islamic congregational prayers, and five Christian worship services. Observations



focused on ritual sequencing, musical transitions, leadership interactions, congregational participation, and collaborative worship practices.

Documentary Analysis: Documentary sources included church liturgies, hymnbooks, worship manuals, mosque prayer schedules, service programmes, institutional guidelines, and historical documents. These materials complemented the interview and observational data by providing institutional perspectives on the organisation of worship.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The researchers maintained reflexive field journals throughout the study to document methodological decisions, emerging interpretations, and personal reflections. Regular discussions among the research team minimised bias and ensured that participants' religious beliefs were presented as lived experiences rather than empirically verified claims.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. The process involved familiarisation with the data, inductive coding, theme generation, theme refinement, interpretation, and theoretical integration. Themes emerged inductively before being interpreted through relevant sociological and ethnomusicological perspectives.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Trustworthiness was established using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement, triangulation, and member clarification. Dependability was supported by maintaining a transparent audit trail, while confirmability was strengthened through collaborative coding and reflexive journaling. Transferability was ensured by providing rich contextual descriptions of the research settings and participants.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the St. Ambrose College of Education Research Ethics Committee (SACE-REC), Ghana, before the commencement of fieldwork (Approval No. SACE-REC/2025/014). Permission to conduct the research was subsequently obtained from recognised religious authorities, including shrine custodians, Imams, and church leaders, before any interviews or observations were undertaken. Written or verbal informed consent, depending on participants' literacy and cultural preferences, was obtained from all participants after the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage had been clearly explained. Confidentiality was ensured through the use of pseudonyms, the removal of identifying information, and secure storage of all research data. Given that part of the fieldwork was conducted in Indigenous shrine settings, the researchers strictly adhered to locally prescribed ritual protocols, respected restrictions on access, photography, and recording, and refrained from observing or documenting ceremonies without permission. Throughout the study, the researchers remained culturally sensitive and ensured that scholarly interpretations respected participants' religious beliefs and practices without evaluating or challenging their theological convictions.

Findings

The analysis of interviews, participant observations, and documentary materials generated five interconnected themes explaining how musicians and recognised religious leaders collaboratively organise worship across Ghana's Indigenous religious traditions, Islam, and Christianity. Although these traditions differ in theological orientation, ritual structures, and institutional arrangements, participants demonstrated remarkable similarities in understanding music as a fundamental element of religious practice. Across all three traditions, music was not perceived merely as artistic



performance but as a specialised ritual competence requiring discipline, experience, spiritual sensitivity, and communal recognition. It functioned as a medium for organising worship, communicating sacred meanings, strengthening collective identity, and facilitating active participation.

A central finding of the study concerns the distinction between musical expertise and formal religious authority. While musicians were consistently recognised as indispensable contributors to worship, participants did not perceive them as substitutes for priests, Imams, pastors, or other recognised religious authorities. Instead, musicians were understood as specialised ritual practitioners whose responsibilities complement those of formal religious leaders. The findings therefore demonstrate that effective worship emerges through cooperation among actors possessing different but mutually dependent forms of expertise.

Musical Expertise as Recognised Ritual Competence

A dominant theme emerging from the data was that musical expertise represents a recognised form of ritual knowledge rather than simple artistic ability. Participants across Indigenous religion, Islam, and Christianity emphasised that effective religious music requires prolonged training, experiential learning, knowledge of ritual procedures, and sensitivity to communal expectations.

Among Indigenous religious communities, participants explained that mastery of drumming involves understanding ceremonial structures, symbolic meanings, and appropriate rhythms for different ritual moments. A senior Indigenous drummer explained: *"Anyone can beat a drum, but not everyone knows which rhythm belongs to which ceremony. If the wrong rhythm is played, the ceremony loses its order."* (IMD2, Senior Drummer, Interview)

This statement illustrates that drumming is understood as embodied ritual knowledge. The drummer does not merely produce sound but interprets the symbolic requirements of each stage of the ceremony. Another traditional musician further explained: *"The drum speaks according to what is happening. When we call the ancestors, when the priest pours libation, and when people begin dancing, the rhythm cannot be the same. The drummer must know the language of each moment."* (IMD4, Traditional Musician, Interview)

Participant observation confirmed these accounts. During Indigenous ceremonies, drummers adjusted rhythm, tempo, and intensity according to ritual progression. Controlled rhythms accompanied invocation and libation, while more energetic patterns encouraged dancing and communal participation. These findings demonstrate that Indigenous musicians draw on accumulated ritual knowledge developed through apprenticeship, experience, and communal trust rather than formal ordination.

Comparable patterns emerged within Islamic communities regarding the role of the Muezzin and the performance of the adhan (call to prayer). Although participants distinguished the adhan from other forms of religious music, they emphasised that its performance requires vocal discipline, timing, pronunciation, and spiritual preparation. An Imam stated: *"The adhan is not simply announcing the prayer. It prepares people spiritually and brings the community together before the prayer begins."* (IM1, Imam, Interview)

A Muezzin similarly explained: *"You cannot just stand and call people because you know the words. You must understand when to call, how to call, and how your voice helps people prepare themselves for prayer."* (IM3, Muezzin, Interview)



These accounts indicate that the adhan serves an organisational and spiritual function by marking the transition between everyday activities and communal worship. However, participants consistently differentiated the Muezzin's specialised competence from the Imam's religious authority. While the Muezzin gathers and prepares worshippers, the Imam remains responsible for leading prayer, interpreting religious teachings, and providing spiritual guidance.

Christian participants similarly described worship music as a specialised ministry requiring preparation, coordination, and theological understanding. Worship leaders and choir directors explained that musical choices are intentionally connected to the purpose and direction of worship. One choir director stated: *"People often think we simply sing before the sermon, but every song has a purpose. We prepare the congregation for what follows."* (CM5, Choir Director, Interview)

Another worship leader added: *"A worship team must know the message of the service. We do not select songs randomly. The music must connect with what the church wants to communicate."* (CM3, Worship Leader, Interview)

Observations within Pentecostal, Methodist, and African Initiated Churches confirmed that worship teams carefully coordinated musical segments with prayer, preaching, and congregational responses. Musicians adjusted tempo, song selection, and instrumental arrangements according to pastoral direction and congregational reactions. Nevertheless, participants maintained that such influence represented complementary service rather than pastoral authority.

Operational Authority and the Organisation of Worship

The second major finding concerns the practical influence musicians exercise during worship. Although participants distinguished musicians from formal religious leaders, experienced musicians were found to significantly influence ritual timing, transitions, and congregational participation. This study conceptualises this influence as operational authority, referring to the socially recognised capacity to organise aspects of ritual performance through specialised competence, experience, and institutional confidence.

Within Indigenous communities, participants explained that drummers frequently guide ritual movements while remaining accountable to priests and shrine custodians. An Akan priest stated: *"The priest leads the ceremony, but the drummer knows when each part should move. We understand one another because we have worked together for many years."* (IP3, Akan Priest, Interview)

Similarly, a traditional drummer explained: *"The priest may know what must happen spiritually, but the drummer knows how the people should move with the ceremony."* (IMD5, Traditional Drummer, Interview)

These statements reveal that ritual organisation depends on collaboration. The priest possesses spiritual authority, while the drummer contributes the practical knowledge necessary to maintain the ceremonial flow.

Comparable experiences were identified within Christian worship. Pentecostal and Methodist participants explained that musicians frequently respond to pastoral instructions, congregational emotions, and unexpected developments during services. A Pentecostal worship leader noted: *"Sometimes the pastor changes the direction of the service while we are already singing. We must understand what is happening and adjust quickly so that the worship does not break."* (CM4, Worship Leader, Interview)



A keyboardist further explained: *"The musician must listen carefully. Sometimes the pastor is praying and you know whether to continue softly, increase the sound, or stop. It requires understanding, not just playing."* (CM7, Keyboardist, Interview)

Participant observation supported these accounts, showing musicians extending musical sections during prayer, repeating choruses during heightened participation, and adjusting instrumental arrangements according to pastoral cues. However, respondents maintained that such operational influence does not equal pastoral authority. A Methodist minister explained: *"The worship leader can guide the atmosphere of worship, but the responsibility of teaching, doctrine, and pastoral leadership belongs to the minister."* (CM8, Minister, Interview)

Within Islamic communities, the distinction between operational contribution and formal authority was even clearer. An Imam stated: *"The Muezzin prepares the people by calling them to prayer, but leadership of the prayer remains the responsibility of the Imam."* (IM1, Imam, Interview)

A Muezzin similarly noted: *"My duty is important because without the call people may not gather on time, but I do not lead the prayer. That responsibility belongs to the Imam."* (IM3, Muezzin, Interview)

Thus, Islamic practice demonstrates functional interdependence without institutional equality.

Worship as Collective Ritual Performance

A third major finding is that participants across all traditions understood worship as a collective performance rather than the achievement of one individual. Religious leaders provide spiritual direction, musicians organise ritual expression, and congregants contribute through active participation.

An Indigenous musician explained: *"When everyone performs their responsibility well, the ceremony becomes complete. The priest, the drummer, the singers, and the people all have a role."* (IMD1, Traditional Musician, Interview)

Similarly, a shrine elder stated: *"The ceremony cannot stand on one person. The priest performs his duty, but the music, dancing, and response of the people make the ceremony whole."* (IP4, Shrine Elder, Interview)

Christian participants expressed similar views. A Methodist minister stated: *"Good worship is not created by one person. The preacher, the musicians, and the congregation all contribute."* (CM8, Minister, Interview)

A Pentecostal pastor added: *"The worship team prepares the atmosphere, but the congregation must also participate. Worship is something everyone does together."* (CM10, Pastor, Interview)

Islamic participants also emphasised collective participation. An Imam explained: *"The Imam cannot lead people who have not gathered. The adhan prepares the community before the prayer begins."* (IM2, Imam, Interview)

These findings demonstrate that ritual effectiveness emerges from coordinated interaction among multiple participants.

Institutional Recognition, Gender, and Collaborative Leadership

The study further revealed differences in institutional recognition of musicians across traditions. In Christianity, musicians were highly visible and appreciated, yet some reported limited participation in broader decision-making. A worship leader stated: *"People appreciate the music because everyone enjoys worship, but when important decisions about the church are made, musicians are often absent from those discussions."* (CM2, Worship Leader, Interview)



Indigenous communities demonstrated stronger ritual recognition of musicians, although authority remained structured. A shrine elder explained: *"The drummer knows the ceremony very well, but the priest decides what must happen. Each person has a responsibility that the other respects."* (IP4, Shrine Elder, Interview)

Gender also influenced participation patterns. Women often occupied fewer formal leadership positions but exercised significant ritual agency through singing, teaching, and community support. An Indigenous participant observed: *"Everyone has a role. Women may not always play the drums, but without their songs and participation the ceremony cannot be completed."* (IP7, Participant).

Comparative Summary of Findings

Overall, the findings reveal that Indigenous religion, Islam, and Christianity share a common pattern: formal religious authority remains distinct from musical expertise, yet both are essential to effective worship. Musicians contribute specialised ritual knowledge developed through training, experience, and institutional trust. Their influence is therefore best understood as operational authority rather than formal religious leadership.

The evidence challenges two assumptions: first, that musicians are merely performers with limited religious significance; and second, that indispensable contribution automatically transforms musicians into equivalent religious authorities. Instead, the study demonstrates that Ghanaian religious communities operate through collaborative ritual leadership characterised by differentiated expertise, mutual dependence, and coordinated participation. Music emerges not as a decorative element of worship but as a central organisational resource through which religious communities sustain ritual meaning, collective identity, and spiritual experience.

Rethinking Religious Leadership as Collaborative Ritual Practice

A central contribution of this study is the reconceptualisation of religious leadership as a collaborative ritual practice rather than an activity restricted to recognised institutional authorities. Across Ghana's Indigenous religious traditions, Islam, and Christianity, participants consistently demonstrated that worship is not produced solely by the actions of religious leaders but by coordinated interaction among priests, Imams, pastors, musicians, and congregants. These findings challenge conventional understandings of religious leadership that equate authority exclusively with formal offices while overlooking the practical contributions of other ritual specialists.

Previous scholarship has extensively examined sacred music as a medium of theological expression, cultural preservation, identity formation, and artistic creativity (Aniadze et al., 2023; Asare, 2019; Brewu et al., 2024; Ikumapayi & Alao, 2025). However, less attention has been given to the organisational role of musicians within religious communities. The present study expands existing scholarship by demonstrating that musicians do not merely provide aesthetic support but actively contribute to the practical organisation of worship. Their responsibilities include regulating ritual timing, facilitating transitions between worship stages, sustaining congregational participation, and maintaining ritual continuity.

This interpretation aligns with Bell's (1992) understanding of ritualisation as a process through which communities organise meaningful embodied actions. The findings demonstrate that ritual effectiveness depends upon coordinated contributions from multiple actors whose responsibilities are distinct but interconnected. Similarly, Turner's (1969) concept of collective ritual action highlights that religious experiences emerge through shared participation rather than individual performance. The present study extends this perspective by showing that collective participation itself depends upon specialised roles performed by different members of religious communities.



Importantly, recognising musicians as significant ritual actors does not diminish the authority of religious leaders. Instead, it reveals that institutional authority and ritual competence represent complementary dimensions of religious practice. Priests, pastors, Imams, drummers, choir directors, worship leaders, and congregants contribute different forms of expertise that collectively sustain religious life. Therefore, religious leadership should be understood not only as a possession of office but also as a relational process enacted through coordinated ritual participation.

Refining the Concept of Operational Authority

A major theoretical contribution of the study is the refinement of the concept of operational authority. Earlier interpretations risked suggesting that, because musicians are indispensable to worship, they possess authority equivalent to that of recognised religious leaders. The findings demonstrate that this assumption is inaccurate. Instead, musicians exercise a distinct form of practical influence that differs fundamentally from institutional religious authority.

Drawing on Weber's sociology of authority, legitimate authority is associated with socially recognised forms of domination rooted in institutional legitimacy. Consequently, technical ability, usefulness, or functional necessity cannot automatically be equated with formal authority. The study confirms this distinction. Across all three traditions, musicians were recognised as possessing specialised competence developed through apprenticeship, experience, ritual participation, and communal trust. Their expertise enabled them to coordinate worship activities, interpret ritual moments, and maintain congregational engagement. However, participants consistently distinguished these responsibilities from the doctrinal, pastoral, sacramental, and administrative responsibilities of recognised religious leaders.

Operational authority, therefore, refers to the socially acknowledged competence by which musicians organise the practical aspects of ritual performance. It does not represent a replacement for institutional authority or a new form of religious office. Rather, it provides an analytical framework for understanding how specialised expertise functions alongside formal leadership structures.

This clarification addresses an important conceptual challenge in studies of religion and performance. The fact that musicians are essential to worship does not make them equivalent to religious authorities. Instead, their influence emerges through demonstrated competence, communal recognition, and practical responsibility. Operational authority, therefore, complements Weberian analysis by explaining how specialised actors meaningfully contribute to institutional processes without occupying formal leadership positions.

Ritual Efficacy as Coordinated Social Performance

The study further contributes to discussions of ritual efficacy by demonstrating that meaningful worship emerges through coordinated social performance. Participants across Indigenous religion, Islam, and Christianity consistently described successful worship as the outcome of cooperation among religious leaders, musicians, and worshippers rather than the achievement of individual actors.

This finding supports Bell's (1992) argument that ritual effectiveness is produced through organised social action. Rituals are not simply collections of prescribed activities; they are carefully coordinated performances through which communities construct and experience sacred meaning. The present study demonstrates that music plays a significant organisational role within this process by regulating movement, coordinating responses, sustaining emotional engagement, and creating continuity within worship.



Turner's (1969) concept of *communitas* also provides valuable insight into these findings. Collective ritual participation generates shared identity and belonging, and music serves as one of the primary mechanisms through which this collective experience is created. Similarly, Rappaport's (1999) understanding of ritual as communicative performance highlights how repeated public actions reinforce social expectations and communal meanings. The findings show that musical forms contribute to this communication by signalling transitions, reinforcing ritual patterns, and strengthening participants' sense of involvement.

However, the study carefully distinguishes participants' theological interpretations from empirical claims. Many respondents expressed beliefs that music facilitates healing, spiritual renewal, divine encounters, or emotional transformation. These perspectives represent important dimensions of lived religious experience, but they cannot be treated as objectively measurable causal relationships. Instead, the study demonstrates that music contributes to the social and experiential environment within which worshippers interpret their encounters as spiritually meaningful.

Therefore, ritual efficacy should be understood as an emergent outcome of coordinated interaction among multiple participants. Worship becomes meaningful through the combined contributions of religious leaders, musicians, and congregants who collectively sustain ritual life.

Music as Constitutive Religious Practice Rather Than Liturgical Ornament

Another important implication of the findings concerns the position of music within religious practice. Traditional approaches often describe sacred music as an element that enhances worship by creating atmosphere, supporting prayer, or preparing worshippers for preaching. While these functions are significant, such interpretations may unintentionally reduce music to a secondary role.

The present study challenges this perspective by demonstrating that music constitutes an essential component of religious organisation itself. Across Indigenous religions, Islam, and Christianity, music regulates ritual sequence, facilitates participation, communicates theological meanings, and maintains continuity of worship. It is therefore not merely an accompaniment to religious activity but one of the mechanisms through which religious practice is enacted.

This interpretation reflects Nketia's (2002) argument that African musical traditions cannot be separated from social organisation, language, and ritual life. Similarly, Merriam's (1964) understanding of music as sound, behaviour, and culture demonstrates that musical activity exists within broader social relationships. Blacking's (1973) concept of music as humanly organised sound further supports the view that musical practices reflect and reproduce social structures.

Small's (1998) concept of "musicking" provides a particularly useful framework because it understands music as participation rather than merely performance. The findings demonstrate that music creates relationships among musicians, religious leaders, and worshippers. Through musical participation, communities negotiate identity, belonging, spirituality, and collective experience.

Consequently, sacred music should be understood as a constitutive dimension of religious practice rather than a decorative addition to worship. This perspective shifts music from the margins of religious analysis to the centre of discussions concerning leadership, ritual organisation, and communal identity.

Collaborative Leadership within Ghana's Contemporary Religious Landscape

The findings also contribute to understanding religious organisation within contemporary Ghana. Ghana's plural religious environment requires institutions to continually create meaningful worship



experiences that sustain participation, identity, and commitment. Within this context, collaboration between religious leaders and musicians becomes an important organisational resource.

Participants indicated that the effectiveness of worship depends not only on theological content but also on participation, coherence, emotional engagement, and ritual continuity. Music contributes significantly to these dimensions by helping communities experience worship in a meaningful and organised way.

This observation relates to Appau and Bonsu's (2020) description of Ghana as a dynamic spiritual marketplace. However, the present study extends this perspective by demonstrating that religious vitality depends not only on competition among institutions but also on internal collaborative processes that sustain communal worship.

Similarly, while Stark and Finke's (2000) religious economy perspective highlights institutional adaptation, the findings suggest that organisational effectiveness cannot be reduced to market competition. Rather, religious communities maintain vitality through practices that strengthen collective participation and ritual experience. Music, therefore, contributes to institutional resilience by facilitating meaningful communal engagement rather than merely attracting participants.

Theoretical Contribution

The principal theoretical contribution of this study lies in its proposal of collaborative ritual leadership as a framework for understanding religious organisation. Previous scholarship has examined sacred music, ritual performance, and religious authority separately; however, fewer studies have explored how these dimensions interact within everyday worship practices.

The study revises earlier interpretations that suggested a form of "dual priesthood" between musicians and religious leaders. Such a concept risks implying theological equivalence across traditions where religious authority is understood differently. Indigenous religions, Islam, and Christianity maintain distinct conceptions of leadership and religious office; therefore, a single priesthood framework cannot adequately explain their diversity.

Instead, collaborative ritual leadership provides a more flexible comparative framework. It describes how recognised religious leaders, musicians, and other ritual specialists coordinate their complementary responsibilities to sustain worship. Within this framework, operational authority explains how musicians exercise practical influence through expertise, ritual knowledge, and communal trust without replacing institutional leadership.

The study also extends ritual theory by demonstrating that worship is sustained through coordinated interaction among multiple actors rather than through isolated clerical performance. It contributes to ethnomusicology by showing that musical expertise functions not only as a form of cultural expression but also as an organisational resource that supports ritual continuity, participation, and institutional stability.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that religious leadership extends beyond formal office. Leadership is a relational process enacted through cooperation among individuals possessing different forms of recognised expertise. This perspective provides a more nuanced understanding of religion, music, authority, and social organisation within Ghana and broader African religious contexts.

Conclusion

This study examined the collaborative relationship between musicians and recognised religious leaders in organising worship across Ghana's Indigenous religious traditions, Sunni Islam, and



Christianity. While previous scholarship has established the importance of sacred music within African religious life, limited attention has been given to how musical expertise contributes to the practical enactment of religious leadership during ritual performance. By addressing this gap, the study provides a broader understanding of the intersections between music, ritual, and leadership within Ghana's religiously plural society.

Using a qualitative comparative ethnographic approach, the study demonstrates that worship is not produced by a single authority figure but by the coordinated participation of individuals performing distinct yet complementary roles. Recognised religious leaders retain responsibility for doctrinal teaching, ritual supervision, pastoral guidance, and institutional governance, while musicians contribute specialised knowledge in regulating ritual flow, managing transitions, encouraging congregational participation, and maintaining the coherence of worship experiences. These roles do not compete but function together to sustain meaningful communal religious practice.

A significant contribution of the study is the development and clarification of the concept of operational authority, which distinguishes practical ritual competence from formal institutional authority. This concept explains how musicians exercise recognised influence within worship without being equated with priests, Imams, pastors, or other religious leaders. Their authority emerges from expertise, experience, communal trust, and familiarity with ritual processes rather than from formal religious office. Building on this distinction, the study advances the framework of collaborative ritual leadership, demonstrating that religious leadership is a relational process involving multiple actors whose specialised contributions collectively sustain worship.

The study further contributes theoretically by integrating Weber's sociology of authority with ritual theory, ethnomusicology, and African religious studies. It argues that religious leadership should be understood not only as an institutional position but also as a performative and relational practice enacted through coordinated ritual participation. This perspective expands scholarly discussions of authority, sacred music, and religious organisation by recognising the importance of diverse forms of expertise within religious communities.

Beyond theoretical contributions, the findings have practical implications for religious institutions, educators, and cultural policymakers. The study highlights the need for greater recognition of musicians' specialised contributions, improved integration of theological and musical training, and deliberate efforts to preserve Ghana's sacred musical traditions as valuable components of intangible cultural heritage.

Ultimately, the study demonstrates that sacred music in Ghana extends beyond aesthetic expression. It functions as a vital organisational resource through which communities structure worship, communicate religious meanings, reinforce collective identity, and sustain spiritual traditions. Recognising the collaborative relationship between musicians and religious leaders, therefore, provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding ritual practice, authority, and leadership in Ghana and other pluralistic religious contexts.



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